

THE
HAUNTING
OF FORTUNE
FARM

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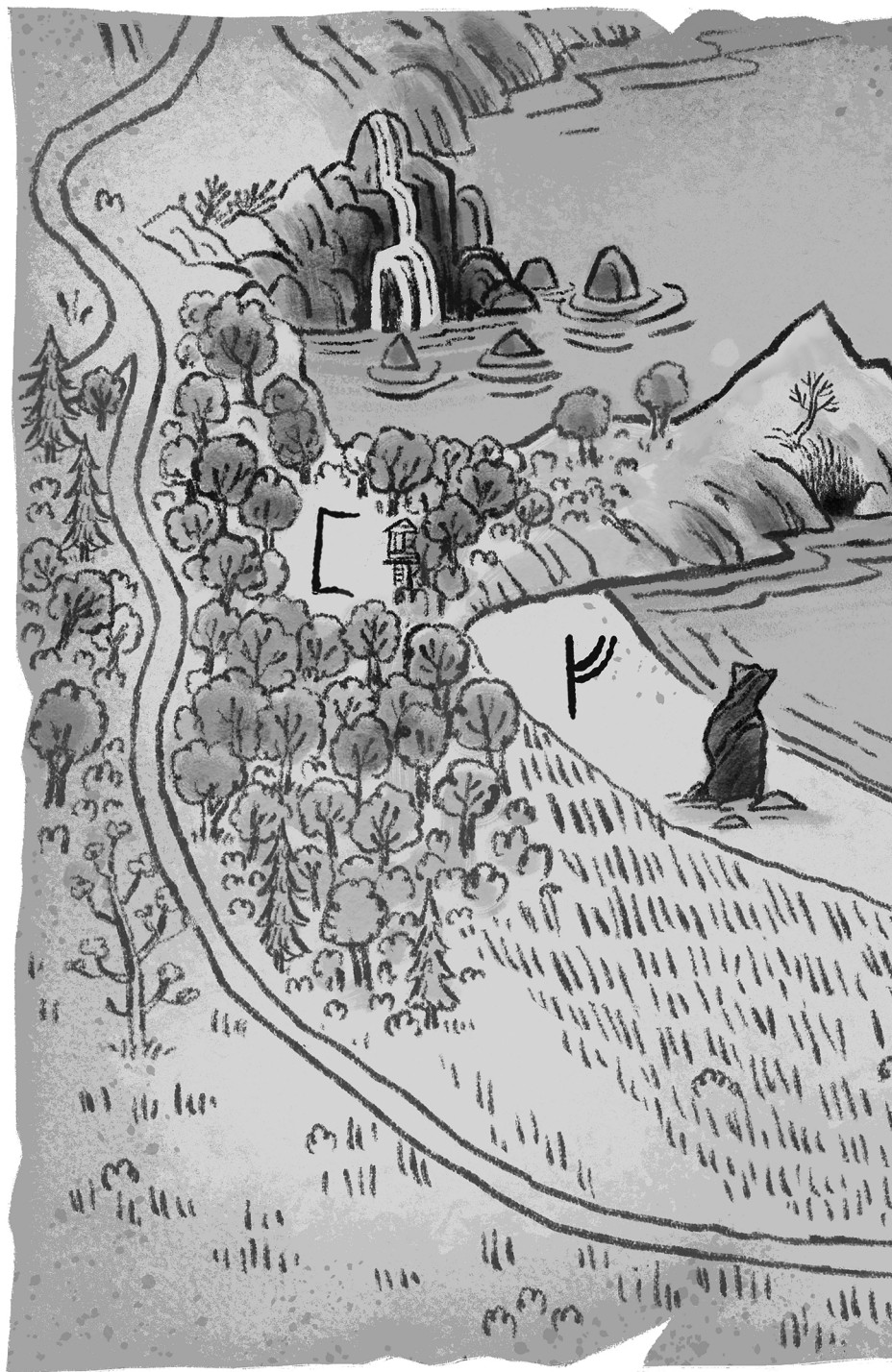
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*I have been lonely for such a very long time
The years turn so fast and so slow it all blurs into one
so many winters
so many springs
so many summers
and now it is autumn ... again
... again ... again ...*

