

## THE WATCHER IN THE WOODS

### THE WILDERNESS

At the start of autumn, the air begins to change. It feels different to me now. Everything is sharp, as if it's clinging to the last vestiges of life. But it excites me. For a time, my mind thinks there may be possibilities. The leaves crackle under foot, wood smoke from the chimney hangs within a misty hue, the sight of rose hips ripening on the hedgerow, a time for bonfires of the rotting crimson leaves. I rake them up into enormous piles, skirting round the place that's never touched. But most of all, I notice the difference in the trees.

I stand there, poised and silent waiting for a sign, something to appear that may give sight of her. But it always stays the same. She's gone – how long now? Twenty years perhaps? Funny that I'd always thought she'd loved the wilderness as much as I, loved the life we had, until she said she thought the city was the place for her and abandoned the guardian trees, the wilderness, and me. Where is she now? Swallowed up in human concrete and the taxi fumes.

I feel the first flush of oncoming winter in the air. Another year has passed. I pour pale tea made from herbs, into a mug - although I'd rather have a scotch. But drinking doesn't help the pain. She's gone and yet I can't accept it.

My cabin in the wilderness is full of ghosts. Memories of our life together in the woods. I thought us birds of a feather. Was I wrong? We appreciated the natural things of life and creating things from them; the lampshades she had made from the skins of animals we'd culled, the bowls from saplings twisted into curious shapes, the dish of pebbles gathered from the stream. But most of all, her picture. She had called it "*The watcher in the woods*". She told me she was painted into it. 'There I am,' she said, pointing to a tree where there was just a tiny sliver of what looked to be a person standing there. Just the eyes and mouth were visible to one side of the trunk. 'I'm standing there,

waiting for the deer to come,' she told me, pointing to it. She said it was her signature...to be there amongst the paint.

She'd named it when she'd come to the finality of its creation. Given birth to it and said she'd never part with it. She said that both of us were '*watchers*', so the picture was for both of us. But then she left it on the wall - and also left me too. The city claimed her from the womb within the woods.

Five years ago or more, I saw a photo of her in some glossy magazine - on the table in my doctor's waiting room. The blurb said she was now an Editor of books. Married too - to some city guy. He was standing with her, his arm draped around her waist at some swanky do in some hotel. I was so jealous seeing this. Her cheating me. Leaving me. She was supposed to love me most. Stay with me. Be with me. She'd deceived me. Left me and the perfect life we'd had, after all I'd done for her.

I spend the days now plotting how to get her back. Life is not the same in this cabin in the woods haunted by her ghost. No one knows I'm here, I'm totally alone. I doubt she talks about me now. Does *he* know about me? Does *he* know about the two of us? Does *he* feel jealous too? I stare at the painting, until my eyes grow sore, trying to absorb myself deep within the layers. Until I feel I'm wandering through the bracken, the leafy glade, the towering trees amongst the dappled shades of sun coming through the canopy of leaves. I can spend hours there just lying on the grass, gazing at the sky where it shows through clouds. The security of the wood blankets me, and she is there, standing next to me hidden by the trunk.

My days are spent alone, until I have to travel half a day to trade my skins, enough to survive here in this wilderness. My ancient truck trudges along abandoned tracks until I come to town. People look at me as if I'm someone best avoided. They shrink against the wall when I go past. My hair has grown wild and unkempt and my clothes have all seen better days. Why should I dress up? For them? I buy the dried goods for the larder shelf. Leave - like I have never been. Then I go back to being the watcher in the woods. Each night, I will sit there watching. My eyes go deep within the

frame, into the scene, and she is watching me from inside the paint – a communion of sorts. I am the wine and she is the bread – and the Holy Ghost is in there too – “*the watcher in the woods*”.

This last summer was so dry. I notice the painting has developed cracks, there’s a bit of paint missing by the tree, where she’s supposed to stand and wait for deer. Before long, the paint will start to flake, it’s time to find the box of oils she left behind and make repairs. It’s ghostly looking at this scene. I can see her standing by the tree, almost out of sight, there’s the place that’s supposed to show her head. I have become fixated looking for her there. Every night watching the shadows from the fire, cast patterns on the canvas. So it looks like a living thing. If only I could capture her there, keep her to me always, instead of her illusive shadow, it may make me feel complete again.

I look at the only photo I have of her from then. We’d scraped together money for a film. It shows her hair, flattened on her skull when she’d taken off her hat, her breath fanning out before her like a cloud and chilling in the frosty air. If only her true self – her photo was within the painting - perhaps I could accept the choice she made. She would be with me within “*the watcher in the woods*”.

Should I make a crack and slide her picture underneath the paint? Then her real face would be there, partly hidden by the trees, rather than a smear of paint?

I manage to make a slit, the precious photograph slides within the gap. Some adjustments, then it’s in place. Her face, just a sliver of it, stands behind the tree, and she is turned towards me. I will get the paint and fill in round her face – if I leave the eyes exposed – and perhaps her mouth, no one else will know she’s there. I consider I may be a little mad, but if it comforts me and makes me feel some love, would anyone blame me? Certainly the forest creatures would appreciate the sentiment – they had loved her too.

It takes me a week to match up all the colours with the paint. There is a tiny place I’ve left where her eyes have always been. I will mark the place with a pin and another where her mouth would be.

That way I can always go back and claim the spot where the photo lies beneath. I no longer think I’m going mad. I feel comfort and I’m sleeping well. She comes to me in dreams and we are back within

our life within the woods. I observe I feel quite happy now, as if she is a butterfly I've managed to trap within a web. She will be with me always now and I can rest.

## THE CITY

The woman had left the woods behind some twenty years ago. She didn't care to dwell on what had happened then. This year should have been the same as all the others since she'd left. She didn't notice the first signs when her skin had started to get dry. It had been a hot and sweltering summer and the heat within the concrete of New York had lasted many months. When she took time to really look, there were flaky patches everywhere. Perhaps it was time to have someone analyse her skin.

They took some tests. Fumes, the dust of city life and heat, had been the diagnosis. But then her husband started noticing how rough her body was, when he held her in his arms. And it was getting worse. The layers of skin had started to peel and crack and were getting thicker. It was hard to breathe.

Whatever the condition, it was speeding up. There seemed to be a veil across her eyes as if she were in a mist. With it came a familiar smell of greenery and forests. And so too, came nostalgia. She was annoyed. She didn't want to be reminded of her former life. She had left all that behind – didn't want to be reminded of that love.

A month passed and she was no longer going out. The smell was stronger now. She said she could smell paint. The layers on her skin were cracking and flaking off in layers. She felt as if she was suffocating. Then they linked her to an oxygen supply.

A specialist posed the question long avoided when he asked about her life – did anyone have allergies?

The woman said she hadn't known her Dad. He had died when she was born. She shivered when she thought of the patch of ground outside their cabin in the woods. The place they never touched. She didn't want to be reminded of that time. The suffocation and control. The way her life had been. How she'd run from there. And she thought, for the first time in an age, of her painting of *"the watcher in the woods"*. The memory of it seemed to burn her soul.

Then she told the man about her early life before New York, in whispered shallow breaths - the life she'd refused to talk about before.

She didn't know that, at the same moment, deep within the woods, her mother placed the pins in the place that had been her daughter's face, within the layers of paint.

As she died, the woman had a sudden sense of butterflies trapped inside a web. Then her breathing stopped.