

The Mouse Who Didn't know Love

By Ben Palmer Fry

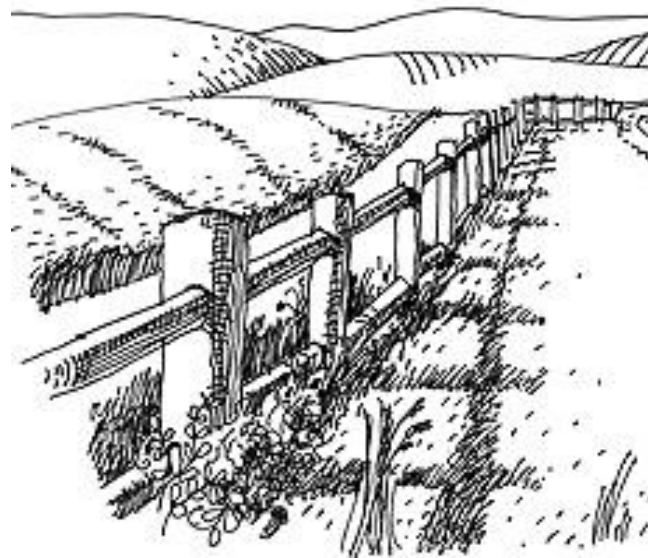


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For Thea
my favourite dragonfly





The Mouse Who Didn't Know Love

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Prologue

A field's mouse

Once upon a time there was a youthful brown mouse. Everybody called him Brown because, well, he was brown. That wasn't particularly extraordinary for that part of the country as most folk in and around were called descriptive things like Blueeyes, Stripes, and Oldwizardlizard. Brown was out collecting conkers one late afternoon, after a drowning downpour, meandering in the golden autumnal sunlight, casually intent, picking his way to the finest specimens – those special smoothest of conkers that can be seen shining on the ground like tiny flames, trying to dry out the damp world around them. Late afternoon was Brown's favourite time of day. He was awake, his legs and mind had been warmed up with the tasks of the day, and he found he could hunt with considerable success. He'd been led to that area by his instinct and intuition, knowing the stubborn seeds in that mighty chestnut grove would have been cast to the ground by the squalls of the noontide storm. Brown was a collector, or a 'curator', as he'd often correct other more innocent creatures. Gathering up a battle-hardened acorn, probably some rebel leader escaped from a squirrely squadron, he noticed his knapsack was getting full. Through a patch of ancient oaks at the end of the grove he could see the sun beginning to kiss the edge of the Chaldon Hills and he smiled broadly to himself, a smile that wrinkled his face and made him look older but really showed and shared his happiness. He was marvelling at the beautiful timing of things, that so often the nature of his collecting seemed to time itself perfectly with the nature of the sun and moon. God, he thought, has great timing.

He turned his long slender tale around and set off for home with that slightly bobbing walk he was blessed with. Home was important to Brown. He couldn't pinpoint exactly why, though he'd mused about it many times with his more philosophical hedgehog friends, but whatever the reasons he always welcomed that deep homecoming warmth, that rising but mellow joy which comes to the cheeks with colour and comes to the lips with a tune. His home burrow reflected that warmth and joy, made cosy

with an abundance of simplicity. It was under an old millstone that had been cast aside many years ago when men still worked the land. Amongst the soft meadow grass, it was iconic as the outer marker of the village, and Brown liked this prestige insofar as it brought him more visitors – locals often used it as an aim on aimless walks and outsiders would come and see it as it was the only real landmark the village had. He always kept two rocking chairs set out in the front garden for such eclectic and weary visitors, and many a restful hour would pass with companions and strangers alike enjoying his hearty laughter and high-pitched exclamations.

Upon entering through the doorway, the burrow stepped down into the one small but well-turned living room. A larger than average hearth was set in the far wall and had aromatic ash crackling at the grate almost all the time, whatever the time of year. Deep russet-hued carpets from some unknown land covered the earthen floors and roughly hewn wooden beams steadied the cracked granite of the millstone ceiling. Brown kept a modest selection of old furniture which created a comfortable focus around the fire, but eyes were also drawn to the corner, where a magnificent French dresser lay, full of games and books, a gift from his gentle father that now provided a sort of backdrop to the scene. It was rather grand in the scheme of things but Brown was confident that its potential pretention was mostly lost in the shadows of the flickering firelight. Radiating from it were densely packed lines of pine shelving that ran around most of the room, holding a multitude of dark shapes, big and small, shiny and opaque, sharp and rounded, clumsy and fine. The single product of his years of collection were displayed there in the semi-darkness for any that cared to wander in. He'd once hoped to establish a sort of public gallery of natural curiosities but during that season of his motivation, howsoever he tried and whichever way he turned, the world conspired against him to temper that dream. He thus contented himself with concentrating on his own collection, some of which were considerably more exotic than the carpets underfoot, but which many folk missed in the half-light of his living room. He, however, thought the main quality of tree seeds was not what the eyes revealed, but what the touch beheld. Brown would oftentimes pass his visitors a seed or kernel during conversations simply to allow their hands to feel the shape, the texture

and the pleasing weight of the 'children of the forest', as he liked to call them. A glittering enthusiasm, his trademark, was never far from the surface, and would almost overcome his sensibilities when asked to explain either why a seed was designed the way it was, or indeed, what distant shore it'd been collected from.

At the fire, his pot always had stew to serve and late at night there was regularly a different array of friends curled up in the chairs or stretched out on the floor, full of food, full of stories, full of the Spirit. In that place, Brown wanted for nothing. He was loved by the creatures of the village, his expressive face and rather obscure passion endearing him to one and all. But sometimes, just sometimes, despite all the contentments of his life, he felt a slight jab of sorrow, like he wasn't meant to be alone.

Chapter 1

Fate in fête

That same autumn, true to tradition, the 45th Greenfield Jamboree was held on the village common. The marquees and gazebos were out and the white bunting was liberally draped through the lower boughs of the surrounding oaks. It had been an Indian summer and there was still kindness in the wind, colour in the leaves, and singing in the soul. Part for the cause were the badgers' ales, the lizard's tombola, the woodlouse racing, the rabbit's apple rolling, the cuckoo's caramel making, the squirrel's tightrope, the hedgehog's cheese tasting, the shrew's woodcraft, the field mice fiddle music, the slimy toad wrestling, the laughter, the serious discussions, the relationships renewed, and the strangers made friends. But this year there was a slight air of mystery and intrigue about the fête too; a band of coastal folk were making merry amongst the villagers and local countrymen, stopping over on their way home from Moonfleet to Arne after trading their exquisite fabrics with the foreign merchants. They were mostly otters with an accent that had a slight European flavour, all dressed very flamboyantly in oranges and rich blues, with bronze bells adorning their hands and feet, long, ornate coats that glistened with sequins and semi-precious stones, and distinctive walking sticks that showed remarkable carvings in wood and bone, a level of craftsmanship that even the diligent shrews would be proud of. There were a few other creatures in their number, a rabbit, a frog, and handful of voles from upcountry, but together these sea folk brought an un-looked for spice to the occasion. In addition to the normal, pleasant wares of the fête, they had established a javelin contest, set up a smoking tent filled with apple aromas, and encouraged more of the children to swim in the River Frome that idled past nearby. They had also brought along a plethora of wind instruments that were very unlike the strings in sound, but could equally rouse the most infirm to dance a jig with vigour! They were indeed strange, but they came seeking humble pardon for their coarse tongues, they came with energy and excitement, they came with good intentions and good hearts. They were, naturally, welcome.

Brown had set up his stall towards the river, where quietitude could normally be found in years gone by, but with the raucous river games in full flow, there was more melee than he was expecting in that quarter. Still creatures came to his small display and took time out from the somewhat exhausting festivities, sitting on the few wooden benches, sipping on some of Brown's homemade ginger beer, each absently toying with tree seed whilst recharging their batteries. Nearby various youths exercised their wild abandon by flinging themselves off the willow tree into the pool. Each higher branch conquered was greeted by a rowdy cheer from a small band of the exuberant visitors, while a substantial group of mothers milled about nearby, trying not to look concerned but unable to hide their apprehension as the encouragement got louder and louder.

Brown left his small refuge in the trusted hands of an old rabbit that happened to be there, and wandered off towards the squirrel's rope display, which this year was called the 'spider's web'. As he regarded the tangle of lines, he thought that maybe the spider in question had imbibed a few too many of badgers' ales before beginning the construction. A cheeky glance over to a dapper looking rat, decked out in a set of cotton slacks and a white linen shirt, confirmed that he wasn't the only one thinking the squirrels had become a little too avant-garde for the village jamboree. After the first 'act' of the squirrels 'Acrobat's Sonata', Brown was nibbling on a sesame snap and righting the world with Rat (the schoolteacher in the slacks) when he heard a noise that was quite unlike anything he'd ever heard coming from the direction of the smoking tent. It was a kind of high-pitched wail that was interrupted with uncontrollable snorting. As they looked about the crowd Rat pointed out the source of the unmusical score – a golden mouse was doing an impression of some large creature with a long nose for a group of tiny rabbits. The snorting was the golden girl's own laughter as the children clamoured and clattered for more, the whole group ascending into greater rapture. Rat remarked at the foreign looking headdress that one of the travellers had obviously lent to the golden mouse, which was clearly adding to the novelty of the occasion. Not hearing anything in response, he began a discourse on why he thought the spiritual leadership of the parish should be more accountable to the congregation. When he paused for Brown's input to

what was, to his mind, a fascinating topic, he found Brown to be unusually absent. He was still staring over towards the smoking tent, transfixed. Honey was from a distant valley but was known to a few of the villagers due to her tailoring handiwork. Brown had never come across her.

