

Wilding

Alex quickened her step on the path, winding between scraggy shrub and sharp grasses. Even after three weeks, the anticipation still thrilled her. A ragged sandy track, a snaggy tree root to navigate on the downward run, before the vista opened in front of her. To the right and left, as far as she could see, a creamy fringe of sand spooned the great wild sea. Seagulls hawked against the wind, hovering, as if on invisible strings, the red sticks of their legs dangling. Crusted rows of seaweed, brown and mysterious, scribbled out the line between soft and firm sand. She walked here every day, sunrise and sunset, when there was never anyone around. It seemed her world alone.

She had slept deeply for the whole three weeks and did not dream, lulled to sleep at night by the smash and suck of waves. This morning, she'd woken early in her cabin, watery light bleeding through hazy window glass, the bedcovers heavy and damp with salty air. She'd made coffee on the

Wilding

small gas stove and drank it out on the leaning front porch. When the sun had begun to give shape and shadow to the sea mist, she walked briskly down the path towards the sound of the ocean, feet silent on the bitumen, waiting for the cold bite of sand between her toes.

She was a different person here. Her posture became effortlessly straight, her stride long and easy. As if her body knew what it needed even when she, herself, did not; had possibly known all along and led her here. Every day when she sat at the table for lunch, she felt the pull of thigh and calf muscles well used. In the shower, her figure glided smooth under her hands, silky as driftwood, wiry as the rusty fingers of coastal grass lining the pathways.

Four weeks was the maximum time they were allowed. There was only a week now before she had to leave. She didn't want to think about it; couldn't, without the weight of it crushing her timid joy. She thought by now she would be stronger, healed. But the longer she was here, the longer she wanted to stay.

The harder it was to go back.

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'It seems you are deeply troubled.'

He was a big man, his shirt straining in the centre, damp patches of half circles at the armpits.

'They tell me your productivity has fallen away.'

Leslie Thiele

'I'm sad.' Her hands hung heavy in her lap; useless, separate things. 'Everything stays grey.'

'Is this all since the mistake?'

'Yes. I suppose so.'

'You understand the policies, don't you? We have trouble comprehending how this has happened to someone of your standing. It's not as though it happens accidentally, after all.'

'I know.'

'You've tried the screens? They can be quite therapeutic.'

'I'm sorry. They didn't help.' Why was she apologising?

'And the headsets?' He scratched at his beard. 'Were they of no help to you?'

'No.'

He leant across the table, the reflection of the overhead light bright on his glasses, obscuring his eyes. The movement released an unpleasant mustiness. She drew back, breathing shallow, looked towards the wall screen where a tall waterfall sent endless cascades shattering onto mossy rocks below.

'You don't need to be afraid of me, you know. I am here to help you.'

'I know.'

'If the normal methods are having no effect, we can look at medications.'

'I don't want medications.' She felt like an inconvenient boulder in the smooth flow of the social stream.

He stared at her intently. 'We have places. Places of nature...wildings. Sometimes they can help in these chronic

Wilding

cases.’ He shrugged. ‘It’s a theory, anyway. It’s a four-week course. We are still in the trial stages.’

A leap of hope within. So, it was true after all. ‘I didn’t think there were any left.’

‘There are some. They are not for general access.’ Stubby fingers spread wide on the desk, a smear of moisture. ‘We kept them aside years ago. We do think of these things, you know. We care for the general welfare of all. No-one is just a number. Is that how you feel? Is that part of the problem?’

‘No. I understand. It’s not that. It’s me. Inside.’ Her heart fluttered at the imagining of a wilding. That there might be such a thing. ‘Would I be eligible?’

‘I don’t see why not.’

He rose from his chair and came to stand behind her, a clammy hand landing on the softness between her neck and shoulder. The mustiness was stronger, suffocating. She stiffened, hoping he couldn’t tell. When his fingers tightened, a wave of revulsion bent her forward, away from his grip, and she tugged at her sleeve to disguise it.

‘There is a lot of paperwork, of course. I may need to be convinced.’ His breath shivered her ear. ‘Sometimes we only need the right persuasion to approve people.’

‘I see what you mean.’ She held herself steady as his thumb began small circles under the neck of her shirt. It would be worth it. The truth had come to be worth anything. She clenched her fists in her lap. ‘Will there be birds? In the wilding?’

Leslie Thiele

‘Yes.’ The fingers shifted slightly. ‘Perhaps we could arrange a time.’

She smiled up at him with numb lips. ‘After?’ Panic fluttered behind her ribs.

‘Before?’ His voice thickened with seduction, an awful playfulness.

She grasped at escape, however temporary. ‘I won’t be able to relax. I wouldn’t be much use to you.’ She reached for his hand and gave it a light squeeze, regret. ‘I’d like to be ready.’

‘After, then. No fun if you can’t enjoy these things.’

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Here, on the cold shore by the timeless sea, she could believe it was worth it. That man, the awful bargain, for this. Rumours had circulated for years about the wildings. She had scarcely dared to believe any of them. There were always stories about one thing or another. Everyone talked.

She had known all along it was an impossible dream but held her secret for as long as she could. Too long, it turned out, in the end. She should have done something about it earlier. It was such a commonplace thing, accidental breeding. She had never taken it seriously until it happened. How far could she push this? What would it feel like? But she had been found out and the termination arranged. Afterwards, the dullness had seeped into her days like a slow tide.

Wilding

The crush of people irritated her, the walls of her apartment pressed inward, the screens no longer amused or enthralled. Food had no flavour, eating seemed pointless. There was emptiness to everything outside her body, corresponding to the emptiness within. She got up, she went to work, she came home. Her breath went in and out, her legs carried her around the city—but her fingers were always cold, her jaw tight. At night, she found herself weeping silently with no end, other than sleep.

