

12th June 1837 – Black Ham

Sometimes, if we had some free time, Alice, my daughter, would ask me to tell her a story, so sitting on Black Ham wall, waiting for the fair to start, I told her this one. Granddad had told it to me when I was young.

Isaac had to go on the run. It wasn't for a crime that he'd done but one he found; a stranger's corpse had been left by the side of the road, damp and cold; covered in blood. He never been so near to death so poked it with a stick and shouted at it to see if it moved. He tasted the blood. He knelt down and looked into its eyes and saw a space where life had been. He didn't know what to do, so ran away and left him there. He didn't know he'd been seen. Although no-one believed he'd do such a thing, the finger of blame was turned his way. They desperately wanted blood, the elders son had been the dead man's friend and Isaac's blood was as good as the next man's.

The other son, Isaac's best friend, came to see him and said, "you have to leave - unless you do, they'll kill you." Isaac put some food in a bag and a few coins in his pockets and walked out of the house that had so long been his home. He didn't have the heart to say good bye. His mother was in bed and was sleeping. He didn't know what to say to her, so closed the door and left quietly. Isaac knew that as soon as dawn came, she'd hear a knock on the door and aggressive swordsmen would rush in and ask her where he'd gone. They'd make accusations, repeat the same lies. They'd ask where he was and if she was protecting him. She'd refuse to talk and they'd shout at her. He didn't want to let this happen to her but if he talked to her now she'd have to lie and put him in more danger.

Isaac stayed in the trees for a while but, as soon as dawn rose, moved down the road, constantly looking back to make sure he'd not been seen. The elders would be anxious to find him now. They'd issue writs - release their dogs to track him down; everyone would be asked to look for him and if they found him would take his land. A burning stake would set up for him and poets write new songs to mark his death. He didn't have much of a plan; the only plan he had was to go as far and fast as he could, towards the hills. Nobody would get to him once he was there, and, even if they tried, wouldn't last long. Nobody returned from those dark hills. The dangers there were equally true for him of course, but perhaps he could make it though on his own. He didn't know what lay on the far side of the hills. Some called it the black lands. He didn't know why this was, but hoped he'd be free there.

"Come on, come on," he said to keep up some pace, as he looked back through the undergrowth.

Eventually, Isaac arrived at a river that was too wide to cross which meant he

either had to turn north to the hills or take the low way to the sea. He didn't know how far it was to the sea but chose to go there; he might find freedom there, he thought, and, if not, could take a boat to some far place where nobody knew him.

"Come on, come on," he groaned, once more; tired now but knew he had to move faster.

Eventually, Isaac came to a low bank, and climbed up to see a flat land where the river slowed and the trees changed from ones he knew to ones he did not know and, eventually, walking for a few more hours, the trees thinned and changed to reed and willow scrub that formed the edge of a wide marsh. He couldn't see a route across this marsh so walked round the side then reached a low path that led to a causeway through the reeds.

"Come on, come on," he said, unsure how far he'd gone or if they were following him.

Isaac followed the path as far as he could but had to stop when he came to a flooded fen. Every other path he found, was deep in mud and soon went nowhere. He didn't want to go back so pushed on through the wet ground, surrounded by reeds that were so dense and tall, he had no clue where he was going. Above him, great flocks of birds crossed the marsh and their noise was relentless, seeming to mock him as he pushed on as if they knew he was mad to be going this way.

"Shut up," he cried at them, so tired by then, he did not care if he was heard.

Isaac came to a creek, and, there seemed no way to get through. He was desperate to find food; his supplies from home were all but gone. He also realised, it would be soon be dusk and the ground was wet and there was no place to settle down to sleep so crouched low and tried to get what rest he could but it was impossible.

"Isaac, hold on please" he said and prayed his fate would soon change.