“I said, don’t you think it best that we get the deacon involved to at least have a word with the PriestOwl?”

No response from Brown.

“The PriestOwl could preach whatever he wants within the current framework.”

Still nothing.

“He could start a drugs raquet.”

A small grunt of agreement from Brown.

“He could hold origami classes using the pew bibles.”

Another absent grunt.

“You’re not listening to me, *are* you?”

“Eh?... What?...well, no... not really, I was, well...” Brown’s words trailed off.

“You’re useless sometimes,” Rat reprimanded with clear humour in his voice, “Simply can’t do two things at once. It seems you need to give the smoking tent some attention. Shalom Don Juan.” Rat walked off, amused and a little surprised, in the direction of the shrew’s workshop, but Brown didn’t notice him go. Shaking off his absurdity, Brown checked reality around him. He was a little bit shaky, and felt strange. He wasn’t used to experiencing this kind of pulse rate, except when he was shinning up a tree or breathlessly reaching the climax of an adventurous tale.

“Get a grip!” he audibly instructed himself with a restless patter of his feet, “Be cool.” He knew this last remark was feeble. Brown was comfortable in the company of prince and pauper, happy speaking to crowds of people, calm when faced with impending doom, but was the epitome of un-cool when it came to womankind. He tried to divert his attention to the second act of the climbing show that was unfolding above him, but he was once again drawn in by Honeys voice, this time softly chastising the infants for being so demanding. He once read, in some old eastern book full of pithy wisdom, that the voice is half of love. At this moment *the voice* was an all consuming bewitchment that was occupying considerably more than its fair share of Brown’s affection. She

straightened from tending her young flock and was surveying the scene when she glanced at Brown. She held his eyes to the point of uneasiness, when her mouth then curled into sweet silent greeting, once again awakening tickling butterflies in Brown's stomach. She smiled a disarming smile that was so filled with the joy of being that Brown couldn't help but smile back, allowing her to lift his spirit. The lazy breeze had stopped momentarily and the festivities had briefly lulled. Her eyes were bright blue, the kind of blue that the sea would be if the sea was perfect. Her slender frame gave her an effortless elegance while her amber coloured coat was iridescent as it caught the sunlight. Their souls danced together in the sky above them, her steps vibrant, beautiful and excitable, his being slower, grand and intrigued. They watched and loved this dance, the content of a moment, without a movement, until quite suddenly Father Time wrested back his hold on the world. The fête rushed back into view with the tugging of Honey's summer dress as the young rabbits swiftly led her off to play with the woodlice, giving Brown an opportunity to actually breathe again. He quickly gathered his emotions from where they lay all around him in the lush grass, and followed after Rat, letting an old sea shanty rise up to his whistling lips.

As afternoon turned into evening and the activities mellowed into melodious music, Brown was back at his stall attempting to iron out the creases in his ruffled heart. A relatively new companion, an even-keeled middle-aged mouse from the city, was lending his grey ears and council. Brown didn't know at the time, but Grey and he would become great friends and, through their mutual love of collection, would together establish the first natural history museum in the region. But now Brown was struggling to comprehend the strength of the feelings that had disregarded all reason earlier in the day, and Grey could do little more than nod rather benevolently. He had been happily married to a gorgeous white mouse for over a decade now but remembered very well the early stages which Brown was describing.

"It only goes to show that my experience of such things really is limited - I thought that there was something special between Penny and I a few years ago, but it was nothing like that... I'm not one to prone to rash

decisions..." his eyes brightened as a phrase came to him, "...but I will answer if deep calls to deep, so to speak."

"Very profound" Grey sighed sarcastically. Unperturbed, Brown continued, "It's a very strange thing to know so much about another person without having said a word to them. It's happened to me a few times with male chums, but never with a girl, and never to this extent. I know she's full of the spirit, I know she's got a head full of adventures, I know she's forgiving, I know she comes from a loving family, and we've never exchanged a word. And those eyes...those eyes are like..." Brown's head tilted to the side as he made another far reaching comparison between Honey's eyes and the celestial bodies of heaven. He stared wistfully into the crimson of the closing day, leaning up against the polished wood of his stall frame, letting his words and thoughts wander down various paths into the future.

"With a beret and a cigarette, you'd do quite the impression of a Parisian. 'Mon amor!'" A mock French accent made both creatures start. Honey stood there, beside the stall, totally soaked through but imitating Brown's stance. She'd just won a wager with one of the otters who'd challenged her to a breath holding contest in the river. Brown, mortified that she might have overheard his rather mushy musings, quickly hid behind some chivalry.

"My goodness! You're drenched! Why?... actually, it doesn't matter, get yourself over here by the stove, sit down and warm those hands. I'll get you a towel and a hot drink at once." Allowing herself to be taken by the hand, she feigned a swoon to Grey as Brown went into action. Grey grinned inwards and outwards. He suddenly didn't think Brown's metaphors of her beauty to be quite so ridiculous.

"So you're Mr Brown, the curator from the Winfrode millstone?" Honey began after she'd been fussed over quite enough. Brown blushed at her recognition.

"Yes indeed, but please, call me Brown, I'm not into formalities. I gather you are Miss Honey from the Lulworth Vale?" She nodded, again holding his eyes and inviting him to continue. "Well I saw you with some children earlier and meant to come and introduce myself..." Grey stifled a giggle with a forced cough and interjected,

“I’m sorry I’ve been so demanding of your time Brown, do forgive me.” He gave a broad but sly grin and continued, “If I’d known you had such a beauty to make the acquaintance of, I’d have stopped bending your ear hours ago.” He drew out the ‘hours’ into an ‘hooooouuurrrss’ as he spoke. Despite his wickedness, Grey was a very funny mouse, and Brown genuinely enjoyed his quips, even when at his own expense. It was Honey’s turn to blush at the compliment, and Brown admired her artless and innocent openness.

“My mother was an absolute beauty in her day. Still is in fact, but I get my coat from my Papa. He’s from the one of true blonde mice from the western isles. Anyway, I’ve heard you’re relatively new in this village,” she addressed Grey, “but I see you’ve already made a good friend? I’ve yet to hear a bad word about Mr Brown, sorry, Brown. The whole community seems to be quite under his spell, including you.”

This confirmed to Grey that there was some mutual interest, her asking the villagers about Brown, but ‘Mr’ Brown needed no further encouragement.

“I think you are probably the most perfect creature I have ever laid eyes upon,” Brown piped with unexpected candour, “and it runs right through you, from your magical coat to your outrageous laugh! I’m no fan of dilettantes, and a dilettante you are not.”

“Well thank you,” Honey accepted, abashed but gracious, “and in danger of sounding conceited, I must say you’re rather easy on the eye yourself.” Honey was looking at the village conquer collector with clear admiration. Brown involuntarily puffed out his chest a little.

Grey had heard quite enough. Two straight-shooters needed no additional tact from a third wheel, so he politely mumbled something about wanting to see the lizards before they left, doffed his imaginary cap, and made his way off into the dusk.

Brown and Honey sat on the bench near the river for many hours, enthusing and being enthused, exploring each other’s lives with animation, both taking turns to act out various dramas that words couldn’t truthfully recount. They found common ground in positive attitudes, love of adventure, silly humour, and mutual geekyness – Honey listened wide-eyed at the story of how sycamore seeds had become like little spinning

flying machines, and Brown was warmed by the passionate explanation of why all-in-one tailoring is indeed the future. The immediate freedom and comfort they found with each other regularly caused them both to pause and take stock, and at each subsequent pause, their *stock* seemed to be improving.

Abruptly, Honey jumped up. “The otters have begun to play!!” She almost shouted, “I can hear them. We must go and dance!! Come!” Brown was totally acquiescent, carried by her vivacious delight, and before he could even consider himself, they had run straight into the jam of reeling bodies in the main marquee. Brown hadn’t danced for years, more due to a quirk or life than an actual aversion to dancing, so his first few jigs saw Honey pulling him bodily around the circles while his head and feet learned to talk to each other again. The only creatures more overjoyed at the occasion than the beaming Honey and Brown were the pipe playing otters on the small stage. Alongside the mice with their fiddles, the visitors layered on the melody and harmony while keeping heavy rhythm with their boots upon the boards. As a result, the crescendo of each dance was quite spectacular. Everyone sweated and nobody cared. Many of the villagers had also noticed the stunning golden mouse laughing her way around the reels with Brown, and nods of approval and admiration were exchanged at almost every turn.

