

Mycelial Wood Web Olive Coxon

The pearly white surfaces and sparkling clean tiles drew me to the bathroom that first time - for longer than was necessary I mean. I'd finished washing my face one morning and had climbed into the bathtub to reach the window shut when Eli (who was perched on the edge of the sink) had put the thought into my head of what it would be like to lie in the bath fully clothed. After some contemplation, and reaching over to lock the door, I had cautiously stepped into the bathtub. Feeling the cool white surface against my fingertips, I gradually lowered myself down until I was horizontal. A weird sense of calm began to wash over me. It seemed I had finally found some peace in the chaos. A place of safety where no one but Eli could reach me. A place safe from the infection that was spreading to so many men across the world, wiring their brains in a way that made them abuse. So it was that the bathroom became my sanctuary. I became so familiar with the cool feel of the chipped green tiles under my fingers and the sight of the bare bulb swinging from the ceiling; I often forgot I lived with ten other people. Eli didn't count of course. He, like the bathroom, was for me and me alone.

It was a sleepy summer's afternoon when I first became aware of the writing. A tiny piece of paint had begun to peel off the wall a few days ago and from my position in the bath I had begun the addictive process of peeling and scratching it off. This particular afternoon I had escaped to the bathroom to scrub myself down after Little Sarah had mistakenly thrown a mud pie at me, thinking I was Jimmy. Though the mud barely touched my skin, I could feel the dirty particles worming their way inside me as though someone was probing there, infecting me. Eli had been waiting for me and whispered comforting words in my ear as I scoured my skin. When I felt satisfied I sunk into the bath and continued peeling tiny pieces of paint off the wall, rolling them between my fingers before flicking them onto the floor beyond my pearly white sanctuary. To my surprise a tiny letter 'r' in curly handwriting came into view beneath the section of paint I was scratching at. Excited yet apprehensive I picked off more of the paint until a word came into view. It read: 'run'. Puzzled, I scratched off more of the paint, my fingernails scraping for answers. When nothing appeared I picked another section of wall further along and started scraping at the paint there, But I was left disappointed. Eli grimaced and glided towards me for a hug. He meant well but Eli's hugs left something to be desired; being void of matter meant that instead of a warm body pressed against my own, all I got was a cool tickling sensation that ran up and down my legs and arms. Still, it was better than nothing.

I couldn't deny that the writing had shaken me. The last time I had run away from somewhere - or rather someone - had been five years ago.

The next day I was sitting downstairs eating breakfast with the others - porridge as always - when I became aware of something moving under the table. Without realising what was happening I kicked out as a hand felt its way up my leg. Jumping up onto my stool, heart beating fast as memories resurfaced and my breathing quickened, I saw an older kid who'd been here longer than most - Tommy Handling - grinning at me from under the table. The sight of his smug smile turned my fear into anger. I felt as though a ball of fire had been sparked in my chest and as I stared into his cruel grey eyes, a burning sensation began to course outwards from the place he had touched me. The sensation spread through my body, like the branches of a tree, up into my chest and down into my fingertips until my whole body was coursing with energy. Alarmed at this sudden spark of uncontrollable energy that had risen up from inside me I held both hands to my chest. I gasped and felt myself explode, tangles of branches and earthy roots clawing their way out of my back and springing from my fingertips, heading straight for a - no longer

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grinning - Tommy. The roots snaked their way around his waist and raised him up above the table, soil raining down onto the eleven bowls of porridge like a dusting of chocolate snow. All the other children were staring at us, many of them dripping porridge from their spoons. Little Sarah was looking right at me with her big blue eyes, a spoonful of porridge halted on its journey to her mouth. *Drip drip drip.*

