Finding Home

Roisin McAuley

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Extract

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1

Louise

Winter reveals.

That late November afternoon, through the bare trees and hedges that line the lanes of Oxfordshire, I saw – flickering past me like frames from a silent film, muted grey and brown – houses, barns, bleached fields, a wood, a steep roof and tall, crooked chimneys straining to the sky.

'Stop,' I said. 'Go back a bit. I thought I saw something.'

Rebecca reversed the car and parked in a gateway.

The wood had been cleared of undergrowth. It looked as though it had been swept. Naked trees rose unsteadily from a carpet of copper leaves. The sun cast an amber glow on their trunks and branches. What had flashed past me like a film was now a single frame, a sepia photograph.

'Is this what they call a spinney?' The word felt foreign in my mouth. I had come across it in books. Had never heard it used in Ireland.

'Don't ask me,' Rebecca said. 'I'm a townie. As in Shepherd's Bush. No shepherds, no sheep, no bushes, no trees. I haven't the faintest idea what a spinney is.'

'There are trees on Shepherd's Bush Green,' I said.

'You're too literal, Louise.'

'I'm just keen on detail.'

We got out of the car and walked back down the road until

we saw again, through the trees, the roof and decorated chimneys of what was surely an Elizabethan manor.

Rebecca stared at the timber and brick gable end, the narrow, mullioned window, just visible at the far side of the wood, beyond the brown furrows of a ploughed field, about a quarter of a mile from us.

'Well spotted, Louise.' She looked around. 'It's in a valley. There must be a way down to it.'

We had taken a side road to see more of the countryside on our way back to London, having spent a disappointing two days hunting for a sixteenth-century house in which to shoot the most ambitious film of Rebecca's career. 'This is my breakthrough,' she had announced when she hired me. 'The chance I've been waiting for. This production could put me in the premier league. You too, Louise.'

By that time, most of the production money had been secured. The big names that reassured the backers were negotiating their contracts. A production designer was working on the sets.

There wasn't a final screenplay. One of the backers, an American distribution company, had reservations about the third draft of the script. This wasn't unusual. Rebecca wasn't bothered. She was more worried about finding a location.

She had intended to use a Tudor house in Cheshire. In the time it had taken to get agreement from the film council to finance the first draft of the script, the actress who was to play the lead, and whose name had persuaded the other backers to put up the rest of the money, became pregnant and had twins. They were now ten months old. The actress wanted her contract to guarantee that she could get home to London every day after filming. Rebecca had to find a location within easy travelling distance, or provide a plane. A trawl of several location companies had thrown up nothing suitable. The actress had suggested a couple of houses in the Chilterns. I had gone with Rebecca to see them. One had no space for parking. The other was Queen Anne, the wrong period.

'Cross your fingers,' said Rebecca.

She turned into a single-track road that skirted the wood and

twisted down into the valley. After about half a mile it bottomed out and turned left. We passed a sawmill, a row of cottages beside a pond, then a farmhouse, with outbuildings and wooden barns and a sign for free-range eggs.

Sheep grazed in parkland on one side of the road. On the other, a sloping field of stubble glowed pale gold in the thin rays of the sun. A man in a tweed jacket and breeches leaned against a tree in the middle of the field. He had a black-and-white spaniel at his feet and a shotgun under his arm. A yellow scarf flopped around his neck.

A painting flashed into my head. Tree, cornfield, clouds in the sky, a man with a dog and a gun.

'He reminds me of one of those landowners painted by Reynolds or Gainsborough,' I said. 'Complacent. Gazing on his acres. The master of all he surveys. Like that Gainsborough in the National Gallery, *Mr and Mrs Andrews*.'

Rebecca slowed down. 'I see what you mean.' She glanced sideways again before accelerating. 'I don't see any Mrs Andrews.'

'If he's free you can have him,' I said.

'Gone off men?'

'English landlords aren't popular where I grew up,' I said drily.

A crumbling wall of brick and flint now ran along the left-hand side of the road. Ahead of us, in the angle of a bend, crumbling gateposts stood like full stops on two lines of trees. A hand-painted wooden sign swung from the wrought iron arch that curled between the posts. 'Wooldene Hall Herb Farm and Garden Centre. Plants. Compost. Christmas trees. Holly. Mistletoe.'