The dancing continued until a rose-petal dawn teetered on the horizon. Having no desire to part company, Honey and Brown ambled unhurriedly out of the marquee and, arm in arm, continued to feed their growing affection through the morning mists on the bank of the Frome. They wandered upstream to a specific bend in the river where a large elm reached out far into mid stream. Sleepily, they hoisted themselves up onto one of the huge boughs, and sat together watching the river pass, keeping time, as the world awoke for another day. Brown tenderly took her hand, and gave her a firm look, as if to say ‘this is more than a fleeting pleasure for me’. As was the case for the whole of their short acquaintance, the expression on her face mirrored his own. As the sun rose and filled the tree with the cool whispering of the morning breeze, Honey got up on the branch, walked carefully out over the water and stood. Without looking at Brown, she said confidently,

“When we meet again, things will be even better.” And with that, fully clothed, she dived neatly into the current, disappearing underwater for some time. Brown hopped up onto the branch and watched her surface. She looked back at him, and smiled. The river carried her around the bend and she was gone.

Chapter 2

An enlightening encounter in the dark

The following morning, Brown walked unsteadily out of his burrow, as was his custom, to feel the freshness of the morning dew between his toes and to allow the dawn chorus to rouse him into full consciousness. As his view of the world sharpened with his widening eyes, something caught his attention down where his roughshod garden path met the village track. He gingerly made his way along the path, not yet trusting his balance, and, setting down his steaming cup of black coffee, regarded a note that had been weighed down with a few choice stones. Immediately a small rush of adrenaline gripped him; he knew exactly who it was from. Everyone local to the village would pop notes through the letter box, and he wasn't expecting any missives from further afield. Holding Honey's letter in his hand, he savoured the simple happiness of his seeing his name handwritten on the white paper. Wiping the dew off one of the rocking chairs with the corner of his dressing gown, Brown reclined and thought of the hours that had passed since Honey's impulsive departure. He was mildly tormented by the uncertainty of where they stood; he and she who had danced and sang and begun to entwine their souls. But he was also nourished by her final words. '*When we meet again, things will be even better.*' The assuredness in that statement had warded off any real despair, and she had provided the thread for his rather random dreams that night - a montage of confusing countryside scenes, with all the colours mixed up, but in which Honey made frequent, comforting cameos. He slurped his sweet coffee and unfolded the note. Her hand made a very pleasing style on the page and she'd used a dove feather quill. She obviously wrote a lot. Brown was impressed. As his eyes scanned the words, disappointment quickly furrowed his brow. This was replaced by a broad smile and small chuckle, and he concluded his reading with an air of serene contemplation. She had been invited by the otters to accompany them back to Arne and spend some time learning their weaving techniques. As she was a tailor, and those coastal fabrics had no equal, she could hardly refuse such an offer. Arne was a long way away and they had left the previous evening. She was now somewhere in the depths of the

countryside, journeying towards the sea with that merry band. This had caused the furrowed brow, but Brown held in his hand affirmation that she left her affections there with him, just as he sent his affections out with her. This had caused the smile and chuckle. She signed off her letter with the same phrase she left him with on the river. Brown eased himself to his feet and wandered back inside, fulfilled in spiritual wholeness, but nonetheless pensive. The thought of not seeing her gave him that familiar jab of sorrow.

A full month passed and the autumn was in full swing. Gusts began to shake the trees and fallen leaves began to obscure the road around the village. Fewer creatures were out and about in the colder air which now had a touch of winter in it.

“Brown, can you please stop wobbling around?!” Grey exclaimed.

“Look, just move a little more to the left. No, the left. That’s it. A bit more. Just...a... bit...more.” Brown seemed to be holding his breath as he issued instructions from up in the foliage.

“If I had known that your offer of an ‘afternoon stroll’ would mostly involve you standing on my shoulders, repairing the nests of migrating birds we don’t even know, I don’t think I would have left my fireside. Ouch! Flipping heck! You should really give your nails a trim you know, they’re digging into me through my tweed!” Grey was doing his best to look like the quintessential country gent in a tweed jacket and some plus fours.

“Nearly there... ok... it seems to be stable enough now... one more twig... right, ok, you can let me down now.”

“Finally” with a big exhalation Grey bent down and Brown slipped off his shoulders, “I’m going to send you the cleaning bill, you know. Look at this.” Grey pointed out the muddy prints on his shoulders wearing a semi-serious forlorn expression.

“Come on Grey, that’s what tweed is for! It’s made to disguise mud.” Brown comforted, “You can hardly see it and Mrs Grey will hardly notice.”

“Hmmm... anyway, I meant to catch you after the school play yesterday but lost you in the crowd”, they were now walking at a healthy pace towards the embankment which rose up near the churchyard, “I wanted to talk to you about Honey, and well, what’s going on in your head. I can

see a growing melancholy which, to be honest, I don't much like the look of."

"Oh come on," protested Brown, "I haven't been a misery guts!"

"I know you haven't, but that's not what I'm saying. I've got to know you better recently and I know all is not well. You can't engage for more than a few minutes and I'm worried the longing that I see in your eyes might turn into sadness. You don't want to get sick."

"But I feel in fine fettle, tip top shape" Brown sang back, emphasising the 'fine'.

"I don't mean physically sick," Grey said with slight exasperation, "I mean *love* sick."

Brown stopped and looked up at the sky. His mood flattened.

"I don't think I really know what *love* means yet," he muttered quietly, "I think I got a glimpse of it, a taste, but it was so fleeting...not really enough time to get my head round what my heart was feeling. You know she went off to the coast...?"

"Yes yes, you showed me the letter when I popped in the other day. But if the status quo is not satisfactory, what are you going to do about it?" Grey's deep voice sounded quite severe.

"I'm not entirely sure, but I need to find out what this 'love' is, or means, otherwise I'll get lost and too introspective, as you say. I can feel it happening already."

"But what are you going to *do*?" Grey laboured, "you need to address it, and soon."

"Well..." Brown motioned to the heavens, "I feel like He's telling me to follow my instinct, and go to the coast. But that's a very long journey and I've got responsibilities in the village, especially with the winter closing in."

"Listen, you know you can delegate those tasks to others. I mean, come on, I can run the Sunday school while you're away, and the pensioners will survive without their bowls referee, for a little while at least!"

"I know..."

"I don't want to tell you what to do, but I can say this, from plenty of experience, regret what you *do*, not what you *don't* do. Don't go through your life wondering 'what if', just because you couldn't rationalise the situation. Love is irrational."

“I know you’re right,” Brown’s tone sounded a bit more positive, “I need to see her again before my heart stagnates, and see how deep this rabbit warren really goes. But I’ll have to prepare for a trip like that and go alone; I couldn’t reasonably ask someone to come with me as it’ll be a real push. Plus I don’t exactly know where to go either – most of my local forays have been to the west of here, not to the east.”

“Well, you haven’t got much time. The weather is only going to get worse. You’re fit enough and savvy enough, you just need to overcome yourself. The very reason for your journey is what’s keeping you from starting it. You haven’t known love before, it seems, and it’s fear of this unfamiliar territory that is keeping you here, with your coffee and your conquers and your crocheting.”

“I don’t crochet.”

“Whatever. Just promise me you’ll think about it?” Grey had eased off a bit and was now being more empathic.

“Ok, I’ll think about it.” Brown agreed.

“And then do something. Think and do. That’s the key.”

“Ok, enough, enough! Let’s away! Onwards and upwards my friend! We have hands to lend and nests to tend!” Brown twirled his stick around imaginary birds’ nests with dramatic flair, and set off with renewed vigour for the embankment. Grey sighed deeply and rolled his eyes, stepping in behind.

“Quite the poet.”

That evening Brown made his way home through Marley Wood, a sizable forest that obscures a narrow valley, and where the bluebells totally cover the floor with cerulean enchantment in the spring. Grey and he had gone their separate ways as the sun had passed the yardarm, the older mouse going back to be pampered by his wonderful wife while Brown looked in on his brother who didn’t live far from the churchyard. He was walking slowly along the central path, a trail that cut the wood almost perfectly in two and ran steeply downhill. It could be quite treacherous in the wet. The night was arriving relatively quickly and the dense, gnarled trees didn’t give the twilight much of a chance. In a normal scenario, Brown would be hurriedly scurrying down the path, silent and vigilant. Marley Wood was not a place for a mouse to be abroad after the sun had set. But this wasn’t

a normal scenario, and Brown wasn't thinking normally. Grey's words bounced around his head, while Honey danced in and out of his imagination. He was occasionally talking to himself, having an open debate as to his plan of attack."

"If you don't go," he said aloud, "you'll never know. You've got absolutely nothing to lose... But then again, that's a crazy thing to do! You've known her for all of 6 hours and you don't even know her surname. My gosh, this is ridiculous!"

"I agree." That wasn't his voice. It was gruff and low and almost made Brown jump out of his skin. He whipped around to see the toothy grin of a fox, a very large fox, peering at him in the darkness. Brown was terrified and went ice cold, but true to form, immediately started planning an escape. There was a vine running up a tree to his left that was closer to him than the fox, and it was thin enough for him to climb with ease...

"Stop trembling, and for goodness sake, stop looking around for an escape route." The vixen grumbled, lowering herself to the ground nonchalantly. "I've already had my dinner, and I'm not sure you'd be worth eating anyway." Brown relaxed, but only slightly.

