

After the Fox

by Marina Warner

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The hole appeared under the thickened stem of the wisteria on the south wall of Judith's garden. It gaped too large and too deep for a vole or a rat: Judith knew the size of their runnels from the banks of the canal two streets away, and when she'd had the outside lavatory at the back demolished, small neat tunnel heads soon dotted the mud where the builder had trodden the old lawn. When she managed to call him back again, he kicked at the holes, and asked her for empties. Taking three wine bottles from her recycling, he dropped them into a bin liner, hammered them thoroughly till the plastic slumped like sand bag, and then dug down into the old waste stack and stuffed it.

'They'll not make their way up through cullet,' he said.

She remembered the word: so satisfying in its finality.

But this hole was wider than a rat hole, bigger even than a cat flap: her visitor was no small burrower.

When Judith went out to look at her garden one morning, hoping to find the first cyclamen uncurling

their delicate heads, she caught a panicky flash of fur and the scramble of nails on the garden wall: an animal was writhing for a foothold on the brickwork. As Judith stopped, the creature's first panic subsided and she sensed – though she could not actually see it – how the soft white fur on the inside of its pricked ears quivered to pick up her response, and hearing no reverberating anger, found its centre of gravity and levered itself on narrow, orangey haunches to propel itself with a twist and a shove up and over into her next door neighbour's.

A vixen, thought Judith, and a young one, too, far smaller than a spayed hearth cat, and scrawny. The hole must be a branch exit in a lattice of communications running under the gardens adjoining one another near her, in this part of the city where she'd lived all her adult life with Iain, until one morning in tears he said he'd always love her, but that he had to care for someone else now, as Amanda needed him more than she did: Judith was so resilient and proactive, she was a woman who could manage on her own.

Since then, Judith found that to her own way of thinking, she was now widowed: somebody dying fixes memories, defaces the present, and fills every moment with the past, ablaze. Iain not being there pressed him more brightly on her vision than Iain being there. His absence kept her mind in perpetual

rewind - this *is* became this *was*, the time *now* the time *then*, this place *here* that place *there*, when he, when we did this and said that, ate this and saw that... the sequence, end-stopped, the frame frozen, flickered slightly in the light of her recall. The pictures screened all else, beyond now the possibility of change except for paling in patches, like colour prints leaching slowly of light.

This past mocked her as it flung at her, You didn't see it, did you. You missed the signs. You didn't know that moment was the end of it.

It pressed on, taunting: Iain is living with Amanda now, he is putting his arms around her encased bones after that crash when he was driving our car, and under the plaster cast she's growing bigger with the baby she was starting to have with him all those months. For you, the past kept on, it was the last time for this and the last time for that. But you didn't see it, did you.

She was plunging through a snowstorm, flakes spinning through darkness towards the headlights' beam and vanishing as they hit it over and over again: everything had already happened to her that was ever going to happen, and she could re-enter the sequence again at any point and it would unfold the same, a life snowbound.

So the vixen was an event, unexpected. Her apparition was a first new thing. She had never seen

any kind of fox close up before, and she found herself wanting to see this one again: *Mille Renard*, she thought. Cunning little vixen. Sharp Ears. *My fox*.

She put out apples and she made peanut butter sandwiches with stale loaf after hearing a radio programme about mange. Foxes were leaving the country, now that fields were stripped of hedges and woodland cover and poisoned with sprayings, the radio expert went on. No more hen coops and wild birds' nests - they were evolving, abandoning their traditional habitat for the spilling dustbins of the new cafés, restaurants and fast food outlets.

She felt at first a twinge of annoyance – jealousy? – to hear so many others talk about *their* foxes, but the feeling passed, to yield to a sense of belonging, just as soon after her widowhood started, she found comfort in the solitude of others like herself.