Rebecca steered the car through the open gates. The avenue rose slightly, then dipped and curved around a low hill. The gable and chimneys came into view again behind a high wall. The road turned and widened to run between the wall and a stable block, which had been converted to a shop and garden centre. It looked closed. Christmas trees were lined up in the yard, like a miniature forest. We parked opposite a wooden door set into the wall. A plaque on the door was inscribed, 'House'.

We peered at the date chiselled into the stone lintel: 1498.

'Five hundred years old,' said Rebecca. 'I wonder what kind of condition it's in.'

There was nobody about. She pushed the door. It swung open.

'Wow,' she said. 'It's perfect.'

The brick and flint façade blushed; the mullioned windows glinted in the setting sun. The house and its tall chimneys stood out with perfect clarity, as though framed by the air around them.

The garden in front of the house was divided by narrow brick paths that criss-crossed to make squares and rectangles of flowerbeds and tiny lawns lined with low, boxwood hedges. Beyond the geometry of the formal garden, a plain lawn blended seamlessly into a field where black cattle congregated around a trough beside a towering, leafless tree.

I lived in London. I spent my leisure time in the cinemas, theatres, museums, art galleries, bars and restaurants. The city was my toy box and my springboard to adventures elsewhere. For the first time in my life I was free to visit Paris, Rome, Amsterdam on weekends and holidays. Sometimes I went back home to Belfast. Occasionally I visited friends in Brighton, Manchester and Glasgow, glimpsing the countryside from the window of a train as I hurtled from city to city.

I had never seen a house look so settled in the landscape, as though it had grown up naturally like the trees in the walled orchard, the fat sculpted hedges, the grass in the fields beyond. As my brain absorbed this timeless picture of tranquillity, I realised I had been living in London with no real sense of inhabiting England. I felt I was now encountering it, like a foreigner, for the first time.

'There's a telephone number on the shop sign. I'll ring the owner.' Rebecca tapped the number into her mobile. 'Bugger. No signal.' She dropped the phone into her bag and took out a camera. 'I'll take a few photographs.'

A fragment of poetry came into my head. It seemed to sum up a kind of English certainty and a sense of place.

'"With ruffs about their necks, their portion sure,"' I said out loud.

Rebecca stopped clicking. 'What?'

'It's a line from a poem by Louis MacNeice.'

She looked blankly at me.

'I was thinking about the distance between here and where I grew up,' I said. 'It's a far cry from Ardoyne.'

'It's not Shepherd's Bush either,' said Rebecca. And she resumed capturing what I had already decided was the essence of England.

I closed my eyes and pictured the narrow streets of red brick houses in North Belfast. The back alleys and the front gardens, five feet square and hardly qualifying for the name. Flax Street Mill and Holy Cross Monastery marking the boundaries of the parish that had been my secure, happy world until I was fourteen years old.

My dad was a taxi driver. He had learned to drive in the Royal Army Service Corps in 1941. Thirty years later, when we had come to view British squaddies as an unwelcome frightening presence in our streets, I asked Dad why he had joined the British army.

'Was it because of Hitler, Daddy?' We had been studying the Second World War at school.

'Daughter dear, God only knows.' Dad thought for a moment. 'It was better than being a barman in the Midland Hotel. It made me feel more of a grown man. I wanted to see what war was like. To see a bit of the world.' He sighed. 'Maybe some of the men out there joined up for the same reasons.' He was silent again. 'The Brits only fought one good war,' he added softly. 'And I was in it.' His voice hardened. 'You make sure and work hard to pass your exams and get a decent job, my girl. You can't eat a flag. And you can't eat a gun.'

Mum was a hairdresser. She met Dad at a dance in the Floral Hall in 1947. She was twenty-one and going out with a steward on the Larne–Stranraer ferry, the Princess Victoria. He died when she sank in the great storm of 1953.

'Imagine. If I'd married him I would have been widowed before I was thirty,' Mum said when she told us about him.

