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BIRNAM
WOOD

A Novel

BIRNAM WOOD



ELEANOR CATTON



FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

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for Steven Toussaint

I

The Korowai Pass had been closed since the end of the summer, when a spate of shallow earthquakes triggered a landslide that buried a stretch of the highway in rubble, killing five, and sending a long-haul transport truck over a precipice where it skimmed a power line, ploughed a channel down the mountainside, and then exploded on a viaduct below. It was weeks before the dead could be safely recovered and the extent of the damage properly assessed; by this time the temperature was dropping, and the days shortening fast. Nothing could be done before the spring. The road was cordoned off on either side of the mountains, and traffic diverted – to the west, around the far shores of Lake Korowai, and to the east, through a patchwork of farmland and across the braided rivers that flowed down over the plains towards the sea.

The town of Thorndike, located just north of the pass in the foothills of the Korowai ranges, was bounded on one side by the lake, and on the other by Korowai National Park. The closure of the pass created an effective cul-de-sac: cut off from the south, the town was now contained in all directions but one. Like much of small-town New Zealand, the local economy depended for the most part on the commerce of truckers and tourists passing through, and when the rescue teams and television crews finally packed up and drove away, many Thorndike residents reluctantly left with them. The cafés and trinket shops along the highway frontage began, one by one, to close; the petrol station reduced its hours; an apologetic sign appeared in the window of the visitor centre; and the former sheep station at the head of the valley, described by its real estate listing as the town's 'greatest-ever subdivision prospect', was quietly withdrawn from sale.

It was this last that caught the attention of Mira Bunting, aged twenty-nine, a horticulturalist by training, and the founder of an activist collective known among its members as Birnam Wood. Mira had never been to Thorndike, and she had neither the intention nor the means to purchase even the smallest patch of land there, but she had earmarked this particular listing when it had first appeared online some five or six months prior. Under an

alias, she had written to the realtor, registering her interest in the proposed development, and asking if any of the subdivided plots had sold.

The alias, June Crowther, was one of several that Mira had developed over time and maintained on rotation. Mrs Crowther was imaginary; she was also sixty-eight, retired, and profoundly deaf, for which reason she preferred to be contacted by email rather than by phone. She had a modest nest egg in shares and bonds that she wished to convert to real estate. A holiday home was what she had in mind, somewhere rural, which could be shared among her daughters while she was living and bequeathed to them after she was gone. The house must be new – after a lifetime of repairs and renovations, she was done with all of that – but it need not be purpose-built. A smart prefab would suit her fine, a cookie-cutter sort of place on a cookie-cutter sort of street, as long as the neighbours were not too close, and she was free to choose the colours. All this the farm at Thorndike might have promised; some four months after the landslide on the pass, however, Mrs Crowther received an email from the realtor explaining that owing to the change in circumstances, his client had decided not to sell. It was possible the property would return to the market at a later date; in the meantime, he wondered if Mrs Crowther might be interested in another of his listings nearby – he attached a link – and wished her all the best on her house-hunting journey.

Mira read the email twice, wrote a courteous but non-committal reply, and then logged out of the fake account and called up a map of Thorndike in her browser. The farm, situated in the south-east corner of the valley, was roughly trapezoidal in shape, much narrower at the bottom of the hill than at the top, where it backed on to national park land. One hundred and fifty-three hectares, she remembered from the realtor's listing, with a perimeter of perhaps eight or ten kilometres. It was not far from the site of the landslide; she switched to satellite view to check, but the image had not yet been updated. The road over the pass still wound smooth and glittering, tacking back and forth as it ascended, interrupted here and there by the grey gleam of sunlight glancing off the roofs of trucks and cars. It occurred to Mira that the image might have been captured mere moments before the quakes: the motorists pictured might now be dead. She told herself this experimentally, as if testing for a pulse; it was a private habit, formed in girlhood, to berate herself with morbid hypotheticals. Today she could not muster pity, so as

penance she compelled herself to imagine being crushed and suffocated, holding the thought in her mind's eye for several seconds before exhaling and turning back to the map.

A windbreak of arrowy poplars threw a toothy shadow over the driveway and up to the house, which was set far back from the road – high enough, she figured, to clear the height of the trees along the lakefront and so command a view across the water. Above the house was a kind of natural terrace, formed by the seam of limestone that divided the more wooded upper paddocks from the open pasture that adjoined the road. Mira enlarged the image and scanned the paddocks one by one. They were all empty. A rutted track showed the owner's habitual route around the property, and from the angled shadows in the dirt she could see that several gates were standing open. The realtor had not disclosed his client's name, but when she typed the address into a separate tab, a news article came up at once.

