

The Diversion

I love the sound of Storm's hooves on the compacted mud of the country lane. They make a soothing bah-bum, bah-bum, bah-bum sound on the ground like a heartbeat. She huffs through her nostrils and I realise I'm breathing in time with her. I move with Storm as she moves beneath me, rolling and tilting in perfect synchronicity. Carole is riding River beside me and she's smiling into the sunshine. This was our shared dream. We'd both wanted ponies when we were little girls but our parents couldn't afford that. But, although we didn't have ponies or big parties, we always knew we were very well loved.

I stroke Storm's shoulder and revel in her warm coarse hair, finer than silk to me. Max bought me Storm and River as a wedding present two years ago and I adore both horses. Carole and I take them out on the Quantock Hills as often as possible so they can thunder across the heath, bursting with vitality and vigour. That's when Storm and River can release all the energy packed into their supple muscles and show how mighty they truly are. The sheer power in their bodies intimidates even me and snatches my breath away. When we ride like that, I leave all fears and worries far behind me. Then, I'm blessedly free. By the time we finish, both horses are breathing hard and shining with sweat, but dancing in delight. Their usual musky odour intensifies with a hint of ammonia, but with a rose fresh sweetness like fine perfume laced through it. To me, it's the scent of triumph and freedom.

Carole and I ride out with them for a much more leisurely stroll through the countryside a couple of times a week and this is a favourite route of ours.

The Diversion

The country lane is winding with high wild hedges and trees on both sides. Even riding high on horseback, I can't see over the hedges or very far ahead but that's part of the pleasure – besides, I know where I'm going.

I'm lulled by the trilling birdsong and buzzing insects. It's as though the soft summer air, fragrant with wildflowers and heavy with pollen, is caressing my skin like a lover.

The warm sunshine soothes my aches and pains, melting them away.

We ride through a tunnel of entwined trees and into spotlights of bright sunshine flashing through the leafy canopy, before we burst into the brilliant daylight beyond.

It was like that when I first met Max. The sight of him had dazzled me like a burst of sunshine. He was handsome and confident and he'd easily beguiled me. I'd thought he was charismatic and caring at first.

I'm drawn from my reverie as Carole and I come to a yellow diversion sign in the middle of the lane directing us onto the main road. Storm's leather saddle creaks in a grumble of discontent as we come to a stop.

'Up for a reroute, Rhonda?' Carole asks me.

She probably can't see beneath my careful facade that I don't really want to ride out on the busy road. It's only her eager smile that persuades me.

'Go on then.' I gently squeeze Storm with my calves and turn her towards the main road.

As soon as Storm steps onto the tarmac her hooves ring louder and sound almost artificial, like someone clapping coconut shells backstage at a pantomime.

Along this road the hedges are slashed back and nature's thinned right out. There's not much birdsong, buzzing or humming along here – mostly it's the sound of cars rumbling along the hard road that fill my head. This road is dead straight and bare. I

The Diversion

can see ahead now but the view isn't worth seeing. This route may be easy but I much prefer the more natural and comfortable track I was on.

Our parents raised us in a small cottage in a pretty Somerset village in the heart of the English countryside. It was the most idyllic place I've ever lived. Our picturesque cottage could have featured on a packet of artisan biscuits. Mum and dad would never have been able to buy somewhere as truly beautiful as that – they had inherited it from our mum's parents, and our mum often said the only way she'd leave it would be in a box. Luckily, that hadn't come to pass yet.

When we were young, Carole and I used to ride our bikes along the country lanes and troop through cattle fields and orchards. We chased each other through meadows, played in pastureland and climbed trees, built dens and caught tadpoles in cool streams. We were outdoors so much that we turned golden brown in summer and freckles blossomed on our faces.

When I moved in with Max, it was into a large modern house in town. The house was spacious, well-equipped and in perfect condition but totally characterless and without heart. It was nothing compared to the charm and warmth of my earlier home.

