I DIED AT FALLOW HALL

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For Kawan and Som, always.

'Such is the beauty of the garden that it is our desire that it be maintained perpetually and with great care. We therefore enact a lasting covenant on the walled garden; cottage garden; and surrounding acreage, that the resident gardener may live in the cottage without rent, providing he maintains these gardens to the satisfaction of His Lordship.'

Deeds, Fallow Hall, 1784

Upper Magna in autumn is a world purified by fire. The leaves are a blaze of forest and crimson, and sweep across the landscape, reaching up into the sky from skeleton fingers, carpeting the paths underfoot. Against the burning, dropping leaves, the air is fresh and cold. Behind such clarity, there is the faintness of woodsmoke and sweet rot. Everything is clean, stark, beautiful not in its beginning but its end.

From Fallow Cottage, the land rolls outwards, a carpet that at first looks endless. The garden used to extend beyond the horizon too, before parcels of land were sold to the neighbouring farmer. At the doorstep of the cottage is the kitchen garden, thick with the harvest season, behind its walls, the orchard, the rose arbour, and from there, the mad tumble of the wildflower meadow. In the hollow, below everything else, is the stream, a hem of woodland, and rising up again on the opposite hill, Fallow Hall watches everything.

From the cottage, Anna Deerin looks out on the garden like a first love, pulls down the sleeves of her jumper, and puts her tools in the wheelbarrow. Her elbow aches as she lifts it and steers it towards the farthest corner of the kitchen garden. This work has echoed in strange ways across her body – strains in muscles she never used in her past life; the rust and microbes in the soil sometimes staining patches on her hands, and when, come the evening, she strips her sweaty clothes off and into the machine, her body is oddly patched; milk-pale from sternum to ankle, but golden and freckled on the back of her neck,

and her arms and hands, like she is wearing long gloves to a ball.

Today Anna wants to start clearing the last vegetable beds. Where the rest of the kitchen garden is overflowing with its fruits, these are barren. They are the last of what she had been greeted by eighteen months earlier, the whole of Fallow Cottage a wasteland. Weeds strangling anything foolish enough to raise its head, the tumbledown sheds home only to rain-bloated cardboard, when anything metal – tools, gates, chairs – had instead been dragged out to die in the open, to oxidise and rust. It will take seasons and years to raise Fallow fully, but with these beds cleared, the last of the dead flesh will at least be scraped from the bone, and everything will be new growth.

'Afternoon, Mrs Polready!' Anna smiles and waves.

'I'm sure these bouquets get more beautiful every week.' Mrs Polready drifts over, holding her daughter's hand. The posies are arranged in jam jars, and the larger arrangements in buckets, and they adorn the end of the trestle table.

'August and September are good for the quantity of wildflowers, but I actually think October produces the best colours.' Anna runs a hand over the variegated coppers and pinks. The Polready girl is wearing pink, as always. 'Would you like one in your hair, Imogen?' Anna asks, and glances at her mother to receive a nod of permission.

Deftly, Anna picks a cosmos out of one of the jars and shucks a frond off with her nail, then leans over to gently weave it into the little girl's plait. She tweaks and adjusts it.

'Thank you.' Imogen blushes. 'You smell nice.'

'Thank you, Imogen. That cosmos looks at home in your beautiful hair.'

The little girl glows. Her mother buys a bunch of snapdragons and some apples, and Anna waves again as they thread their

way to the next stall. Imogen's head is still twisted back to look at her.

The wind picks up across the green, and Anna buttons up her coat.

'Ms Deerin, it's always lovely to see you here! A new face is a good face.' Paul Wolsey makes a beeline for the stall, Barbour flapping in the breeze. Anna has been at the farmers' market every Saturday for nearly a year now.

'The community has been so welcoming, Mr Wolsey. I've landed on my feet,' she says. 'How is your wife feeling now?'

'So much better, thank you.' Mr Wolsey moves his eyes back to the apples and late berries. 'It's good of you to remember her.'

'Please send my regards – I've been thinking of her.'

Joanne Wolsey is abject, wilted, as quickly forgotten by her husband as an umbrella, and Anna knows he will say nothing to her. She sells him a jam tart and before he leaves, he glances again at her mouth and breasts. Sam Deneuve, the local GP, buys a madeira cake, and Anna slips Jake Mason a brownie and winks at his smiling mum. Happiness costs so little for children. She fills the reverend's Bag for Life with fruit and vegetables, and stacks a dozen eggs in the empty carton he brings, and he asks her to keep the change. 'Wonderful to be able to shop local.'

Anna greets the villagers she knows, and asks the names of those she doesn't. She put make-up on this morning, and has to be careful not to rub her face and smear it.

There is a sort of rhythm to Upper Magna's Saturdays, she finds, lulls and swells in custom, each villager bobbing on the crest of their own routine. She has come to anticipate when they will visit, has on her tongue the rapport that has developed between them. *I held a lemon cake back for you. Did you get the*

wi-fi working in the end? Your car? Is your grandson, granddaughter, wife, boyfriend, uncle, cat doing well?