Mr Owen Darvish, of 1606 Korowai Pass Road, Thorndike, South Canterbury, had recently made headline news. He had been named in the Queen's Birthday Honours List and was shortly to be created Knight Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit, for services to conservation.

Intrigued, Mira forgot about the map for the moment, and read on.

Chivalric titles had been abolished in New Zealand in the year 2000, only to be reinstated nine years later by a moneyed politician desirous of a knighthood of his own. It was embarrassing whichever way one felt about it: the monarchists could not celebrate, as the resurrection only proved the Crown could be politically compelled, and the republicans could not protest, because to do so would be to suggest that there was something sacred about a monarchic code of chivalry in the first place, that ought to be beyond a common politician's reach. Both parties felt disgruntled, and both received the twice-yearly Honours Lists with the same peevish cynicism, concluding, jointly, that all the knighted intellectuals were sell-outs, and all the knighted businessmen were bribes. Owen Darvish, it seemed, was a rare exception. The news of his elevation had come so soon after the landslide on the pass as to give the impression that the knighthood had been offered as a kind of consolation to the Korowai region at large, and *that* was a kind of chivalry with which neither monarchists nor republicans were prepared to find fault. Darvish had even offered up his house to Search & Rescue to use as their

base of operations in the days after the disaster. 'I take my hat off to those guys,' was all he said about it. 'They're heroes, they really are.'

Mira read on.

She learned that Darvish had begun his working life forty years ago at the age of seventeen, clearing his neighbours' fields of rabbits at a rate of a dollar a head. He was a very good shot, and his two most treasured possessions, both presents from his father, were his .22 air rifle and his skinning knife, which had a fixed blade and a boxwood handle, and which he'd since had mounted, together with the rifle, in a special presentation case in his front room. In those early days, he'd skinned the carcasses himself and sold the dressed meat as pet food to kennels and dog owners nearby. The pelts had been a tougher prospect. Eventually he'd found a scour plant willing to take them, in batches, to process into felt; but as the plant had insisted on invoicing, Darvish, now aged nineteen, had taken the decision to incorporate. He'd hired an accountant, leased an answer-phone service, and bought a tin of yellow paint from the hardware store. On the doors of his truck he'd stencilled the words *Darvish Pest Control*.

As the son of a slaughterhouse worker, Darvish knew first-hand that large numbers of healthy livestock had to be prematurely butchered each year on account of a broken ankle or a broken leg. Rabbit warrens laid waste to good pasture; they were also an introduced species, along with possums, rats, and stoats, which shared their taste for the shoots of native plants and the eggs of native birds. The extermination of these pests was one of the few instances of common ground between conservationists and industrial farmers in New Zealand, and Darvish, as he expanded operations, steered a middle course, courting clients on both the left and the right. Mira read that over its lifetime Darvish Pest Control had held contracts with all of New Zealand's major agricultural industries, as well as with iwi and rūnanga, town councils, and departments of state; but it was a recent partnership with the American technology corporation Autonomo, included on the S&P 500 Index, that Darvish hoped would be his crowning achievement. Autonomo, from what Mira could gather, was a manufacturer of drones, and with its help Darvish Pest Control had just embarked upon an ambitious conservation project aimed at monitoring native wildlife populations that were under threat. It was early days, Darvish said modestly, but he believed the scheme had the

potential to rescue a number of endemic species from near extinction – including, he dearly hoped, the critically endangered orange-fronted parakeet, which he confessed was his favourite bird.

Mira was scowling. It annoyed her, almost as a matter of principle, that anyone of this man's age, race, gender, wealth, and associated privilege should have used his power – allegedly – for good, should have built his business – allegedly – up from the ground, from nothing, and should possess – allegedly – the very kind of rural authenticity that she herself most envied and pursued. Even more annoying was the fact that she had never heard of the orange-fronted parakeet, which she now searched for, still scowling, in a separate tab. Like all self-mythologising rebels, Mira preferred enemies to rivals, and often turned her rivals into enemies, the better to disdain them as secret agents of the status quo. But because this was not a conscious habit, she experienced only a vague feeling of righteous defiance as, unable to dismiss Owen Darvish, she told herself instead that she disliked him.

