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## The Well

HE PAUSED ON HIS WAY to the well to take in a landscape blown more open by the wind. Following that window-splattering shower of first light the world was radiant—from the glitter of grass flooding the fences to a sky where clouds ran like sails. He didn't own what he saw and didn't want to.

The downland keeled into a broad valley where winter brown became green, black-edged in intensity. It was the last days of March, the spring slower to arrive these two-fifty metres above sea level. Sea level was a quaint expression, since the sea was a long way off wherever he shaded his eyes. At the far edge of his vista, cells trafficked along the motorway, urgent antibodies. The pylons came nearer, linked arms across the levels in hungry parody of a fertility dance.

He was above their spit and hum. The rented house had no power laid on. Before him there'd been an old lady, last descendant of the farm long since subsumed into a land trust. The house, never lovely, was now semi-useful in the manner of flotsam. The old lady's legacy was newspapers and publicity brochures of the kind that most people bin without reading. He came into occupancy to find them stacked round the margins of the main room, sandbags to the final flood. Insulation maybe: he quickly found that two skins of brick were tissue to the wind. Water was heated by the fire's back boiler, returning him to Black Country childhood in corporation housing. The flames were the same flames of Sunday nights long ago.

At night he read by heady paraffin lamp. Days, he divided between the well and the warped table. The table was placed in a

compromise between the fire's heat and the light of the window. There, he failed to quite capture in words the many new and pleasing thoughts that came to him, and which had little or nothing to do with the book he was supposed to be writing. Perhaps it was only an alibi after all. He was getting clear about many things, but slowly. Time, however, kept up its steady go-by. "The days are getting longer," he thought, feet deep in the leathery grass. He saw days to come like logs in his arms. "How many more can I carry?"

In answer, he climbed into the well.

He was calm. He seemed to have no nerves to speak of. He no longer lay awake at night, his back on a slippery slope, worrying sounds into malign presences. He cherished the small occurrences, even of the dark, like food to his short-leased senses. Each instance—the shadow of a shrub bossed on the back window by a lowering sun, the nipping smell of a struck match—each scintilla was a grain of sand pouring through the narrowing hourglass of his body. His sensations marked time, but each grain was noticeable and fell at its own angle. Time was not a rigid arm; it was generous and pulsing, contracting or enlarging according to what his senses registered.

Naturally, he had fits of melancholy, usually blended of tiredness and dimming light. Now he had put himself apart, however, there was no face against which to judge himself, no voice to strike the right tactful note and send a fine thread looping like cheese-wire around his insides. The morbid images grew sporadic and short-lived, vanishing with the sparks from a fresh log thumped onto the grate. Day by day, a kind of tranquillity had trickled in. Tranquillity was not the word exactly. It didn't convey what he felt as he stood on the rutted ground of a morning with his veins quickened by the gift of one more dawn—no two alike—feeling the light and what it glanced off enter clean into him. His ears thrummed, the mike close to everything that moved. His hands lingered on surfaces. If his mistakes had led to this state, then it was alright. He wouldn't use the word mistake any more. He would no longer bring himself bad news. Alone there was only good. Alone, he could hear rust forming and the blackbird clearing its reed between bars. He wanted for very little. He noticed how, when the wants died down, the fear went with them.

It was only when he heard the woman's voice that he realized a single, fierce want had replaced all the others: the want of his solitary peace to remain unbroken.

But there it was. Not the voice of an ancient, trapped witch of the well—she was real and he could not pretend he hadn't heard. He thought the obvious air of the place would deter: callers by appointment only (appointments never given). He thought the stolid rain-butt, fat with drops of silence, the unkempt grass against the drab brick, the vaseless windowsills, would welcome only the weather. Besides, what would anyone want up here?

"I think I'm lost," she said. Her face was a too-bright disc in the scoured air. She was already through the gate.

"Oh," he said, within the well and looking out.

"But I'm certainly stuck."

"Oh dear."

"Yes. I was trying to turn and I went into a bit of a hole. The track's so narrow. Maybe I should have reversed it, but—"

"You could have," said the man. He rested his arms on the parapet of the well. He even dropped his gaze into it. Remembering his manners, he said, "The track was made before cars."

"I suppose so."

She looked nonplussed at his lack of interest. A gust of wind blew her mac and she pulled the lapels about her neck. She wore a black beret at a self-conscious angle. She turned her head to see if the car had moved, and perhaps to focus this man's slow mind on her situation. When she turned, the wind blew her mac against her body.