Alex Johnson usually has his pottery stall next to hers, but he's doing a county show this weekend, and a lady selling handmade cards is there instead. Anna waves across to her. Standing still all day, Anna wishes it were warmer, or that she could be wearing jeans under her coat instead of a skirt. But this is the Anna that the village admires.

She sits down in her canvas chair and skims her fingertips over the tufts of clover and trefoil that the parish council has tried to eradicate, but that pitch through heedless, powerful.

She watches the teenage couples, keen to be seen together by their peers, and the way they curl and stroke their fingers round each other's palms as they wander hand in hand, proudly implying a greater intimacy in private than they can show in public. They take videos to post on social media, harnessing the beauty of the place that is also their prison. A few families come by Anna's stall and she makes sure she acknowledges the women first, because to acknowledge their husbands before them is how gossip starts and business ends.

Already it is past two o'clock. Anna is impatient to pack up. She has sold almost everything, and she wants to get back to the garden. The dark creeps up early now, and she needs to put the chickens back in the coop before the foxes come out looking, and there are apples to pick before they fall, and the weeding is never finished.

Anna tries not to fidget and instead watches the thinning crowd. Men are making their way to the pub to watch the match on Sky Sports, and women in expensive leggings call to their children to get a move on. On the far side of the stalls, Anna notices a tall man she does not recognise. He stands out, the only Asian in this crowd of white faces. Like everyone else, he is dressed in an outdoor jacket and walking boots, yet the

rest of Upper Magna is looking at him too. She can see the stallholders' heads turn slightly as their eyes eat him up. He drinks the coffee he has bought and pretends not to notice their noticing. He gets his phone out of his pocket, sees there is no signal, and tucks it back. His clothes are a touch newer than the rest of the villagers'.

The newcomer drifts past the butter-yellow cottages of Cotswolds stone that box in the back of the village green; ignores the butcher and pie stalls; pretends to be interested in Ella Purley's candles when she calls him with her pitch: *You must have a girlfriend who'll be impressed with a candlelit dinner?* Ella does not vary her line, even for those villagers quietly acknowledged to be gay. The man politely extricates himself and moves on. As he nears Anna's stall, the copper on duty greets him.

Anna arranges her small smile. 'The rain's due soon.'

'That'll make for a change then.' It has been drizzling all week. The man has a slight London accent, which she thinks he is conscious of. 'What are these?'

'Physalis – cape gooseberries. Try one.' She peels away the papery outer shell and hands him the fruit. 'They can be used in sweet or savoury dishes—'

'Hitesh,' he tells her, and appears bemused by the taste in his mouth.

'It's a bit acquired,' she laughs and hands him an apple instead.

'Well, I know what this one is, at least.'

'More than Eve, then.' Anna picks up her book as Hitesh browses the stall; people do not like to feel they are being watched. She examines his profile and the working of his jaw. The rain starts as foretold, a gentle patter to remind humans of their place. Anna pulls her hood up.

'Ms Deerin – how are you faring in this dreary weather?'

Anna stands as her landlord approaches. 'I quite like it, Lord Blackwaite.' In the periphery, Hitesh does a double take. 'A little rain never hurt anyone.'

'Good for the garden, I expect. It's looking lovely from the Hall, by the way. Stunning, with the leaves changing.'

'Thank you – although I'm not sure I can take credit for the seasons. What can I do for you?'

'I need your assistance, Ms Deerin – we're having a winter gala this year, the first in decades, and I'm looking for someone to do the flowers.' He spreads his arms. 'And who better than you?'

From the corner of her eye, Anna sees the newcomer wave a parting hand. Anna's own drifts upwards in return, but now Lord Blackwaite is deep in explanation, and he requires all of her attention.

Anna.

A palindrome; a name that ought to make her feel special.

But as a child, she had hated it, and the way it made her feel invisible, occluded. As she grew, she found that in the act of speaking, writing, her name began – only to turn back and erase itself and her, a betrayal.

Then she reached womanhood, and that name became what Anna needed to know. To be a good woman. Pleasing, mouldable, doe-eyed and a good fuck, intelligent yet free of *opinion*. She realised that to be these things and no things, or to appear to be so, was not unlike her name, which started and erased itself.

Anna. Flat-chested, sweet-freckled, dark-haired. Quite plain or intensely appealing. If no one looks closely, she can give no offence.

Now she has the garden at Upper Magna, and no one is looking. She is alone for nearly a mile in each direction.

Anna drops to her hands and knees and begins picking out detritus from the final vegetable patch and casting it into a bucket. Pebbles, weeds, screws, bottle tops. She works quickly because the rain is due again, and if the soil gets wet it will be harder to clear.

There is a garden again now. The first true garden at Fallow Cottage since before the Second World War. God-like, she has raised it from nothing. It is only seeds and earth really, but it feels miraculous. She brushes away the scrub and tangle and thinks of how she will lay out the rows for kale and marrows. This new life has lost none of its novelty; she still feels a pang each time a seed throws out a green shoot and begins to grow.

It is unmediated.