I watched the roots from my fingertips winding further around the boy in front of me. The word *run* echoed inside my mind like a mantra, *run...run...run...runrunrunrun!* I jumped from my stool, the roots that had sprung from my fingertips and back releasing Tommy and curling their way back inside me as he slumped to the floor trembling. Dropping to a crouch I tried to gather my thoughts. I looked over at Little Sarah, Gazelle, Louisa and Persephone - four young girls alone in a place I didn't trust to keep them safe. I couldn't leave them. But Tommy was back on his feet and running towards me with a menacing gleam in his eye. I was in danger. It was clear the infection had reached him too, and I knew what that meant. My flight instinct kicked in as it had years before, and I ran out of the dining room and into the hall, bare feet slapping the tiles, my head spinning with a million thoughts and my hands clutching my chest as though stuck there. I wrenched them free, pulled open the front door of what had been my home for the last five years, and flung myself out onto the street.

Without glancing back I turned left down the road and continued to run, the adrenaline of what had just happened coursing through my veins like a ticking bomb about to explode. Shit. What had I just done?! Years of smothering the hurt and pain festering and growing inside me, only to let it come tearing out of me in response to one touch. *Weakness. It wasn't weakness, said a voice in my head, it was strength. It was instinctual self protection. You couldn't go back there,* piped up another voice, *you only just escaped last time. He's infected, just like your father was.* I slowed to a jog and mulled this over in my head. I had only just escaped last time, fled from my father's house in the early hours of the morning and banged on the door of the 'New Hope Orphanage'. Luckily they didn't ask many questions but it hadn't exactly been a place of new hope, just of escape. And now, five years later, I have had to run again. The infection that had made my father hurt me had spread to the orphanage, to a seventeen-year-old boy who is nearly a man, to a home full of vulnerable children. My heart clenched as I thought of the others. What would they do without someone to look after and protect them? But that wasn't my job, I was barely sixteen, not an adult at all. And yet some part of me knew that I was the best hope they had.

I stayed the night on Gaia's Hill: a mound of earth and plants that barely passed for a hill but was renowned in this part of the city for being one of the few accessible green spaces. I rubbed mud into my clothes as camouflage and arranged a nest of branches and leaves to curl up in, falling asleep to the sound of wind rustling the trees. It was just after dawn when I woke, sweating profusely from a dream where Little Sarah had been shouting my name, screaming for me to come and help her. "River, RIVER, we need you River, RIVER" she'd yelled and I'd been trying to run to her but kept falling over my feet again and again, in that infuriating way you do in dreams when your mind won't allow you to move. Now I was awake but could still hear her voice calling to me and I jerked my head around searching for the source. Morning gleams of red and golden light were casting their glow upon the trees and I sat up and shivered, wrapping my arms around me for warmth. The

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voice had probably just been in my head, some lasting effect of the traumatising dream I had just had. But wait, there it was again “Riverrrrrrrr”. I jumped up at once and followed the voice cautiously to the base of a slender silver birch tree that was swaying in the light morning breeze. Walking right up to the tree I felt the urge to touch its speckled bark and pressed a hand gently to it. At once a rush of energy transferred itself from the tree to me and I heard Little Sarah’s voice clear in my head, “River we need you. Tommy Handling’s infected the others, they’re hurting us. Please come, you’re the only one who can make them stop.” Silence. I stumbled backwards away from the tree and made myself take a calming breath. I couldn’t go back. Not when I had just escaped, I might not get another chance, I might not be able to... Little Sarah’s face appeared in my head, scared and desperate for help. I couldn’t ignore it. I had to go back. I had to help them like no one ever helped me.

I was running again. Back down Gaia’s Hill onto the street, right at the old oak tree and along to the orphanage. Not stopping for breath I crashed in through the front door and bumped smack into three boys, one of whom was Tommy, that smug grin still plastered onto his face. Without hesitation I bundled past them and out into the garden, my eyes casting around madly for Little Sarah as I went. I found her in the shed at the bottom of the garden with the three other girls crowded around her - a couple of them had been crying. Little Sarah ran and hugged me forcefully, her little arms holding me tight. “You came” she said, “I didn’t know if you’d got the message or not.”