"The track doesn't go anywhere after here," he said. He pulled up to sit on the stone rim, carefully, as though he or it might fall over. "It gives out in that reedy patch up there."

She followed his arm. She didn't see. "Oh," she said.

"Where were you aiming for?"

"St. Anatole's. The retreat place. Do you know it?"

"You need the track lower down. There's a fork—"

"I knew it," laughed the woman. His ears hurt. She saw the frown. "I am sorry to bother you."

"Oh well. It's easily done. There used to be a sign, apparently."

"Apparently?"

"Well, there's a post at the fork. And it's what people say. I wouldn't know. I've not been here long myself, so—"

He had time to regret this needless confession because it prompted the visitor to inspect the place as one where someone

actually lived. Approaching, she had thought it deserted and nearly turned back—till she heard the sound from the well.

She started to walk nearer, still averting her head to look at the roof. “I wondered if I could at least use your phone?”

“You could if there was one.”

“Oh dear.” She checked again. “Not even a mobile?”

“Not even a mobile.”

“Oh, I thought everyone had one these days.” She produced again the sharp, hard laugh that was like a spade striking rock. It exposed rather than masked her unease; she was weighing the man’s normality.

The man, in spite of himself, felt sorry for her civilized embarrassment, her shame at merely existing to be a trouble to others and, yes, he was guessing—a conundrum to herself. What was there to be sorry for? You lived. You lived until it too gave out.

“The nearest is back on the road. Call at Edge Farm, on the left as you go towards the motorway. Not the town. I’m sure they’ll oblige.” He glanced down into the well again.

The woman looked at him now with a certain disbelief. She cut her stare to look away to the hill, still clutching her lapels. The wind came over the empty rust of a pasture littered with the wool of sheep that had been sucked away. She bit her lip. “I’m stuck, you see. You don’t think you—we—could try to get her out?”

“Her?”

“It—my car.” She waved a hand. “Sorry. I call her Fifi.” The laugh was doubly loud. “Well, she *is* French.” She rubbed her hands and even from this distance he could see the blush. Her whole life was in the wind, the kite of string-bound choices that makes a person.

He read his hands and wiped them on his shirt. “Of course,” he said. At once he could feel her attention on the top of his head as he levered himself up and over the lip of the well. He regretted his suddenness and stalled momentarily until the weak feeling passed. So that she wouldn’t notice, he kicked dirt from his boots on the boulder that was like a mounting step, not for a horse, but for the getter of water.

With instinctual practicality he picked up a spar of wood to take. The car was not far down and he was surprised that he had not heard it as she tried and failed to turn. Perhaps he was successfully filtering out the outside world from his perceptions. Except that here he was, walking by this woman’s side to lift her car out.

It was like a delayed echo: meaning, a situation he might have welcomed—before. Do our wishes come to us whether we remember and later want them or not? he wondered. This is neither a wish nor a situation, he told himself. When she said “I am sorry” yet again, he said, a little too promptly, “We’ll soon have you on your way again.”

She chattered the whole way down. The day, where she lived, the journey, the lovely view, the lovely air, the lovely quiet. To which the man said Yes or No or nodded unseen, his own eyes reserved for the many details crowding to be noticed like children around their teacher. If he did not respond to her, then the spell was not entirely broken—even while he knew it was. The further he came from the house and the nearer the car, the more his face tightened. The false completeness of the factory-made thing, its absurdly human looking lamps, reminded him of too much.

The little car was tilted with thoroughness into the uneven V of the water run-off which went down alongside the track. The car was at perfect right-angles to up or down. Its underside rested on small boulders so that the rear wheels had nothing but air to bite on. In the gusts the metal box rocked idly. Such a thing could have no purpose where it hung on the side of a hill.

He considered the tentative primulas studding the bank instead. Close by, the snowdrops were green, their flowers withering rust in their passing.

“Is it impossible?” The woman’s hand went to her cheek in another of those involving gestures. She couldn’t make him out. He seemed to move completely in his own time.

“No,” he said, straightening. “Not at all.”

“I feel such a fool,” she laughed.

“It’s easily done.”

The words were fine but to her ears his tone was limp. There it is again, she thought: the mixture of reluctance and soft undisturbability. If you’re going to help then help. Or let me free to go elsewhere. No wonder he isn’t married, she thought. He moves alright but he doesn’t look strong. Like he’s left something important behind along the way. Forty? The woman was thirty-seven, exactly.