I remember Dad winked at us. 'I'll make sure I outlive you, Kathleen.'

'Don't be too sure,' Mum said, laughing.

Mum wanted us to be middle class. Not that she ever uttered the words, but I knew that was what she meant when she said the same things as Dad. Work hard. Get a good job. Save money. Buy a house.

I knew she dreamed about living in the kind of big house advertised in magazines like *Vogue* and *Country Living*. 'Fine country property on six acres. Garden and paddock. Grade II listed.' The magazines were bought for the customers at the salon. Mum took them home to read when they were out of date.

She read books as well. Romantic novels, mostly, from the library. When I was born she wanted to call me Daisy after the heroine of a book she enjoyed while she was pregnant. 'That's no name for a Catholic child,' roared the parish priest. 'If you want something fancy, call her Louise.'

My baptism was over before anybody could voice even a feeble protest. Granny agreed with Father Doyle. She thought Daisy was a Protestant kind of name.

I found the story both funny and unsettling. I wondered if it explained my sense of uncertainty about everything. My younger brother, Michael, said that was fanciful. He said I felt insecure because we had been forced to move house so often.

Wooldene Hall looked a safe kind of house. The kind of house my mother dreamed about. Secure and self-assured. It was a house a Daisy would live in.

2

Diana

Winter makes me want to hibernate. I snuggle into the bedclothes like a burrowing animal. I sleep longer and more deeply. But I wakened early on my birthday.

I pushed my head out of the tunnel of blankets and said out loud, 'Today is my birthday. Happy birthday to me.'

The words felt satisfying and I felt wonderfully alert. I lay waiting for familiar objects to take shape in the darkness, musing about the dinner party the night before. Celery soup, winter salad, pheasant with Calvados. I had found a bottle in the back of the drinks cupboard. I bought a whole Wigmore cheese – the most expensive item – and made a sort of pre-Christmas pudding with odds and ends of dried fruit and the rest of the Calvados. We had a similar sort of pudding at school, minus the Calvados of course. We called it Lucky Dip.

I did the entire meal for three pounds a head and felt terrifically relieved that we could still afford to entertain. Not that my brother seemed to care. He was becoming less sociable.

'You hardly ever go into town these days,' I had remarked to him a few weeks previously.

Henry didn't look up from the newspaper. 'Can't park in Henley. Reading is full of rubbish. Streets covered in spat-out chewing gum. Disgusting. Can't park in Oxford, *and* it's full of rubbish. Jenny spent most of my money in Marlow. Can't walk down the street there without thinking about her. Rather stay

here, thank you very much,' said with a lip smack on the last consonants.

'It's my birthday on Monday,' I had said. 'I'd like to invite one or two people to dinner on Sunday night, I think.'

Henry put down the newspaper. 'Thank God for something to celebrate.'

He went over to the old house and brought back a bottle of port. 'Good excuse to open this. Taylor's. Your birth year. We ought to drink it. Past its best if we leave it too long.'

Like me, I said silently to myself.

'Gosh, that's frightfully good,' Ronnie Bolton had said when he tasted it. His brown, piggy eyes shone with pleasure. 'Best port I've ever tasted.'

Henry was gratified. 'My father liked port. Liked wine too. There's a lot of interesting stuff in the cellar.'

I made a mental note to get the wines valued. Henry needed every penny to pay for the roof.

Ronnie blew me a kiss across the table. 'Happy birthday, Diana. I won't ask what age you are.'

Susan Reynolds, who was always trying to find out, raised a dark eyebrow and said, 'But younger than you, Henry?'

'Nowadays, yes,' said Henry. He was becoming more sardonic every day.

Ronnie said, with mock gloom, 'I used to have three older sisters. Over the years they've all got younger than me.'

I tried not to glare at Henry.

'You don't look your age, Ronnie,' I said lightly. 'So that's all right then.' And I changed the subject.

We played bridge after dinner. Susan partnered Henry. 'We play awfully well together,' she said. I began to think she had her eye on him.

