

## Wildflower

She says the names to herself as she walks up the lane, even though he is not here to listen. *Tansy. Feverfew. Toadflax.* She knows that if she lets herself, she will be able to hear his voice. *Look Mummy, musk mallow!* She will be able to feel the weight of him bouncing along on her back, his wellies drumming against her thighs.

They have walked for miles along these lanes – hundreds of miles she supposed – with Henry asleep in his pram at first, then riding high in the carrier on her back. When her hormones had settled and the visitors had stopped coming with their Mothercare gift sets and casseroles for the freezer, she had needed this. On those grey-tinged mornings when that fierce, surprising love was still not enough to make her forget who she had been before she had been his mother, she had found herself in the rhythm of her footsteps. When they were out walking, he became her companion instead of her jailer.

She stops at the gate to admire the first slender petals of the woody nightshade nodding over the stream beyond the wall. She will show Henry this. On the way back from school she will lift him up to see and they will play their game where they both have to make up a new name for it, and even though she will think of something poetic – *afternoon star*, perhaps, *mother's joy* – and he will call it something like *pointy purple yellow face*, they will both agree that he has won.

They'd learned the flowers together. As he'd learned to form his first words, she'd taught herself to distinguish hedge parsley from wild carrot, cat's-ear from rough hawkbit. She'd say the names aloud as they walked and it made her feel better. If she was teaching him flower names then their walks were not only for her benefit; they were for his education, not just her escape. She didn't have to feel guilty that sometimes – just for one minute, just for one

deep breath – she wished there were a few more inches between them. How she loved him; how she ached to see him fly a little further from her side.

In the kitchen, she drops the shopping bags and flicks the switch on the kettle. Her eyes wander to the clock above the sink. What is he doing now? Maybe he is sitting at one of those tiny blue tables, learning to distinguish b from d, 2 from 5. His Fireman Sam wellies will be under the peg marked with his name. His hair will be dishevelled, his tongue poking out as he follows the dots with his HB pencil. When she picks him up he will have grown another few inches. In the three weeks since he started school his limbs have grown impossibly long, his horizons dazzlingly wide.

It is this growth that has always caught her unawares; ounces and inches adding to him in a trickle or a thunderclap. Last spring he had all at once become too heavy for her back. Their walks had circled closer to home as he had bumbled along beside her. On the footpath over the far field he would run ahead, aeroplane wings spread wide, engine noises spluttering into giggles as she chased after him, caught him by the hands, spun him in a dizzying circle. They would stop to say hello to the sheep or to look up an unknown flower on her phone. If the flower had more than one name, she would read them all out and Henry would choose his favourite. *Lords-and-Ladies* or *Jack-in-the-pulpit*? *Cow parsley* or *Queen Anne's Lace*? If he didn't like any of them, they would give it a new one – a name just for them.

At the school gate he comes running to her, book bag flapping. She asks how he is, did he have a nice day, what has he been doing in the six hours and 41 minutes they have been apart. She is hungry for details to fill in these first gaps in her knowledge of him, of his life beyond her gaze. He shrugs. *Nothing much.*

On the walk home she teases from him a little more of the Nothing Much: phonics and hop scotch and pictures made from dyed rice. When they reach their gate she tugs him to a stop, lifts him up, pulls back a wayward leaf to show him her discovery.

“Look, Henry, what do you think that is?”

He glances at the flower then to her face. And the look he gives her is the one he has been giving her more often of late. It is as if he has glimpsed something he hadn't realised was there. He has seen her, the stranger beneath her skin. He has realised that he and she are not the same person after all.

“It's a purple flower, Mummy.” He wriggles from her arms and climbs on to the bottom bar of the gate to release the latch. “Can I have a snack?”

A purple flower. He is right, of course.

She watches him run down the track to the back door, his arms spread again into wings. How she loves him; how she aches to see him fly a little further from her side. She pauses just long enough to touch one fragile petal. *Woody nightshade* or *bittersweet*. Then she begins to chase after him. And she knows that however fast she runs, however far she stretches, this time she will not catch him.