"I'm just curious." Foxy continued, waving her bushy tale about as she spoke, "For starters, what is a mouse like you doing walking through the woods at night? And what's more, you're not just aimlessly kicking through the twigs and dry leaves, you're talking to yourself as well! Or, more accurately, announcing your thoughts to every inhabitant of the forest. Are you alright... in the head I mean?"

"I'm quite alright," Brown retorted defensively, regaining control of his voice, "my mind is just on other things at the moment."

"Now there's an understatement. I can tell you're local from your accent, and *everyone* knows not to come through here at night. This must be pretty major." Foxy was very inquisitive, so inquisitive that many of the woodlanders called her nosy.

"It is pretty major." Brown answered, somewhat taken aback by the genuine concern in her voice.

"Well, whatever it is, you need to sort it out. It'll do you no good wandering through the countryside, absently wondering about it, forgetting yourself and your surroundings." Foxy had a point. Had things

been different, this could well have been Brown's waterloo. That thought shook Brown to the core.

"Umm... I suppose I should say thank you, firstly for not eating me, and secondly for scaring some sense into me." Brown was breathing heavily as the shock hadn't left him yet.

"You're very welcome. Now off you go. No more of this negligence. Adieu mouse." She disappeared off into the undergrowth without a sound, the way night creatures *should* move, and Brown was left alone in the silence of his thoughts. The air sat totally still within the wood. A nightingale began his beautiful song somewhere in the far distance. After a moment, Brown shook his head vehemently in self castigation, and darted off down the path, heading for home.

Early the next day, Rat (the teacher with parochial concerns) made a visit to the millstone to borrow some fishing tackle. He was short a few lures and knowing that Brown loved tying his own flies, he thought he could scrounge a few from Brown's substantial collection. The little roundwood door was ajar, as usual, so Rat just walked in.

"Kindly Brown, could I trouble you for a couple of flies, my dear chap?"

His well-polished question found no reply and ebbed away amongst the well-polished furniture and plethora of seeds. Rat noticed that Brown's small wardrobe was open and some his clothes had been tossed onto the floor, apparently discarded in a rush. Exploring further, he also saw that the fire hadn't received any attention since yesterday, and was now quite cold and lifeless. Rat helped himself to a few flies from Brown's tackle box, knowing that he wouldn't mind, and turned to leave. As he tucked the lures into his dufflecoat pocket, Rat's eyes passed the hooks by the door; Brown's travel gear was missing. No hat, no jerkin, no knapsack. He clearly hadn't just popped out on an errand. Cast upon the floor in the doorway, as if as an afterthought, Rat read a note that'd he'd missed on the way in. It was scrawled in the beautiful matter-of-fact manner of haste, and read, 'Gone to the coast to find the Otters, to find Honey, to find Love. Back before Christmas.'

Rat raised an eyebrow. Brown had left.

Chapter 3

A river runs to it

As Rat cast his first fly into the clear waters of the River Frome, the same waters lapped against Brown's ankles further downstream. The bright mid morning was flickering through the willow leaves as he stood motionless on a gravelly shoal, staring into the unknown east. The water, like the surrounding air, was cold but as the sun was warm, he let his feet gently numb, knowing they would quickly thaw as he began his journey in earnest. A few sticklebacks darted through his legs, tickling him a little and causing a slight giggle that disturbed a nearby wren, who chirruped twice before fluttering off downstream.

"A set of wings would be handy right now", Brown whispered to himself, the words assuming wistful puffs in the still frozen air. Despite his pedestrian prospects, he couldn't keep a sly grin from shaping his lips. He loved an adventure, and he quite relished the unnerving anticipation that these first hours always gave him. But he'd never set out with such a significant yet unmapped goal, and this added to the gravity of the occasion. Ahead of him lay a land he'd never covered, on foot or by boat, and at the end, where this river met the sea, was a girl who he loved, or thought he loved at least. Digging his stick into the stones, he rocked back on his heels before vaulting onto the grassy bank. Setting his eyes on the horizon, his feet on the path, and his heart on the prize, he loped off into the morning glare, hoping the fine weather would hold.

Not long afterwards, the path temporarily veered off the river and into a dying meadow. Some wildflowers could still be seen valiantly pushing forth their whites and yellows while the colour faded from the world around them. Brown let his hand trail lazily through the long sorrowful grass until he stopped abruptly at a fork in the path. A large boulder dominated the junction, lying ahead between the diverging routes. It wasn't indecision that halted Brown's progress, but a curious creature that lay basking on the rock in front of him. The sloe worm leisurely turned his head towards Brown, until the mouse could see the deep lethargic contentment in the eyes of the small snake.

“Excuse me sir, sorry to bother you but I was wondering if you’d be so kind as to point me in the right direction? I’m looking to rejoin the towpath.” Brown asked as politely as possible. He wasn’t sure how highly snakes esteemed good manners, having never spoken to one before.

“Well,” the sloe worm said unhurriedly, “the left fork takes you directly back onto the river but is very muddy at the moment...” he paused, as if to think, “...while the right fork also rejoins the river a little further down but is a much better path. And by the way, it’s not a *towpath*. Towpaths are found next to canals. This is just a path.”

“Thank you very much. I’ll be on my way in a jiffy, on the *path*, but if you don’t mind me asking, what kind of snake are you?”

“A sloe worm” answered the sloe worm, “there used to be a lot more of us around, but we’re not too popular with the locals, being snakes and all.”

“Well, you seem pleasant enough to me” Brown continued, “and it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Brown. I’m a seed collector.”

“My name is Sloe. A pleasure indeed. You are a warm person to meet on this cold day. Are you off on a collecting mission?” Sloe was becoming slightly more animated, though still speaking quite slowly.

“Actually, I’m not on a ‘business’ trip per say, although I’m sure I’ll pick up some things en route. I’m heading to Arne to, well, see about a girl.” Brown said this last part rather coyly.

“Ahhh... love...” Sloe mused, “a wondrous thing. It makes us bold, for sure. Arne is a long way and the winter is arriving. But for love, these challenges are mere trifles.”

“I hope so” responded Brown, “I appreciate your faith. On that note, I should get on. I’ve only just set out and I’d like to make the Wool ford before nightfall. But before I go, as you seem well versed in such things, could I ask you, umm, how best to put this.... what *is* love? What does it mean to you anyway?”

If Sloe had had an eyebrow, he would have raised it quizzically. “A deep question at this early hour, and one I’d have thought you’d be able to answer, given your mission. But anyway,” Sloe looked calmly about him, then glanced at the sun, before returning his restful gaze to Brown, “love, to me, is not rushing. It is patience. I come out of my burrow in the morning and lie on this rock, and have to wait while the glorious sun

warms me, enables me, motivates me, and slowly breathes life back into my cold blood. I love the sun, but I need to be patient with her. I savour this time now, although I never used to when I was young.”

“Wow” Brown remarked, taken aback, “I wasn’t really expecting that. Thank you. Very much. And I hope she warms you up today, as warm as ever. I’m sure we’ll meet again, Sloe, as I don’t live very far away. I’m at the Millstone, on the edge of Greenfield.”

“Ah yes, I know it. I’ve always wondered who lived there. I might just pop round sometime. Good luck Brown, and I’ll pray that the sun keeps shining for you.”

“Thanks. Adieu.” As Brown made his way down the recommended right fork, he wondered why he said ‘adieu’. He’d never used that phrase, and couldn’t work out where he’d heard it. Before leaving the meadow, he turned back to see Sloe still happily sunning himself on his rocky vantage, and made a mental note of how genuinely affable he’d been. From now on, Brown would definitely try and put in a good word for sloe worms wherever possible.

After his encounter with the surprisingly sympathetic Sloe, Brown made very good headway along the winding course of the Frome, occasionally having to get a little wet as the path crossed from bank to bank at a ford. He made it to Wool that evening, where a great forsaken manor presided over the riverside, and he stopped at the Black Bear Inn, glad to get in from the cold, but more so away from the haunting view of the vacant manor. These large houses, empty shadows of former glory, generally gave Brown a sense of unease. But as he sat by the fireside, with an ale in one hand and a tatty hand-drawn map in the other, he planned the next week of travel using some of Grey’s directions, setting small goals that would hopefully bring small victories.

The weather held for almost an entire week with Sloe’s additional prayers clearly aiding Brown’s progress. Nonetheless the temperature sharply dipped at night and if Brown wasn’t able to find a cosy hollow to set up camp, he was forced to seek the hospitality of local folk. Although he didn’t like requesting generosity, Brown relished the odd little communal evening after a day lost in thought on the deserted road. A family of moles

had put him up one night, Brown being drawn to the welcoming lantern hung outside their home hill, and he spent another with a wizened old badger who was equally delighted by the evening of company. Brown had packed a selection of finely polished seed specimens for just such occasions, and he left one with each of his kindly hosts.