The idea now roused me out of bed. I got dressed, went to the kitchen, let Paddy out, and took the vegetable peelings and coffee grounds from the night before to the compost bin. I tripped over the spade that Tomasz had left propped up against the bungalow wall and only just managed to stop the plastic basin from spilling its contents over the back step.

I hopped around on one foot, rubbing my shin and cursing Tomasz and his recent absent-mindedness. A girl, of course. He had shown me her photograph.

'Her name is Anna. From Posnan.' His smile was a mixture of greediness and awe.

I thought how nice it would be to make men smile like that again, and how one never quite gives up hope.

Catherine telephoned as I was making breakfast.

'Happy birthday, Mummy darling.'

'Lovely to hear your voice,' I said. 'Did you stay up late to call me?'

'We had friends to dinner. I've just finished clearing up. It's nearly midnight here.'

'How are the children?'

'Sound asleep, thank heavens. They're going to telephone you in the morning. About six in the evening, your time. You're closed on Mondays, aren't you? What are you going to do with your day?'

'Plant tulips. Visit Aunt Lucy,' I said.

'Oh, give yourself a day off, Mummy,' Catherine said. She had that bossy tone in her voice. 'Lucy won't remember whether you came to see her or not.'

'She loves having visitors.'

'She didn't recognise me when I went to see her in the summer.'

'She hadn't seen you for two years.'

'You take on too much, Mummy.'

Catherine had taken to scolding me. She was horrified when I said I was moving in with Henry.

'You're utterly insane. You know he's useless around the house. You'll end up doing absolutely everything for him.'

'It will be cheaper for both of us. He's on his own. I'm on my own. We get on terribly well. I've got a nice little business going now with the garden centre. It's much easier than driving over from Amersham every day.'

'When the business gets too much for you, you'll be stuck there.'

That was another thing that irritated me. Catherine talked as though I was decrepit. She was always banging on about planning for old age.

'We get along,' I said. 'Henry's tidy.'

'Only because he was in the army. He's not organised in any other way. I'll see what Carl thinks.'

When Carl pronounced in his calm Californian way, 'I think your mother's right, honey. It makes sense,' Catherine was mollified. 'But you have to make Henry help around the house,' she said. 'He can't afford a cleaner. The old house just eats up money.'

She asked me what I had got for my birthday.

'Henry gave me a sketch of you and Carl and the children in the orchard. He must have done it when you were here in the summer. Susan gave me a bottle of gin with a card saying "Better than botox. Paralyses more muscles."'

Catherine has a hearty laugh. I wished I heard it more often.

'Have a wonderful day, Mummy. Don't go charging off to see Lucy. Give yourself a rest.'

'Why are grown-up daughters more bossy than grown-up sons?' I said to Henry when he came into the kitchen. 'Peter isn't bossy, is he?'

'If you ask me, he's not bossy enough,' Henry said. 'He lets Christine run his life.'

'Don't you like her?'

'Not much. She's got no sparkle. She's all wrong for him. At least Jenny had a bit of sparkle.'

Most of it round her neck and paid for by Henry, I thought to myself.

'His mother couldn't let a day pass without spending money. Now he's engaged to a woman who wouldn't spend Christmas.' Henry gave a short laugh. 'Peter is thirty-five. I suppose he knows what he's doing.'

'Catherine will be forty next year,' I said. 'I can't believe I have a daughter who's nearly forty.'

Where does time go? I asked myself. One moment I am a teenager. I blink, and I'm sixty-two.

3

Louise

I stood in the doorway to the garden, watching Rebecca move around the lawn, framing shots, pausing to push her hair behind her ear in a familiar gesture. She had hardly changed in fourteen years. Dark and dainty. I still felt all legs and freckles next to her.

We met in Belfast in the early eighties. I had just got a job with an independent production company making a children's series for the BBC. I had been living at home in West Belfast with Mum, Dad and Michael. In those days, you could never be sure of getting back there easily after dark. Besides, I was twenty-six and anxious to begin life outside the comforting cocoon of the family.

I rented a flat near the university. It was not much more than a mile, as the helicopters flew, from the treeless streets, crescents and culs-de-sac of Andersonstown to the leafy avenues of South Belfast, but it was like living in a parallel universe, entered through checkpoints and security barriers that lifted in the morning, fell with the night and closed off the troubled areas of the city like a cordon sanitaire.

