

Kingfisher Dreaming

(a November fog fiction in the tradition of the ancients' sensitivity to animal messengers from the Otherworld: the kingfisher symbolic of diving into the unconscious to retrieve the Holy Grail of spiritual truth; the Fisher King's wound healed and his wastelands restored to health once divine feminine wisdom is again welcomed to the world)



It was a cold grey beleaguered day. Wrapped in a cloak of winter chill, he sat at a plain desk of many papers and tried to work. It was difficult to concentrate, hard to engender energy into any action or task he set. Consumed, rather, by the sense of the long dark days laid out before him like a banquet of cold promise and sullen despondency. All around, colleagues felt likewise. Theirs a collective misery borne of the clime, a sad knowing that the light at the end of the tunnel was far far away.

He looked out the window beside his desk, an unblinkered view of grey upon grey upon grey – naked trees, their leaves all but fallen. Late autumn in an already early winter, the deep reds and burnt orange hues were long since the stuff of memory, stripped by heavy storms and trampled underfoot to become sodden inky mush on uncompromising ground. He watched the world reveal itself thus, saw how it mirrored his own life of fallen leaves, dreams discarded and left to rot in the mud as others' expectations were fulfilled, as contrary practical considerations held sway, as quietly, surreptitiously, himself was kept from himself.

Often when he looked out this window, he thought of past joys, past loves, exotic locations, and rued the fact he must think on things past, things long gone and etched on stone tablets. Of course, such thoughts served to feed his melancholy, but they also served to tug at his consciousness, to say: Hey! Think some more. How to change this game? How to get the tyre out of the wheel rut and onto firmer fresher ground? How to be weaned from the tranquillisers of mediocrity, sameness, safety, to look anew for meaning, fulfilment?

It was just a small tug, each now and then, by an unremarked soul trapped in a winter-dark landscape. Thus, a tug that chanced by only when he looked out on a sad grey vista on a day such as this, unable to concentrate or generate the requisite energy to produce exciting relevant work. Or when he and his mate had sat musing their respective complaints about their situation for far too long rather than plan new

challenges for the future or engage in spontaneous unexpected fun. Thus did the sameness of his life, the feeling there was nothing to look forward to in the long years which stretched ahead, catch up with his consciousness as it did now like a too-polite runner ready to pass on a relay baton.

Little tugs, little naggings, little glimpses that things were not as they should be. But they did not chance by too frequently and as a result, were not well-heeded. Instead there were enough moments of pleasant distraction, meetings and beers with friends, trips or holidays away to rekindle old memories (ahh, the past again), the enjoyment of nature, the pastime of birdwatching a constant, calming reservoir of peace. And so it was that when the little tugs came, on days such as this when the sky was grey with lost hope, they were quickly expediently and unconsciously countered by moments of simple immediate blinding and ferociously consumed gratification.

Yet one day, it happened that the tugs grew bigger, less polite, increasing in magnitude and frequency, and unable to be ignored no matter how he tried. Here, the first tug. A conversation at the breakfast table. He reads the morning paper. Content, warm in the knowledge of her body just consumed, while she moves quietly about the kitchen, slicing bread, brewing coffee, smells of familiarity that fill and placate his senses. Then she speaks. Breaks the mood. Cuts through it with a knife.

It is time we made children, she says.

He lowers the paper and looks at her face, but already it has turned back to the coffee pot. He could think he has misheard or simply ignore the statement. But he knows her well, her habits, knows this is an important thing for her to speak. So he folds the paper and places it on the table.

Have you thought of this often, or only recently, just now?

Oh, she says to the coffee pot, it is just that I see friends with children, I think of my age, I think of my parents' desire to have babes at their knee, I think we have been together a good while and would provide a good home for our own flesh and blood.

And what of love? he says.

Well yes, she sidesteps, there is that also.

They sit in silence awhile as coffee is poured and bread broken. He is seized by an urgent desire to pick up the paper and continue reading. He feels weary, suddenly drained of energy, empty of emotion, and into this vacuum walks an important proposition, a life-changing decision. Does she expect he would say: Well, alright. And that would be enough discussion? He wonders instead how it is in other relationships when such a decision as bringing children into the world is considered. Would there be shooting stars, deep passion, the symbolism of a perfectly formed baby to consummate a fulfilling union? Or as this, a statement over morning coffee with averted eyes and a monotone voice.