Eventually, after the light rose he had some luck; a punt was moored by a creek, and, across the creek, was a shack. He untied the punt and crossed the creek but when he arrived at the hut, nobody seemed to be there. Isaac knocked on the door, but nobody came. He hesitated at the door then opened it and found a pile of nets, untidily left of the floor; beside them were spears and traps. He walked in and ruffled up the nets to make a bed and laid down to try to get some sleep. He didn't know if the marsh was in the black lands or if they'd kill him if he was discovered inside the hut but he was tired and ceased to care. Isaac slept a sleep,

heavy with dreams of lives lost as if all the things he loved would soon be swallowed up by the dark. He didn't want to die on his own but this seemed inevitable if he failed to get out of the marsh. The very air had the smell of illness and death.

It occurred to him that the smell of damp and age meant the hut had been abandoned. He decided, therefore, to steal the boat and nets and traps, and investigate the creek. He also tried to use the nets to catch some fish but it was hopeless; he didn't know what to do with them and lost one in the creek, but managed still to catch a few frogs and found eggs and had a feast, and this encouraged him to stay a few more days. Nobody told him to leave the hut or demanded their boat back. No-one in fact, came by as if the marsh were outlawed in some way.

Isaac worked out where to find the fish and grew more skilled with the nets. He figured out the best way to catch them was to row in a wide arc and lay the nets to enclose a small part of the creek; later, he'd draw them back and find them full and managed to raise them and make the fish spill out in the boat and not escape back to the creek like they had the first few times. He also used traps. He baited them and left them on bed of the creek and, when he came back, found them bursting with eels. He therefore, found a way to live there, but feared, one day, a stranger would come and take all of these things back. Without a place to stay he wouldn't get out of the rain and cold. Without a boat or nets he'd soon starve; he couldn't get this thought out of his head, and this weighed him down and troubled him so much, the day came when he took the nets and traps, piled them into the boat and set off to find a new place to live. A river flowed out of the other side of the creek and this was the way he went.

As Isaac rowed, he sang old songs to the time of the oar strokes, then new ones about his life, about where he'd come from and where he'd like to go, but, although he rowed all day long, nothing changed; nothing but reeds in view. He began to lose all hope and his songs were now sad ones, hymns to the war, ballads of young and old lives lost so far from home. Only then did he notice the reeds had grown thin and heard the sound of geese in the near distance. Suddenly, a great flock of them rose high in the air; a roar of noisy wings and squawks. The river grew wide and slowed down and he realised he was by a great lake that stretched out for miles, and it was so immense it looked like the sea. Isaac stopped to look. It wasn't the sea and wasn't a place that gave him hope as the sea would have done - instead it looked unforgiving and bleak for a small man in a small boat. Around the lake were small inlets and creeks and on the far side was a wood made up of dark trees and an island rose up at the heart of the lake. He wasn't sure what to do next - he knew it wouldn't be safe to cross the lake in a small boat that had been made so unstable with things piled on top but he knew he could not to turn back

having come so far.

He decided to stay close to the shore and try to get some sleep. He lay down, covering himself up in the nets then, looking out from the boat, saw the sun released its last threads of light and these spread out on the lake. The evening was so perfect and clear, it made him feel he'd come to rest at last and was now weightless. Isaac thought of his home and friends. His family must have known he couldn't see them now, and he prayed, one day, he'd find a way to tell them why he'd abandoned them.

When morning rose, he woke up and looked out at the lake once more; now unfriendly, roughened by a strong wind and dulled by clouds; its mood was troubled as if the wind and waves could find no way to rest, which made him nervous. Isaac rowed round the shore to find a place to stay, and found a spot in a secluded bay. A river met came down there and, there, he found a wood of battered trees, many on their sides in the wet peat. They formed a mass of entangled branches, leaves and stems; the perfect place to make a hut where nobody could track him down. He gathered sticks and reeds and made a low platform, then a 'lean to' to shield him from the wind and rain, then, by the door he constructed a pit lined with stones for a fire. He didn't plan to stay long. He intended to build a raft to take his nets down to the sea. He thought, perhaps, he could sell them there.

Isaac watched how the fish moved in the lake and searched the small unnoticed places where the birds made their nests. He didn't know what they were so invented names for them. Metal fish. Dirt fish. Secret bird. Paint bird. By hanging nets between the boughs of the trees, he found a new way to catch these birds. He hid himself in the reeds out of sight and stayed still and watched as they returned to the creek to feed, then slipped out and cried out or his boat became a drum; striking it with a stick, so that they flew up in the air all at once, enough of them forced so low, they caught the nets.