At the beginning of the second week, the landscape changed dramatically, as the map foretold, the Frome emerging from the gently rolling hills and onto the vast farming plain that led to Wareham, a busy market town that Brown wasn't particularly looking forward to. The river was open here, wider and slower, and as he rounded one of the many meanders, he noticed a small rowing boat loosely tied to one of the stunted yew trees further up the bank. Two creatures were sat in the wooden craft, seemingly deep in conversation and so totally oblivious to Brown's approach. The physical contrast between the two debaters was extreme, one being small, prickly and intense, the other being large, sleek and relaxed. Brown was internally questioning what had brought the hedgehog and hare together when he arrived at their mooring spot. Despite his direct presence, their concentration was not broken. They seemed to be arguing over the finer points of time and matter, the hare maintaining that time can't exist without matter while the hedgehog was contesting this with some more philosophical and rather incoherent points. Brown didn't really want to disturb them, but he had a thorn in his foot which wouldn't budge.

"Excuse me" Brown announced, to no avail.

"Excuse me" this time a little more assertively. Both creatures looked up at the now quite rugged looking mouse on the bankside, genuinely surprised at his arrival.

"Hi there mouse" the hare said cheerfully.

"Yes?" The hedgehog asked, significantly less cheerfully.

"Terribly sorry to interrupt your discourse," Brown started, as politely as ever, "but do either of you happen to have a needle? I've lodged a thorn in my heel and can't seem to get it out with the tip of my knife."

"It is your lucky day my friend," replied the hare, "I was whipping some of my ropes earlier and have the needle just.... here!" He produced a shining sail-maker's needle from his pack and tossed it up to Brown.

"Thanks. How providential. I'll just be a moment."

"Not to worry, *time doesn't matter*" the hare added. His companion remained in what can only be described as a gloomy silence. Brown was aware that his interjection was not particularly welcomed by the hare's haughty friend and suspected that the hedgehog's debate wasn't going particularly well.

"I've lost my thread now" stated the hedgehog flatly as he stared grumpily over the floodplain fields.

"Ah... No you haven't," retorted the hare jovially, obviously on the up, "you were just about to launch into the classic relativity rant!"

"No I wasn't!" the hedgehog countered, but didn't continue.

"Suit yourself. Maybe we should continue this after lunch when you've had something to eat?" The hedgehog ignored the jibe and so the hare looked up toward Brown. "Do you need a hand?"

"Actually yes," Brown replied with slight mirth, "I just can't reach it. It's quite silly really, but I'd love a bit of help."

"Of course." And with that the hare sprung out of the boat, clearing the reeds and mud in one impressive leap, landing expertly next to Brown's prone form. The boat rocked wildly and the hedgehog, while holding on for dear life, grumbled something about hares and recklessness. The hare grinned at Brown and winked, introducing himself proudly, "Wander".

"That was quite a jump" observed Brown, "I'm Brown."

"You don't say," joked Wander, "now what can I do you for?"

"Well, I can't quite see what I'm doing enough to get the needle under the thorn. If you can do the honours, I'd be much obliged." Brown handed Wander the needle and sat back while the hare set to work.

"It *is* a stubborn fellow!" Wander exclaimed, "I can see why you were struggling. I get these from time to time as well and it sometimes takes an age to get them out."

Brown just nodded, wincing a little, but disguising it so as not to discourage the charitable hare. During the operation, Brown decided to quiz Wander about his companion.

"He seems like a bit of a stick in the mud." whispered Brown.

Wander looked up and beamed back at Brown, clearly amused. "He's alright really, just doesn't like it when our intellectual musings don't swing his way. We come out in the boat twice a week, every week, and talk

about all sorts of things. He's much the brighter of the two of us, and I've learnt so much from him. I may be able to cover ground faster than him, but he can sweep the heavens with his thoughts."

"I suppose I've just seen him on an off day then?" Brown murmured furtively.

"You could say that." Wander stifled a little laugh. "I really love it though, coming out and exploring the depths of existence and logic. That's the essence of plutonic love, my good mouse, the meeting of minds." Wander continued with his task, leaving Brown to digest that little nugget of wisdom.

"Aha! Out you come you thorny scoundrel!" Wander announced his success with triumph.

"Ahh..." Brown breathed a sigh of relief, "that was a deep one."

"You can say that again. Looks like a hawthorn." Wander handed Brown the sizable thorn as they both got to their feet. "You should keep that as a souvenir and tie it to your walking stick as a warning to evil thorns everywhere."

Brown laughed. "Ha! I might just do that. Thank you so much. I'll leave you to your luncheon and your debates," and more quietly said, "and I hope you manage to cheer him up!"

"I've got his favourite pate in the hamper. He'll be smiling before long, don't you worry." Wander whispered as he prepared to leap back into the boat. The hedgehog looked up at the hare with clear horror and gripped the sides of the boat with all his strength.

Brown turned leave. "Adieu Wander, and adieu Mr Hedgehog." There was that word again. Strange.

"Bon journey Brown" said Wander.

These kind of spirited creatures are essential on a long lone journey, and just as some clouds started to gather in the sky, the skies of Brown's mind were cleared and refreshed by his heartening meeting with those most intellectual of animals.

Chapter 4

A garden haven

The weather broke and it took three rain-filled days to track through the plain expanse of the Wareham Valley. It would have taken two, but Brown had to hobble for the first day in order to keep the small wound on his foot clean. As suggested, he'd bound the thorn to his stick, and brandished it whenever he saw a hawthorn bush. It definitely made a difference; he got no more splinters for the rest of his journey.

"That place really doesn't appeal to me" thought Brown as he stood to survey the dark urban mass of Wareham through the sheets of rain, now only a mile off. The town, with its gothic church towers and threatening outer wall, roosted like a raven on a small hill, watching the innocent Frome flow by to its right. One positive thing that Brown had heard was that Wareham had a beautiful public garden somewhere inside the town gates that was kept well stocked with vibrant flowers all year round. The gardeners were renowned throughout the region as also being accomplished florists, and apparently would adorn the streets with marvellous bouquets from time to time. Brown embraced this hopeful vision and let it soften the austere image that lay in front of him.

"Appearances can be deceiving" he concluded and joined the main road that led up to the ancient town entrance.

As regularly as the passing of the days, Brown would think about Honey. Through the drab experience of trudging the length of the floodplain, he had often found solace in the memory of the of their brief time together. He would wonder about her wanderings by the sea, about her weaving, about her wild nature, and would often hear her whispers on the wind. He knew that travelling alone would lead to many hours of melancholy reminiscence and that these conjured experiences would simply make Brown miss her more. But, he was happy in the knowledge that his desire to see her was ultimately a good thing. At this moment, the sound of Honey's outrageous laugh as well as the prospect of a floral display encouraged Brown to wade through the muddy approach to the gate and push open the massive oaken doors. Disappointingly, the sight of the dark,

sodden houses leading away in haphazard terraces was very much in keeping with the brooding exterior of the town. All the inhabitants were sheltering inside these sad looking abodes, and precious little light was escaping past the heavy curtains onto the deserted street. A few of these curtains twitched in nearby houses as Brown stood contemplating a game plan in the entranceway. Abruptly he tucked his hands deeper into his jerkin pockets and holding onto his happy thoughts, quickly made his way up the gloomy main road toward the centre of the town.

Brown had still not seen a single soul when he caught his first glimpse of the famed garden. Down one of the small side streets a flash of yellow turned his head. Tracking back a few paces he beheld the colourful side of a long garden a few hundred yards off the cobbled high street. Even as the light drained from the sky and the grey rain seemed to fall even harder, the blues and reds and whites and greens poured brightness into their surroundings, drawing Brown towards them. He entered through a small wrought iron gate and stepped into a glorious world. None of the stern surrounding architecture could be seen through the dense foliage, and Brown's mouth opened involuntarily as he absorbed the colours; he hadn't seen such a vibrant display since the Jamboree that autumn. Around the periphery, tall palms reached up towards the heavy-laden sky while the narrow central lawn was bordered by thick, unkempt flower beds. What the gardeners clearly lacked in tidiness, they more than made up for with colourful ambition. There were all sorts of exotic snow white orchids, patches of rich ochre bracken, ruby red tulips sprouting at imaginative angles, purple bougainvillea climbing an aged trellis, and many other plants that Brown couldn't identify, all planted randomly about the place. The disorganised feel appealed to Brown, and he thought that this garden would bring a smile to the face of whimsical Mother Nature. After placing his pack in a dry bower under a tree fern, he took a tour of his newfound oasis. The lawn ended only a short distance away, but rustic paths continued through the undergrowth, visiting a few small ponds, a plot of bamboo, more beds of enlivening colour, and finishing in a magnificent grove of plain trees. Unlike the surrounding town, this place was rejoicing at the rainfall; Brown could hear the plants drinking up the moisture from the fertile soil. As the ground gurgled and leaves pattered, Brown stopped

to regard a lone blossom on an otherwise unremarkable bush. It was quite unlike any of the flowers he'd yet seen and he paused to savour it for a full minute. The two electric blue petals were each as large as his hand and they had some marvellous orange and black spots on them. They resembled a set of deep, searching eyes, like that of a cat. He was about to return to his pack and start bedding down for the night when the lone blossom moved.