The picture on the government website showed a clean-shaven, open-collared man of middle age, with a wide, capable mouth, a strong jaw, and an amused expression; the citation below it praised qualities of ingenuity, tenacity, and fair-minded pragmatism, casting him as a perfect exemplar of what New Zealanders flattered themselves to describe as the national temperament. In interviews, he played expertly to type, fielding questions in a manner that was bluff and self-effacing, and asserting, when asked about his politics, that he had none at all. Mira could not find a single article dispraising him. He presented as a patriot – in other words, as a staunch, self-sufficient, adamantly informal man, doting in his enthusiasms, nostalgic in his routines, and innately suspicious of all partisan displays – though tolerant, perhaps, of a little recreational churchgoing in his wife.

She – Jill, soon to be Lady Darvish – looked a little like Mira's mother: slim and rangy, with a tanned complexion and silver hair in a pixie cut. She had posed for the local paper with her arm around her husband's waist, pulling back to grin at him admiringly, her other hand resting on the broad muscle of his chest. 'The Knight Is Ours' ran the delirious headline, though the reporter had taken pains to qualify that it was Jill, and not the soon-to-be Sir Owen, who was the true Thorndike native: the farm had been her childhood home, bequeathed on the death of her father five years prior. The

point was minor, but Darvish clearly knew his country well enough not to minimise it further. He performed the necessary reassurances that Thorndike was without question the best place he'd ever lived; extolled the many holidays and baling seasons that had brought them back here, over the years; made no mention of their plans to subdivide the property; and confessed, in a play of chagrin, that his wife's old man was surely laughing at him somewhere, for, despite his best efforts, the farm could not yet be declared pest-free. In fact – deftly steering the interview back to its proper subject – he had been shooting rabbits in the upper paddocks when he had received the call from the office of the governor-general informing him of his impending change of state.

'Bloody ruined my shot,' he told the paper. 'Phone went off, I jumped a mile. I was so mad I almost didn't answer it.'

'And bunny got away,' his wife put in.

'So she owes me a dollar.'

'The Queen?'

'The Queen herself. She owes me a dollar, a carcass, and a pelt.'

Mira had found what she was looking for. Her knee had started to bounce underneath the table, and she felt excitement rising in her chest. Returning to the government website, she read that the investiture of Owen Darvish was to take place at Government House in Wellington in three weeks' time. She noted down the date, then closed her laptop, picked up her cycle helmet, and walked out of the library.

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Five minutes later the yellow circle labelled 'Mira' pulled out into the street and began traversing slowly north. Shelley Noakes reduced the scale of the map until her own circle, a gently pulsing blue, appeared at the edge of the screen, and watched the yellow disc advance imperceptibly upon the blue for almost thirty seconds before turning off the phone and throwing it, suddenly and childishly, into the pile of laundry at the end of her bed. Mira would not be home for half an hour at least, but already Shelley's heart was beating fast and the skin of her throat and breast had mottled. She stood up, breathing deeply, and tempted herself with the thought that perhaps today was not the day to broach the subject after all ... but then she heard Mira's voice in her

head telling her that there was a voice in her head, and that the voice was her mother's.

Shelley's mother was one of the pet topics of conversation at Birnam Wood, having estranged herself to Mira early in their acquaintance by referring to the collective as a 'hobby', and to her daughter's involvement with it as a 'phase'. Mira had taken such instant and lasting umbrage at these remarks that Shelley had begun to fear there must be something wrong with her, that she herself had taken no offence at all; and although she had now given more than four and a half years to Birnam Wood, she did not consider this to be a reproof of her mother's early lack of faith in her, for she felt more surprised than anyone that she had stuck it out so long. Mira could not understand this. She was not given to casual self-deprecation, and was convinced that Shelley had been either bullied or brainwashed out of a more natural self-belief; the irony, of course – which Shelley had only fully grasped in retrospect – was that a gently deprecating sense of humour was actually one of the things that Shelley most liked about herself, and one of the things, it had to be said, that she most loved about her mother.

Mrs Noakes was a recruitment consultant who believed that the world's population could be divided into those with a gift for sales and those with a gift for service; most people, she was fond of remarking, were employed against their type, and if they would only take a good honest look at themselves and determine into which of the two categories they fell, they might save the rest of us a lot of fuss and bother. When Mira had first heard this, she had laughed. Listing, with no small relish, all the ways that selling was a service, and all the ways that services were sold, she had dismissed the maxim as vapid neoliberal bullshit, adding, with careless perspicacity, that Mrs Noakes appeared to compete with her children in several arenas, but most particularly on the issue of job satisfaction, a hard-won prize for the women of her generation, and one that she was unwilling, perhaps, to share.