The winter was bad that year. The marshes were deep in ice and the lake was frozen. Isaac had lost his way. He didn't know how to hunt or to fish in these conditions so ate roots and dead things he found on the marsh that had perished in the cold. He became tired and weak and knew he might not see out the winter. The river was the one place free of ice now and he found a dead cow there, alongside the bank. The carcass was cold and the meat fresh, and this helped him survive till spring. Another time, a storm came to the marsh and tore down his shack; exposing him to the rain and cold but, then he found a pile of dead wood on the bank, carried down by the rains and he used them to make a new home. When he was feeling alone or sad, he would sit by the shore and the lake would find ways to encourage him. It revealed how the light can weave new hope, or the way stories can rise from the depths as if they had been made for him. This

comforted him when he was sad or when the night was cold and long.

He allowed the years to pass, and, through this time, he was on on his own; nobody came to the lake. Sometimes, Isaac saw boats but hid in the trees, and didn't move till they were gone. Even now, he feared for his life; the elders had long memories and would want to track him down. They wouldn't let him escape their grasp. Instead, they'd find him and drag him back and tie him to a burning stake and the whole tribe would be made to watch and his mother would be one of them. His story would be told and songs sung. Nobody was out of their reach - they'd plan to make this clear. He therefore watched as the boats passed and stayed out of sight in the trees.

Isaac changed. His existence was now one of the beasts of the marsh and he wanted to be one - instead of a man - wanted to be as bold as a crow, or as secretive as a deer or become the song of a bird or follow the fish as they scattered or rose. Although he wanted to move on at times , he stayed. He didn't know why but the place had a hold of him, and, now, he chose to abandon the world of men. Even the thought of them made him tense and nauseous. Isaac was some bad days of course - he didn't want to live on his own forever; many times, thought of his life when he was young when his father was with him. He didn't want it live like this for the rest of his life; the marshes were no place for an old man and time would run and run, and if he didn't go soon, it would be too hard to leave - he knew this - but, then, one day everything changed. Pulling his nets from the creek, he saw a shape in the water, a few yards from the boat. He ignored it at first, as one more fragment of wood, brought down by the floods. Moving close, though, he noticed part of the shape was white and, beside this, was a mass of red strands stretching out two or three feet on each side - he didn't know what this was - but drawing near, could see it was hair and the white was skin and she wore a dress, embroidered with stars. Isaac leant out of the boat to see if she was breathing. He couldn't tell so touched her face but she was cold and her lips were motionless. He lifted her head to help her breath, then saw an eel come out of her clothing or hair. It wriggled past her lips then her eyes then dived back in the lake. Otherwise she was still. He struggled to lift her up, but she weighed too much; he didn't have the strength and the boat was small, so he dragged her back to the bank. Approaching the shore, he jumped out, lifted her up and took her in his arms. Another eel slipped out of her dress. Isaac thought she must be dead but then lowering her down by the hut, she coughed and strings of slime burst out of her mouth.

He covered her up in reeds and moss and lit a small fire by her side. Her frozen skin was as pale as snow, but her eyes were as green as moss and her hair redder than the fruits of the thorn bush. Isaac cooked fish broth and spooned this carefully into the side of her mouth. She barely moved, but then he saw the

strangest smile grow on her lips. He wondered who she was and where she belonged. No boats had come in weeks. Perhaps, a flood had come down and carried her to him. He also saw from her face and hair that she was not from anywhere he knew in this world.

Isaac made a bed of down to help her sleep, and put herbs in her broth. He attempted to chat to her but her eyes stayed closed. She looked so weak, he expected her to die, but then, one day, she looked at him with clear eyes. A confused smile crossed her face. He didn't know what to say, but then she began to speak for the first time. Her accent was strange - one he had not heard before.

"Someone saved me," she croaked, "was it you?"

"Yes," he said.

"Thank you" she said.