'You'll adapt,' her friend Gail said. 'You'll begin to like living alone. No more short and curlies in the plug-hole.' But Judith waved away her friend: 'I'm too old for that- my mind's not wired for change, not any more. I can't pick up Chinese as if I was four years old or start balancing a basket on my head full of stones like women building roads in India. I can't even remember the names of flowers the way I used to, and I wish the catalogues wouldn't keep changing the botanical names – I don't know why they do this.'

Gail taught English at the local school, Judith

music. But in her new widowhood, when boys and girls on secondment from Biology or Media Studies came to class, she found herself scorning their utter lack of talent for the piano, or the recorder, or, where it really stung the budding rock stars, for the guitar. Yet, before Iain went, she would throw herself into the school concert with relish, conducting till the players steamed. Before then as well she'd write without irony, 'Very promising. *Fame* calls...' over and over again in her end-of-term reports, assuring her income. Now she had visions of slamming the lid down on a hapless aspiring musician when yet another mangled chord, rhythm, key, struck her newly sensitised ears. She began to think she must find something else to do, something solitary to suit her state.

After her fox came, something loosened and stirred, and as she'd always given advice from her experience of her own patch, she put a card in the local sub-post office window, offering:

'Garden Design & Maintenance
Planting Pruning Clearing Weeding Trimming
Ideas and Advice
Organic methods only.'

She gave her telephone number.

Soon afterwards, there was a message: her caller had seen the ad in the post office and needed

help. 'Garden, well that might be the word...' he went on. The voice was melancholy, with the timbre of someone who might at one time have been able to sing. 'Could you come and give a quote? It'll have to be done from scratch.'

She rang the number; left a message.

That evening, the voice rang her:

'I was surprised by your call,' he said.

'Oh, why's that? You said...'

'Yes, I know, but I didn't expect a lady gardener.'

Judith wasn't sure how to respond to this; she missed her moment as conflicting feelings arose and jeered at her for failing to choose between them – scorn of that old-style gallant condescension, and – yes - a glimmer of curiosity about someone so apparently out of sync with the times and the customs of the country. Instead she told him she worked weekends only until the holidays; the appointment was made for the following Saturday.

Sean Barbett's house stood on the lane leading to the village churchyard by the river, part of the tangled waterways that connected her garden via the canal to his. On the Saturday morning when Judith cycled there along the tow path, the chestnut tree was tipped in auburn: a giant redhead standing and spreading limbs against the light. From the street, the house looked like a worker's cottage, with small deep-set

windows in the tawny local stone, and, on both sides of the front door, grooves for a floodgate which was no longer there, indicating that the house was built before the canal was linked to the river to take the overspill. Which made the original building very old, thought Judith.

Her caller opened the front door and stood against the light from the garden at the back; he turned without lingering; took her straight through, down a stone-flagged passage into a kitchen at the back, an extension from the Seventies, slatted pine and roof lights and faded killims, and slid the garden door across. She followed him out and they stood in the first scatter of leaves under a large bedraggled cherry tree. He sighed as he kicked at the mantling weeds. As he waved – shook - his hand at the knotted thickets of ground elder, nettles, and brambles, wound around with convolvulus and dying into a sodden pile of something unrecognisable left behind by a departed builder – carpet underlay? insulating lagging? – she let a small chuckle escape her.

‘It makes you laugh, does it? I suppose that’s good,’ he said. ‘It seems a hopeless task to me. Augean stables.’ He paused. ‘You don’t do crosswords? No, of course not.’

She bridled, ‘If you’re worried that a woman isn’t capable...’ she stopped. ‘If I’m not, I’ll tell you – we might have to arrange a pick-up by the council – of the

waste.’ She paused, then added, ‘I like digging.’

The first day, looking for tools, she found that the door to the garden shed was secured with a sturdy combination padlock. It wasn’t rusty, which surprised her, as the wooden structure had grown into the damp and weedy tangle that had once been, Judith discovered as she began to work, a hedge well-planted to deliver colour each season, with crimson-stemmed cornus, winter jasmine, dark spiky juniper and red-hipped hawthorn. The threshold was trampled and the undergrowth less dense on the approach to the locked door; the small window, with its quartered pane, was curtained; she couldn’t see in.