Shelley could recall it almost word for word. She had been twenty-one years old to Mira's twenty-four, and never in her life had she heard any adult criticised so openly and calmly, without any of the usual forms of obeisance – the ritual admission of the speaker's likely ignorance; the ritual deference to all opposing points of view – that for her were so thoroughly ingrained that they inhibited her thinking as severely as they did her speech. She had

sought out Mira's friendship with a fervour that approached infatuation, transforming herself, though she would not realise this until years later, into a more perfect image of the person that Mira had told her that she already was: more benighted, more repressed, and more continually in conflict with a mother whose every utterance, she came to discover, incarnated no less an enemy than the spectre of late capitalism itself. Cast virtually since birth in the role of the family peacemaker, and praised throughout her adolescence for having cost her parents not a single night of sleep, Shelley had lived for as long as she could remember in perpetual dread of being dislikeable – a fate even more terrible than being disliked, for it encompassed not only her relationships with others, but her private judgments of herself. It was only under Mira's influence that she learned, if not to overcome this terror, then at least to direct the blame for it elsewhere.

She returned to the pile of laundry and checked her phone again. The yellow circle had crossed the avenue that marked the border of the central city and was drawing level with a planted flag that on Shelley's map was labelled SITE FIFTEEN. It slowed as it approached the turn-off and seemed to be on the verge of stopping. 'I went already,' Shelley said aloud, and as if Mira had heard her, the circle seemed to change its mind, and carried on, picking up speed again. Shelley had a creepy feeling. She shut off the screen a second time and plugged the phone into the wall to charge, stabbing the cord into the socket with more force than was necessary, and willing herself not to touch it again before Mira got home – not even if she heard it buzzing.

Shelley had been deciding between a diploma in library information studies and a diploma in high-school teacher training when she had first encountered Mira planting seedlings in the dirt. She was only fifteen credits short of the three hundred and sixty needed to complete her bachelor's degree, majoring in English and specialising in twentieth-century genre fiction, for which she had accrued twenty-three thousand dollars in debt; but within a fortnight she had dropped her final paper, *Popular Teen Fantasy and its Representation on Film*, blighting her academic record with the first failing grade of her life, and placing both diplomas, for the time being at least, out of reach. Her mother could not comprehend it, and flouted her own dictum by prescribing a few months' work in the thankless world of retail to set her daughter back on a sensible path; she was unable to accept that

Birnam Wood might answer what she saw as Shelley's natural gift for service, for she could not see what higher purpose a frankly illegal scheme of trespassing and botanical vandalism could possibly hope to serve, either for Shelley or for anybody else. Or so she was imagined to believe. At Birnam Wood 'Shelley's mum' had become a kind of shorthand for the many evils of the baby-boomer generation, a despised cohort of hoarders and plunderers from which Mira's own parents, who had recently separated, always seemed mysteriously to be exempt.

(Nor was Shelley's dad of any interest to Mira as an adversary. He was a mortgage broker with an irritable disposition who was always, in the family parlance, 'in a rage' – an infirmity openly encouraged, as Mira pointed out, by his wife, who indeed devoted an unusual proportion of her daily conversation to reminding her husband of the many kinds of people in the world whom he disliked. That this list, which included vegans, slow walkers, loudmouths, ostentatious breast-feeders, people of indeterminate gender, buskers, bad drivers, and the unwashed, covered in one way or another the entire membership of Birnam Wood, Mira did not appear to find insulting. She saw Shelley's father as a creature of his wife's devising, not an autonomous adult, but a hapless pawn designed by Mrs Noakes for the solitary purpose of throwing her own, more vivid personality into greater relief – a plainly narcissistic exercise of which she, Mira, could not remotely see the appeal.)