Gradually, her strength came back. He asked her where she was from but she was confused and told him that her old life was gone and then asked him the same questions - about who he was and why he was there - he couldn't say he said - he couldn't trust her yet - didn't know who she was - "oh - I believe you've done something wrong," she said then asked him why he was on his own. "I've suffered much from the world of men," he said,"and have no wish to go back." Her peculiar smile made him think she knew much more than she chose to confess. Slowly her strength grew and she asked him if she could help and he took her gathering food in the marsh and she sought the roots of the bull rush and found cranberries then cooked them for him. Clearly, the secrets of the marsh were familiar to her, and this made him think she was from these lands. Another time, she followed him to the lake but she was gripped by fear and asked him to take her back immediately.

"What scared you?" he asked

"I don't know," she said.

Finally, one day, he looked down at her and her skin was clear and hair shone and he decided she was as well as she could be with him, and said, "I believe it's time for you to return home."

She hesitated then said a weak voice, "I escaped from my old home"

"What does that mean?" he asked.

"I wouldn't know where to go if you made me leave," she said.

"I didn't say you had to leave," he said.

"I prefer to stay with you then," she said, "can I stay her?"

"Yes" he replied in a way that turned the word yes to a long smile. Isaac had long forgotten what it was to smile so it felt strange and out of place on his face.

"I remember my name," she said, "Marisa's my name."

"What else do you know," he asked.

"Nothing."

Isaac wondered if her old life would come back to her now, or, perhaps, she'd always known much more than she chose to say, but, when he tried to ask her more, Marisa refused to talk and this made him do the same. Their secrets were left undisclosed in this way and, before long, they turned to truths that they shared unspoken, questions from which they made their lives. Isaac made a home for Marisa; he cut down trees and sawed them up and from these he built her a house, buried deep in the wood, out of sight, where they'd not be found. When Isaac took her to see it, she looked stunned that this was her new home as if nobody had cared for her in this way. Within the shack, he made a bed filled with several layers of dried moss and down from a swan's nest. When she saw this, Marisa's eyes filled with tears then she took his hand and kissed him and pulled him onto the bed.

Isaac began to sing once more - the first time since he'd come to the lake and one evening, she joined in with songs from the place she said she had long forgotten, but, despite these words, couldn't help but cry and didn't try to hide her distress from him. She didn't tell him more. He didn't ask her why - he could tell she didn't want him to do this.

The baby was born on a day when the lake was calm. She told him what to do, as if understanding many things from her old life - she ordered him to boil dark peat upwelling water then plunge in a knife then let it cool. She asked him to look for the spongiest, driest moss he could find. She told him to stay calm and do what she said; "everything will be fine", she said, "I promise all will be fine."

The labour was long and hard and he could see pain in her eyes but she refused to scream. The baby came out and, when it cried, great flocks of wigeon and teal rose up from the creek and leaves shook in the wood and in the morning the lake wore a dress of silk made from the dawn - as if it had

waited for this day to come for years.

They decided to call her Eve.

Isaac worked hard to feed them and keep them warm and, now, at last, Marisa looked well. Summer ran on and their lives were good. They sang together by the fire and the wood spat and the songs spilled out on the lake. One evening, Isaac showed them a game; something he'd played when he was small. His father showed him an egg and a stone and fooled him which one was which, and he ended up with mess in his hands, unsure if he should laugh or cry and she was confused in the same way, as he moved all the eggs back and forth and she followed them with her eyes or he grabbed them or dropped them or broke them or conjured them out of the air and this made her laugh more as they rolled in circles. Isaac, therefore, liked to look for eggs and bring them back to her. One morning, he took the boat out to find a place where he'd seen cranes and their nests, across the lake. The journey was a long and the eggs were hard to track down and only when he was on his way home, did the rain start to fall and wind rise and grow annoyed as squalls crossed the lake and, soon, over to the west of the fen, he saw lightning crack the sky and the waves rose and spat and turned on the boat as he continued to row home. Eventually, he found a bay that was clear of the worse conditions. He decided to stay for the night.

The following morning, when he came home, he thought the girls would be overjoyed to see him, surround him with lots of hugs and smiles but Marisa wasn't like this; instead, her face was full of tears. His daughter, Eve was gone.