The sodden mass by the door turned out to be bedding, and crumpled wet inside the cold matted sludge that had been a duvet, lay a nightie – with rotting lace insets round the neckline. Judith kicked a fold of the bedding over it and a stab of ammonia rose from the mess and caught her by the throat till she had to clap her hand over her mouth and nose and back off fast.

When Sean Barbett came back that afternoon, he found Judith still hard at work, stretching her back as she contemplated with satisfaction the enormous pile of dead plants, living weeds, cuttings and prunings which she had cleared.

‘We’ll let it settle and then, you can have a bonfire

night, or, as I say, we'll call the Council.' She gestured to the gunge piled by the door. 'You must have had a squatter?'

He didn't answer. He was wearing a suit and he pulled the tie loose and drew it through and rolled it in his hands, and nodded approvingly at the heap she'd made.

'Crumbs, you certainly get down to things.'

He sighed and turned, then turned back and asked her in.

Leaving her boots standing outside the back door, she asked him for the combination of the padlock.

'Oh, you don't want to go in there. If you think the garden's a mess...'

'I thought I'd keep my stuff there – save coming through the house.' He'd shown her his garden equipment, such as it was, stowed in the broom cupboard under the stairs.

'No need.' He shook his head.

'Well, I bring most of what's necessary with me, I suppose.' It wasn't ideal, as she couldn't come on her bicycle if she had to bring large tools and couldn't leave them during the duration of the job.

'I had a wife,' he said. 'They say 'partner' now, but I still think of her as my wife though we weren't official, but even so. She lived here, and it's her things in the shed, you see.'

Finding a man living on his own, Judith had him

down as gay; and there was something a little gay about the way he picked so carefully around his appearance and objects, setting out tea things with an air of formality. He had been russet-haired, she could see, from the silver cockatoo crest springing from his forehead where a few freckles drifted; his hands were very white as he straightened the trivet on which he'd placed a good bone china teapot with a pattern of forget-me-nots. Looking at his fingers, she had a sudden flash: the image of these same fingers laid on her own darker flesh flickered up in her mind, weakly, hesitantly, then abated as quickly. She almost missed it, but it was something alive inside her moving, the single disturbed blade that tells the tracker something has passed this way.

The second week she was working on his garden, he returned in the early evening and asked her, with stiff good manners, if she liked going to bed with men, and if so, would she consider going to bed with him? He did not add anything more.

He was standing near her in the garden where she was still hoeing by the light of a big lamp she'd looped over a branch. Judith told him she was out of practice; then, gesturing at her state, asked if she might use the shower first. He gave her a towel, and then, calling through the door, offered her a dressing-gown. She kept her mind on not slipping, not splashing too much, and cleansed herself with a cat's

assiduity. No, she was not going to think of the possible condition of Sean's bed.

The dressing gown was silky, with embroidered panels, Chinese. When she came out he didn't say anything to her as he busied around her barely dried form. He was eager; she found herself surprised: a feeling of festivity, a flash over her limbs. He patted her and said, 'You don't seem to have forgotten how to do it.' He laughed then, and added, 'I have to say, I thought I had.'

Back in her own house, Judith went out into her own garden and laid out food for her fox; she wanted the animal to be there, for though her sleeping with Sean surprised her, and changed the scene of her widowhood, it didn't lift the solitude.

On the radiator shelf in the hall at Sean Barbett's cottage, there drifted some small change, a few old business cards, drawing pins and paper clips and rubber bands from postman's bundles, peppermints and receipts accumulated in various chipped saucers: also, keys. Sean showed her how they were tagged to identify them: cellar, garden door, side door, front room window locks; and a slip of crumpled paper with 'garden shed' written in felt tip, and a number. She did not mean to take it in, but the digits impressed themselves as if they had spoken aloud.

