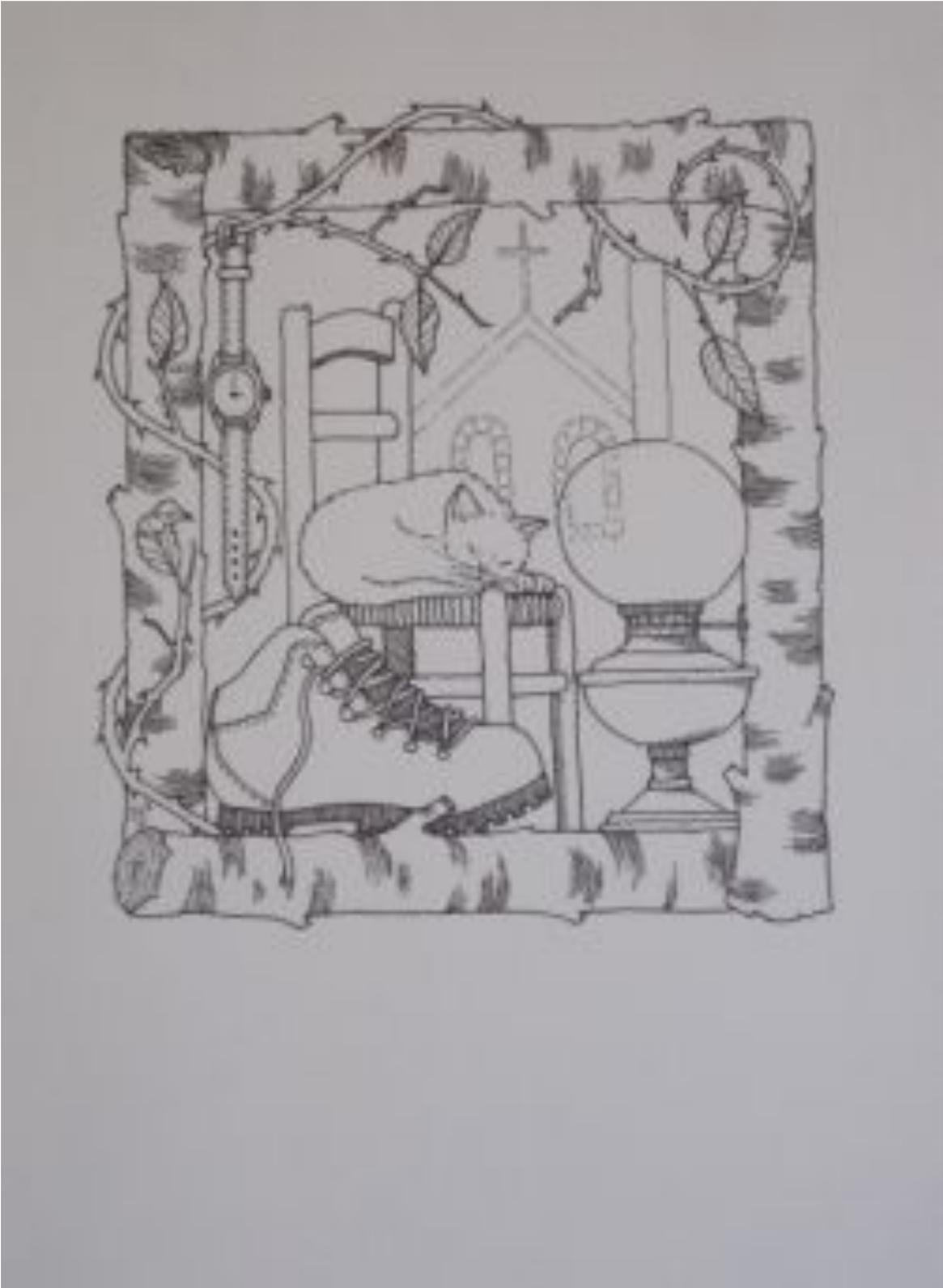


THE SNOW FORESTERS



With thanks to Anthony Nanson, who first made me aware of the existence of such creatures.)

It had been another bad night. He had woken from a dream of dread and failed to get back to sleep. With dawn he had dozed and then slept through the alarm clock.

The self-catering cottage had been a good idea. He could get up when he felt more rested, have a good breakfast, put the gloom of the night behind him and still get in an afternoon's walk in the snow.

He had planned his route the previous evening so now drove directly to the pub where he had intended to have lunch. It went by an intriguing name, "The Snow Forester." He was glad to find it oak panelled, with a roaring log fire and not at all disheartened that he was the only patron and the young barmaid not inclined to pay too much attention to him. He confined himself to half a pint and a steak and ale pie. The beer was reasonable but the pie was salty. He re-checked his route on the map, anticipating the pleasures to come, a walk through woodland in freshly fallen snow.

On a trip to the loo he searched the walls for any notice that explained the strange name but there was nothing. The sign outside only bore the name of the pub and the brewery, no pictorial representation of a snow forester that might have given him a clue. At the end of his meal he took his empty glass back to the bar.