Marisa's face was cold and grey as if all the life was gone from her skin. She explained to him how she'd been in the hut as the storm had raged; how she'd cradled Eve in her arms to keep her calm. Only when the storm was far in the distance, did she find rest but, then, realised she'd come to a new place, enveloped by a strange, half sleep, dreaming now she was on her own; abandoned and lost. Marisa knew she was meant to find some lost thing but couldn't think what this thing was but, still, searched for hours, knowing it was utterly stupid to do so; checking each room twice, but then woke, suddenly; turning to where Eve has last been by her side, she found her missing.

Isaac didn't know what to say. Marisa's hands shook and her arms flapped as she apologised once more. She wanted him to tell her what do but he was too confused and shocked. The only thing he did was to look back at her, scared that everything good in his life would be lost once more. Their daughter could crawl but couldn't go far on her own and the ground was rough so would block her way, no creatures he knew in the marsh would take a child; he'd never seen a fox and the

eagles stayed out of these trees but Eve was out there on her own in the confusion of the pools and reeds. Perhaps a thief had come down and abducted her but no-one had come to the marsh in all the years he'd been there. The elders might have learnt where he was or it might be the black tribe. Marisa might have told them and Eve would be theirs from now on, this was her punishment - not his - her secrets not his ones. He'd noticed scars on her skin, carefully made with a knife - his fingers had traced them down her legs. This overwhelming rush of thoughts rose up but did not tell him what to do next, and already, it might be too late.

Isaac ran out and looked for tracks in the mud but the rain had been hard so nothing was there. He didn't know where to turn so looked to where he'd take an abducted child. He made his way down to the lake but no boats were there, so he returned through the trees and took the path through reeds down to the river bank from where a thief might head for the hills to the north, but there was nothing.

Running along, Isaac looked from side to side to search for clues; some piece of cloth or damage to the reeds or marks left in the mud but he found none. He didn't want to overlook some clue or waste more time so pushed on, but then saw blood splattered on the path and his heart stopped but it was a dead bird, flesh torn, feathers left in the mud and this made him think of how soft and weak and vulnerable she was. His desperation made it hard for him to think straight, heart thumping in his neck. He couldn't work out what to do next and felt sick. He arrived at the end of the path but no-one was there and no tracks had been left. The baby wouldn't last long in the cold. He couldn't bear to think of her exposed to the wet and cold of the marsh; it didn't help to think these things; this required a calm head. He decided to run back and try a path that he knew went deeper though marsh. He didn't stop when he came to the hut; just shook his head as Marisa watched him run past. This section of the marsh was so wet he struggled to run as his feet sank down. He didn't think she'd gone along this path - the ground was clear and the reeds had not been touched but he couldn't think what else to do. He couldn't think where to go next so carried on.

Isaac stopped to catch his breath. His clothes were soaked and his eyes sore from crying. He tried to calm down then stopped to wait for his breath to ease. He listened hard to hear her cry. He realised he should have done this from the start. He couldn't hear a thing though with the noise of the birds and the wind. The marsh was always loud with these sounds. Unless she was close, it would be hard to hear her crying. He'd never gone so far this way and it made no sense to go on but he couldn't go back to the hut with bad news so he pressed on through the heavy mud. He imagined Eve dead in a ditch or in the jaws of some beast. He was exhausted and this slowed him down, and all he could do was trudge on as

resignation took hold of him.

Eventually, the path ran out where it met the lake, but Isaac then saw his boat beyond the reeds. He stumbled through the mud and leaves to reach the mooring. He decided to use the boat now and rowed near to the shore, trying to see through the reeds for some sign of life but for a long time he found nothing. Only when he reached the creek, did he hear the sound. It was different to the rest of the sounds - although far off he was sure this one did not belong to be there. He carried on down to the stream at the end of creek and as he

approached the shore, the sound grew much clear. Isaac slowed down. He was confident now it was the cry of a baby. He arrived at the shore, tied the boat up and entered to the reeds once more. The bottom was soft and he sank to his waist but struggled on, and with each step, the sound grew more and more unmistakable.