Let me think on this, he says, and picks up the newspaper. It is the first tug.

It had been a busy year, one full of achievements in his career. Fulfilling in its way but nevertheless all-consuming, drawing him away from home, with long hours and competing pressures. As he drives to the office, he thinks what it would be to bring a child into this structured existence. It is too much to consider in the moment, there are conference papers to prepare amongst other things in a too-tight schedule. With unusual spontaneity, he decides on a holiday, a one-week throwaway line into this whirlpool, this vortex of sameness tugging him down down down into a collapsing black hole.

To his mate he announces it when he returns home that evening. With shining eyes and much holding of hands. Let's go down to Spain, he urges. It will still be warm there, we can shirk this cloak of autumn chill a while longer, we can talk more and plan for a future with children. And it will be a birthday treat for me. For us, he adds shyly.

She withdraws her hands slowly, carefully, with consideration. No, she says. You go. It would be impossible to find someone to cover my shifts at work at such short notice.

A second tug, this time of his own making. And in the car on the long road south he has time to ponder whether he unconsciously expected her answer, knowing this journey had to be taken alone.

So where is he going? To whence does he drive? Along roads well known from ten years prior, he retraces a path to a Spanish love of burnished hair and coal-black eyes. Tugged, from one to another. Back. Remembering a time of abandon, happiness, drinking in another's smells, turning one cheek then the other to the warmth of the sun, eyes closed to real life, breath expelled in a long drawn out sigh of heaven.

What sign is this? he thinks as the road climbs before him, leading onward, upward across mountain ranges of thick pine forests and cragged tufted crests. At his elbow are old cassette tapes, scarred from overuse but reminiscent of those times. Rewound, replayed, over and over on a journey toward a future he cannot see, yet around each next curve he hopes that perhaps a glimpse will be waiting.

Turns, he thinks as he drives. Curves in the road, crossroads, paths which intersect by happenstance. There had been no curves in his life for so long, simply a linear passage borne of expectation and stereotype. He thinks back on the conversation at breakfast, a checklist of practical reasons ticked off to begin a family. A fork in the road, it is clear, but around which curve of the road will a glimpse be waiting to help him decide which fork to take? Thus does he drive on, back into his past to search.

He arrives in the seaside town of his youth, steps out of the car into warm wet air. The salt blue of the sea and clear-skied sunshine greet him as an old friend. Why were you away so long? they say, a wind-borne song tinged with regret. It has been long, he agrees. And walks into the old white-washed hotel overlooking the water to check in.

Her home is a half-hour away from this sleepy resort town. He calls to announce his return. She who now is a family herself, with child and husband, is happy to meet and talk. Isn't it amazing? she says into the phone. I was only thinking of you the other day and what your life was like.

You knew me well once, he responds. I want to find the me I was then, before I became too safe, too regular, too drugged by daily circumstance. I want you to tell me what I was like, what you remember.

He hears her nod down the line. I can meet you tomorrow for lunch, after my husband has left for work and my child is at kindergarten. I can be most honest when we are alone.

That night his sleep is fitful at best. Dreams well and subside like waves washing clean his memories, making fresh hope of past joy. Nevertheless, he wakes well-rested, dons swimming trunks too seldom aired and walks his white body down to the shoreline. Plunges into the cool depths and swims strong, hard, out to the buoy and back, each stroke stripping him bare, leaving his skin slaked, scrubbed, ready for reinvention.

Well? he says as she enters the restaurant drenched in loveliness. Her laugh is a song.

Wait! she says, hugging him deep. You are too thirsty! We need to discuss inconsequential things, banal topics first before our conversation becomes too sombre.

He smiles and orders wine, tells her how beautiful she looks, and how happy.

It's true, she agrees. I am in love with my life, my husband, my child, the all of it. I look the way I do, I feel the way I feel because of this joy.

You deserve such happiness, he says with feeling. It is something for which I too am searching. It is as if I have lived as though asleep and now waking, find my life half over and ...