She was making a rockery on the south-westerly

slope at the end of the garden, where she'd collected together the old bricks and rocks she'd dug up in the rest of the plot, and as she worked, her back was to the garden shed with its mute door and small blind window with the gingham curtain tucked against in on the inside and the combination lock on the hasp across the entrance. But she felt its presence behind her; one afternoon she peeped in again through the gap where the curtain, on its wire, sagged in the centre of the window, and saw that a postcard which she felt sure wasn't there before was propped up against the pane, its picture side turned inwards, the message and the address legible on her side of the glass. It was addressed to Daisy Sulter, and came from Turkey; the caption identified the image, as 'Suleimanye mosque Very beautiful worship place'. It was old, postmarked something something 197-something, as far as she could decipher it. The message read, 'Conference boring but have played truant and tried to find the carpet shop where we bought ours - they all looked the same and when I asked, two merchants at least fell on me like an old friend. Need your eye, but shan't say wish you were here, Love, Sean PS Back before this reaches you, probably!'

Judith swivelled the cogs on the padlock to the number still clear in her head: the interior was in shadow, and she took a moment or two to see what

the garden shed held. It was full of things, as Sean had warned. But whereas Judith had envisaged a stack of tea chests, and perhaps a shelf of rusting antifreeze and some hardened sacks of fertiliser, she found she was looking at a tiny, neat bedroom.

The shed was a Wendy house, with a narrow, low bed, tucked in and covered by a satin eiderdown stitched in a floral design; one pillow set straight; a low cupboard, doubling as a bedside table; a pair of chemist's reading glasses lying there, next to a ewer and basin in china with cabbage roses; on the floor, a round tatting mat, variegated, and a pair of Wellingtons with mud on them; hanging on a hook beside the window, the slippery satin dressing gown, Chinese sprays of embroidery on glowing crimson panels.

Judith drew back, slipped the hinge of the lock through the hasp with fluttering fingers, her heart pumping blood to her temples.

'Daisy turned against me, for some reason she wouldn't give.' Sean explained under some constraint the following week. He resisted Judith's attempts to turn over the past. 'Perhaps she didn't know it herself.'

'But...' Judith wanted to object, but fell silent, not to give away her trespassing.

'I could see I irritated her,' Sean went on, 'that my very presence set her teeth on edge, that my touch repelled her.' He sighed and turned towards Judith,

and put a fingertip to her shoulder above her breast. 'You are different, you see. You rather like sex. At least you seem to - with me.'

'I used to think she had a lover, someone else,' he said. 'Though she wouldn't ever admit it. So one night, after a terrible time, when she rejected me and said she would never sleep with me again, I rushed out into the garden and went to sleep in the shed. After that, it became a kind of habit – injured pride, that kind of thing. Then one thing led to another – you know the rest.'

Judith didn't: except that Daisy, his first wife, had left him eight years ago, and that afterwards there had been a potter called Sylvie.

'I don't know why,' he said, again.

She tucked herself closer in to his body, thinking of the garden shed. His limbs, in which something had leaped a short while ago, now felt damp and chill.

'Then, after Daisy moved out, she sometimes came back without warning. She still had keys. Once she arrived when I was Well.' He turned onto his back and lifted himself up the bed a little to laugh. 'Her appearance for all intents and purposes as if she still lived here... it did not please my guest, as you can imagine. But as for Daisy, she didn't turn a hair.'

'Who was that?'

'Meriel, that was her name. Pretty. Her name, I mean. She was middling good-looking. But a fine viola

player. We played together in the quartet I...'

Now there were too many paths: the memory map was lifting into new land masses, trackless wastes, and new creatures of unknown feature and behaviour were roaming its unknown expanses.

Judith ignored Meriel for the time being. For now, she'd keep to another track:

'Where is she now? Sylvie?'

There was a pause.

