

Wild Garlic

Chapter 1

64,278 Miles

In the south of England there is a stretch of road that curves itself around clusters of wild garlic.

Driving through towards the closing of winter your nose wrinkles as the smell intrudes through a closed window. Around autumn the overarching trees start to lose their weight, the colour draws from their shadows and lays a bed for the bulbs to bloom. December arrives and the stench intensifies from the seasons wetness before announcing itself for months on end. We pass through here to reach anywhere, escaping our detached thatched fortress and into our lives.

She and I, the radio, the screen wash, and blanket fitted neatly into our dirty white car. Wild garlic lingered like flavour on the fingers, defrosting with us through the day until we froze again at night-time. Spring came and the white tepals rejoiced, our visors angled themselves toward our brows dissuading the sunlight from our eyes only to break through the woodland.

As the year passed away so did our hats and scarves, rolling down our windows to usher in the lands perfume and breeze. I've begun counting the miles on the dial behind the wheel, satisfied to see it creep away in tandem with the crowning road. 64,278 miles. We start again today, the car doors clapping one after the other like cantering hoofs. My mother turns the rear-view mirror and guides a turquoise kohl pencil to the orbit of her eye, weeping a little and blinking dry before smiling, 'Seatbelt?'. The gravel parts itself underneath our alloy wings and mother drives like she always has done, one eye on the road, one eye on me, one ear for the radio, one for my voice, one hand on the gear and one awaiting mine. We approach the garlic and commence staccato inhales like airport dogs. She asks if my trainers are tight, and I tell her not yet.

'Do your toes curl at the end?'

'No, they are quite dirty though'

'Well, we can clean them. They'll go in the washing machine'

I imagine the shoes chasing one another around the metal drum, falling one after the other as they run and stumble without me. Later they will rest beneath the radiator on a bed of newspaper headlines, the opinion section crumpled into the sole and the crossword in the heel.

‘What do you fancy for tea?’

I pause and await the options, white fish and frozen peas negotiating themselves in the freezer drawer. This morning her hair begins to dry to the west, with one hand remaining on the wheel she combs her fingers backwards through her parting and redirects it to the east. Come June she’ll forget all about perfection, the warm wind casting her red collar length hair backwards like ribbon off a wedding bumper. We pass along a thin lane, the verges closing in between pockets of hedgerow untouched by farmers. The smell of farm animal manure dismisses the woodland odour we are taken further on by a thin ribbon of road. A raspberry Citroen comes toward us from a blind corner, and we surrender to the vehicle and its startled navigator. We reverse as outstretched brambles squeal alongside our windows before tucking ourselves into the mud like polite creatures. I keep my eyes on the mileage clock, convinced we are granted a refund on one twelfth of a mile. We never are, we never get this time back. The other car finally passes us, ‘Breathe in’ my mother says. My lungs rise and their cage shrinks, we drive off and breathe out.

Passing by the giggling river, the broken arms of roadside trees intrude beyond their stone boundaries. For a moment I imagine ploughing through this storm, being crushed beneath the weight of an old oak. I awaken frozen to my seat with two legs broken. She is in the driver’s seat, a brook of blood trailing from her eastern hairline and her face lifeless. Sunlight breaks through the road and strikes the bridge of my nose, disrupting the tears forming at the cliff of my cheek. I blink back to the road, she looks over to me – her face light and pink, crow’s feet like a cradle.

‘Alright?’

‘yep’, I reply. Truthfully, I’ve just returned from a daydream in which you were dead and although you look horrified to hear this now you must know how much I’d hate that and how

glad I am to see both of your hands guiding us along safely whilst the trees behave themselves.

‘You remembered your lunch?’

I bow my head, squint my eyes, and tuck the bottom lip underneath the top one. I beg for the impact of the falling ash tree from my daydream and perform a remorseful routine deployed only for an occasion as careless as this. The lip recedes further away until I fear I may lose it for good. Mother sighs. It’s the kind of sigh that fuels the day, a gust of wind pushing mothers and their children along through the maiden voyages. We’ve been learning about maiden voyages in history, how some women launch ships with their face and others just smash a champagne bottle onto the side. The majority are left behind on the dock to wave the men off with their handkerchiefs.

‘No.’

Her eyes widen and her heavy sigh returns as an inhale up and through the shoulders before she lurches over the dashboard to inspect a sharp turn. There are twenty-eight sharp turns on the way to school, one morning I counted when the world couldn’t stop raining and I had to be very quiet so that the road knew we were paying attention.

‘Go into my purse’

She motions toward the glove compartment, gritting her teeth. I picture them sliding in and out like the levels of those coin tower machines in arcades. Inside the glove compartment her purse is sandwiched between CD cases, cracked, and scraped. The purse slides begrudgingly toward me and reveals the face of Neil Diamond. I’m always careful in the glove compartment, once I was told if you’re too heavy handed the air bag might erupt and mash you up good. A potato imprinted on the passenger seat left for the sun to crisp.