He is at a loss to express, and turns to look out this new window, this fresh mirror on the world. There he sees nought but the blue of the sky, untouched by a cloud's hand. Empty, he finally says, turning back to her. I feel empty. But I know there is something beyond the emptiness, and I want to find it. To be filled.

Oh you, she mocks. Your life has been full, your career achievements grand, your environmental work oft-applauded. You have just come up for air and need a reality check. Just see this as a time for working out all the pluses and minuses in your life, like a balance sheet. Do a profit and loss, adjust your cash flow forecasts and *voilà*, all will be clear!

He groans. You have obviously learnt a lot from your husband's accountancy practice.

See? she laughs. Here is something already for your balance sheet – your wit and humour have not been lost during this long sleep. It is something I have always loved about you.

He takes her hand and kisses it. I knew this was the right thing to do.

During the meal they speak on, about shared memories, stories from each's past and present. Fuelled by wine, they take the table napkins and giggling, begin to write on their starched whiteness, recording entries in a mock ledger of his life's assets and liabilities. Through the smiles, he is suddenly tugged to look again out this window to beyond, a far off horizon on whose canvas he now feigns to see wide broad brushstrokes of paint infilling his void. Nothing clear, it is still all as remote as a Rothko colour field, yet holding the promise of discernment, of understanding, the longer one communes with the image. Like a destiny not yet dreamed or imagined but somehow already real. Oh, so real.

Come walk with me along the pier, he says.

Arm-in-arm they stroll along, slowing taking in the shared meaning that has occurred. You see, she says, this meeting has been as much a reality check for me – I had often thought of you, wistfully perhaps at times when my husband and I argued, or when the child's cries could not be quieted. Yet I am sure that my decisions have been the right ones, that what I have is what I want.

He squeezes her hand. I am glad, he says, and smiles. You know, it is as if I have been asleep for a long time, like in the fairytale of *The Sleeping Beauty* and now the Prince's kiss has woken me.

She laughs at the analogy. You're such a romantic! Sleeping Beauty? And shakes her head, thinking through this new thought. No, she says, finally. I am not the Prince's kiss. That event will only take place when your path reveals itself to you. I am simply like one of the three good fairies in the story who watch over you as you sleep. I come from your past, from the time before you slept, watching you grow to adulthood, into the person you were before you pricked your finger on the spindle.

She turns to look at him, there on the pier, a strong breeze tugging the hair away from her face, her skin as soft as kid leather and just as brown. If you are serious about this journey into the future, she says, you need to draw insights from your other two good fairies. Sit with them as you have with me. Only then will

you receive the Prince's kiss – whatever that is, whatever that means. Only then will you wake to what is meant to be.

The first part of his pilgrimage is over. As he drives back north, to the cold and winter-dark, he thinks on the metaphors embedded in their conversation, the connection, the spark that still links them as electricity through wire. And knows she is right. He has more counsel to seek.

To the office he returns, refreshed but distracted. The quantum of work continues to frustrate him but now in a different way. He receives a call from a former colleague, a friend of more than fifteen years' standing, one who assisted his career from the beginning and still takes keen interest in its direction.

Are the conference papers complete? the friend asks. It is less than two weeks till the seminar.

He groans. You saw the draft before I left on vacation?

Yes, comes the answer.

Well, what did you think?

Fine.

Good, then consider it a final. I have no time for revisions anyway.

The telephone goes quiet.

What's this? The man I know is a rigid perfectionist, revising, revising, revising till the last minute! I'm not saying I have a problem with that, simply observing a change in behaviour. So, what's wrong?

The sigh which answers this question is long and primal, expelling stale air from the deepest recesses.

Are you free for dinner tonight? the friend asks, and they meet at a small restaurant in the hills.

It is well-lit and cheering in its warmth and solid furniture. Nevertheless, they seek out a dim corner where they can talk with little disturbance.

You are not happy? the friend asks. Is it the conference? Would you like to be taken off the speakers' list? It's always an option, even though I think it would benefit your career. The session you lead definitely sets the tone for the remainder of the week.

No, no, he protests. It's a commitment I'm happy to honour. You simply caught me at a bad moment. My body returned from leave but somehow my mind wants to stay in the south a while. It will pass. He shrugs and looks at the menu, but the other pursues his silence.

Well I see it slightly differently, he says. I sense something more behind this façade of an excuse.