"Oh my!" exclaimed Brown, "You poor thing! How awful to get caught in the rain!" Brown gently swept up the limp butterfly into his hands and scurried back to the dry bower. He set the beautiful creature down on his bedroll, before quickly starting a small fire using some dry tinder he carried with him. While preparing some wild rice, Brown cast concerned glances at the butterfly, hoping it would live and flex its delicate wings again, but couldn't understand how he thought it was just a flower in the first place. He must have been so engrossed in the novelty of the garden, that even butterfly-shaped flowers were possible. Then one of her long antenna rose a little. Then the other, followed by a slight flex of her body. Her wings were still soaked but she was alive and Brown's soul sang out.

"Hello my little friend. How goes it?" Brown chanced. He didn't know whether a butterfly would talk to a mouse, being such shy creatures.

A tiny voice issued from the tiny being.

"My goodness. I thought I was done for," she paused for breath, and let out a little groan. "Ooo... fiddlesticks! I can't move my wings!"

Brown smiled. It seemed she was going to live, her almost inaudible voice was very musical, and what a marvellous turn of phrase!

"Easy now," Brown cautioned, "just relax and I'll move you a little closer to the fire. Now you're conscious you can tell me if it gets too warm, OK?"

"OK," she said sounding sweetly forlorn, and Brown gently pulled the bedroll towards the hearty little fire. After a few more minutes she spoke again,

"Thank you Mr Mouse. You are very kind to bother saving me. Thank you, thank you. I don't even remember you picking me up..." She started to recount, "I was fluttering from the cover of one tree to another and an especially big raindrop hit me, then another, and..." her little voice faltered and Brown thought he heard a small sob.

“I’m sorry,” said the butterfly, “it’s just a bit much, coming back from the dead and such.”

“I understand,” Brown comforted, “it must be a real shock?”

“It is,” agreed the butterfly. “My name is Penny Isabella, I’m a Queen’s Gladness butterfly, and I’m very happy you came along, kind Mr Mouse.”

“My name is Brown, and it’s really my pleasure. I couldn’t let one of God’s finest artworks get washed away, and one with such a beautiful name. Who gave you that name?”

“Me actually,” replied Penny Isabella. “We Gladness butterflies see a name as a gift to the people we meet, and as early as we can talk we are encouraged to choose a name. Penny was the name of my mother, and Isabella comes from one of the shops on the main street here, ‘Isabella’s Trinkets and Treats’ I think it’s called. I just thought they made a good combination.”

“They make a wonderful combination” said Brown, “Now, would you care for a little rice?”

“I can’t really eat rice. I can only drink things.” Penny Isabella seemed a little embarrassed. “Butterflies don’t have any teeth, see”. She uncurled an elegant straw-like proboscis to show Brown.

“Oh, I see. I’m sorry for being such an ignoramus.” Brown was learning so much more about the world on this trip. “I can offer you some of the rice water then? You should be able to drink that. I often keep it to drink anyway. It’s very nutritious.”

“That would be marvellous,” she responded.

Brown served their meal in the two wooden bowls that he had, draining the white rice water into the smaller of the two for the butterfly. They sat eating in contented silence in their little dry haven under the tree fern while the heavens continued to water the garden around them. When he’d finished, Brown reclined to stare into the glowing embers and knowing that Penny Isabella would not have the energy to talk much, took the liberty of telling her the story about Honey and the reason for his mission. She listened carefully, giving out endearing murmurs of attentiveness from time to time.

“...and so as I wandered into the town,” Brown was finishing, “I saw the garden and made straight for it. I was just exploring it when I found you. In

all honesty I'm not too happy to be in the town, but finding myself here, I can't really complain. We could be anywhere in this little bower."

"I don't care for the town much either," Penny Isabella said after a short pause, "I was born in the garden and have stayed here my whole life. I see the wasteland of stone and slate and brick around me and find no reason to venture father a field." She then changed tack slightly, "As for your mission, and your love, we butterflies don't have much time for love, which is a sad thing as I think I understand it, insofar as I experience it every now and again. Our lives are just so short. I might have another summer, I might not. But that is how it is, and has always been. I wouldn't have it any other way. It makes me appreciate the present."

"How do you experience it? Love I mean, not the present" asked Brown.

"Well, you just showed me love, in probably the two forms that I most appreciate. I am a delicate creature, and even the slightest brush, or falling leaf could damage my fragile wings. If I am to survive, Nature must be gentle with me, my friends must be gentle with me. I can't be what I'm meant to be, I can't be radiance and colour unless people treat me with gentleness. When you picked me up and set me down, you must have been very gentle as my wings are completely unblemished. So firstly, love is gentleness." Penny Isabella's wings had dried out by that point, and for the first time she arced them upwards and slowly let them fall in a thoughtful manner. Brown's eyes widened as her iridescent colours glittered in the firelight.

"And secondly" she continued in her quiet voice, "love is self-sacrifice. You didn't need to rescue me, or indeed dry me out and offer me food. It came at your expense, but it is these actions that keep the world going round. The very heart of love is found in selflessness. The world needs more people like you in it, kind Brown."

If the words of the hare were intelligent, the words of the butterfly were wise. Brown had not expected to hear such measured wisdom from a butterfly, given their short lives, but such is the unexpected nature of things. Penny Isabella was one of God's little surprises. It was very humbling and Brown was left in silent contemplation. Her words also gave Brown a strong sense of nostalgia. As a small mouse, he remembered his wise father teaching him the same message; "love is self-sacrifice".

After a while he changed the subject, “Penny Isabella, tell me about the garden. What are these exotic flowers? And who are these gardeners?” As her melodic voice undulated in harmony with the easing rain, she told Brown of the endless colours and blossoms of the garden, the magical garden keepers and the life that the butterflies live in this sanctuary. The embers burnt low and both creatures eventually drifted into deep sleep without knowing whether the story was finished. Penny Isabella dreamed of summer fruits and summer sun, and Brown dreamed of love.

In the morning the wood ash was still smoking and the rain had ceased. The sky was grey and uncertain but the air was still, and the garden was filled with the rhythmic dripping of the foliage. Brown sleepily looked over to the bedroll where he’d left Penny Isabella. The Gladness butterfly was gone, evidently offering her enchanting colours and beautiful name to fresher pastures. Brown made a small mug of coffee with the last heat from the fire before packing up his effects and ducking out of the garden. As he hurried out of the still silent town, a few rooks croaked on the rooftops. Passing out of the far town gate, Brown gratefully rejoined the Frome and quickened his pace, knowing he was over half way to the sea.

Chapter 5

The sea

The open landscape closed in around Brown as familiar woodland replaced the expansive floodplain. After Wareham, the Frome carved quite a formidable gorge out of the limestone bedrock and Brown followed the top of the narrow forested canyon for a few days, occasionally looking over the edge at the rushing waters below. Silver birch grew everywhere amongst the rocks and mosses and a few individuals were holding onto select yellow leaves, holding onto the memory of fairer times. They also were shedding their beautiful bark, presumably so that the nymphs and naiads from the canyon could continue to write their musical verse. Brown tossed a peel of this bark down into the river as a tribute and watched it spin and float through the eddies. He had stopped to smell a gust of salty wind that swept through the wood when he heard the rustling from some large creature on the path behind him. Brown took refuge between two rocks on the edge of the gorge, the excitement of the sea scent quickly making way for the apprehension that comes when a small mouse hears heavy footsteps. The blood pulsed in Brown's ears and he could feel the presence of the creature coming closer. He peered out from between the rocks and a lustrous red coat came into view. A big fox stopped on the path to sniff the ground and Brown thought he recognised her. Somewhat rashly, he shouted out a greeting.

"Hi there! Foxy! Over here, I thought..." A big dog fox turned his menacing glare upon Brown and his lean body visibly tensed. He had only one eye and the tip of his tale was ragged and black. It was clearly not the nosy Foxy that Brown met in Marley Wood, but a stranger, and a very hungry stranger at that. Brown withdrew hurriedly through the cleft towards the edge of the canyon tightening his knapsack. The fox stretched its neck towards Brown and let out a deep gurgling growl. Brown had no escape and the fox could see that. Turning its body, it slowly crouched, then leapt suddenly towards Brown with all its ghastly yellow teeth bared. Brown stumbled backwards and fell over, and after a few seconds of staring at the sky, he wondered why he was still alive. He looked up and saw the dog fox couldn't quite fit between the two rocks and had jammed itself in the

narrow gap. It gave an awful snarl and wriggled backwards, keeping its one eye on Brown. The mouse jumped up and looked down at his only way out; the watery ravine dropping away below his feet. Another snarl and angry fox was free. Brown looked back at him and the fox smiled a sickening smile. It jumped and scrambled up to the top of one of the rocks and bore down on poor Brown. Brown spun around and looked down again. He thought he caught a glimpse of a small winged girl in the air below him, beckoning him with open arms and a warm glow. He jumped. Brown could hear the snapping jaws and scrabbling paws behind him as he left the ledge, chancing the waters and the spirits over the teeth and the claws. He fell and fell through the empty air, holding onto himself and closing his eyes, until he plunged into the icy water. It rushed him and ducked him and swept him and bumped him. The rumble of the waters filled his ears but as he bobbed up and gulped a breath he heard the frustrated howl of the fox disappearing in the distance.

