

Rings

‘I’m going for a walk. Want to come?’

‘No, you go ahead. I’m busy here. Don’t be long though, it gets dark early now the clocks have gone forward.’

‘Okay. Back soon.’

What a beautiful afternoon, I think, closing the door behind me as I start on my favourite walk. A short way along the road I find the familiar path which loops through the nearby woods. I follow a deer track into the dark pines, the shadows occasionally broken by oak and beech trees just turning to gold. Head down, trying to keep up my pace without tripping over stones and roots, I’m looking forward to getting out of the trees into the sunshine on the heather covered hilltop with its peaceful view over the village and the fields beyond.

At a turn in the path, the sun comes through the trees into a clearing and lights up a small circle of mushrooms by a recently fallen log. A fairy ring! I always knew these woods were magical and this confirms it. Stopping to sit on the log, I take in the low sun shining on the yellow leaves of the trees in the middle distance, and smoke from a bonfire in the next field curling toward me on the autumn breeze. Everything is bathed in golden light. I close my eyes and breathe deeply, enjoying the moment, wanting to hold onto it.

The smell of burning wood unexpectedly takes me back to the campfires of my childhood: roasting marshmallows on sticks during family holidays; telling spooky stories, singing silly songs with friends...

Thoughts of friends remind me of my university days, sitting on another log around another campfire, this time on Rockaway Beach in San Francisco. What great times those were. A whole gang of us – drinking beer together and enjoying each other’s company. Talking about everything – and nothing. Singing those same silly songs: ‘Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream...’

Then one friend stayed after the others had gone. We chatted for awhile when he reached into his backpack and pulled out a book: a small journal with beautiful leather tooling on the cover. A circle cut out of the leather revealed a colourful sketch of a unicorn in a forest, stopping beside a fairy ring.

‘For your writing,’ he said, handing it to me. ‘You should have somewhere special.’

Without speaking, I opened the book. Its pages were creamy white with three rings that

opened so you could add more when you filled it up. I've never opened the rings. The pages are still empty.

The sound of church bells breaks into my silent reverie. There must be a wedding in the village. I look down at the ring on my finger – set not with diamonds, but topaz. His birthstone. Smoky, golden like the campfire. Has it really been more than twenty years since those days?

The echo of the bells is fading away when a shrill ringtone disrupts the moment. I'd forgotten the phone in my pocket. When I see my own number, I answer.

'Where are you? It's getting dark.'

'Oh! Sorry. I took a longer path this time. I'll be home soon.'

'Okay. Take care. It can get tricky up there when the light goes.'

'I will. Bye. ...love you.' But he'd gone.

He's right, it is getting dark and the distant bonfire is starting to die down. I run my fingers along the rough bark of my log seat and smile at the fairy ring, thinking of the magic it has brought to my walk. As I stand to leave, the sunlight catches the dust dancing in the clearing, and falls on the end of the log.

Look how many rings are on this stump where I've been sitting. This tree was alive when those dreams began. Now it's dead.

Leaving the fairies to their dance, I turn to circle down the path and head back. I'm chilly now after sitting all that time, and hurry to try to warm up a little. The quiet shadows of the forest give way to the noisy road and I'm soon home; the golden light now coming through my own front windows. I open the door and enjoy the warmth of the log fire.

'I'm back,' I call to my husband – still busy in another room.

'Good,' he says, coming in and kissing my cheek. 'You're cold. I'll get you a hot drink.'

'Thanks,' I said, and wandered upstairs to see if I could find my journal.