

## **Back Home**

She was in France, on a farm, staring down the rows of vegetables when she first saw the resemblance to home. Somewhere behind her, her boss was pulling up his sheet plastic, she was in front, digging old plant roots out with an adze. And though she couldn't stop, hunched over the current plant as she was, the glimpse of it haunted her all afternoon. That evening it came back to her again and again – the lie of the hill, the set of the crops up the left hand side, just trailing gently away over the crest, and the trees edging up the right to catch the sun as it set. It must face due west, like home. Only here they used the plastic over the earth to keep the weeds down, and here the slugs were as big and fat as a man's thumb, and here the dank smell of the earth was almost sickly sweet; and at home it was dry, dry to dust.

There was no work, at home. She had flown halfway around the world, wandering aimlessly most of it, through Asia and some of Europe, to find work. The day she left she had felt liberated, hopeful. Free of drought, going only places where it was wet, and the earth was so rich compost would take root and grow. Never cracks in the ground, never dust in your clothes, your food. She hadn't expected it to be so difficult. First visa problem in Indonesia, where, as they said at the consulate, your best hope was to get the bloody hell out; then no work in Europe. This job was a farce, really, but it was work, and she ate with the family, so she wasn't about to let it go, no matter how hard they worked her. She would show them she could take it, for one. They hadn't wanted a girl. But now, slowly, everything began to remind her of home. She would catch glimpses of it – all the same shapes, but with the wrong colours, dank browns and green instead of reds and gold. It was as if it haunted her, was following her around, and yet whenever she stopped to stare, to fix it in her eye, the resemblance would slip away, and only the memory of home would be left to tease her. She was starting to hate this place.

They went to market the next day. Her French had improved enough that they left on the booth these days, and from her perch on an upturned crate she could see them through the window of the local pub. They would be drunk when they came out, the farmer and his son, and she would have to drive home; she hated that still, the narrowness of the lanes gave her the heebie-geebies, not to mention being on the right-hand-side. But at least sitting there in the sunshine was a break, and a pleasant one with the bustle of the market. Plus the lunch today would be good in celebration of her sales, and likely progress until dinner, if they were drunk enough not to notice. If only it were a little warmer, it would be perfect. The heat here was soft, almost damp. She would give a weeks wage for ten minutes of sunshine from home.

They were drunk, when they emerged, later than usual – the market place was long empty, and the sun had disappeared. It always seemed to in the afternoon. They piled out of the pub in a heap, laughing and shouting to mates, reminding her of her brothers at the George, back home. Smaller than her brothers. There wasn't space to grow here. No open sky. Her mother had always said a boy needs open sky. She had packed the van an hour ago, waiting for them, and had eaten the last of the unsold apples, along with a handful of loose carrots and beans. It was only when they were all packed into the front, and she smelt the alcohol on their breath that she realised quite how drunk they were. Thank God it wasn't far home; the light on the cobbles as they drove out reminded her of afternoons in the shade of the veranda, and the bluestone of the house at home. Her mother's failed grapevine, struggling up the beams, and the yellow of her sparse lawn, blending in with the red and yellow of the paddocks behind. Focus girl, drive! The hedgerows along the road were claustrophobic in comparison.

They were out of the village when the trouble started. They were singing, the farmer and his two boys, football songs, (though it was soccer, really, wasn't it?), and then dirty drinking songs, involving English whores, and French soldiers.

‘Elle est anglais!’ yelled the youngest, sliding a sly hand up her thigh. She slapped him away, and his brother laughed, punched his arm. Even the father smiled. Her brother would have hit them for her. She ground her teeth in anger.

They went on silent for a while, and it became a chant in her head, nearly there, nearly there, not far, nearly there; till they reached the dirt road to the farm, and he tried again. She hit at his hand, eyes still on the road, and missed, got her own leg – he laughed. His brother and father ignored him. He slid his hand further, and she swatted at him, annoyed now, but he didn’t move it. She pulled at his fingers, peeled his hand back, but her grabbed at her hard enough to hurt, and she was livid now. Looking across finally she punched him in the leg, again and again, and him laughing, but it wasn’t until his brother yelled that he let go, and she looked up, and it was too late to do anything but brake and scream. They were sideways when they hit the gatepost; the tractor in the road had turned them round, and the empty vegetable crates in the back spilled over their headrests to rain stupidly down on top of them. When they came to rest on their side in the paddock, two rows of potatoes were unearthed behind them. The back door had opened, and an umbrella stuck out at a rakish angle, half open, its cover fluttering gently over by the hedge. The rotted remains of the gate were shattered, one piece skewered in their wheels, and the father was slumped crookedly over the gear-stick.

It was the younger brother who pulled her out, his hands shaking. His brother was half crawling from the other side, crying, strangely, a stream of abuse rattling from between his wet lips. It slurred together, and she couldn’t force it to make sense, but knew he was talking to her. The youngest was staring around himself with wild eyes, alternately leaning into the cab grabbing at his father; and yelling out for help, his head thrown back, eyes closed. It made her want to giggle, he looked like an actor in a bad film. She lay back where they had left her. No hurry, help would come. The tractor had been empty, so a farmer would be near. Sitting where she was, half propped against a tyre, she was delightfully warm; and somehow she was looking out to that hill again, and this time the resemblance to home was fixed, and she could drink it in, hungrily. Their place was there, just over the ridge and

to the left. The stream would be down on the right, and on the other side of the hill it would cut back across to the south, before snaking away down into the valley. The sun would be setting soon, and then even the colours would be right, red and gold, just as she remembered it. She closed her eyes, and waited. The noise of the brothers behind her slowly faded into the background. Perhaps it was time she went home.