The art critic John Berger said that all those paintings of women looking at themselves in a glass – the Rokeby Venus and her sisters – the male painters, the male patrons put a mirror in women's hands and called them *vain*. Anna knows the truth of this, that women are always to watch themselves – to know precisely how they look as they cross the room. They are to watch their own lives and to perform their womanhood. But if they are caught taking a glimpse in the mirror they have been given? That is vanity.

Perhaps, Anna often wonders, perhaps I only listened to Berger because he was a man.

Still, she wants to put her fingers under the edges and peel it back – this dual vision she has been taught since birth, this watching of herself.

She looks harder.

Anna.

Finally, the earth is cleared and it is time to break and turn the vegetable bed. Anna scratches past the topsoil to feel underneath, and like much of Fallow's earth, it is dense and clayish. The pickaxe weighs almost as much as she does, but

she can still heft it and bring it down, and it is the best way to break the clods.

The clouds shift and the first drops of rain begin to spit and patter. There's no harm in that, Anna thinks, the ground is breaking well. She stops to clear away some rotted wood. The earth underneath looks good quality – richer than anticipated – and after a few minutes she drops the pickaxe back into the wheelbarrow and takes up the gardening fork.

Then the rain begins in earnest. Suddenly it is clattering from the sky. It lands so hard that the loose soil froths and spatters, and the broad leaves of the other beds are bowed down. As soon as it starts, Anna is soaked, so she may as well finish what she is doing. You can only get wet once – that's the refrain here in Upper Magna.

With her boot, Anna presses the fork down into the earth and can feel the snap and crack of buried twigs giving way. The new earth comes to the surface, dark and flecked with something white. Anna digs again, and more of the white speckle comes up. Again, and this time a larger fragment turns to the surface. She sticks the fork in the ground and pushes the wet hair from her face with a forearm.

It is bone, smooth under the gardener's dirty fingers, apart from the splintered end. She holds it up to the sky to be cleaned off. The sun is still bright behind the clouds and she can see there is no marrow left inside. It is greying where the calcium has leached out – returning what was borrowed. She turns it this way and that. In the summer, she had brought up the skeleton of a fox, or maybe a small dog in the rose bed; it is surprisingly hard to tell when the soft tissue goes. Likewise, she cannot tell from the piece in her hand what is buried, but Anna needs to take it all up or it will be hard to plant the bed. If she takes away the top layer of earth, the rain might wash the rest away from the bones. She can come

back later and pick out what is left, perhaps bury it again in the meadow.

The ground boils under the force of the rain and Anna works quickly now, shovelling mud to one side. Veins of chalky white appear and disappear from view. It is hard to establish the length of what is buried. A few ridges are briefly visible and she guesses these are the ribs. If she finds the head she might know if she is dealing with something small, or if she has to take up a whole horse. The rain has got inside her boots and soaked her socks, and as she crouches down it seeps between her toes. She uses her hands to clear where the skull might be.

More by touch than sight, Anna finds a socket. Her fingers slip off bone-smoothness and into nothing. She snatches her hand back. Probing gently, she works her way to the next cavity; the eyes are close set, a predator rather than a prey animal. Slower now and panting, Anna scores a sopping trench with her hands and works inwards.

The rain is freezing and collects anywhere it can: in the wells of her ears, the backs of her knees. The soil is in her nail beds and mouth and it tastes of iron and minerals and damp. The crown of the skull comes into view, first from the earth. Then the brow. Anna wipes it clean, then her own cheeks, where the rain begins to dilute tears.

It is so much smoother than she would have expected. So much more and less than itself.

She wipes the caul of mud from the noseless face, as a midwife once wiped away the newborn membrane, because of course, once, this was a person.

February 1967

February is a miserable month. A low and creeping month that dampens any good spirits with its chill and mists. It is not as though the Hall feels jolly in December, but at least I

can drag in holly boughs and take nips of brandy while I feed the Christmas cake, and if you belt out carols in the kitchen, they bounce back like you've been joined by a choir. But in February there's nothing to sing and it's all grey chops and boiled potatoes again.

I can hear Mother clumping round upstairs, no doubt straightening out the sloppy corners on the beds I made. I've never done them quite right, or at least not deliberately. Mother's fastidiousness is a hangover from when she was housekeeper here, from the days before she married Father and became mistress of Fallow. God knows how she was a housekeeper when she walks like an elephant. Perhaps that's why Father married her, so she would sit down and stop stomping. It did not work.

The entrance hall needs vacuuming, but I am quite comfortable in the parlour with an Iris Murdoch novel and some tea, and it's hard to see the urgency. The dirt is harming no one, and once I vacuum, it is only a matter of time before there's more. Running a household is only so much treading water.

I read another chapter of *that Irish authoress*, as Father calls her. But he will also call me idle if he finds me here, and more than that, I do not want Mother to see the vacuuming is not done and do it herself.

I will be a good daughter and do it. I will. Up now, lazybones.

I emerge into the dark of the corridor, and breathe in childhood and present. It is term-time and Sprat is up at Oxford and the house is full of those uncanny echoes it throws about when it is only Father, Mother and me. It ought not to since there are carpets – it's indecent.

'Have you done the vacuuming yet?' Mother's voice rings down the wide sweep of the stairs as I emerge into the entrance hall.