Again the sigh, and he puts down the menu. Alright, he says in a rush of gritted teeth. I struggle with where my life is going. It's as if I'm at some crossroads or other and I don't have the capacity to make important decisions at the moment because I feel I've been sleepwalking much of the time until now. Hence, I worry that if something significant does need to be decided, it's more likely I'll drift into it as a sleepwalker does rather than consciously decide what is right or true. So, is that better? To now break through the façade and ruin a jovial evening out in the process?

His friend remains calm. Asks: What decision do you need to make which prompted this assessment?

Oh, he dismissed, it is whether to have children. But that is not the whole of it – it is whether this is the life I want for the next fifty years. Whatever decision I make now has implications for everything else in life, which of course, includes my mate's. The point is I don't yet know what I want, what I want etched on my gravestone, what moments of significance, what things of beauty I want to remember on my deathbed. It is as if I've finally begun the search but I'm stuck in a maze of paths, none of which is jumping out at me to scream: This way! This way!

He throws up his hands in exasperation, but then tells about his Spanish love and the insights she brought him. Tells further how he needs to find other directional beacons through this November fog landscape, only knowing that people from his past can help him, those who knew him before this seeming malaise of mediocrity set in.

Well, I'm enough of a fossil to fit that category, his friend teases.

A singular retort that serves to draw a laugh from him. The air between them is warm as toast, hot-battered with common threads. So let me tell you a story, nay two stories, his friend says. Here is the first.

Once upon a time there was a man who worked at a newspaper, long hours, hard work, an editor no less, but with the reward of knowing that what was produced, what was read by the public each day was truth, always truth. One day, into the newspaper office burst this university student. I say 'burst' because that is how I remember it, a lad flinging open a door, rushing in with news to tell. It tumbled out of his mouth with a mix of passion and excitement, but also with venom as he recounted an environmental disaster just witnessed. A journalist went with him to the scene, a photographer also; the article ensuing from their investigations described an environmental 'mishap' which authorities were working to 'contain'.

The friend sits back, thinks a minute, smiles into memory-made. Well, he continues, if the first day the student burst through the door, the next – after the article was in print – he almost knocked down the door in his anger which, as I recall, was directed at the editor for 'toning down' the report – that is, toning down the report as he, the student, had first told it.

In short, he challenged the editor's respect for the truth. He ranted and raved like the twenty-year-old ideologue he was. And the editor offered him a job on the spot so that he could learn, so that he may be taught that truth does not come singly, as a black or white, but in collectives, a spectrum of colours, based, as it is, on the number of actors' perspectives in any given theatrical production.

He pauses a moment, smiles again. This boy of fire and passionate ideals, especially when it comes to environmental harm, is still within you. Not fully asleep because you are still learning about truth, and different ideas of truth and reality and yes, I have helped your education along during much of that time. But I can understand your dilemma, your restlessness, so let me tell you this other story, also about truth.

Once there was a man who preferred the company of men to women. Or rather, enjoyed the company of women as friends, nought more, but looked at other men with desire in his eyes. In a society with low tolerance for such seeming aberrations of the flesh, this truth needed to remain hidden. Not asleep, just hidden. It was important to lead a sort of double life, to keep private and public spheres separate, not always easy, but the challenge uplifting in itself because it revealed that truth can exist on different levels and be relevant to different purposes, different situations, different people. A short story, I do not wish to dwell on its content. But heed this, experiences are not always fun or pleasant, yet they are formative of who we are and why we act the way we do. It is the learning, always being open to learn the new, which helps us grow and leads us on – toward our own truth.

Truth, says his friend. Only ever truth. And remember, this truth is within you. It does not need to be made public, made known. Your actions will reveal your truths, or as much as you want revealed. I am not saying there is no Holy Grail waiting for you at the end of this quest when you finally emerge from the maze. Your wound is self-inflicted, your wastelands are your own. You made the choices you are now sleep-walking through – yet you are realising this is not a path to follow any longer. So I say: Look to what you have learned and look deep within you for the truth, the truth of your existence. My reminiscence of a lad bursting into my office with passion and ideals and a deep-seated commitment to the world we live in was no fairytale.