"Unusual name."

"What?"

"The Snow Forester. Do you know where it comes from?"

She looked at him as if it was the most stupid question anyone had ever asked her.

"Dunno. Something local I guess."

He was almost out of the door when he noticed a large bowl by the door. It was full of salt.

"What's this?"

She shrugged. “Some superstition. You’re supposed to take a pinch of it if you are leaving the pub in the dark, for luck.”

“Then I won’t need it then.”

But she had already moved off into the public bar.

When he got out of the pub he found a thick mist had descended. For a moment he considered changing his plans but walking in mist in snowy woodland had its own charms. He drove about a mile to the layby where he could park. The road had been gritted but he had taken alcohol so was careful. Boots and warm weather gear on, map checked again, then off along the path that led into the trees.

His boots crunched on virgin snow, above him the mist swirled around the branches of the trees like wraiths. Close to the path were straight young ash and silver birch but off in the mist he caught glances of gnarled, ancient oaks. He was not a romantic and knew there were very few patches of the old Wild Wood left, if any, but it was possible to imagine that this could be untouched forest, millennia old. When he stopped the forest was silent. He waited for a bird call but there was nothing.

Cold stung his face but his body was warm. He carried on at a steady pace. Back in London his colleagues would be looking at their watches and know they still had three hours to work.

Something gigantic loomed out of the mist, something that looked like a huge skull. The mist billowed and cleared a little and he saw that it was only some sort of building, with two upper windows and a central door. That silly human trait that can see faces in anything had given him a momentary jolt. There was a cross on top of the roof. An aficionado of visiting old churches, he tried the door and was surprised when it opened to his push.

Gloom and the musty smell of an unheated building. His hand searched on the wall for a switch. Cold stone but then metal. When he flicked it down a sour yellow light glimmered

shakily from a bare, dusty bulb, illuminating a stark interior of dark wooden pews with their backs turned to him. No ornament, so some extreme puritan sect that might still exist in such an out of the way spot. He let the heavy wooden door shut behind him, the echo rattling through the empty building. He was propelled further into the church, looking for some local history, but the plain white walls told him nothing.

He took out his map from the pocket of his anorak, checked the route and found where he must be. Chapel (dis). He did not remember spotting it during the planning. Disused, yet he had found the door unlocked, presumably a not very careful guardian. There was a heavy thump on the roof of the chapel. He ducked, his heart racing but then realised it must be a clump of snow falling from the trees. He smiled, and the scratching on the windows could only be branches. But it made the place feel desolate. He felt that creepy feeling that sometimes came over him in empty churches, of being watched by generations of disapproving church-goers. Chapel goers must be even worse. He left, the door banging behind him, and set off at a fast pace along the path.

Soon he was warm again. He concentrated on enjoying the pull of his muscles as he walked but the visit to the chapel had made him feel spooked. He stopped for a moment. Still the forest was completely quiet. He had not seen another human being for, he checked his watch, three quarters of an hour. Normally he would be happy to have achieved such solitude but he admitted to himself that he would like to come across a fellow human. He might be the only soul in the whole of this forest. He shivered and set off again at a faster pace. He had reckoned that the walk would take him about two hours. He was a quarter through it. But how long had he spent in the chapel? He still had over an hour and a half before he saw his car again. No, enjoy this! He was walking through snow and mist in a safe and beautiful English wood. Atmospheric was the word for it, stupid to wish his life away. He set off at a faster pace.

He was on the ground, his face in snow and a pain in his left knee and his foot was being held. He pulled himself up on his elbows and looked backwards. It was a bramble. He had been a bit careless, nothing more. He smiled as he gingerly lifted himself up and dusted the snow off his anorak. No great harm done. Checking his watch he found five minutes had passed since he had last looked at it. Had he been walking that long? Had he knocked himself out for a brief while? He felt a little light headed but that might be the beer. Although the forest was still there must have been a breath of wind off to his right because the branches of the larger trees moved like something advancing. He had become chilled by the snow and needed to get moving.

As he walked his hand moved to his map pocket. It was empty. He patted the other pockets in a futile gesture. He always kept his map in that pocket. He had last looked at it in the chapel. He must have left it there. He turned around, wondering if he ought to go back for it but then another gust of wind rattled some branches along the track from which he had come. He turned round again and studied the path in front of him. If he remembered the route it would take him on a loop through the forest and bring him back to the road. A hundred yards of road walking and then he would be back at his car. He thought fondly of his car, the joy he would feel at seeing it, his adventure successfully over. He had left a thermos of coffee on the passenger seat. It would be good to drink that and then drive back to his cottage. A hot bath was what he needed now. All he had to do was make sure he did not take any of the smaller side tracks in the mist and he would be fine.