*A skein of geese passes in the pale sky
when they see me they honk their hellos
The birds know that I am still here
I watch the geese vanish into the autumn sky
and I try to remember
the days the weeks the months the seasons
when I too was alive*

*So long ago
So very long ago*



SILENT VALLEY



Our old car turns off the narrow mountain road on to an even thinner lane and I stare out the window at the autumn emptiness. The engine makes a grinding noise as the lane gets steeper; I slip into a lovely daydream of the car breaking down and us having to get towed on a rescue van all the way back to Bristol and me spending half-term doing fun things with Cooper and Nizrana and all my friends at home, rather than being stuck over here in Ireland, visiting my long-lost grandma, in the middle of absolutely empty nowhere.

But we don't break down. Our car moans and groans and climbs the lane that snakes up and up and up until we're so high that we're actually in the clouds and the road ahead has practically vanished – it's white and misty like we're driving through milk.

'Don't drive too near the edge, Mummy!' pipes up

my little brother from the back seat.

'I'll do my best, Pip,' says Mum. Her fists are tight on the steering wheel and I can see the little flicker of her pulse in the vein on the back of her hand. She looks so tired and tense that even though she's the grown-up and I'm only twelve, it makes me want to look after her almost.

'Don't worry, Mum – we're nearly at the top of the mountain,' I say in the cheeriest voice I can find, as I squint into the white uncertainty.

'You don't actually know that, Edie!' declares Pip. 'It could still be lots and lots of miles away. We might actually be lost because we haven't been to see Lolly for ages and ages and ages so Mummy might not really even remember the way to Fortune Farm and it's so foggy the road might go right off a cliff and—'

I see Mum's throat do a swallow. I turn to Pip and give him a *shut up* look.

'What?' says Pip.

The car engine makes an even more horrible crunching sound as we turn another tight bend and just as we're picking up speed again Mum slams on the brakes and we all jolt forward.

A ghostly grey shape looms in front of us, through the mist. 'What is it?' I whisper.

Mum inches the car onwards.

'It's a sheep! It's actually a sheep!' shouts Pip,

bouncing up and down like it's the most exciting thing on earth. I guess when you're six, pretty much *everything* seems like the most exciting thing on earth!

The sheep peers at us through the mist for a few seconds, then goes back to eating a tuft of grass growing right in the middle of the lane. Mum sighs and puts the handbrake on; we wait while the sheep nibbles.

'Ooooooh!' squeals Pip, pressing his nose to the window. 'It's like we're on a real-life safari!'

Mum laughs then. 'It doesn't take much to keep our Pip happy, does it, Edie?' She smiles at me, like we're a team, and I smile too – my heart feels warmer to see the twinkle come back to her eyes.

'Look, Mum.' I point to where I can just make out the dim outline of a tree. 'I think the fog's starting to clear!' And almost before the words are out of my mouth the mist swooshes away and the world appears, like opening a curtain. We're right at the top of the mountain and everything is impossibly green.

'So many sheeps!' breathes Pip in delight, wiping the window with his sleeve. 'Can I get out and say hello to one?'

'They're half wild, Pip.' Mum smiles wearily. 'They'll never let you near them.'

'Can I try, Mummy? Please? That one's looking right at me.'

‘They’re all looking right at you, Pip,’ I say, turning in my seat. ‘Because they’re HUNGRY!’ I lick my lips ominously.

Pip narrows his eyes. ‘That’s not true, Edie! I know sheeps don’t eat people – I’m not stupid.’

Mum sighs. ‘Oh, don’t bicker, you two. Listen, hop out and stretch your legs for five minutes. We’ve been on the road for hours and you both need to let off some steam before we get to Lolly’s house or you’ll drive me round the bend.’

‘You’ll actually drive us round the bend!’ giggles Pip, pointing gleefully at the wiggly-windy road ahead.

‘Ha ha! Very funny!’ says Mum. I roll my eyes, but I let myself smile a little smile too.