Her manager became alarmed. ‘You’re wasting away. There’s nothing left of you.’

‘Yes.’ She felt the truth there. ‘You’re right. There’s not.’

‘Get yourself sorted.’

At the beginning of every season, they changed the rota of screens. On the first evening of spring, she had turned on the wall with no expectation, save habit. An image of a forest, the bare trees budding into bright green, filled the screen. Halfway through eating her bland dinner from the servery, something unexpected flitted across. She watched, transfixed. There it went again, from one graceful shining tree to another.

She phoned her supervisor. ‘Flying. In the air, I think.’

‘Birds,’ he said. ‘Pointless things, really. Gone a long time ago.’

Her discovery of birds had woken her from her stupor. She read all she could find about them. Miraculous creatures that flew under their own power, laid eggs, *sung*, of all things!

Leslie Thiele

Of course, there were none here now. But she began to hear whispers about the wildings, almost as if she had somehow drawn something towards her aching soul. Surely, if the rumours were true, there would be birds there.

If she could hold one in her hand, she would be cured. She would always hold some joy in her heart so long as she was sure such things existed. For who could ever be truly sad when there were such things singing and winging in the air, somewhere?

She began to plan. The downward cast of her eyes was enough for most people to carry their gaze conveniently past her. It gained her access to hidden places, quiet conversations. She knew wildings were only offered to those whose longing for nature somehow contributed to their condition.

For many, the screens were more than enough, and eminently more comfortable than what they had heard of the discomforts of the Old Real World. After she tried vitamin supplements, her doctor had prescribed time under UV light and then a course of virtual headsets, which only gave her a headache. None of it made any difference to her mood. She thought it would always be so. Until the wilding.

Every day she saw birds here. The large seabirds cut the thick air with wings like bread knives; others flew so high above, she could only make out the shape of the group of them in the sky, fluid and changeable.

The tiny ones were her favourite. On her first morning walk down to the beach, she had been overjoyed to see

them flitting among the rushes. Their sweet chirping filled the air as much as the constant washing of the waves against the shore. Unafraid, they darted past her face and over her shoulder. Tiny beaks and quicksilver wings, lively darts slicing the air. They filled her heart with a lightness she had not felt since the first quickening of the baby.

She would find a way to come here again. There were staff who kept to themselves as they mowed and swept. Every day, her towels were fresh when she got back from her walk, though she never saw who laid them in a folded fan across her bed. She could do that, perhaps—be the towel person. Walk in the mornings and evenings, fold and arrange towels through the day. It was a long way from her high-powered role in public monitoring, surrounded endlessly by walls, screens and data. She was tired of spying on people, weary of reporting them for being human. She could be happy here, living this simple existence, and watching the birds.

On her way back to the cabin, the wind dropped behind the shelter of the trees and she could hear the birds—sharp, piping notes, and the rustle of their landings in the scrubby bush. They flitted through the branches, darting occasionally across the cleared path. Out of nowhere, one flew crazily towards her face, hitting her shoulder in full flight, the blow much harder than the size of the bird indicated. It fell to the ground, and she bent with a cry as it lay fluttering on the hot pathway. In her hands, the frantic motion of wings light yet full of vigorous, angry life.

Leslie Thiele

It weighed more than she'd imagined. How could something so heavy fly so lightly through the air? It was a wonder to her. She cradled the bird in her cupped hands and ran along the path towards the cottages lining the parklands.

Ahead, a dark-haired woman in a navy uniform was coming out of the cabin.

'Excuse me!'

There was no response.

'Excuse me?'

The woman turned her head and stood motionless at the bottom of the steps.

'Can you help me? The bird is injured. Is there somewhere I can take it? Someone who can help?'

'Checkout is at nine. The bus leaves at nine-twenty from the forecourt. Additional charges will be forthcoming for late departures. Do you need a wake-up call?'

'No! I need help for this bird. It's injured.' Alex held up the quivering bundle of feathers, dark against her fingers. 'See?'

'All damages to government property must be reported to management.' The woman turned to walk away, unconcerned.

Something was wrong. 'This isn't government property. This is a bird.'

The woman turned back. 'All damages to government property must be reported to management.'

Alex grasped the woman's arm with her free hand, felt the smooth cool of plastic. Android. Of course. It made sense. Worker bees to do the towel folding, the mowing, the

cleaning. She pushed the robot away as it was still talking, and it walked up the pathway, arms full of towels.

Back in her room, Alex laid the bird on the quilt. It opened and shut its gleaming eyes, its beak making sporadic movements and disjointed sounds. Gently feeling along each tiny wing, she checked for breaks. She felt up along its neck, then pulled her thumb away quickly. It was covered in red. She sucked on it and tasted blood. The cut wasn't deep but stung all the same.

She stopped suddenly, the metallic tang of her blood fresh on her tongue. The light through the window was weak, but it enough to shine on the gleam of steel protruding from the feathers. No bone here to wither away with age. No flesh, no blood of its own. She picked the thing up and threw it to the floor, a scattering of cogs and wheels, wire and feather, a smear of something oily on the spread.

She set aside the urge to vomit, found a dustpan and brush, gathered the bits from the smooth floor. Hot shame burned like a wave at their deception, the cruelty of it.

Under the table, a shining piece caught her eye. She reached down and picked it up. The central motor, still whirring slightly. She wrapped one of the perfect towels around her hand, made a fist and smashed the window. The glass cracked through and fell outward, towards the beautiful empty view.

Government property. Report that to management. Arseholes.

The motor buzzed crazily against her palm. She raised her arm, threw it as far as she could. Far enough away so the only thing she could hear was her own ragged breath.