Only years later had Shelley thought to place the long and penetrating conversations of the early months of their friendship in the context of Mira's parents' separation, which dated, she eventually learned, from the morning of the day that she and Mira had first met. From Mira's brief account of the scene – it had taken place over breakfast, her father standing behind her mother's chair and massaging her shoulders tenderly as she relayed the news – it would seem that her parents had arrived at their decision so amicably and mutually, and with such happy consciousness both of the wonderful years they'd spent together and of the exciting possibilities that now lay ahead, as to make redundant any further examination of either the meaning of their choice or its potential consequences for anyone involved. Mira could talk about other people's relationships endlessly – she freely confessed that she liked nothing better – but when she talked about her own, it was always in a

tone of brisk, semi-exasperated satire that gave the impression she had exhausted the subject a long time ago and felt no impatience to revive it. For the first few months of their friendship, all that Shelley had known about Mira's parents had been that they were former hippies who had each stood for their local constituency – her mother for the Green Party, her father for Labour – in subsequent elections, without success; and that Mira's mother had a son from a previous relationship, Mira's half-brother Rufus, who was the lead guitarist in a touring rock band and whom Mira's father apparently adored. They sounded wonderfully enlightened, and the fact that Mira saw them only intermittently Shelley took as further proof of the psychological maturity that Mira found wanting in everybody else. She began to feel embarrassed that her own family convened each week for their parochial Sunday lunch, where invariably the conversation centred on, and was directed at, the dog – and she was even more embarrassed whenever Mira asked to tag along. Mira always behaved politely and engagingly at the table, praising the cooking and helping with the washing-up; she barely mentioned Birnam Wood except to narrate the odd family-friendly anecdote in the humorous and confidential mode of speech that she always used when speaking to adults. But to Shelley the occasions were unbearable, every detail an appalling indictment of her family's mediocrity, every word spoken an appalling desecration of Mira's deeply held beliefs. She was still too much in Mira's thrall to suspect her of any emotion so ordinary as loneliness, or so shallow as envy; and it was a relief, walking home, to return to the central theme of their friendship by cataloguing, freshly, all the many ways in which Shelley's mother was in need of reform.

If Mrs Noakes knew how unsparingly she was anatomised, then she possessed more fortitude of character than either Mira or her daughter ever diagnosed, for despite her initial resistance to Shelley's sudden change of course, and despite her frequent sharing of career vacancy advertisements 'just to give you a sense of what's out there', Mrs Noakes had really come around to Birnam Wood; in fact, it pained Shelley to admit, when her mother spoke about it now, it was with real pride and admiration. The political rout of 2016 had brought with it a new mood of deference towards the radically unforeseen. Around the globe, forecasters had been chastened and experts maligned; in their place had come the disruptors, the technological

imperialists, the metadata millenarians and stokers of popular feeling who had managed, invisibly and hitherto impossibly, to manufacture the authentic, the world's most influential brand. A new vocabulary had come into force: Birnam Wood was now a start-up, a pop-up, the brainchild of 'creatives'; it was organic, it was local; it was a bit like Uber; it was a bit like Airbnb. In this new, perpetually unsettled climate, Shelley's defection from the conventional economy had gained, she knew, a kind of retroactive valour, and even Mira – seditious, independent-minded Mira – suddenly seemed to be just the sort of trendy big-talking renegade one could imagine being contracted by the government as a black-ops adviser, writing inflammatory blogs and newspaper columns that defended unorthodox opinions and debated the right to free speech. Agitation had lost its juvenile cast: it had been made urgent again, righteous again, necessary again. An aura of prescience now permeated Birnam Wood.

And Shelley wanted out. Out of the group; out of the suffocating moral censure, the pretended fellow feeling, the constant obligatory thrift; out of financial peril; out of the flat; out of her relationship with Mira, which was not romantic in any physical sense, but which had somehow come to feel both exclusive and proprietary; and above all, out of her role as the sensible, dependable, predictable sidekick, never quite as rebellious as Mira, never quite as free-thinking, never – even when they acted together – quite as brave. She wanted out with a force of feeling that was as abrupt and absolute as when she had first known she wanted in, and when she probed the conviction, she found that she could not explain the reason for her disenchantment any more clearly than she could explain what had so powerfully attracted her to Birnam Wood in the first place – and even more: she found that she did not *want* to explain it, did not want to understand it, did not want to subject to scrutiny that awful buried certainty that whatever she did or said, however she acted, whatever life she chose, she would always be wrong, ill-intended, ill-prepared, and incomplete. On a dark and shameful level of her consciousness Shelley knew that the drastic course corrections in her life – her *phases*, to use the word that Mira so deplored – did not owe to any sudden clarities of vision or vocation, but to this smothered and ever-present sense of dread. She had tried to escape it by joining Birnam Wood, and she was trying to escape it now, but she would

never escape it, because she could not feel the difference, could not understand the difference, between running towards something, and running away.