Pip puts on his favourite *I’m Bats About Bats!* cap and goes pootling off on his sheep safari. I grab my sketchbook and step into the gusty freshness; even the air tastes green. I scramble on to a big boulder and gaze out across the valley, full of mist, like a huge bowl of cloud soup.

I flip my sketchbook open to a brand-new page and, taking my pencil out of my ponytail, pull up my hood against the wind. I smooth the new page to stop it flapping and in the top corner I write today’s date, 28th October, then I add *Silent Valley*. It’s a pretty stupid name if you ask me. Even though there are no city noises

like back at home – no car engines, no builders’ drills, no squealing toddlers – this valley is not even slightly *silent*: I can hear the buffeting of the wind on my rain jacket, the moany *maaaaaas* of the sheep, and from somewhere in the misty sky a strange sound I can’t quite place – a kind of squeaky, honking noise.

The sound comes closer and the big shadowy shapes emerge through the mist; a flock of geese, flying together in a V shape, so close I hear their wingbeats.

‘Look at those geeses!’ shouts Pip, pointing.

With my pencil at top speed I sketch the geese, but within minutes they’re only specks in the pale sky.

Turning my gaze back down into Silent Valley, I gasp in surprise. The mist has drifted away and a whole hidden world has emerged from the gloom; I flip to the next page and start to sketch again – my picture is only pencil grey but what my eyes see is full of colour. Deep green fields; reddening autumn trees; the silvery surface of a huge lake ... or *lough*, as everyone says over here. ‘Lough,’ I whisper, practising as I draw, like *lock* but with an extra vacuum-cleaner sound at the end. ‘Lougggggghhhh!’

Chewing on my pencil, I peer out over Silent Valley and I get the funniest feeling ... like somehow, in all this huge emptiness ... there’s something I’m not quite seeing ... like ... something is kind of hidden ...

‘Silly!’ I murmur to myself. I squint my eyes and

follow the twists and bends of the narrow road all the way down the mountain and along the shore of the lough to where it disappears into a dense cluster of trees, then re-emerges – way over on the other side of the water – at a whitewashed farmhouse where the road just ends. Lolly's house, so little and alone beneath these towering mountains and glowering skies.

I clutch my sketchbook to my chest. I know Lolly's house so well, from way back, from always, but seeing it again after all these years doesn't fill me with joy, like it once did. Instead it makes my tummy feel heavy and knotted.

'Fortune Farm,' I say aloud. And a sudden wind rises, howling soft and mournful through the emptiness.

DAD



It's funny how things change. When I was little I loved it here at Fortune Farm; we'd come over to stay with Lolly and it was like we'd been transported to a different world, a land of mountains and valleys and forests and loughs, a world where anything seemed possible. We loved it, all of us, but especially Dad – this is where he had lived when he was a boy.

A sharp feeling spikes deep in my chest. And twists.
Dad.

At home I've trained myself not to think about Dad, but maybe it's different here.

I bite down hard on my pencil and, blinking at the dim shimmer of the lough, I try to go back to my sketching. I'm just drawing the jagged outline of the headland that juts out into the water when suddenly the name of the lough pops back into my head from the long-ago

past, like a switch being flicked.

'*Lough Ivarr,*' I whisper, my pencil freezing mid-stroke.

And before I can even stop myself a memory grows and grows, unstoppable as a wave. I remember the day years ago when Dad rowed me out across Lough Ivarr in a battered blue boat. I smile to myself, remembering how Star, Lolly's big old sheepdog, came along too. I get all whooshed away in the memory so that I even remember the deep mossy smell of the misty air and the softness of the dog's fur and the *sloshy-sloshy* sound of Dad's oars cutting through the brown water. I remember Dad's voice telling me one of his old stories as he rowed, a story that I can't quite recall now but that I know was scary and exciting too. And I remember the catch of Dad's beard in my hair when he cuddled me ... and I remember the soft-scratchy feeling on my cheek from his favourite jumper, which was made of wool in underwater colours – blue and green and grey. And I remember we were exploring, we were searching for something, Dad and me. And I can almost remember we ...

No!