I feel Storm grow bored of the stark regularity of this main road and her steps become robotic. It's like switching from a thrilling freewheeling rollercoaster ride to a slow one-speed Ferris wheel.

A car drives up behind us but the driver slows as he nears us. Storm glances suspiciously at the car and jitters as it passes us, aggravating my back injury from last week. I'm almost as jittery as she is.

The Diversion

Max wasn't happy about me riding out with Carole this morning. For some reason, he suspects I'm having an affair but that's simply ridiculous. I might dream of a gallant knight riding to my rescue on a graceful and powerful steed, but Carole is the closest I've got to that. How can she rescue anyone if she doesn't know they're in peril?

We reach a blind corner and follow the diversion sign along another dead straight road. More cars pass us in both directions. Most of the drivers in our lane slow down and allow us space but not as much as Storm would like. I tuck her into the side of the road as much as possible and Carole does the same with River. We're smothered in exhaust fumes and jostled with loud music from the driver's cars. Now more than ever, this route seems particularly artificial and harsh. Still, I should be used to harsh conditions and an artificial front by now.

As if reading my mind, Carole asks how Max is.

'Oh, he's fine thanks,' I say.

'Did you cook him that risotto I told you about?'

'Yeah, he quite liked it,' I lie. He'd turned his nose up at it to start with, complained I'd used too much garlic and then said the mushrooms were like slugs. I'd made the mistake of joking about it and that sent him off on a rant which quickly morphed into a one-sided argument. It began with Max staring daggers at me and ended with him flinging his plate across the table, sending the risotto flying all across the table and over the edge and the plate knocked my glass of wine over. I'd had to make another dinner from scratch then he moaned because I'd fed him so late. At least he hadn't hit me. Small mercies.

'How's Clive?' I ask quickly.

Carole grins. 'He's brilliant.'

She launches into an account of his latest romantic offering – tickets for a coach tour of Provence in a few months time. ‘I can’t believe it Rhonda,’ she says, ‘he’s just so considerate and romantic and thoughtful. He really is wonderful.’

I see the truth of her words in her open expression and fluid movements, in her sparkling eyes and easy smile. She’s practically beaming with pleasure. I wonder how long I’d looked like that about Max before things went bad. Before his mask slipped and I realised who he really was. Before the start of his snide comments, criticisms and harsh treatments.

‘Oh dear,’ Carole says, glancing down at the ground.

I follow her gaze to a small grey rabbit dead on the road. It’s clearly been run over and its poor little body is twisted and crushed. A shiver darts through me.

‘Poor little thing,’ she says. ‘How awful.’

‘Yes,’ I say, ‘poor thing. I hate to see that.’ What I don’t say is that what I hate most of all is that life can be so brutal to the gentlest creatures.

Storm’s ears twitch and flicker. A second later, I hear what she’s heard: the roar of a motorbike racing up behind us. I instantly think it’s Max on his motorbike looking for me, tearing through the countryside, destroying the tranquillity. I only realise I’ve flinched when Storm reacts to my tensed legs and my tug on her reins. She sidesteps into the road and strains to look behind her towards the noise. I twist round to see if it is Max coming after us, but it’s not him hurtling recklessly towards us. The closer this man gets though, the more Storm jitters.

Carole soothes River and shuffles her closer to the hedge but that leaves Storm exposed and I can feel her vulnerability and distress in her lurching movements, and in her nickering, and her swishing tail. In her panic, she dances further into the road.

The Diversion

I shoot a pleading glance to the biker willing him to slow down and give us space, but to no avail.

The inevitable happens – Storm bucks and lunges, kicking out frantically. I hold on tightly and try to ride it out but I can't keep up with her. She flings me backwards and forwards, shooting a fresh spear of pain through my already painful ribs. I shut down and give myself up to it, flying from the saddle.

My back and right leg explode in pain when I hit the brutal tarmac. It knocks the wind from my chest and for a moment I can't catch my breath. It's only when Carole cradles me in her arms that I realise she's dismounted and come to my rescue.