I advertised on the BBC noticeboard for someone to share the flat. Rebecca was on attachment to the drama department and needed somewhere to stay. We liked each other straight away. We seemed to fill the gaps in each other's personalities. I was anxious and attentive to detail. Rebecca was confident and always saw the big picture.

When things were going swimmingly for Rebecca she rode the wave. She felt success would follow success. I was nervous when things were going well for me. A little voice fed doomy clichés into my brain. 'Pride comes before a fall'; 'Don't count your chickens;' 'Many a slip'. I was afraid to banish the gloomy whisperer. I felt a sense of foreboding was a price I had to pay for the granting of my wishes.

Our backgrounds were similar. Both our fathers were taxi drivers. Our mothers wanted us to have careers. To succeed. Our parents had left school aged fourteen. Rebecca and I were grammar school girls. We had gone to university. We had aspirations. We were on our way. But Rebecca had an audacity I lacked.

She pushed me into applying for a unit manager's job I didn't think I'd get.

'You're intelligent, organised, hard-working. The job's ideal for you.' She had coached me and made me borrow from the bank to buy a well-cut suit for the interview. 'Stop worrying. It's an investment.'

She supervised my shopping. 'You have a great sense of colour in everything else, so why do you wear beige? Stop trying to vanish into the background. You can't; you're tall, you have flaming red hair. Make the most of it. Be dramatic. Wear deep pink, violet, midnight blue. Wear high heels.'

'I'll tower over them like a shipyard crane.'

'Good,' said Rebecca.

Under her tutelage, I became braver at work. I spoke up in meetings. I argued for changes I knew would make the unit more efficient. I began to enjoy being assertive.

Rebecca tried to make me more self-assured in my dealings with men.

'I'm afraid Louise isn't here at the moment. Can I take a message?' Waving me away. 'I think she's been asked to the theatre tonight.' Putting down the telephone. 'Don't let him think he can ask you out on Saturday morning for Saturday night. Have some faith in yourself. He'll give you more notice the next time he calls.'

We had promised to keep in touch when she went back to London and so we did, for a while. I flew over to spend a weekend with her. She spent a week with me in Donegal. But my mother was descending deeper into depression and it became harder for me to get away. Rebecca and I telephoned each other a few times and exchanged Christmas cards. Then she moved to New York. About a year later I got an invitation to her wedding. I couldn't go. Gradually, we lost contact.

I had been living in London for two years when I picked up a copy of the *Evening Standard* and saw a photograph of Rebecca. It was more like half a photograph, for she was almost out of shot, turning away from the camera, on the edge of a group of BAFTA award winners. Her surname in the caption was Hood, not Morrison, but I recognised her straightaway. She had the same sweep of straight dark hair to her shoulders, and held herself in a posture I remembered; energy coiled inside her, ready to spring into action.

I looked her up on the Internet and found her company website, Telekineticproductions.com. I sent her an email. She telephoned the next day. As soon as she heard me say I was now a line producer, she offered me a job.

'I'm developing an Elizabethan murder mystery based on the Amy Robsart story. I've got Teddy Hammond working on the third draft.'

I knew the name. He'd adapted *The Watsons*, an unfinished novel by Jane Austen, for Granada. He'd won a BAFTA.

'I'm half lined-up for something else.' It was half-true. The film industry is a-twitter with birds in bushes. I had just finished a picture and was beginning to wonder which of several new projects would take off and fly. There were a couple of low-budget films being planned by producers I had worked for before and who had got in touch. Still, a bird in the hand . . . and this was a bigger production.

'I've got development money to pay you.' Rebecca sounded confident.

That clinched it. I accepted her offer.

'Hire one, fire one,' Rebecca laughed. 'I've just sacked a useless

production assistant. But there's a queue of wannabes ready to work for nothing to get into the business. It's harder to find a good director.'

'Jacky McQuitty has just directed *Treasure Island* for the BBC. We ran into each other last week.'