Her phone buzzed, and she looked over to read the notification that had lit the screen, craning from where she stood so as not to break her promise not to touch it. The message was a promotional email from a hotel where she had once logged on to the lobby WiFi. *Last Chance to Save!* read the subject line. Shelley's heartbeat had surged again. Miserably, she put her hand to her throat to quell the pounding and stared at the device until the screen went dark and the image was replaced by a hash of oily streaks and fingerprints marking all the places she had scrolled and tapped and liked and pinned and maximised and minimised and forwarded and binned and sent.

To break up with a friend was difficult enough, but she and Mira shared far more, and had committed far more, than ordinary friends, and for all that Shelley had tried to reassure herself that she desired nothing more exotic or exceptional than an independent income, a chance at self-fulfilment, and a change of scene, she knew – and she felt sick even to acknowledge it – that Birnam Wood would likely not survive without her. After five years of operation the collective was still nowhere near the point of self-sufficiency that they jokingly referred to as 'breaking good'; without her contributions, that dream would recede even further. Mira would have to take over the accounting and schedule planning, fields in which she was almost comically unskilled. She would have to find a new flatmate, and possibly a new flat. She would have to train Shelley's replacement, not just over months, but over years, for each season brought its unique challenges and opportunities, and each crop behaved in a different way – and all of this, Shelley thought in disgusted outrage against herself, all of this would take up time that Mira did not have to spare. The project would be forced to downscale, members would lose interest and disband, and Mira's ambitions would be crushed. Feeling despicably, preposterously selfish, Shelley went outside to turn the compost heap and rehearse what she was going to say.

Officially the group cultivated eighteen plots of land around the city, some in the gardens of care homes and preschools, one bordering the car park of a surgery and dental practice, and most in the yards of rented student flats. In exchange for access to their space and use of their mains water, the

hosts received half the yield of every crop; the rest of the harvest went to the members, either to consume among themselves or to pack in boxes to give to the needy or to sell on the side of the road beneath a sign that claimed, with some creative licence, that the produce was home-grown. In accordance with their charter, they spent any income they earned only on seeds, soil, and whatever equipment could not be bartered or salvaged from the tip. Nobody received wages, and all assets were commonly held; membership, as a result, was almost entirely a part-time affair, and even Mira, who stayed perpetually enrolled at university in order to draw down the student allowance and yearly bursary for course-related costs, was occasionally obliged to seek temporary employment.

Several times Shelley had raised the possibility of launching a subscription service – a monthly box of produce, collated from all their growing sites and delivered door to door – so as to afford the group a little more stability in planning, but despite general interest it had never come to pass. The problem was not just that they had never quite reached that point of critical mass where their income would finally exceed their many costs and liabilities; it was that breaking good, for Mira at least, had always meant more than simply breaking even. Her ambition for Birnam Wood was nothing less than radical, widespread, and lasting social change, which would be entirely achievable, she was convinced, if only people could be made to see how much fertile land was going begging, all around them, every day – and how much more could be accomplished in the world if everybody simply pooled their knowledge and resources – and how arbitrary and absurdly prejudicial the entire concept of land ownership, when divorced from use or habitation, really was! The difficulty, of course, was in knowing whether it was better to raise public consciousness through protest, and risk putting off those very people who were yet to be converted to the cause, or to risk accusations of hypocrisy and try to change the system from within – and here Mira never really gave a settled answer. Temperamentally, two factions existed within Birnam Wood: the ideologues, who were combative and self-conscious, and who cherished revolutionary aims; and the do-gooders, who were more reliably hard-working, but who were also, in a way, more hard work, being more fixated than the ideologues on the ways in which any breaches of protocol ought to be policed. Mira didn't fall wholly into either

contingent, but the fact that the ideological faction had dwindled over the years was a source of great shame and consternation to her, and sometimes Shelley wondered if her patent lack of interest in the financial viability of Birnam Wood was her way of reassuring herself, even unconsciously, that she had not sold out.

Mira had a peculiar relationship with money. She was uninterested in profit and at the same time obsessed by growth, and she opposed most mainstream economic policy not only on moral terms, but also on the grounds that it was imaginatively limiting. Unusually for someone of her politics, she was untouched by depression; her convictions were of the sort that required a sparring partner, rather than of the sort that required a cure. She could be impulsively, even alarmingly, generous, and never seemed to second-guess (as Shelley did) the things she sold or gave away; but she was also wildly inconsistent. That the university, for example, had never once made contact to ask the reason for her continued non-attendance she saw as proof of a rapacious business model that in her opinion had so utterly debauched a university's fundamental reasons for existence as to justify almost any act of civil disobedience against it; but that she herself had effectively come to treat that institution not as a hallowed place of learning, but as a financial instrument, she considered to be merely fitting. She was untroubled, or at least claimed to be untroubled, that her student record showed only failures for the last three years; and although her student loan was now in excess of a hundred thousand dollars, she avowed that the debt did not remotely worry her, because she had no intention of ever paying it back.