'Shush, shush,' she says. 'Don't try to talk. Just take slow steady breaths.'

I do as instructed. Eventually, I manage to breathe more normally. I'm lying in an undignified heap on the tarmac, hurting and ashamed in front of passing drivers.

Tears spring to my eyes but I blink them back.

'Can you move?' Carole asks.

I gingerly test myself then nod.

Carole helps me shuffle off the road towards the safety of the hedge. She then rescues Storm from near the middle of the road where she's blocking traffic, and walks River over to us too, hooking the reins over some branches.

'Are you alright?' she asks, crouching beside me.

'Yeah, I'm ok.' As I stretch my arm though there's a stab of pain in my elbow and I instinctively flinch.

Carole notices. She takes the cuff of my long sleeve and pushes it up my arm. I know what she's going to see and what she's going to think. I have to look away. I don't want to see the dawning knowledge in her eyes.

'Oh Rhonda,' she says.

The Diversion

I look down at the deep-purple bruises along my arm; four circular bruises on one side and one slightly larger bruise on the other. Carole touches her fingers and thumb against my bruises – they match almost perfectly. Max's hands are bigger than hers though.

'Was this..?' she asks.

I nod, but I can't meet her eyes.

'Are there any more?'

I take a wobbly breath then lift my shirt up on the right side to show her more big purple bruises with older yellow ones scattered amongst them.

Her gasp stops me showing any more and I quickly lower my shirt.

'Tell me,' Carole demands.

I don't want to, I really don't, but I know there's no way to avoid it anymore. It's too late – what's seen cannot be unseen, what's known cannot be unknown, but maybe what's broken can be repaired? So I do as Carole says: I tell her everything. Once I start talking I can't seem to stop. Confessions I've held back for years spill from my mouth like a crumbling dam. The release feels strangely euphoric. I'm crying – a watery reflection of that bursting dam – but they're tears of relief.

Carole cries too but her clenched jaw marks them as angry tears. I imagine she's annoyed at me for not confiding in her, but she's also clearly furious at Max.

We sit and talk and cry for what feels like ages. A few passing drivers pause to ask if we need any help but Carole politely thanks them and waves them on. Those drivers can't help me, but I'm certain Carole can now that I've finally opened up to her.

'What do I do now?' I ask when I've finally wrung it all out of myself.

The Diversion

'Well, you don't want to stay with him, do you?' Her expression is carefully blank, her tone even.

I open my mouth with an automatic lie, but I owe it to her now to be honest. And I owe it to myself. 'No, I don't.'

'Phew.' She grins then. 'Thank God for that. In that case, everything can be sorted out. You know there's nothing we can't do if we work together. And I'll be with you every single step of the way, I promise. I always will be, no matter what.' She hugs me then, sealing her vow, before gently releasing me. 'Hey, don't worry, ok? You can come and stay with me and Clive for as long as you want and we'll bring all your stuff over to ours. We can see about starting proceedings and all that other official stuff later, but don't worry about all that yet. For now, let's just get you over to mine, shall we?'

I nod. 'God Carole, what would I ever do without you?' I smile and wipe away the last of my tears.

'Let's never find out, ok? Now, do you think you're able to ride? We've still got a bit further to go.'

My head's thumping from all the crying and the anguish, and my body's hurting in more places than I'd like to admit, but I feel oddly positive. As well as the pain, there's a buzzing feeling dancing across my skin that's somewhere between pleasure and panic. I vaguely recognise the elusive sensation of hope rising within me.

I smile openly, freely. 'I think I'm ready, Carole. We can go now.' A small stream of anticipation flows through me at the possibility of freedom ahead.

Carole helps me back into the saddle, and then I follow her and River back along the road.

The Diversion

It strikes me that we should ideally be riding off into the sunset together like the heroes in a story, but the reality is even better than that. In reality, we're riding into a still sunny and warm day that holds the promise of even brighter and better days ahead. Now, my story can begin again.