I take a big swallow and close my eyes tight; I need to squish the memories away before they start to hurt. It's best not to think about Dad at all. So I do what I always

do – I hold my breath and in my mind I paint over the memories in bold stripes of colour:

Red ... I imagine each colour ...

Orange ... painted so thickly ...

Yellow ... that not even the tiniest ...

Green ... speck of memory ...

Blue ... can peep its way through ...

Indigo ... the colours wash everything away ...

Violet ... in the brightness of themselves.

My mind full of rainbow, I shiver and hold all the colours tight, just a moment more. Then I breathe a long breath out and open my eyes.

Blinking fast in the breeze, I gaze out over the empty sky, the stillness of the lough, and I get that funny feeling again, like there's ... something I'm *not* seeing.

I stare down at my blank page, but no lines will come now; my pencil feels frozen in my hand. Sometimes remembering Dad takes me by surprise like that. And remembering him by surprise hurts the worst. 'No!' I whisper sharply to the tears that try to sneak into my eyes; crying is just as unhelpful as remembering. I clench my fist around my pencil and I squish the tears back down. Remembering just takes you backwards and makes everything all wobbly.

I take a shaky breath.

Dad isn't here, not any more. Dad isn't anywhere.
Dad died. That's just a fact.

A fact I don't want to think about.

TOO-FULL BALLOON



The road twists and turns through wisps of mist, down and down into the valley. Pip jibber-jabbers on about the animal facts he knows and even though Mum says, ‘Gosh – really!’ I can tell she isn’t really listening; she has that look on her face again, like she’s thinking her way through a puzzle. These days Mum almost always looks like that: stressed and tense and worried. She reminds me of a balloon blown up too full, like if she’s stretched even a tiny bit more she might just suddenly go *POP!*

Twizzling my pencil in my fingers, I think about all the things that might be making Mum into a too-full balloon. For a start, she has three jobs: she does her normal job at the City Farm in the daytimes, then at weekends she works at the vet’s and in the evenings she studies online to learn how to be a proper ecologist. Plus

she has to do everything at home as well, all on her own, with no help from anyone else.

Well, nobody except me. I bite my lip. It's up to me to stop Mum from going *POP!* It's up to me to be helpful and good and not to wind Pip up. I stare out the window into the glum emptiness of Silent Valley. It's up to me not to make a fuss about spending half-term at Lolly's house so that Mum can go to her conference.

'Oh no!' sighs Mum. She's tap-tap-tapping at her phone screen. 'I've lost signal!' Where the map used to be there's now only a swirling blue circle. A little way ahead, the road forks in two directions. 'I think we take a right turn next ...' Her brow furrows. 'But ... maybe it's a left? Edie, there's a map in the glove compartment – would you grab it quickly, please?'

Under the junk, right at the back is a plastic pocket and in it is a map. I pull it out and as I start to unfold it I realise it's handmade. I flatten the map across my knees; it's beautifully drawn in faded blue ink and everything is exactly where it ought to be – the lough, the mountains, the wood. But instead of words the map is labelled with little symbols. I peer at them curiously; they look ... familiar somehow ...

'Which way, sweetheart?' says Mum.

We're almost at the fork in the road now. I quickly find where we are on the map. 'Turn left, Mum,' I say.

She breathes a long breath like she's deflating. 'Thanks, Edie,' she smiles, patting my knee, before she turns the car on to an even narrower, even bumpier, even lonelier lane.

'Are we nearly there yet?' says Pip from the back.

'Not far now,' says Mum.

'YAAAY!' cheers Pip. 'Are there lots more sheeps at Fortune Farm? And are there cows too? And horses?'

Shaking my head, I turn in my seat to face him. 'We've been here before, Pip.' I sigh impatiently. 'It's not a proper *farm* farm. It's just a house in the middle of nowhere that used to be a farm, years ago, but isn't any more.'

'Oh,' says Pip. 'So no animals at all?'

He sounds so disappointed I feel a bit bad. 'Well ... there will be lots of animals that live here in the wild. There might even be ...'

'BATS!' squeals Pip.