Every few steps, he rested to try to work out where he was and where sound was coming from. Alongside this shore, the reeds were were high and he could see nothing more than a few feet and the cry seemed to move from place to place but he continued, covered in mud and soaked, and then saw a gap in the reeds. Waterlillies filled this gap and, as he pushed on, he found he was by the edge of a stagnant pool.

Although the cry was loud now, he couldn't see her or work out where to go next. The water was deep and this forced him to swim but this made it hard to hear the crying. Water was in his eyes but when he wiped them with his wet sleeve this only made things worse. He couldn't breathe he was so tense and the weed tangled on his face. Only then did he see the nest. The baby was there, looking down at him with a strange smile that showed no signs of harm or distress. Her expression looked calm as if she was sure he would come to rescue her. Isaac crawled out of the pool and took her in his arms. His daughter looked well but this made no sense. Another thing was wrong, the girl looking up at him did not have the right look in her eyes - it wasn't the same - although she was there it was cold and not the same. Anyway, Eve was safe beside him and he could take her home now. Behind the swans nest, he noticed there was a path through the reeds. He gathered swan down from the nest, carefully wrapped it round her cold, bare skin, held her in his arms and walked along the path. It wasn't one he knew - perhaps a deer path - it twisted and turned constantly and he didn't know where it went and feared he might get lost then he, suddenly, knew where he was - a willow tree and a thorn bush - he knew the willow tree was on the path to the lake. Isaac was near the hut - a few minutes from home.

When Marisa saw Eve, she let out a cry that was raw and seemed to come from

nowhere in this world. Isaac grinned as he ran up to her and put Eve in her outstretched arms. Marisa held her close and sobbed with joy but then he noticed a change in her face as if her tears of joy had failed and were turning to ones of grief. He asked her what was wrong but she did not answer. Isaac saw Eve's face turn grey as if all life had been extracted out of it and he feared once more that she was close the death. Marisa took her to the hut and made a fire to warm her up; then, as night gathered, they saw her slip in and out of the world, as if they had no more than a tenuous hold of her but then, at last, she seemed to find some peace and fell, quietly into a deep sleep. He explained where he'd found her and how overjoyed he was to have her back - the two of them by his side - truly blessed he was to have them there he said and these words became tears and he was too tired to know what else to say.

It didn't take long for Eve to get well and for each day to come and go and seem ordinary once more, if living by the side of a lake on their own, divorced from the world, hiding from their own past, could be called ordinary. It offered them a world of their own, and here they committed their own forms of love and sin; made their own form of heaven and hell, out of the black, wet earth. Sometimes they had nothing but roots to eat but then days came when a big haul of fish or good hunting allowed them to have a feast and sing old songs by the fire, but, even then, Isaac sensed things were wrong. He couldn't quite pin this down but he felt a transience in things as if they would not stay like this for long, as if he might be witnessing them for the last time - something had been lost or some kind of unspoken curse had come down on them, which he thought had come from Marisa's unease, worsened now by his own fears that cast their own spells, but whenever he asked her what was wrong, she'd tell him all was fine and her life was wonderful. Perhaps he should let go of these things, he thought, but felt their lives contained deep lies, secrets that had grown worse since the day they met. He believed she knew much more than she chose to say but he dared not ask her more, anxious that if he tried to force it out of her, she might turn her back and run away. Neither of them liked to talk of these things, and life went on but it was not the enjoyable life he'd hoped they'd share. Isaac feared that she'd leave him one day. Nothing would be said but he'd come back to the hut and she'd be missing. He also knew that if she left him this way, she'd take Eve, and he'd never find them.