‘You’ll go hungry one day’

‘I know’, I don’t think she would ever let that happen.

‘Go into the pocket, take something for school lunch’

I pluck four-pound coins from the pocket and rub them together like breadcrumbs.

‘How much is left?’

I start counting, four 20p’s, three 50p’s, two bits of shrapnel. We’ve always called small change shrapnel. World war two week at school was very confusing, soldiers losing their lives to small pieces of shrapnel falling on their head. Imagine being sent off to fight a war and being killed by a penny. Thirty-two, Thirty-three.

‘Two pounds thirty-four’

She conducts her eyes toward my lap, then to my face and then the road and back once or twice more to make her point. I glance everywhere she is not, wherever I can hide.

‘Don’t forget tomorrow’

‘Tomorrow is Saturday mum’

She doesn’t answer, her mind belonging already to other working parts of us.

‘I thought we could go and buy you shoes for next term tomorrow, what do you think?’

It doesn’t really matter what I think, I know that by now. I’m the inconsiderate one, growing at a pace she can barely keep up with. I’ve almost passed her line of sight; she’ll have to talk up to me when we aren’t sitting down. Soon we will have to find clothes that don’t bite at my ankles and wrists. Our weekends are gone, older women will help us find long trousers in high-street fitting rooms only to comment in disbelief ‘My she’s tall’.

‘I put her into a grow bag each night’ laughs my mother.

I think of my toes covered in soil, while worms bite at me like hungry fish in hot Mediterranean pools. At night I’m mummified in a grow bag. I’ll happily sit on a soft turquoise cube whilst a stranger touches my feet and asks me to wiggle my toes, no problem. The hills stagger themselves like racehorses as the glass cools my temple. I look down at my

feet toasting in the halo of the engines heat and slip them begrudgingly into my softened brogues.

We slow down for a red light, and she impatiently drums her fingers upon the steering wheel. Guitar strumming increases through the radio and George Michael proclaims “Well I guess it could be nice” as her palms begin to syncopate upon the taught leather. I join her ensemble ‘I gotta have faith’, over and over until a dissonant horn disrupts our fun and the light hops to green.

‘Sounds good.’

“Now time for a traffic update”, a jingle swirls around the stereo before streamlining into a faint morse code melody “- there’s que’s building up along the A32 continuing up until the ring road leading towards...”

‘Were you warm enough last night?’

I nod her way like a dashboard dog, the traffic report trailing along the downbeats of my neck. My mother dresses our beds as she would a shop window, pillows placed one after the other descending like steps from a church. The duvet splayed heavily under the quilt, summoned from my fathers’ shirts. Last night I bled through the sheets, too tort and pale to hide my embarrassment. In the morning I appeared like a lamb to my mother,

‘I’ve bled’

‘All over the sheets?’

‘Oh Sweetheart’. Her heaviness casts itself upon the bedding, now crumpled like a used napkin and the puddle of blood framed neatly between the floral pillows and a mottled teddy. The sheets were quickly stripped like a cruel nurse to a wound dressing. I lingered in the shower, the dull knot twisting beneath my swollen belly as I look down at the diluted blood. Since I’ve started bleeding my mother has been writing down the dates. I’m a newly discovered species to her, and with each observation she inches closer to knowing what I am. The cupboard beneath the sink boasts neat rows of always daily. Forgetfully I pass a white towel between my legs and bring it to my navel to inspect a caught clot. I think about how

useless white towels, white football shorts, white table clothes are. White is my mother's favourite colour, white makes us clean. I sit in my car seat shuffling occasionally to adjust myself, crossing my legs tightly to dam the river until I feel my heartbeat in my crotch.

'How is your tummy?'

My eyes grow heavy and roll themselves toward to my mother. She passes me her eye in return, 'Oh darling'. Driving makes her softer. She motions toward her bag, large and leather with a robust clasp to keep out the intruders.

'There should be a line of painkillers. Take two'

I rummage through petrol receipts, tablets of gum and reading glasses, a sharpened edge of a cut line of pills pinches beneath my thumbnail. Two have already been consumed, the other two are for me. I swig from a murky water bottle which has sat in the cup holder since summer. The plastic crumples in my grip and the metallic bitterness flushes away the pills. We are good at killing our pain. At times my mother will dress hers unrecognisably, disguised in leaf coloured lip sticks and flowing ankle length skirts. I know she loves the female voice echoing through the car, that thunder only happens when it's raining, and that the woman singing wears skirts like wind in autumn colours too. I wonder if Stevie Nicks has a period. We arrive at the school gates and bounce over potholes one two and three. I land from the third and I wriggle away from the blood escaping. Leaning over she kisses my cheek lightly and immediately corrects the remnants of lip colour on my cheek to blush.

'You'll be fine' she says.

I inhale, taking her perfume with me as the morning takes me with it.