“I got it”, I said grimly, “how did you do that?”

“Gazelle found out a way of sending messages via the tree root system. She’s got roots too, we all have now.” As I continued to talk to this small group of frightened but determined girls, I learned that in the short time I’d been gone Tommy and the other boys had begun to show more and more signs of infection: unsolicited touches, looks and nasty words. Apparently the New Hope staff hadn’t taken any notice, and when Little Sarah had gone to them to ask for help, they’d merely said: “Boys are just like that, you’ll get used to it.” So they’d decided to take things into their own hands. The next time one of the boys had attempted to chase and grab Louisa’s waist, she’d summoned every ounce of anger and hurt inside her and thrust him away from her, thin winding roots exploding out of her ankles like twisted wings. In quick succession all the girls had started to show signs of being able to summon roots, whether it be from their ankles, fingers or backs. But they were still scared. The boys were all bigger than them and they didn’t want to harm anyone.

I did.

I was fed up with it. These boys and men taking what they want, using our bodies as if they own them. I was done. The infection was spreading and if I couldn’t save everyone I could at least save these four tired, hurt and scared orphans. Tommy and his friends were going to get what was coming to them, that much was certain.

I turned back to the girls and told them how we’d do it. Eli appeared next to me and I turned and felt his hand in mine, a comforting squeeze that told me I could do this; I didn’t need him anymore, I’d found my purpose. My best friend drifted away into the wind and I watched him go, vowing I would always remember the comfort he had given me all these years alone. I had to go on without him, the friend who had stayed with me even after our separation years ago. My father was the reason he was gone, and my father was the one

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who was going to pay. But first, we had to escape this place. Escape for good. And so it was that at 9am the next morning, Gazelle, Louisa, Persephone, Little Sarah and I marched into breakfast, our hands joined, our bare feet planted as close to the earth as we could get, looks of determination set on our faces. Tommy and his cronies were sitting eating their porridge laughing and joking, clearly infected as words like “slut”, “deserved it” and “she didn’t say no” spilled out of their mouths. I advanced, breaking free of the two girls whose hands I had been holding, my anger and hatred from years of pain, years of staying quiet, years of enduring arrogant arseholes, bubbled inside of me threatening to explode. And explode it did. I was raised up into the air, tangled roots bursting from my spine and forming giant wings that hung in the air beside me. The burning sensation made me feel as though I was on fire, flames licking the inside of my body, travelling down into my fingertips where more roots shot out, licking the air and winding themselves around the boys until all six of them were raised up off their chairs, looks of horror painting their faces, their arms pinned to their sides. The other girls found confidence and joined me, their arms raised in concentration as each of them added their roots, of various sizes, shapes and colours, to the fray. Little Sarah glided into the air beside me, her own silver twisted wings rising and falling behind her, as she addressed the six squirming lifeforms below.

“Do you think we like what you do to us?” she asked. “Do you think it makes US feel GOOD when you plant your hands on our waists, touch us in places without our permission and with too much force? Do you realise you are becoming our fathers, stepfathers, uncles, the men who we have been hurt by before. DO YOU REALISE! Or do you just not care? Do you not care you will turn into them. You say you are just joking and you push down that tiny inkling of a feeling that maybe you’re wrong. That maybe you are hurting us beyond repair. That maybe you are becoming the monsters and we are your prey. Think about that before you hurt someone else, before you damage another person’s spirit.” She released a shuddering breath and turned to the rest of us. I was so proud of her and yet so distraught that an eleven-year-old knew this much of the world already.

Taking Sarah’s hand, I beckoned to the others and the five of us walked out of the New Hope Orphanage, our feet planted firmly on the ground as they deserved to be. But knowing that each of us had power hidden in the folds of our backs and the bones of our ankles and the flesh of our fingertips. We were going to need it.

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