Isaac noticed that when Eve slept, her eyes flicked from side to side as if disturbed by dark dreams and, sitting by her bed, he observed her lay down in some unfathomable place. He imagined this place was dark and the marsh was gathering around her in a great rush of life and she was lost in its stems and tendrils that dragged her down to the black earth. It gathered her fears and he desperately wanted to find some way to reach out to her and save her but she was

entirely alone and he could not get there. The only thing he could do was watch the constant shifts of the skin on her eyes as they tried to hold the dreams in place, as every muscle in her face grew tense. Isaac hoped that, when she learnt to talk, he'd uncover the truths of the pool but the chance to so did not come; returning one day he found her gone. Marisa looked up, unsure sure what was happening, thinking she was by her side but when she'd reached out she found nothing. Isaac rushed out of the hut but there was no sign of her and no footprints to show him where to go. Marisa looked at him and he could see her desperation more than her fear; almost as if she was in some state of grief or such sadness that she saw no hope. Isaac didn't know where to go, but, then a thought occurred to him. He recalled the thorn bush and the tree. Heavy rain was in the air; beckoning the storm. He couldn't find the path - a heavy growth of reeds masked the entrance. The heavens broke and hard rain came down and he heard a clap of thunder far off from the marsh. A lightning flash lit up the reeds. Isaac cut his forearms, as he pushed through the reeds and his feet sank down in the peat. No toddler would have the strength to come this way but he ran down the path regardless.

When Isaac found Eve on the swan's nest, she smiled at him as if she'd expected him to come. Picking her up, her breath was calm and strong. He noticed strands of weed in her hair and an eel crawled from her dress and slithered down her legs to make its way to the pool. The storm was, directly above them now, and the rain was cold, and gusts of wind rushed between the reeds and made them thrash from side to side as he pushed between them.

This happened again when Eve was two; again when she was three, and on each occasion, a storm had come to the marsh. Marisa had been by her side but she'd secretly wriggled out of her arms then found her way to the nest.

Isaac resolved not to let her out of his sight when a storm was near but couldn't be there all the time and storms were quick to rise in the fens as if gathering out of the wind and waves or the heat and cold, or will of the whisps ignited them or great flocks of birds dragged them out of the sky or they rose mysteriously from nowhere.

Isaac told Eve to stay at home when a storm came to the marsh; she could understand him now she was four years old. He also said the wind chased children like her and picked them up and threw them to the clouds and the thunder clapped its hands round them and crushed each one of them and each lightning flash was a soul on fire sent to hell. She cried when he told her these stories, but this, he hoped, would keep her at home.

Unfortunately, this failed to work. Arriving again at the nest, he found the girl hysterical, shouting strange words that made no sense. He was

anxious how frail she looked and he knew she might die from fear but didn't know how to help her. He carried her home once more, but this time Marisa didn't look pleased; she raged and spat at the girl for not doing what they'd said but then, seeing her so weak, withdrew with a look of resignation. Isaac could see, as Eve grew up to be a girl, how much she was like Marisa. It wasn't just the same green eyes or the same red hair - it was something in the way they looked at him - something he could not pin down - a distant look but a deep one, as if she seemed to know what he was thinking. He wondered if he should block the way to the pool but feared she'd find another place to go where he might not track her down.

Isaac, seeing a storm on the way, waited in the reeds near the nest. Eve didn't see him as she passed by or when she slipped in the pool and quietly swam out of sight. He followed her but it was hard to see anything between the weed, so he swam out to where it was clear but he couldn't find her there. Isaac turned back and he saw her on the nest. She was watching him, kneeling on the reeds. She appeared, once more, to be waiting for him. Isaac swam back and made his way to the nest and sat beside her. She didn't turn to look up at him and when he took her hand it felt fragile and cold. Isaac took her back to the hut and put her down on the bed. Marisa didn't seem to care this time. She didn't look up for a long time, then looked vacant. Isaac saw, for the first time, that she was sick as well; that the ordeal had put her at risk in some way, as if she shared the fate of her daughter.

Isaac waited for weeks for the next storm to come and this turned out to be most ferocious storm he'd seen in his life; the sky black; conditions muggy and hot; an oppressive tension in the air that begged to crack and set off sparks. He scrambled to the swan's nest to be the first there, jumped in the pool and hid amongst the reeds. A torrential rain lashed down, so hard it roared, then lightning flashed in the sky to the west and this soon reached the marsh. The thunder was so loud, he could feel its shock wave swell through his chest. Eve then appeared, soaking wet, yellow dress stuck on her skin. He shouted but she did not respond. She approached the pool, dived past him then swam through the pool; the water was too dark to see and his eyes filled with the shapes of plants and roots that coalesced around the half light and blocked his way. Between this, he saw her and struggled to get to her, but, before he reached her, she was gone. He rose out of the water to breathe and looked out but she was not in sight so he swam down deep, reaching out with his hands but all he could find were roots and mud, but another flash then burst and filled the pool with sheer light so bright it hurt his eyes, blinding him at first but then, emerging from this flash, he saw Eve, left in the after-image, tangled in weeds where eels were by her arms and legs, and shadows swam with them; Isaac carried on this way and grabbed for her; he desperately needed to breathe so pushed but this time found he was trapped by a