The man searched for a part of the underside strong enough to lever against. Then it needed the right angle. The wood was too long. It was all very awkward in the usual small ways of life—not the sort of thing one remembered but nonetheless the sort of thing

which ate up so much of life. He stood up, thinking. But his eyes had to clear first.

"What shall I do?" she said brightly.

"Nothing just yet."

His new beard on his long face had more than one colour in it. "It's my birthday," she said. "Just my luck."

"Is it?" He couldn't meet the halogen face. Her impatience was a forcing current around his legs in a river. He was wondering if he should try to lift the car on his own.

"Here." He offered the wood to her. The woman's hands went to her coat. "You wipe them afterwards, not before." For the first time he smiled, his eyes shyly down. She laughed her metallic laugh. He would have run if he could.

He told her to put the wood down on the other edge of the track to stop the car rolling into the soft stuff. The wood oozed into her palm. She looked doubtfully to the front of the car. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to try to lift it out. You put the wood where the wheels will go. Then take the handbrake off."

"The back's very heavy. It's loaded up, I'm afraid."

His eyes went down and up. "We'll take it all out then." She cast her eyes to the sky. He said, "If it rains, it rains." He saw her mouth try to smile so he added, "It'll be two minutes if it goes."

The boxes were heavy, full of cans and bottles. Then there were cases and a grip. "My God," he said. "How long are you staying?"

"It's not all mine. Contributions appreciated, it says. I've no idea what people eat in Russian Orthodox retreats. Have you?"

Probably not artichoke hearts and capers, he thought. He pushed the boxes clear. When he stood up he was breathing heavily. She asked him if he was okay. "Fine," he said and pulled the hatch down. "Take the handbrake off."

She opened the driver's door and made elaborate preparations, as though about to drive off: secured her mac, straightened her hat and gathered fabric evenly under her bottom. She put herself squarely behind the wheel. There was a horrible scraping sound. "Oh dear me," she said. Gingerly, she got out again.

"Can't be helped," said the man. "Can you just reach in and release it without sitting?"

"I'll have to kneel," she shouted unnecessarily.

"Whatever."

“Brake’s off,” she shouted. She got out and stood back, as for an explosion.

The man positioned himself in the run-off and bent at the knees to lift. As his arms pulled straight, he knew there was nothing to pull with. His legs felt shaky. He felt cold on his back and sweat on his forehead. The tires had touched the bouldered edge. Up they rolled an inch, until he could brace himself no more and back onto its metal husk the car sank again.

The woman stood her distance and blinked, afraid at his distress. She was right: in his tall frame there was no strength. Her luck. With his exertion the man looked not redder but paler. He was propped against the bank feeling his arms.

He saw her stand with hands in pockets, as if posing for a fashion shot. Almost it tired him more than the car. “I am sorry for all this,” the voice repeated. His smile was close-lipped and averted. “Do we need more hands?”

“No,” he said, at once kicking himself upright. “We’ll do it.” He was defying his condition. Resting on the bank, he had seen the well bottom in its still shadow. But if he thought about the quiet well and the halting and stained trickle he wanted to make into a clear flow, he felt not quietness but anger. Contrary to what he always read, anger weakened him. To focus his energy he needed calm. Surely this wasn’t beyond him yet—this simple good deed?

When he tried a second, over-long time, applying his shoulder in a way he knew at once to be bearing down and so adding to the weight he was trying to push, he had to fall back once more. The sinews of his arms felt over-stretched, making him nauseous. He was clammy all over and vagrant tadpoles whipped to and fro in his eyes.

“Are you alright?” She came forward. The tears made her hesitate. “I am sorry,” she repeated in her meaningful voice.

He wiped his eyes. “The wind,” he said. “I’m—I’m not in the best of conditions—just now.” He felt her eyes’ fretful movement. He was wondering at this new, wholly involuntary, tendency to water at the eyes. Another development. Now he would have nothing left with which to work on the well today.

She said, “Look, it’s not my house, but can I invite you to a cup of tea and a rest?” The laugh was meant to dissolve the impertinence.

He nodded. “Okay. Ten minutes.”

“Yes, fine. I’m not really in a hurry.”

"Oh dear," the woman said as they reached his back door. "I mean, I've invited myself, but am I safe up here?" She laughed rapid and loud, a series of white flashes or birds blowing over in the March wind.