Brown was presently hurled over a small waterfall and lost his stick in the process, while another series of rapids almost knocked him senseless. Dazed, he suddenly found himself in a calm pool to the side of the rushing river, a miniature cove carved out by the backwashing of the torrents. His pack was placed neatly on a smooth flat rock next to the pool and he could see some indistinguishable lights dancing around it. Hauling his bruised but intact body onto the rock, he lay back and caught his breath on the strangely warm stone. Every time he opened his eyes dancing lights quickly flitted away but Brown felt an enormous sense of well being as the mystical but genuine warmth thawed his body and dried his clothes. When he had regained his senses, he stood in awe-filled silence, regarding the flowing stone and intricate shapes of the canyon walls. Brown started when a nymph appeared and lingered right in front of him. She gave a graceful, joyful curtsey and before Brown could say anything, she had darted down the gorge. His eyes followed her light and drew his attention to a previously invisible narrow ledge that led away along the river. Shaking his head in relief and disbelief, he shouldered his pack, crossed his healing platform and took a few steps on the fairy's pathway. He bent down to study it. It was a walkway carved by hundreds of tiny chisels that could only be to serve unfortunate creatures that fell into the river; a

labour of love and unconditional generosity. As Brown ran his fingers over the groove of a small step, he noticed something float up next to him. It was his stick, with the hawthorn still attached. He picked it out of the water and at the same time heard a peal of ethereal laughter, happy and giving. Bemused but grateful, questioning but contented, Brown carefully edged off downstream, listening to the echo of the waters and the singing of the spirits.

The deep gorge petered out only a few hundred yards after his encounter with the nymphs, which was welcomed by Brown, for even though the fairy pathway was kindness itself, it was tricky to negotiate even for Brown's small and agile feet. He dreaded to think of the dilemma larger creatures must have faced when being shown the miniscule ledge, wondering how many bigger beasts must have thrown themselves back into the watery peril rather than suffer the indignity of another fall into the river. The rushing turned into a swishing, and the swishing turned into a bubbling, and the bubbling faded into silence as the river played out its final act. The path left the riverside and Brown fairly skipped through the groves of silver birch as they blended into the coastal pines, and his nose was awash with a confusion of strong smells. Sweet pine sap mixed with the airborne sea salt, and this pleasant combination was fighting the mildly sulphurous scent of drying estuarine mudflats. The distant crash of the ocean waves also mingled with the familiar call of seagulls, and Brown could make out the occasional silhouette of a seabird as it cruised over the tree tops.

"How terribly tantalising to be able to smell and hear the ocean and not be able to see it," Brown thought to himself. He was normally a very patient mouse, but the prospect of sighting the endless ocean kindled an infantile excitement, he could barely restrain himself from breaking into a run. The pines abruptly ended in a gorse border and Brown, feeling the sand between his toes, could contain himself no longer. He cast his pack and stick onto the ground and bounded up the back of the small dunes. Standing on a tussock of marram grass he beheld the mighty sea, first with his eyes, then with his soul, as he closed his eyes and let the sea breeze envelop him. The clouds were broken and the odd beam of warm sunlight traced the beach. To his left he could see the fabulous rivulets and

marshes of the Frome's delta and to his right the beach stretched away into the distance where some weathered white cliffs fell into the sea. Brown stayed standing on that tussock, embracing the flush of emotions that this meeting brought, until he began to feel the chill through his jerkin. He knew that Arne, the otter village where Honey was, lay somewhere around the delta and so returned to collect his pack before wandering slowly along the water's edge towards the mottled, swampy river mouth. He couldn't see any sign of the village as he stood on the edge of the mudflats, but his view was quite limited from this lowly point. Brown was making his way back inland towards the higher sand dunes when he noticed some movement on the mud and stopped to explore. He was witnessing a raucous scene of a mudskipper family picnic, mudskippers being the little fish that scoot merrily along the surface of the mudflats. They were laughing and laughing and laughing some more, as they chased each other round and round and round in circles. He cleared his throat quite audibly and the frivolous scene paused, albeit momentarily.

"Hello there, big furry creature!" piped the father mudskipper.

"Hello hello, my dear fellow," said the mother mudskipper.

"Hello, hello, hello, hello, hello..." added the many young mudskippers, and they continued to chorus 'hello' in a most spritely manner as their parents skipped over to talk to Brown.

"Greetings to you, Mr and Mrs Mudskipper. You definitely look like you're making the most of the fairer weather," Brown started, crouched on the bank.

"Yes, yes, yes we are," both fish responded, laughing and talking at the same time. "Why don't you join in?"

"Well, I'd love to but wouldn't I sink into the mud?" Brown said.

"What's wrong with sinking? It's just as fun and it's not deep here. And it tickles. Makes you laugh you know. Love to laugh, laugh to love. Love to laugh, laugh to love. Come on in! Play with the children. We're just playing team tag. Do you know how to play team tag? It's fun, it really is, fun fun fun." Both Mr and Mrs Mudskipper started spinning around in circles of excitement.

"Well... I'm trying to find the village of Arne, and I was hoping to get there before nightfall," but Brown was clearly tempted, and the joy at reaching

his destination was overpowering. The festivities of the small fish felt a little like a congratulatory party to Brown's sub-conscious.

"Oh come on, come in, come in! The village with all the other furry creatures is just over there, through those first trees, and we've got a whole few hours before the day closes. There's fun to be had you know. One can never have too much fun, isn't that right Mrs Mudskipper?"

"That's right Mr Mudskipper. Totally right. So right in fact, that we should probably ask the children. Children! Can we have too much fun?"

"No such thing as too much fun, no such thing as too much fun..." the youngsters repeated again and again. To that refrain, Brown looked about him, suddenly a little self-conscious, set down his effects and slipped surreptitiously, or 'quived' into the mud with the jubilant mudskippers. It was considerably warmer than the water of the river or the sea and really quite indulgent. The mud oozed up to Brown's waist but no further, and stripping off his jerkin, he sat back and let the silt creep up to his neck and chin. He was now at mudskipper-eye-level and could fully partake in the games, even if he had to be a little careful not to inundate his playmates with the waves of mud he created.

"OK, Mr Furry Man," Mr Mudskipper instructed, "as you're the newest member of the team, you have to do the tagging. All you have to do is touch any of us with your shiny black nose and we swap roles. OK? Quite straightforward really, but the little ones are ever so evasive!"

"OK, mudskipper team," Brown was getting into the swing of things and wonderfully losing himself, "here... I... come!!" Brown set about the mudflat, a furry head moving about slowly but darting his nose out from time to time when one of the children, or their parents skipped too near. They were all laughing, Brown most of all, and they played on and on, with the mouse occasionally immersing himself fully in the grey-brown ooze to escape a hunting mudskipper. It was the most relaxed Brown had felt for a good few months, and it was marvellous, to be at journey's end.

Brown heaved himself out of the mudflat and onto the grass with much difficulty and not little protest from the mudskippers. He grinned back at them, resembling some kind of primordial monster, and the mudskipper family cheered and hopped and skipped and laughed. Brown bid them farewell, and having wiped clean a hand, picked up his gear once again and

set off in the direction of Arne. Almost immediately, with the return of his thoughts, the gravity of his mission brought him to a standstill. He could still hear the mud n' games going on behind him, but he allowed himself to pause there to let his mind wander, to digest, to prepare. He'd set out to find love and his destination had been reached. The words and actions of his many new acquaintances repeated in his mind: Sloe the sloe worm had said love was patience; Wander the hare thought it was a meeting of minds; Penny Isabella the beautiful butterfly said love was gentleness and self-sacrifice; the naiads loved through unconditional generosity; and these little mudskippers loved through their laughter. This all rang true and he was grateful for their providential roles, but the love he now sought was more than just those principles. Brown knew that although he'd come to understand more about love on his journey, he was looking to find those principles personified, he was looking to find Honey. He started off again, towards the coastal pines, towards Arne, to do just that.

Brown, while still looking like a primitive mud creature, came across a pretty village signpost, carved from driftwood, announcing to the traveller that they had arrived in Arne and should follow the path ahead. He looked up in the direction of the arrow, and his heart stopped in his chest. His mind froze, and a shiver ran through his whole body. Walking towards him, not ten yards away was the golden mouse who had graced his dreams and his imagination for all those months. He couldn't breathe. There was no air. Honey walked unhurriedly over the pine needles with a basket of fresh figs under her arm. She wore a beaming smile as well as a simple red dress over her gorgeous amber coat. She was holding a floating balloon on a ribbon. She was a summer's day, she was a blooming honeysuckle, she was the warmth and joy of a thousand sunrises. Brown had never been so certain in his life. He was looking at his love.

She spoke first.

"I knew you would come, my dear Brown, but my *what* a costume!" and she kissed him.