confusing tangle of stems and had to scratch and tear at them to get to the air. The floating mass didn't yield and his lungs burned as he tore the stems with all his remaining strength but then a gap formed and he pressed his mouth to it and managed to suck in air and dived back down and felt eels on his skin and knew she couldn't be far from him now, but then, again, thunder rushed through the pool, then another flash burst in his eyes, and Eve was there once more but she was entirely still as if drowned but still he pushed on and tore at the stems and leaves, separating them but then the next flash ripped through the pool and he was alongside her, so close he could see her eyes - empty as glass- but then he saw light returning to them. She reacted and raised her arm to reach out for him and he was conscious of strange sounds or some part of sound - missing words or ones decided upon but not yet said - ghost words that ran from side to side or fell down or opened and closed on what they hoped to say or could not say and pushed and pulled against him and within in these ghosts words was a deep shame and fear but this didn't stop him so they swam off with the fish or the wake of the fish, as the next lightning flash burst out then rushed down and he had to push up once more for another breath and swam down and tried to grab hold of her arm but he couldn't do so when the eels turned and pecked his eyes and the half words coalesced and laughed, and, pulling her hand, he could feel her weight and her resistance grow less and, although she was held, it gave him hope; so he continued to pull at the force that kept her there, then the next flash burst across her face and he saw there was fear in her eyes as if the half words had become cries for help - she thrashed her arms to get to the air and the eels crowded each side of her but she squeezed past them to cast off their skin; and although his lungs might burst, held her tight and pulled with all his might; every bit of strength he had left to force her free and pulled her through the next lightning flash as the wave of sound crashed through his ears but she was held again by a mass of eels that did not want to let go of her but she broke free from this slivering chaos and she moved up with him, and he rose now and spat the weeds and debris out of his mouth and grabbed the swan's nest and dragged himself out of the pool and pulled her with him.

Isaac coughed up green slime and choked on the foul taste. Eve's body was so limp and her eyes so blank, he couldn't tell if she was alive or dead but when he held her tight he knew she was not dead - not another carcass from the marsh that he'd found - yet; he often found them - birds and fish - always so light in his hands - detached and strange with all of their life drained out of them - - nothing like they were when they were not dead - it was nauseating to hold them - damp and cold - and the blood seeped downward to the side that was stuck to the ground. He didn't know why he was thinking this. He withdrew from her but as he did her lips moved; a breath so faint he wasn't sure it was there but then he saw her chest rise and a tremor moved in her eye and then she coughed slime out of her mouth. She

shuddered and the force of this ran down her legs. Eve looked up and a tear entered her eye then this tear grew and her chest shook and soon it was raw and irrepressible. Another eel slipped out of her dress as he held her tight and then one uncoiled from her hair.

Isaac knew from the look in her eyes that she was free now; it wasn't like the other times - she didn't seem out of reach - clearly with him now; recognition in her eyes, as if she'd seen him for the first time. Returning home, Marisa was by the fire. She looked up at him and smiled and then began to sob.

"Nobody comes back," she said then held his hand.

After his day, their life was theirs - a brutal, hard life but it was theirs - full of struggles and fights but these were theirs. Another baby came then one more. Others came to the marsh and chose to stay. The children were safe. The mysteries of the lake came to them and took hold of them and gave them joy and sustenance. It remained this way for a long long time; until this day in fact. It surrounds you now.

Just look

"Where did that come from," my daughter asked. "You've never told me that kind of story before".

I didn't know what to say, except that it came from a place of ghost words - stolen ones from that day from the mud and eels and all the wet things that do not belong to this world.