"You're quite safe," the man said, feeling uncomfortably the presence of the stranger at his back.

"Sure?" She stood on the threshold as he held the door. The weakness in his eyes reassured her no better.

"Positive," he said.

She carried her smile through the door. "Oh that's alright then."

She took in the kitchen rapidly. There was a thick enamel sink with an old curtain underneath, two jutting taps and, by the sink, a double gas burner. Above her head, ceiling boards sagged. Cups, food packets and pans stood on open shelves. She flung herself towards the window and the less-naked outside. "That's a well," she said. "How lovely."

"Hm," said the man. He filled the kettle from the wobbling tap and lit the burner. "You saw it before. When you arrived."

"Did I? I was too preoccupied probably. Silly really. It's only a car and I'm not in a hurry. I don't know why—has it got any water in it?"

"The well? Yes and no."

He sat in the chair by the stove. When she turned to the window he could study her leaning above him. She was the first woman to stand in the house in the four months he had been here. She was almost as tall as he was, solid without any heaviness. Her face was so constantly, nervously animated, eyes brimming and drinking: she was like two hands cupping a light that the merest draught could take out.

He stood to take down two mugs and he could smell soap and something scented from her. She wasn't as young as he first thought. Under impatiently applied makeup there were plenty of lines, a map of troubles. He saw again her eyes with the daylight in them and thought it curious how some people kept the largeness of innocence and youth in their eyes, a danger to themselves always. Her hands were on the sink and she wore no ring.

He put his hand up to the packets on the shelf and said, "What's it to be?"—noting the sudden brightness in his own voice, a barman under his optics. But her head was at that moment turned to look through the open kitchen door into the sitting-room.



She flushed. "Sorry."

"You've done it now."

"What? Sorry."

"Missed your chance. It's Orange Pekoe or nothing." He was not irritated. He felt pity, held as she was on such taut strings.

"Oh, anything's fine."

He took the cloth to pick up the kettle and put the hot water in the pot to warm it. She watched him. He spooned the dark, curly tea into the pot and added the water from the agitated kettle. The steam was dense in the cold kitchen. The woman saw how sinewy his arms were, like an old man's, except his were supple still. He moved with economy and calmness, not only meting himself out carefully but by his care increasing the value of those things he touched. Her early fret had all but passed.

"Oh look," she said, now modulating her voice for his sake. "That bird. What is it?"

"Kestrel." He angled his head to share the same lit space as hers.

"But it's so close." She craned to the window, childlike, mouth a little open.

"She's got nothing to fear up here. I see her often."

"Her?"

"Her. She's a bit bigger than the male. I see them both sometimes."

He knew but he did not insist. She saw that when watching the bird his eyes had more life in them.

Whether because a blast of wind rose up or because the kestrel tired of its stance, or of some super-subtle moment in which air and impulse synchronized, the bird abruptly canted and wheeled off. That one always lowers herself in threes, thought the man. The others, it was two. She's thorough, or cautious. He did not share this detail. Man and woman watched in silence as the kestrel disappeared.

Pouring the tea, he said, "The place was empty for about three years. The hill went back to the kestrels and the wind."

"I suppose so," she said. She wanted to ask him why he was here, but liked herself more for biting the question back. She took the mug his hand indicated. She wasn't invited to go through or sit. "How do you get your food?"

"Delivery, to the bottom of the track. Once a week is enough."

"You carry it up?" She wished at once to call back the incredulity in her voice. His face absorbed it.

"I manage." He added quickly, "There's a bus twice a week into the town, if I want."

He sat again. She leant against the sink, facing in, and tilted her face to the mug. "Mm," she said, her eyes big over the rim. He was looking past her, to the sky over the hill. She could see him not just looking but reading what he saw.

Without addressing her directly, he said, "It was blue first thing. That's been the pattern these last few days. Blue at first. Then streaky clouds creeping over, and a stray wind that doesn't seem to know where it wants to go."

"Really?" she said. Privately, she was wondering if St. Anatole's had central heating. "Has it rained much?"

"Squalls. The odd drip from the odd cloud." He was tilting his head this way and that, unhurriedly. "Don't worry. I don't expect any just now." His eyes glanced to her and away.

She was thinking about the cases and her bag, the boxes of food, out on the track under the sky. She put down the mug with a wide gesture. "That was lovely." Then she couldn't just leave it. She tried the tap.

"It's okay, just leave it."

