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The corpse you planted last year in your garden,
Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?

The Waste Land, T. S. Eliot

I thought I saw an angel in an azure robe coming towards
me across the lawn, but it was only the blue sky through
the feathering branches of the lime.

Kilvert's Diary, 21 July 1873

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1

Winter Journey



IT WAS TOO early for birdsong. Harold lay beside her, his hands neat on his chest, looking so peaceful she wondered where he travelled in his sleep. Certainly not the places she went: if she closed her eyes, she saw roadworks. Dear God, she thought. This is no good. She got up in the pitch-black, took off her nightdress and put on her best blue blouse with a pair of comfortable slacks and a cardigan. 'Harold?' she called. 'Are you awake?' But he didn't stir. She picked up her shoes and shut the bedroom door without a sound. If she didn't go now, she never would.

Downstairs she switched on the kettle, and while it boiled, she got out her Marigolds and wiped a few surfaces. 'Maureen,' she

RACHEL JOYCE

said out loud, because she was no fool. She could tell what she was doing, even if her hands couldn't. Fussing, that's what. She made a flask of instant coffee and a round of sandwiches that she wrapped in clingfilm, then wrote him a message. She wrote another that said 'Mugs!' and another that said 'Pans!' and before she knew it, the kitchen was covered with Post-it notes, like small yellow alarm signals. 'Maureen,' she said again, and took them all down. 'Go now. Go.' She hung Harold's wooden cane from the chair where he couldn't miss it, then slipped the Thermos into her bag along with the sandwiches, put on her driving shoes and winter coat, picked up her suitcase and stepped out into the beautiful early morning. The sky was clear and pointed with stars, and the moon was like the white part of a fingernail. The only light came from Rex's house next door. And still no birdsong.

It was cold, even for January. The crazy paving had frozen overnight and she had to grab hold of the handrail. There were splinters of ice in the ruts between stones, and the front garden was no more than a few glass thorns. She turned on the ignition to warm the car while she scraped at the windows. The frost was rough, like sandpaper, and lay as far as she could see, slick beneath the street lamps of Fossebridge Road, but no one else was out. It was a Sunday, after all. She waved at Rex's house in case he was awake, and that was it. She was going.

Road-gritters had already passed through Fore Street, and salt lay in pink mats all the way up the hill. She drove north past the bookstore and the other shops that would be closed until Monday, but she didn't look. It was a good while since she'd used the high

street. These days, she and Harold mostly went online, and not just because of the pandemic. The quiet row of shops became night-lit rows of houses. In turn they became a dark emptiness with a closed-down petrol station somewhere in the middle. She passed the turning for the crematorium that she visited once a month and kept driving. Now that she was on the road, she felt not excitement, but more a sense that, even though she didn't know how to explain it, she was doing the right thing. Harold had been right.

'You have to go, Maureen,' he'd said. She had come up with a list of reasons why she couldn't but in the end she'd agreed. She'd offered to show him how to use the dishwasher and the washing machine because he sometimes got confused about which buttons to press and then she wrote the instructions clearly on a piece of paper.

'You are sure?' she'd said again, a few days later. 'You really think I should do this?'

'Of course I'm sure.' He was sitting in the garden while she raked old leaves. He'd done up his coat lopsided, so that the left half of him was adrift from the right.

'But who will take care of you?'

'I will take care of me.'

'What about meals? You need to eat.'

'Rex can help.'

'That's no good. Rex is worse than you are.'

'That is true, of course. Two old fools!'

At this, he'd smiled. Only, something about the completeness of his smile made her miss him without even going anywhere, so that he could be as sure as he damn well liked, but she wasn't. She