In any case, a great deal of what they needed could be got for free – if not from the natural world, then by raiding skips and recycling bins, by making collections of unwanted household junk, and simply by asking for donations. Shelley had learned from Mira the particular clairvoyance of the scavenger, whereby discarded items now appeared to her only in the form of something else. Old window screens were shade cloth; flattened cardboard and carpet offcuts were weed matting; plastic bottles, when sliced in half, became little cloches to fit over seedlings to keep them warm. Any receptacle could be a seed tray, and anything reflective could be propped against it to maximise the light. She had discovered over the years that the more peculiar her requests,

the more eager people seemed to meet them: clippings from hair salons for slug repellent; old tights to fit over the heads of cabbages and cauliflowers to protect them from pests; wool to drape cat's-cradle over plantings to deter the birds. Every windowsill of the tiny flat that she and Mira shared was occupied by rows and rows of seedlings, and they recorded each successive planting in the open-source folder shared among the members, that kept track of all the interlocking schedules of weeding, watering, and cultivation, advertised what jobs needed doing, recorded where tools were being stored, and disclosed how any income had been spent.

That was the official face of Birnam Wood, the one they wore when recruiting members and soliciting prospective hosts; in truth, however, a great deal of what they harvested had been planted without permission on public or unattended lands. They chose hardy perennials, fast-growing annuals, or – if the ground was tilled enough – root crops that might from a distance be confused for weeds, and sowed them along verges and fence lines, beside motorway off-ramps, inside demolition sites, and in junkyards filled with abandoned cars. To avoid detection, they tended these guerrilla plantings in the very early morning, or, when in daylight, wearing high-vis, to give the appearance of an authenticated scheme. Water posed their biggest challenge, being too heavy to transport in any volume. A twenty-litre water-cooler bottle strapped to the back of a bicycle was too memorable a sight to risk with any regularity, and although they had experimented with drip irrigators fashioned out of finely perforated plastic vessels, these also had the disadvantage of drawing the eye. They had better luck collecting rainwater, dredging ponds and rivers, and tapping private spigots and irrigation booms, where, in the event that they were apprehended, they took care never to identify themselves – or Birnam Wood – by their real names.

Shelley was not a natural liar, and no matter how minimally or justifiably they trespassed, she could never fully shake the dread of being caught. This was rare, but when it happened, all of Mira's reasonings – that they were only reaping what they themselves had sown; that they were giving to the soil, and to the air, at least as much as they were taking from it; that a good proportion of their harvest was destined for the needy; and – in anarchistic moments – that, after all, the landowners had committed theft on a far greater scale, simply by virtue of being landowners – deserted her, and she became

too mortified even to speak; it would fall to one of the other members to deploy one of several plausible fictions they had devised in order to be able to stall an inquisitor for long enough that they could get away.

And they did more than trespass. Their plantings occasionally choked out local competition, or became so prolific as to be expensive to remove; sometimes, they returned to a site to find it had been doused in weedkiller or burned. They took cuttings from suburban gardens, leaf litter out of public parks, and manure from farmland. Mira had stolen scions from commercial apple orchards – budding whips of Braeburn and Royal Gala that she grafted to the stocks of sour crab-apple trees – and equipment out of unlocked garden sheds, though only, she insisted, in wealthy neighbourhoods, and only those tools that did not seem to be in frequent use. But she prized her freedom too highly ever to risk it very far, and she was careful to conceal any patently criminal activity from the wider membership of Birnam Wood, whose good opinion she was anxious to retain. That, Shelley thought, as she forked the compost and released the sweet vegetal stink into the air, had been her own most valuable contribution to the group, over the years; through the sheer unlikelihood of her allegiance, she gave Mira the only kind of credibility she lacked: the ordinary. In playing the supporting role not as a disciple or a fanatic, but as a foil, she not only tempered Mira's image, she ensured – she had ensured – that the hidden face of Birnam Wood stayed underground.

She heard a crunch of gravel behind her and turned in surprise, for even with a tailwind Mira could not possibly have made it home so soon. But the person coming down the driveway was a tanned, bearded man of around thirty, slightly round-shouldered, his long hair swept back from his forehead and his thumbs tucked under the straps of his backpack. He was wearing a tartan scarf and a misshapen woollen coat, both of which looked emphatically second-hand.