'North Carolina, she has a husband there – she met him through one of her courses. She liked taking courses: Buddhism one year, caning another.' He laughed. 'Basketwork. Not the other sort. A broker husband. And children. She doesn't write. Of all the women ...Ouch,' he broke off, as Judith pinched him, 'Well we're not so young that we have to pretend, surely – she is the one I've most lost contact with.' He turned Judith's face with his hands to look at her, 'I'm being tactless.' It was his turn to pinch her, gently. 'Aren't you speaking to me any more?'

Every time Judith turned over something she'd retrieved from the past life Sean had lived in the house and its overgrown garden, it slipped and changed, as certain flowers under sodium street lamps turn sulphurous, an elegant pale yellow becoming dirty dishwater, and crimson blossom reddish-brown scuzz.

One afternoon, when Judith let herself in to the house

and walked through into the garden, Meriel was sitting at the kitchen table warming her hands on the teapot. Judith could not mistake her, in the velour hat she'd seen from one of Sean's photographs with her curling dark 'pre-Raphaelite hair' spilling out under it: she looked as she must have looked when they were together, thought Judith. An aroma of citrus and vanilla emanated from her pale skin and large, sad, ringed eyes.

She began talking about Sean to Judith without a pause, warmly, kindly, like a big sister who has learned that the youngest in the family has found a boyfriend for the first time.

'Don't you find yourself feeling sorry for him? Because he seems so cast down by life? I know I do. Still, after all these years.

'I hope he's paying you properly. He can be very vague about that kind of thing, and when you're sleeping with him, it's sometimes a bit sensitive to ask for money.' (At this she giggled.) 'It's not his way, that, not at all. He may be hopelessly, chronically, congenitally unable to be faithful to one woman, but he would feel utterly defeated if he had to shell out for it.'

She took a sip of tea and looked up at Judith, her soft eyes moist with mischief:

'Has he peed in front of you yet? He loves that. Just a little boy at heart.' She laughed. 'With a big whoosh. Oh, intimacy with Sean is a game, just a

game.’ She pushed a cup towards Judith and began pouring.

‘And has he swivelled you round yet when you’re having sex? So you’re upside down on top of him? He thinks that’s awfully clever.’

Making her way downstairs, she saw the door to the side of the main bedroom was ajar. It led to a kind of glory hole, where Sean tossed things he didn’t want to throw away. She pushed it open and looked inside. Flung on the chair was a skirt, a good, shapely skirt, made of some kind of soft wool in a deep maroon brown. She was magnetised by it, plucked it from its place; it was warm to the touch, and wafted a scent of something alive as she lifted it. The skirt filled as she held it up to the shape of the hips and limbs of the wearer.

Judith began writing Sean a letter. It went through several drafts, many of them blotted with tears and thrown away; these were all far more impassioned, even hysterical than the one she sent:

Dear Sean,

I am afraid that my eyes were bigger than my stomach, as the saying goes, and you were right, the work on your garden has proved too much for me in the end. I’ve made a good start, I hope you’ll agree, and I hope you’ll be able to take it from there to your satisfaction.

I wish you well,

Judith

PS Do keep putting down egg shells to deter slugs and snails, and if it’s dry, please remember to water, as drought will kill the new plantings very quickly.

On the phone the evening he had her note, Sean sounded shocked; he did not understand what had happened.

‘There hasn’t been anybody here’, he said.

When he came round to find her at her house later that evening, he appeared so genuinely baffled, she told him.

‘Even if Meriel really did come to see me, I didn’t see her,’ he said. ‘Besides, I didn’t invite her, and I know nothing about it. Also, it’s quite possible for her to come round and for us to have a drink together, surely?’

She wanted to cry out, from the most boring depths of her hurt, ‘But how did she get in?’

‘And I promise you,’ Sean went on. ‘You have nothing to fear from her. She has shown no sign of returning, now, or at any time. Nor has Daisy, nor has Sylvie. And not for want of my trying to persuade them.’

Judith flinched.