He nods and goes on: Your Spanish love was right. Looking to the past can provide signposts to the future. But don't discount the things you are learning now, the truths being uncovered in the present. Trust your intuition so that you may learn from these things as well. Which means, he concludes with a teasing smile, start looking to this forthcoming conference with a more positive attitude – at least for the sake of a nervous organiser!

They clink glasses in a mock toast to the challenges posed by the perennial maze of life itself. And he returns home that evening, soul seeded with new hope.

A week passes. Nothing to report, he thinks, as he goes to shower before work, the world outside still dark with twinkling streetlights. But this causes him no real concern; he is content enough with the knowledge that he has opened the door, opened himself to the possibility of change, of a recommitment to learning and truth. Still, he is yet to learn from a third good fairy, yet to find another from his past to offer guidance to the future. He thinks about his oldest friends, two who have come through more than half his life with him. Will a sign come from this direction? he wonders.

Out of the shower now, dressed for warmth in shirt, pullover, jacket and trousers, he descends the stairs to the smell of coffee.

Your mother called, she says, between bites of bread. She gave a different number to call her on, and hands him a scrap of paper. She sips her coffee quickly, then rises, pecks his cheek. I'm late, she says into the air near his ear. And dons scarf, coat, gloves and cap, picks up her keys and bag, leaves the house. While he stands, still looking at the telephone number, wondering where his mother could be.

In the car, he puts the mobile phone connection into the cigarette lighter, the receiver into his ear, reverses out of the garage. Once on the road he checks for signal reception, and, driving one-handed, dials the number at which she can be reached. Her answer is immediate, but her voice not her own.

Where are you? he asks.

At the hospital, she replies. Your father has cancer.

He bites his lip till blood comes and listens to her sob down the phone line. Just a minute, he says, pulling the car over to the side of the road and taking a deep breath before asking her what is being done.

Oh, you know, she says, and he can see her clearly, sitting on the side of a starched white bedcover, her hands expressing her confusion, pointing this way and that. They have just taken him for more tests. It's in his brain, see, and we've been here since yesterday when he complained of headaches ... The doctor is quite sure. The tumour is malignant.

She weeps too much to continue. He asks which hospital, says he will come now. She tries to speak but cannot and suddenly his sister is on the line saying: It's OK. There's nothing we can do now, call later when he is back from the tests and come up tonight maybe.

Hold her close, he tells her. Hold Mama close and tell her I am with her in thoughts, and Papa too.

I will, she whispers.

The car is still idling. He puts it into gear, ready to resume his journey, and is almost sideswiped by a heavy truck which blows its horn in indignation. He realises he is shaking and for the first time becomes aware of his location. It is the tiny village where his father was born and his father's father before him. Full circle, he thinks, full circle. I am in the middle of the maze, at the centre of the vortex, at the eye of the storm. Is this really the insight I wanted? And rests his head on the cool of the steering wheel to cry.

The conference has begun. Many people. Different faces swarm in front of his sight but he thinks only of his father, his mother, his family. What to do, what to do? His friend arrives, warmly shakes his hand, too distracted by tasks to notice his shock, his numbness, reminding him instead of a meeting soon to take place with his co-presenters for the session next afternoon.

Duly they meet, a girl from another country and a man, a consultant. The three talk around the issue, covering old ground, he believes, things which should have been resolved prior to this. His frustration begins to show and suddenly he is speaking sharply to the consultant, dictating a plan he expects to be followed. The fellow is meek, accepting, acquiescent, and he turns to the girl to gain her agreement. Mutely she nods, eyes wide with surprise, and watches as he strides purposefully away from the meeting till next day in the afternoon when he addresses the delegates.

For some reason he has become more conscious of the girl's presence, noting her annoying habit of tapping her fingers or pen, looking at her watch, agitated actions that her time allocation is being used up by him. Yes, he is conscious but still asserts his presence. It's as if there is a similarity somehow.

In the evening, he calls his mother, now at home, his father resting, awaiting the go-ahead for chemotherapy. His age denies surgery as an option but he knows the trauma of chemo, the nausea, the debilitation, the openness to secondary infection. He closes his eyes as he listens to his mother speak.

This is the eye of my storm, he thinks.