'Hi,' he said. 'I'm looking for Mira? Bunting?'

Shelley stared at him. 'Tony?'

'Oh shit,' he said.

He was shorter than she remembered, and his tan made his blue eyes seem bluer.

'Shelley,' she reminded him, 'Shelley Noakes.'

‘God,’ he said. ‘I’m really sorry. I guess it’s been a while.’

But his face was flushed: it was plain that he still did not recognise her, and that he was now desperately searching his memory for even the smallest piece of information about her, because the name hadn’t helped. To prompt him, Shelley said, ‘You left right after I joined up’ – kindly, for in fact they had overlapped by several months. ‘Few years ago now – yeah, God. You were headed overseas.’

‘That’s it,’ he said, looking hunted. ‘I only just got back.’

‘It was a Teach Abroad-type thing, wasn’t it? Somewhere in South America?’

His blush intensified. ‘Mexico,’ he said. ‘Technically North. But yeah. Pretty great. Thought I’d never come home, actually.’

‘I bet.’

He glanced at the house, still flushed. ‘It’s weird to be back. Everything’s the same and everything’s different, you know?’

‘I bet,’ Shelley said again.

‘This looks amazing though.’ He made a gesture that incorporated the compost heap, the polytunnels, and the potting bench. ‘I heard it’s all still going strong?’

‘Yeah,’ she said, looking around as well. ‘Santa’s workshop.’

‘Exactly,’ he said, and laughed. He looked relieved. ‘You live with Mira?’

‘Yeah,’ Shelley said. ‘I did back then, as well. We moved into the Hansons Lane flat just before you left. About a month before.’

There was a slight pause.

‘I remember your leaving party was pretty wild,’ she said.

‘Hey,’ he said. ‘Look. I’m really sorry—’

‘Nah,’ she said, waving him away. ‘I’m just making you feel bad.’

‘Well, if I can’t – I mean, clearly I was a massive dick back then.’

‘Steady on,’ she said. ‘Bigger than average maybe. I wouldn’t have said massive.’

‘Oh, Jesus,’ he said, putting his hands on his head. ‘Okay. You’re messing with me.’

She grinned at him. ‘And didn’t I lend you some money? Like, quite a bit of money? Yeah, you know, I think I did. And you never paid me back.’

Now he was smiling too. ‘You’re really enjoying this, aren’t you?’

‘It’s a very powerful position,’ Shelley said. ‘I don’t want to waste it.’

She almost didn’t recognise herself. The adrenaline she had built up in rehearsing for her confrontation with Mira was allowing her to speak and act in ways that were utterly unlike her; she felt at once both dangerously reckless and dangerously calm. The normal Shelley would have been horrified on his behalf, would have apologised for being so thoroughly forgettable, would have reassured him that she had no expectation whatsoever of his remembering anything about her, since it was so long ago, and their friendship had been so fleeting, and those days were such a blur. The normal Shelley would have teased him, in a tone of sisterly indulgence, that back then he had been so patently in love with Mira – and everyone had known it – that it was only natural that his memory would be distorted; of course, it would make perfect sense if the only thing he could remember from that time was her. In the spirit of their shared affections, and to put him even further at ease, the normal Shelley might even have confided that although she shouldn’t really be the one to tell him this, for Mira, he had always been the one who got away.

But she did not feel normal. A solution had occurred to her, an exit strategy so clean and absolute that it was almost bloodless. She would sleep with Tony. She would sleep with Tony, and she would confess what she had done to Mira, and Mira would not be able to forgive her. There would be no need for any confrontation, no need for apologies and tearful explanations and long arguments late into the night. There would be nothing to say. There would be only the fact of her betrayal, which Mira would not be able to forgive; and whether Shelley would then leave Birnam Wood of her own volition or because Mira demanded it would scarcely matter. She would sleep with Tony, and after that, leaving would not be something she was asking for, but something she had already done.

‘Is she home?’ Tony said. ‘I didn’t call ahead or anything.’

‘She’ll be out for another couple of hours,’ Shelley said, the lie coming easily: she didn’t break eye contact; she didn’t blush. ‘Hey,’ she added, naturally, as if the thought had just occurred to her, ‘do you want to go somewhere and get a drink?’

He hesitated, but it was clear that he owed it to her, and he could hardly say that he was otherwise engaged. In her new and preternatural confidence