Chapter 6

A letter of love

It was late afternoon on Christmas Eve back in Greenfield and the final delivery of festive post had arrived. It had been a month or so since Brown returned from Arne and he sat at his table looking through the cards, enjoying the challenge of identifying the aunt, or cousin or friend whose handwriting it was on the envelope before he opened it. He lit his pipe, an infrequent treat for Brown, and puffed a few smoke rings towards the lively fire. Pausing before addressing the second pile of mail, he spent a little time in silent prayer, sighing deeply and contentedly. He prayed prayers of thanksgiving. Then, continuing through the post and after a few more easy identifications, he stared down at some writing that was not so familiar, although he had seen it before. He took a moment, and then a beautiful, warm realisation spread across his face. The fine curve of the letters and the use of the dove-feather quill gave it away. It was a letter from Honey, from his girl who was still by the sea. Of course it was from her, she promised to send a letter and here it was. As he began to read, her musical voice filled his head, her well pronounced words rolling through his mind, and her beautiful blue eyes drifted into his consciousness...

Wonderful Brown
The Millstone
Greenfield
Frome Middle reach

Honey Honeysuckle
Weaver's Cottage
Arne
Frome Rivermouth

My dearest Brown,

I hope you get this before Christmas day, and that you have a joyous day and celebrate the Lord with your whole heart. I was going to send this letter with a most reliable carrier pigeon, but for all his speed and honesty and efficiency, he can be a little grumpy at times, so I opted for the traditional post, keeping up the festive cheer. I'm writing this from the storehouse balcony, sat in the low winter sun, wrapped up in warm and cosy woollen things, looking over the glassy calm ocean.

Thank you for your letter. You write so beautifully, which doesn't come as a great surprise given your eloquent spoken tales. By all accounts your return journey seemed to be just as eventful as your outward journey, though I'm glad you didn't encounter any more foxes, kind or otherwise. I would very much like you to be in one piece next time we meet.

It was quite strange directly after you left. Having you here for a week was excellent fun, I love being with you, but then you were suddenly gone and all I had to prove your existence was a polished conker and a scatter of intense memories. I think I preferred it when you were around, though I've got back into the swing of things now and spend most days in the workshop improving my weaving. Old Mrs Otter is really pleased with my progress – I've been able to master the Chok technique that I was struggling with while you were here and I've now got a long length of fabric with seven of my favourite colours in. I think I might make it into a dress or, if you're lucky, a shirt for you. It would bring out your rugged colours very nicely.

Yesterday Reeba (the white haired otter) took me out fishing with him. We cast off at dawn from the quay just inside the river mouth and rode out with the tide. It was marvellous starting out in the half light; all very mysterious. Once clear of the river mouth, we set the little triangular sail and headed towards some deep water reefs that only he seems to know about. He normally goes out alone and is more than accustomed to handle the boat alone, so I just sat in the bow under a thick blanket and looked out at the gentle sea swell. Some porpoise decided to join us for a little while, and in their group there was a young one who turned on his side to eye me every time they cruised past. Have you ever seen a porpoise or dolphin? Their skin is so smooth and has some very subtle blue colouration – I might try to recreate their patterning in a ‘dolphin weave’ sometime. They were a lot bigger than I expected and there is such power in their tails! I wonder what meeting a whale must be like. Quite scary I imagine. Anyway, when Reeba sensed the reefs below us, he paid out his nets, tying them to the stern, adjusted the sail accordingly, then sat against the small mast and waited. I watched him as he watched the nets, concentrating on the small floats that traced the lines away from the skiff. He wasn’t watching for anything in particular. The nets twitched and ducked a bit over the next few hours but he just sat there in thoughtful silence, listening to the wind and the water, occasionally glancing back at me and giving a reassuring nod. He smiled at me each time, but only with his eyes. Seeing his weathered face peacefully waiting made me think of the sloe worm you told me about, and how he would patiently wait for the sun. Reeba patiently waited for time to pass and for the fish to fill his nets, not wanting to do anything else, letting his mind dwell in the present while drifting through the past and the future. I want to be more patient, more like old Reeba, more like Sloe. I sometimes miss the real substance and meaning of life around me as I rush about. The weaving is really helpful though, giving me time and space to relax and just be, patiently be.

I’m also amazed how the world around us is at once calm and nourishing, and then sudden and dangerous. After helping Reeba unload his catch into the cart, I went for an afternoon stroll into the hills. I met up with Bubbles, my little vole friend, on the way and we walked together up through the silver trees (silver birch?). I can’t exactly remember what we talked about, I think I was trying to reassure her over some stitching

problem, when we heard a screech and a loud swoop of wings. We both turned and froze. You wouldn't believe it but there was a falcon hurtling through the trees towards us. It must have had its eye on something else because it passed right over us without even a dip of the wing, but we just stood there, rooted to the spot in fright. I didn't much like the fact that I drew a total blank, and I suddenly wished you were there with us. I'm sure you'd have known what to do.

In more peaceful matters, I've enclosed a poem I wrote. A few days ago I was sitting under the enormous pine we met under when you arrived, nibbling some lunch. It was the same tree near the mudflats which we later tried to climb, the one whose lower branches you then fell out of – which makes me laugh out loud every time I think about it! I was watching the sea birds wheel and glide above me, when a fairly strong breeze came from the ocean and started pushing the trees about the place. They suddenly came alive, nodding and swaying, bowing and rolling. I've called it 'the King Trees' and I thought you might like it, seeing how much you love the trees. You even make a brief appearance in it.

I want to tell you something. But first I want to tell you that I love you, that you need to know that before you read on. It's really important. Over the past weeks, a travelling mouse has taken quite a shine to me. He's an artist and I think you may even have met him when we visited the village shop. I seem to bump into him a lot more than I used to these days and last week he picked me some flowers and left them on my weaving table in the workshop. He's very talented with oils, painting portraits mostly, and has a deep knowledge of art and expression. He also makes some of his own clothes, so we originally talked about tailoring a fair amount, and I think he may have interpreted that 'professional' interest as romantic interest. Writing frankly, I liked the immediacy of the affection and the attention, the fancy free excitement, but he wasn't you. Time with him seems so superficial in comparison to time with you. When he sought me out, I saw his flamboyance but missed your gentleness, I saw his wit but missed your enthusiasm, I saw his intelligence but missed your wisdom, I saw his charm but missed your constancy. I looked up 'constancy', and the dictionary told me that it is 'the quality of unchanging

or unwavering'. I love your constancy, it's a reassurance that helps me fly and I can't wait to see you again, literally.

My plan is to come back sometime in the late winter or early spring, before Easter at least. I'll come and find you. That's the first thing I'm going to do, and things, my dear Brown, will be even better! And don't buy a new jerkin before I see you. I know your one is almost worn through, but I have a certain special Brown-bespoke something for you hanging on the back of my door.

With all my love, from the sea to the rivers to the forests,

Honey xxx

The King Trees

(to be read aloud)

They stand like kings, unfathomably old,
I wonder what they might have told,
In ages past, when they could talk,
And not just sway but stride and walk.

These regal beast, they stop and stare,
At birds with young they hold and care,
I clasp their arms and hug their feet,
And on their shoulder take a seat,
They hum and creak and laugh at times,
When one so young beats fear and climbs,
To see the view they have all year,
And taste the air so high and clear.

They cry when kin are felled in greed,
But mourn by birthing fresher seed,
When some are picked by my dear Brown,
Though most set roots into the ground,
And old brings young and young brings new,
Though those surviving are but few,
The ones that live will grow and grow,
And to the animals can't help but show,
The kingship of the forest strong,
The base of life for nature's throng.

I sit and think what I can learn,
And try to hear their thought in turn,
But words seem not their current tongue,
I hear them not with ears so young,
They must have wisdom in their bark,
And share it when the sky turns dark,
When other creatures turn to sleep,
The secrets of the world they keep.

Epilogue

Home time

Brown awoke to the light rumble of the post cart on the track. It was slightly muffled on account of all the snow that had cloaked the area only yesterday, the first snow of February, but his sleeping ears still detected the bumping of the wooden wheels through the ruts. He turned under his blankets and poked his nose out into the cool air of his home, loving the contrast between the womb-like warmth of his bed and the external freeze that turned his breath into a lingering haze. Like most mornings, he meditated a little under the covers, drifting in and out of sleep, and thinking about what Honey might be doing in the early hours of her morning. Eyeing his living room, he thought it to be rather messy at the moment – he'd been out collecting pine cones the week before and on arriving home, was immediately summoned by Grey to a boating weekend on the upper reaches of the River Stour. There were signs of packing and unpacking on most surfaces, but there was something quite comforting and liberating about the untidiness. The post cart stopped at the end of his path and Brown heard two creatures jump out. The heavy footfalls of the postal Badger were clear as day, while Brown could also here the footsteps of a much lighter creature crunching through the snow. There was some quiet murmuring between the Badger and his companion until they neared the door when Brown heard the mail being posted through the letterbox.

“Thank you Postie!” called out Brown.

“You're welcome, as always Mr Brown” called back the Badger.

Only one set of footsteps negotiated the snow back to the post cart, and before he left Brown heard Badger holler something back towards the door,

“Go well fair maiden, and best of luck!”

Brown leapt out of his bed, flung on his dressing gown and ran to the door. He paused and took a deep breath. Standing on the letters on the mat, he opened the door to Honey and her radiance flooded in.

Brown and Honey had many more adventures together, but those are other stories and will be told another time.