As a group, the conference delegates visit an historic monastery. Revisiting his faith. He gazes up at heavily-decorated baroque ceilings, rests his eyes awhile on age-old stories told in paint. Later, he sees a shooting star over the church spire, an explosion of white through a sky of ink.

This is the centre of my vortex, he thinks.

The next days he remembers only as a blur of superficial sideshows while he dwells within, far within himself, trying to make sense of this new crossroads. Yet clear sounds are seemingly travelling in his direction, being intercepted by his subconscious. The sounds are the girl's voice at the bar late at night. I'm not normally a night owl, she says. It's this jet lag thing for sure. Before continuing with stories of her home, lucid descriptions of deep-hued forests and vast green southern oceans.

Green as her eyes, he thinks, which dance with mirth when he laughs at her jokes. With consideration for her honesty, her truth – did she really say she could never imagine to lead a mediocre life or did he just dream it? – he dredges up a truth for her, holding out a part of his privately private life shyly, like a small shrine offering for her inspection: I am a birdwatcher.

Really?

And she spins more stories for him of the bright flashes, vivid colours and raucous joy of parrots and cockatoos in noonday shimmer, of bee-eaters twirling like dervishes as they dive toward water to cool dusty feathers, of tiny wrens hidden in shrubbery, of mighty eagles soaring on high, and of broilgas that dance on the plains. He feels the tropical heat of these woven tales, drinks in the warm air and earthy smells, and as she talks on, thinks of the things that are precious to him, from his past, from his present, to his future.

This is the middle of my maze, he thinks.

Suddenly, a path out of the maze jumps up at him, tugs him along its route. Would you like to join me birdwatching one day? he says.

Oh yes, she says. And thank you, she says. And then: See you Friday! As she grips his hand and smiles at him with eyes that shine, brimful.

He breathes deep to remember that moment, remember that energy and enthusiasm, the happiness which seemed to fill her and spill over onto those around her. Breathes deep and gets out of the car at his parents' home.

His father sits in an easy chair in the lounge room, television on. A monotone of war, disease and unemployment statistics. Turn it off, boy, he sighs. I would much rather talk to you.

They sit together and talk about things, little everyday things until he says to his father: How do you feel?

The old man looks square at him and says: Like shit.

He lowers his eyes, not wanting to witness a father's pain, thinks instead of the girl, of the maze, of a day's birdwatching sneaking itself in like an illicit lover into the structure of his workaday.

Suddenly, he feels his father's hand on his own. Boy, he says, I will get through this, whether it is to keep living or to die. This will affect me far less than all of you – your mother, you, your sister. You're the ones in turmoil, and this will continue long after I am at peace. You three have it worse and I don't envy you. I have had a full life and this is part of the learning. It may end with this, but then again it may go on. He shrugs. I am ready for it. But still I feel like shit. And the smile between them is rueful, melancholic.

Father, he confides, I am at a crossroads. And this has only served to confuse me further about which path to take, which life dreams to pursue. I look at you and want similarly to be able to say when I face this time that my life has been full.

Then do what makes you happy, the father says. That's the only advice I can give you.

And have you? is his son's question.

Mostly, comes the answer. But when experiences haven't been happy per se, I have still learnt from them. You see, you must think about happiness in a broader sense. It doesn't just mean contentment, or love, or work success. It means more. It means excitement, and stimulation of the senses, and the thrill of challenging norms and conventions, and exceeding your own expectations, not ones that have been set for you. And learning about life, what motivates you and others, helping others achieve their own happiness – not selfishly pursuing own goals. But it also means creative pursuits and dreaming dreams and a sense of freedom, of completion, of wholeness no matter what it is you do in life. This is what I mean by doing what makes you happy. And I've probably left an awful lot out besides. But it's as you say, there are crossroads and paths to follow, to choose. So if you are true to yourself, son, and make every choice a

wise choice, a conscious choice, you will have a full life. Trust your senses, your first feelings about something, anything. Be true to yourself. If you don't think something will make you happy then you are not ready for it. It does not mean that you will never be ready, it just means it is not right for you now. Trust these senses. Trust your own truth. And learn from your experiences, never lose your capacity to learn, your thirst to move forward. Then your life will be happy, be full, he says clutching his hand in an increasingly feeble one.