'Jacky McQuitty? That's a good thought. It'll be like old times.'

'Nice to be in touch again,' I said.

'You should have come to London a long time ago, Louise.'

'I'm here now.'

And then we began our catching up.

'Things went wrong for me in New York,' Rebecca told me. 'It was full of single women and all men were fair game. Including my husband. After a while, Sam didn't even try to keep his affairs secret. I came back to London after the divorce. What about you?'

'Still single,' I said.

'I'm seeing a lawyer,' Rebecca said. 'A barrister, actually. I met him through the lawyer who's negotiating the contracts on this film. His name's Robert. My boyfriend, I mean. Robert Thompson.'

I could tell he was important from the way she said his name.

'What about you, Louise? Are you seeing anybody?'

'Not at the moment.'

'So, still looking?'

'Where there is life there is hope,' I said.

I was smiling to myself, recalling this conversation, thinking how nice it was to be working with Rebecca, and wondering if I should organise a Christmas party with Jacky and some other friends from the old days, when a well-bred voice behind me said, 'Can I help you?'

I swung round and saw an imposing blonde woman with a look of cold surprise on her big-boned face and a three-pronged stainless steel garden fork in her hand. She looked like a statue of Britannia.

Rebecca hurried to my side. 'There was no one in the shop. We're looking for the owner of the house.'

'May I ask why?' There was a hint of sharpness under the drawl.

'We need a Tudor house for a film that's due to start shooting in the spring.' Rebecca proffered her business card. 'I'm Rebecca Hood. Telekinetic Productions. This is my colleague, Louise O'Neill.'

Britannia studied the card. Her face relaxed. 'I'm Diana Wiseman. How do you do.'

We shook hands.

'You'd better come into the house.'

We stood back, expecting her to step through the doorway. Instead, she turned on her heel and led us further up the road, past a field of polythene tunnels and a well-tended vegetable garden.

The road swung right. On the bend stood a steep-roofed wooden barn. Behind it crouched a conventional, suburban brick bungalow with a lawn and flowerbeds to the front, a garage to the side and window boxes of winter pansies. Its incongruity, in otherwise ancient surroundings, was concealed by the black immensity of the barn.

'The big house is far too expensive to heat in the winter, I'm afraid. This is much cosier,' said Britannia. 'We rent the house for parties and weddings. We've never had a film company before.' Her eyes danced. 'This is rather exciting.'

She propped the garden fork beside a companion spade in the back porch and ushered us into a long room divided by a table. On one side were an ancient leather sofa and armchair, and a wood-burning stove. On the other was the kitchen.

'Please sit down.' She glanced at the clock. Half-past three. 'Will you take tea?'

'Thank you, Mrs Wiseman,' I said.

'Do please call me Diana.' Her tone was friendly now. Her smile warm. She began to fill a kettle at the sink.

Rebecca glanced at the dog hairs on the sofa. I glanced at Diana. She had her back to us. I brushed the cushions with the back of my hand and winked at Rebecca. We sat down.

Diana unhooked mugs from a dresser. 'What's your film about?'

'It's a remake of *Kenilworth*,' said Rebecca.

'Walter Scott? I saw it on television. Black and white. Must have been ages ago.'

'Forty years,' Rebecca said. 'Forty-one to be precise. 1957. You must have been very young when you saw it.'

Diana looked pleased at the compliment.

'It's a good story,' said Rebecca. 'Historical films are in vogue at the moment.'

'Who's going to be in it?'

'Caroline Cross and William Bowman.'

'Golly,' said Diana. 'You want to film them here?'

'Possibly. If the timing is right. The house might be suitable for a Josephine Tey series we're planning as well.'

'Good Lord,' said Diana. 'I used to adore her books.' She pulled a chair out from the table and sat down. 'This is all jolly surprising.'

I heard footsteps and a scurrying sound in the porch. The kitchen door opened. A black-and-white spaniel dashed in, followed by a man with a yellow scarf around his neck, a shotgun in one hand and a dead rabbit in the other. It was the man I'd seen earlier, leaning against the tree. He held the rabbit up by its hind legs.

'Dinner,' he announced.