‘Not now, silly. *Then.*’ He paused. ‘You have a past, too. You have... Iain.’ He looked out of her window on to the garden, which lay in darkness now. ‘There are always others. We’re old enough to have

lives around us. We've travelled old tracks, gone to earth more than once.' He turned back to her. 'Don't be angry about this.'

The groundwork on Sean's garden was done, and so they moved into a different phase, for there was no obvious pretext for their meetings. She had to own up to herself that she wanted to be with him, that he wasn't casually profiting from her employment. Sometimes, she even talked to him unguardedly: unaccustomed new feelings sprang at her, like the flash of a pair of night-seeing eyes from the canal bank when she cycled to and from Sean's, or the brush of her vixen, bushier now from all that peanut butter laid out by Judith (and by neighbours too, no doubt) and flaring for an instant in the long evening light as she swivelled into her earth.

When autumn closed in towards winter, Judith bought some mastic and squeezed out a fillet round the windowpanes of the garden shed to improve the insulation; she found a plant rack and some shelving and installed them, regardless of occupants. There she began potting and layering, bringing on slips and cuttings for the planting she was planning for the spring. She had in mind clustered shrubs and ground cover in contrasting shapes and colours, aromatics for the edges of the path to the shed so that the leaves

would release their perfume as she and Sean went past looking for a new bud here, picking out a stray shoot there. She imagined it as it would be: her head was moving with pictures from the future, and the past was jostling for attention at the back of the class, sticking up its hands and messing about, calling out 'Miss, gotta go to the toilet'. She was quelling it with her crossset look, but it was disruptive, it wasn't going to cooperate.

In the shed one morning, a woolly hat appeared, a rich rust colour, with a furry trim, tossed into a basket next to a good make of secateurs. Judith did not remember seeing either of them before, any more than Sylvie's skirt (it was Sylvie's, Sean confirmed). She plucked the hat out of the basket and pulled it on, then checked herself in the pane, which against the dark glossy foliage of the new camellia she'd planted beside the shed, acted as a mirror. It suited her: she looked as if she was up to something, something not to be anticipated or understood before it occurred. Still wearing the hat, she went back through the house, and up the stairs, and into the glory hole. She pulled the skirt from its new position on a hanger, and still in her gardening T-shirt, jeans and socks, stepped into its soft folds. She went into the bedroom and made a tentative turn in front of the mirror. She liked the effect: there was something raffish about this outfit. It turned her into a kind of stranger to herself, a new visitor in

her own life, and the encounter was not unpleasant.

Back in the shed, she went on thumbing in seedlings, then, using the secateurs, cut up into knobby lengths a good section of iris root she'd sliced from a friend's choked clump. As the night drew in, she began to set it carefully into the flower bed on what would be the sunniest patch of the garden in the spring.

When Sean came back from work later, she met him, and, delighted with her outlandishness, insisted on keeping on every bit of clothing when they went to bed so that the skirt's fullness was spread all about the bed under them both, rucked and twisted and right messed up. She found she enjoyed the sex better than the time before or the time before that. Such satisfaction it delivered, to watch Sylvie hovering there, on the landing outside the bedroom door, in her jacket and tights and boots, but without her skirt.

When a nightdress turned up with the Chinese dressing gown again on the back of the bathroom door a few days later, Judith took a shrewd look at the fabric and the workmanship and appreciated the fine blue lawn with cotton lace trim.

She was humming the theme from one of her favourite pieces of Bach while she let fall her clothes on to the bathroom floor and put on the nightie. When she walked down the stairs and saw Daisy sitting reading in a chair by the fire in the sitting room, she

started, of course. But this time, Judith hardly quailed; almost without pause, she turned back on her heel and went upstairs, and standing in the bedroom, pushed her fists into her eyes until the snowflakes needling into her burst into flowers of colour and light, and then she turned on the electric blanket in anticipation, waiting for Sean to come back so that they could do what they liked to do and have sex before supper.

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