As his father had shared with him this lesson, his eyes had seemed lit with a light from another place. All the while that he had listened to his father's speech, he had focussed solely on these eyes and what they told beyond his words. They told of a light seeming to come from that place till now he had only feigned to see – the beyond beyond the window frame, beyond the blue sky of his Rothko void.

Now his father sits back and closes these eyes which shimmered with news of the beyond. Go, he says. I am tired.

His mother places her hand on his shoulder while his father drifts into an uneasy sleep. They walk through to the other room where coffee has been brewed and sweet chocolates sit in a bowl on the table. You know, she says, he would love to have grandchildren at his knee before he passes on.

He looks her full in the face. Sees there her own desire, not necessarily his father's.

He has told me to do with my life what makes me happy, he answers. And to trust my senses, my own truth. I respect this wish of his, but it is for me to decide.

I know he will understand, she says, and sips her coffee.

They are out birdwatching, he and the girl. She is as playful as a kitten, bouncing around with joy at this new thing in her life, a new experience to be consumed. She chatters endlessly about this and that as he removes telescope and backpack and identification book and binoculars from the boot of his car.

She carries things, shares the load, complains not of the cold, while they walk along a path beside the lake where many migratory water birds are settling down for the evening. She marvels at the telescopic ability of the lens and spends much time focussing on the water to watch the patterns of ripples and the shimmer of sunlight, a collective of prisms which twinkle and fascinate. Still she is delighted to look closely at how the birds fluff their feathers, preen, conduct their last dives for snacks before another night spent with head tucked beneath wing.

His thoughts are far away. He thinks of his Spanish love, the tale of *The Sleeping Beauty*, her notion of the three good fairies watching over him on his passage through life, the insights offered by their witness. Truth, learning, happiness all figured, so too the dilemma posed by his father's illness bringing, as it did, another crossroads to consider.

I was at the eye of the storm, he remembers, and how speaking to this stranger beside me about my great love, my love of birds, has brought me here at a time when I needed the calmness and sense of peace that being one with nature offers.

Then –

Through the fog of his thoughts, a tug.

Kingfisher, it says.

He is puzzled, a bird highly prized, seldom seen. Where did this thought come from?

Kingfisher, says the tug. Again at his subconscious. Kingfisher. And again.

Suddenly he is aware it is the girl talking, talking about kingfishers in her part of the world.

Tug.

Their beauty, their speed, the piercing joy of their call.

Tug.

Telling how she loves to watch a forest kingfisher atop a slim pole at a pond near her home, its enigmatic silence at scanning the waters before the suddenness of plunge into the depths.

Tug.

And through the mist of memory and paths, she says with an innocence that cottonwools her ignorance: Do you have kingfishers here in Europe?

The tug is there. Strong. Stronger. It won't let go. An unseen hand pulls at his jacket, grabs the material tight and tugs. Here, it says, your journey goes this way. Come, he says to the girl, and hoists the telescope onto his shoulder.

They walk down a path away from the lake, tugged, pulled forward, onward toward a forest track of fallen leaves, all trampled underfoot, nothing but sodden inky mush on uncompromising ground, on this, a grey grey November fog day. And arrive beside a creek which billows out into a pond.

Wait, he says. We wait here.

She knows she must be quiet now, somehow knows this is important to him, to her, knows somehow that something will happen, something beyond just a flash of blue across a glazed brown-grey pond. He is there of himself. She also. Separately. Together. A tug on both their souls.

Oh, she breathes. Just an intake of air at his side that draws his attention to the pond and the small creature skimming low over the water, colour vivid against its reflection in the dark pool. No time for telescope, no need. A few seconds of pure joy as he claims this prize, this prized prize. Success, he grins. His love, this great love of birds. Success.

For some minutes they stand in silence, each reliving the moment. Till he looks at her face. Green eyes that dance with happiness at the sight just witnessed, and a laugh of pure joy that bubbles away at the corners of her mouth. He smiles in return, looks back to where the kingfisher had been, sees again its bright blue wings and teasing flight path in and under trees which hug the riverbank and stroke softly the stream. Looks again to the girl as she hugs herself to keep warm. Brimful. Brimful.

And knows now he has woken to the Prince's kiss.