

*No.3*

*Rose and the Woodcutter*

By Heather Leach

She watches from her bedroom window. A whole week. Every morning the same thing. First the door of the campervan opens and a black dog comes out. Then a man, tall and thin, with hippy hair and bare feet. He drags a plank of demolition timber from under the van and hacks at it, the axe blade flashing in the sunlight. He takes the wood back into the van and after a minute smoke rises from the narrow chimney. The Town Hall clock says half past eight. Rush hour. Traffic roaring on the Mancunian Way. The van door stays shut.

Her grandmother yells from the bedroom next door: 'Are you up yet, girl?'

*Are you?* She thinks but doesn't say. 'Yes Gran.'

'Get us a cup of tea then.'

The room smells of smoke and sweat. Rose waits by the bed with the tea as her grandmother reaches for a fag, lungs rasping as she takes the first drag.

'Get yourself off to college then.'

*Make me,* Rose thinks, knowing she won't.

She takes a bowl of cornflakes into her room and eats them, leaning on the window ledge. Quarter to nine. If I go in now I'll be late. No point. The van door opens. The man comes down the steps and sets off walking, slowly, his arms outstretched as if he's blind. He paces out squares and circles, triangles and rectangles. Every day the same thing. Going nowhere, the black dog following.

He steps carefully over the scrubby ground trying to hold himself ready for the moment of connection, the unmistakable signal,

but nothing comes. He walks shoeless, the better to be grounded, feet sidling through broken glass and rubbish, the dog at his heel. The earth is unyielding, surface without depth, the city turning around him like an enormous grinding machine. He stops. Remembers to breathe, to look around. A wide open area surrounded by flats and roads, the planned regeneration stalled by recession, the land now regenerating itself. Sedge. Groundsel. Dandelion. Willow. The dog coughs and he begins walking again, holding the rods out in front. The track leads into a thicket of young trees, allowed to grow wild, Poplars and Sycamores already twenty feet high, and as he slips into their green light he searches for a line, a significant thread. For one moment, he thinks, the rods move in his hands, he's sure he can feel an eloquent tug. But then he's self-conscious again, as if he was an actor and someone was watching him. The dog cocks its leg sceptically against a tree trunk and the rods come loose in his hands again, swinging free, the connection lost. It's no good. He hasn't got it, the touch, the knack. Time to stop playacting, Todd. Performance over.

Gran shouts, 'If you're not going anywhere, make yourself useful. Fetch me some fags from the shop.'

'Alright.' Anything to get out of here.

'And the paper.'

'Yes your ladyship.'

'That's enough cheek. I'm not well. I can soon put you back in that home. Four Carlsberg Export, as well. Save you going later.'

'Ok, Gran.'

‘Make sure you go by the safe route and straight back. No messing.’

The route, around three race-track roads, is neither straight nor safe but she pulls on her jacket and does as she’s told, walking head down, hooded and hidden, going nowhere, being nobody. But coming out of the shop she sees smoke rising from the van, and thinks why not?

He’s on the step, drinking tea, the door open, warmth from the fire on his back, the sun on his face. The dog reacts first, head up, nostrils flaring. Footsteps. Someone scrambling across the ground behind the van. He reaches for his axe. The dog barks.

Just a kid. Could be a druggie with a knife, though. Jeans, trainers, red jacket, carrier bag in his hand, the other hand empty.

‘What d’you want?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Well you’ve come to the right place. No cash. No laptops. Nothing worth robbing.’

‘I’m not a robber.’

‘Let’s see your face, then.’

Not a boy, a girl.

‘What’s in the bag?’

‘Just stuff for my Gran. I watched you walking about.’ She points to the block of flats. ‘From my window. I got curious. Wondered what you were doing.’

He smiles. 'Curiosity and wonder. You've come to the right place for that.'

He shows her the dowsing rods.

'How do they work?'

'They haven't got a computer chip in them, if that's what you mean.'

'I'm not stupid. Aren't they for finding water?'

'Not always.'

'What then?'

'You are curious, aren't you? That's good. I'm searching for a path. What's your name?'

'Rose.' She looks around. 'Plenty of paths here.'

It's true. Short cuts to the shop and the pub. Dog walkers. Fox runs. His own futile trails.

'A particular path. A portal. A door.'

She narrows her eyes. She thinks he's a nutter

'What's your name?'

'Todd.'

'Can I have a go, Mr. Todd?'

'Just Todd.' He rests them on her palms, 'Hold them lightly without tension or pressure.' Small hands, the hands of a child. Huge eyes, strangely green given her brown skin. What rich mix made her?

'Shouldn't you be at school?'

'College. I'm sixteen, not a kid. Shouldn't you be at work?'

'I should. They threw me out.'

‘Oh. Sorry.’ She stares down at the dowsing rods. ‘They feel weird. Electric. Buzzing.’

He comes closer. ‘Do they?’ Slender, vulnerable neck. Not yet a woman. ‘Try them out.’

‘No thanks. Better go.’ She thrusts them back at him and strides away fast, clambering over the earth mounds, hood up again. Spooked. Softly softly, Todd.