She spun the chipped brass tap. The pipes rattled and vibrated. At length, water came strong and cold, as from far down. She rinsed the mug quickly and set it upside down. She took the cloth to her red fingers. "That's fresh," she laughed.

"Same source as the well," he told her.

"Is it?"

"They ran a pipe down from higher up. It's a stream. It drops underground when it gets near the farm. Hence the well."

"Can I see the well before I go?"

"Of course."

"If you don't mind?"

"Not at all."

She was at the door when he set his mug on the sink top. "There's not much to see," he said. "That's why I'm working on it. It doesn't flow and the water doesn't collect."

They stood and looked in. Somebody had taken a lot of trouble to force apart, split and gouge rocks to get to the water. Pleased with her intelligence, she said, "But how did they know it went through just here?"

“Good question,” he said. “Maybe there was a lot of trial and error.”

He smiled and his smile lasted while he turned from her face to the circle of shadow. The well was hardly deeper than the man’s height. Even so it had the cold of an elemental and unbreakable persistence in it. It did not smell, as the woman had expected it to. In fact, it made her feel overdressed and impure. The man sensed this from her gaze there—this effect he had himself felt when he made his first doubtful trek up here, on inspection to see if the place was right for his last stance. Seeing the woman, this stranger, peering to see every detail caused the normally laboured beat of his heart to give a little extra, not quite a rabbit thumping. Her eyes skated the shadow, the hint of silver. There was a frond of something green to one side.

“How did they get it this circular?” she asked, her eyes still in the well. “I mean, a well’s supposed to be round, but that’s just rock that side.”

“I know,” he said. “Patient work, I should say. Look, there are even incut steps.”

“Belief,” the woman said, matter-of-fact.

“Necessity, more like.”

“But,” she came back, “needs just stay needs unless you do something about them. Don’t they?” She added the question because she sounded a little too sure even to herself.

“I don’t know,” said the man. He narrowed his eyes, looking down, because it was as if something new had appeared to do with the well’s making.

“Well,” she said. Then a hand sprang to her mouth and her eyes spilled. “Oh dear.” She laughed and part of the laugh went into the well and lost its fragile human note. He began to laugh, at first breath only, but then he shook his head, resting it on his hands, and laughed from his chest. For a delicious second his chest reversed the gradual shallowing of these months. He was appalled to have his eyes pearl up again and the tears spill without a barrier onto his cheeks. “The wind,” said the woman, attending her own.

He pushed a knuckle across his cheek. “Must be.”

Then her hand was on his arm and she was looking at his face steadily. “I think it’s good that you don’t feel any bitterness,” she said. The smile left the man’s face and though he looked into the well, he was not seeing. “That you don’t seem to be full of regret.”

He gave a faint shrug. His eyes merely wandered in the well's shadow. She took this for a response.

"How did you know?" he asked as they went down to the car. "Is it so obvious?"

"No, no," she said quickly. She shrugged and her mouth moved to say more. She changed her mind. Their feet crunched over-real on stones. Then she said with her smiling voice, "Water-divining. What's the word?"

He smiled. "I don't know. Dowsing—is that it?"

"Dowsing." Her hands came up. "The forked hazel."

Together they stood in the rocky ditch and pushed the car's rear wheels onto the track. It went over the lumps first time. She got in to steer it round. He hopped from back to front, gesturing in many and fine degrees with his hands wagging like pan pipes. His face smiled or made disaster gurns. The car made a many-pointed star before it faced downhill, but they did it. They refilled the boot and it was ready to leave.

Bending to the window, he said, "I hope you find your retreat."

"Thank you," said the woman. She turned to the windscreen, to the way down, and turned back. "Thanks for the tea. Finish your book."

"Oh that." He looked away with dismissive shyness. But her interest fell on him like sunshine on the cold March day. "Yes," he said, straightening with emphasis. "I will."

She released the handbrake and the car began to roll. "And the well," came her voice from the window.

"Oh yes." He wished at once his gesture had been stronger and longer in answer to her arm and the hand spreading its clean white fingers.

He watched until the car fell behind the spur. He walked up the track steadily. The light over the crest of the hill was very clear, piercing his eyes. He was glad to feel it pierce. The kestrel was back, a silhouette fluttering on its ends.

It was his writing time. He preferred to go back to the well. He still had reserves left. To do the job, he told himself, while the weather holds. Really, he did not want to go inside yet and register the fresh departure of nervous laughter, of a sweet complexity he hadn't expected to be near again.