He walked on, a pain in his knee but he had stood about dithering for too long. A brisk pace should put it right. The snow along the path was thicker now in the centre of the wood. Before long he was trudging through it. He had to admit to himself that, with the cold and the mist, this was no longer pleasant. Something thumped off to his right, stopping him in his tracks, but there was nothing there. Some more snow falling off branches? It came into his mind that he had not told anyone where he was going. Who was there to tell? The other holiday cottages near

him were empty. The barmaid would have thought him stupid if he tried to tell her of his route in case anything should happen. What could happen?

Through the thick mist he saw something solid beginning to loom. Oh God, was he going around in circles and had come back to the chapel? But no, this was a different outline, squatter, a cottage. From one window a pale yellow light barely shone out through the fog. He would be alright now. The people would be able to give him directions, even, he thought guiltily, give him a lift back to his car, a break from this terrible solitude. He almost ran through the thick snow towards the house.

He stood like a child, looking in at the tableau beyond the window. A simple room, in the centre a man and a woman sat at a table. A cat was curled up on a chair by the fire. He lifted his hand to knock on the pane when he noticed something odd. The couple were both dressed in costume that dated from a hundred years before. The light came from the globe of a paraffin lamp in the middle of the table. He looked more closely and saw that both had their eyes open and were staring, unblinking, into space. However hard he knocked they would not hear him. The man, the woman, even the cat, were dead, overtaken by some terrible miasma that had crept into their room and taken them unawares. All this had happened a century before and was being shown him as a foretaste of his own death. His spine froze with terror. He turned around and ran from the horror, not caring where he went, just to get away from whatever was toying with him.

He held onto a tree, trying to regain his breath. Now he dared to look back but the mist had already hidden the cottage, if he had even ever seen it. He studied the gnarled bark of the tree, which was real and substantial. He put his cheek against it and the damp smell gave him some comfort. He saw that he was still on a path, either side were tall trees and impenetrable brambles. The path led off into the mist. It was untouched, not even bird or fox prints to show him that he was not alone. But where did it lead? Grudgingly he put his foot forward. He had no

choice. He could never turn back in the direction of the cottage. Not finding it would be almost as bad as seeing it again.

Unsteadily he walked into the mist that wrapped around him like a magician's cloak. He thought he heard tinkling laughter from somewhere behind him but he had no wish to stop. He walked on, gaining confidence with each step, each yard that took him away from something that could not have happened. In an hour or so he would be back at his car.

But it was getting dark. He looked at his watch. It was only three o'clock. There should still be a good hour and a half of serviceable light. More than enough time, as long as he was on the right path. It must be the mist, making it unnaturally dark. He stopped walking and looked back. It had been his imagination playing tricks. He shouldn't have had the beer. The forest was silent, gloomy. Far away there was something moving through the forest. It was coming his way. There were supposed to be wild boar in parts of the forest but surely they would keep away from humans? There was also something moving on the other side of the path. It too seemed to be coming his way. He turned and he walked. It was a determined pace but he did not want to run. He could not help but look over his shoulder every so often but saw nothing. He must keep going.

A pain scythed through his abdomen. Stitch, he would have to stop. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a light. He stood up, the pain forgotten. There was another light on the other side of the path, no, there were three moving towards him, like lamplight, barely perceptible in the mist and white rather than the yellow that had been coming from the cottage. Then he could see another, more distant but rapidly catching up. For a moment he thought they might be coming to rescue him, but who knew he was here?

A lethargy rooted him to the spot. They were close now. What was the point in running? The lights came, not from lamps but from within their bodies. They were smaller than him but an almost human shape, although their faces were wizened, old, so old. They came towards him

in a gliding motion, as if not really walking. The part of his brain that liked to label things struggled to find anything to explain what was approaching him.

The nearest of the creatures came up to him and touched his upper right arm. Immediately a coldness flowed through him as if his blood had been frozen. The second came forward but it was twittering like an angry blackbird. It shoved the first who let go its grip. Immediately the man felt he was awakening but into the nightmare. It waved at him as if shooing him off. He was being spared. He turned and he ran as fast as his layers of clothing, his heavy boots and the virgin snow would allow him. Behind him he heard some more excited twittering. He turned and saw all four things once again pursuing him. He had not been spared, they just wanted to prolong the hunt.

There was pain in his side and pain in his throat. He was stumbling rather than running. Why was this happening to him? Tears of unfairness stung his eyes. He could not dare looking back but, over his stumbling, he was sure he could hear their twittering.

Were the trees getting more spaced out? If he could get out of the forest then he had a chance. There was a light, he was sure of it. Could there be somewhere that he could find safety? He tried to run faster. Either side of him he felt space opening up but there was something in front of him from which a light was coming. With horror he saw that it was the same white light that was coming from the creatures. He stopped, there was no more point in running. The mist partly cleared. In front of him was a mound, like a huge anthill. A door seemed to have opened, from which the light was coming. In the light he was sure he could see more of the creatures. He was calm, the uncertainty was over.

He felt both his arms grabbed, again that awful coldness, and he was taken into the snow foresters' mound.