She keeps watching him but stays away. A text from the college counsellor: *great pity not to do the exam blah. High hopes for physics blah blah. Come and talk blah blah blah.*

Delete.

What to talk about? Same old same old. *Education your escape route, Rose. You want things, don't you? Money. A good job?*

Is that what I want?

*You're capable of great things, Rose.*

As if it was that easy. Failure in the blood, the bone. Deeper, even: darkness written into the DNA. Every cell a loser. How to stop being who you are?

The man, Todd, keeps at it day after day. Sometimes, when she's watching he turns his face towards the flats and she shrinks back. Stupid. Too far for him to see. Gran's got a new bloke, someone she found on the internet, the two of them swigging lager, playing James Blunt, the flat reeking of smoke. She wakes to hear them doing it in the room next door, grunting like animals, the thin walls shuddering.

It's a clear night. One by one the stars come out, hazy but faithful. She knows some of their names. Beneath the sky, the waste ground is a black lake, no street-lights there but staring hard, she can make out a glow, a red heart pulsing. Fire. Using her phone as a torch she struggles over tree roots, demolition rubble, bin bags. Barbed wire and blackberry thorns pluck at her sleeves and snatch at her legs. The world is animate, articulate. It says, *Stay at home, little girl*. She shivers. The dog runs out to confront her, snarling. She freezes.

A fire of pallets and scrap wood. He sits her down on a crate and sends the dog away. 'He won't hurt you. What are you doing out so late? It's not safe.'

'You're out here.'

'I'm used to it.'

'Don't you have a house. A family?'

'I did once.'

'What happened?'

'You ask a lot of questions. That can get you into trouble. Warm yourself for a minute, then go. I'm busy.'

He's doing it even now, in the dark, walking in circles, back straight, his dowsing rods held out in front, circling the fire wider and wider. Every now and then he stops to put his head on one side as if listening. He not as old as she'd thought. Thirty? Thirty five? It's hard to tell. He might be a nutter. Tangled blond dreadlocks. Strong arms. He looks like a man who could keep the wolf from the door. He's almost out of sight when the dog yelps and he shouts at it, cursing, a

moment later striding back into the clearing. There's a cut on his cheek, blood dripping. The dog sidles after him, tail between its legs.

'You've hurt yourself. What happened?'

He stares, scowling, into the fire. Then, with a slow over arm movement, he throws the dowsing rods far out into the undergrowth. She hears them fall. Clink. A long silence. A police siren in the distance.

'Did you know,' he says suddenly, 'that the French word for dowser is *Sorcier* – sorcerer.'

'That's a wizard, isn't it?'

'No. It's one who seeks for sources.'

'We've got taps now, mate. Pipes, plumbing. In the real world.'

'I told you I'm not looking for water.'

'What then?'

'A way. A path.' He waves his hand around. 'Out of all this. Back to the wild.'

'Don't you need to be in the country for that?'

'No such thing as countryside anymore,' he says. 'All mapped out, exhausted. There are more old tracks in cities than there are outside. It makes sense. People walked here for thousands of years, nomads. Invisible roads. There was a forest here. Bears and wolves.'

'Yes, but that was then. It's just a dump now, isn't it? And they don't work, do they? Them dowsing things?'

He shakes his head but doesn't answer, tosses a stick into the fire making sparks fly up into the dark bowl of night.

‘Go home, girl,’ he says his voice coming from far away. She’s getting sleepy, the flames so hot, flickering and leaping.

‘I haven’t got a home.’ Her eyelids droop, his gaze on her burning cheek. ‘Not really. Can I lie down?’ she says. ‘Just for a minute. In your van?’

While Rose sleeps on his bed, a rug pulled over her, Todd broods and watches. She’s right, the dowsing rods don’t work. There are no ancient tracks or ley-lines, no way back to the wild. Too many drugs, Todd. Too much new -age bollocks. Time to wake up. The girl sighs in her sleep. He watches the rise and fall of her breast and wonders how it would feel to trace his thumb down that sweet curve of cheek, the tender young throat. I could put out the fire, turn the key in the lock and drive away with her in my bed. He looks at his reflection in the black window. Maybe I’m the wolf. He lies down beside her, so close he can feel her breath on his skin. And maybe she’s the path.

When she’s sure he’s asleep, Rose gets up carefully and lets herself out. The dog lifts its head but doesn’t bark. It takes time to locate the dowsing rods in the scrubby grass but when she holds them again she feels the same electric thrill through her body: bone, blood, mind, heart. Life beating. The dog ambles over and stands next to her, following her movements, watching the traces she makes on the sky. Circles. Squares, Triangles.

‘Up there, past the crap air and the space junk,’ she tells the dog, ‘is real wildness. Polaris. Alderbaren. Rigel. Sirius. Millions and millions and millions. A forest of stars.’ Then she sees what she’d

missed before even though it had always been there. A gap in the fence that a girl might slip through.

Next morning on her way over the waste ground she stands for a moment in the empty space where the van has been. A memory of warmth in the fire but no other sign. She lays the dowsing rods on the ground for someone else to find, then crosses to the main road and gets the bus into college.

*The End*