Mum gives me a grateful smile. Pip loves all animals, but he really really *really* loves bats.

'Don't you remember, Pip?' I ask gently. 'We used to come over here a lot back when...' My voice fades to nothing. I fill my mind with colours before the memories even have a chance to rise.

'Of course I remember!' says Pip, sitting up tall. 'I remember all about it. I remember every minute there

ever was at Fortune Farm.’ He folds his arms across his chest and nods. ‘So there!’

A rough screech outside makes me jump. A black-and-white bird perches on the jagged stump of a dead tree. A magpie. ‘One is for sorrow,’ I murmur, words from an old rhyme. The magpie meets my gaze; he squawks and squawks, loud as a fire alarm. Like a warning.

I gaze nervously at the dark ribbon of the lane winding ahead of us down the mountainside, a sense of dread inside my tummy. The thing is, the further we drive, the more and more I want to shout, ‘Stop the car! Turn around! Let’s go home!’ And not just because I’m missing my friends or because stupid memories keep sneaking up on me ... there’s something more than that.

It sounds absolutely bonkers, but this place, Silent Valley, just gives me the strangest feeling ... I can’t quite explain it, not even to myself, but the closer we get to Lolly’s house the more the feeling builds. A nervous twitchy uneasiness that kind of reminds me of when you’re playing hide-and-seek ... when a room seems empty but you sense that there might actually be someone there. Someone who’s watching you ... waiting ...



*Most of us leave immediately
when our time comes
rising fast into the After
to rest
in peace*

*But some of us remain
beyond our time
Something keeps us here -
a loose thread
an unfinished puzzle
a story without its ending*

*We remain
so quietly
no one really notices ...
just a slight chill perhaps
a breeze
a shiver*

We mean no harm ...

... well ...

most of us ...



MAP AND MEMORIES



The closer we get to Fortune Farm, the more my stomach squirms with dread. To distract myself, I stare down at the handmade map, still open on my lap; there are symbols drawn on it ... familiar almost ... I've definitely seen shapes like these somewhere before ...

I hop my fingertip from symbol to symbol: there's a Ψ symbol, like half a winter tree, that one on the beach on the shore of Lough Ivarr; and at Fortune Farm there's one like a fish standing upright on its tail: δ . Then there's a ζ like a bull's horns – it's in the middle of the woods and quite near to it on the jagged headland that juts out into the lough there's a η , like a wonky letter *n*. Up in the top corner of the map there's another half a tree, Ψ . I peer closer; very faintly I can see a question mark pencilled next to that one. I trace my finger over

the symbols; I wonder if they're just for decoration or if they actually mean anything?

Glancing between the map and the road ahead, I follow our route with my finger. We're driving along a ridge, high above the lough shore; to our left there's nothing but a sharp drop, with peat-brown water lapping far below; up ahead the froth of a waterfall gushes out of the dark cliffside and just beyond it is the headland that's marked by the Π symbol on the map.

A letter *n*? I sigh. *N* for *Nothing makes sense!* Maps are supposed to help you find your way, but this map is only making me feel more lost and confused.

'Look!' giggles Pip. 'The mountain is in the bottom of the lake! All upside down!' I look where he's pointing, at the reflection in the still water.

'Your dad always used to say *any lough is as deep as its mountain is high,*' says Mum, a hazy look appearing in her eyes. 'He said that even though he knew this valley like the back of his hand, it still always felt full of hidden secrets ...'

My heart jolts. That's exactly like the feeling I keep getting.

'Your dad used to love going out in his boat on the lough when he was a boy,' Mum continues. 'He took you too, Edie, once or twice, do you remember? When you were little?'

‘Nope,’ I say, shaking my head hard as I try to splat big splashes of paint over the memories of Dad. *Red. Orange. Yellow. Green. Blue. Indigo. Violet. Red. Orange. Yellow ...*

But it doesn’t work. A shimmer of sunbeam tickles the dark water into gold and the past washes over me: I remember that Dad wasn’t just going out in the boat for fun that day on the lough ... He was searching for something ... something secret ...

And suddenly I remember that Dad ... he was *frightened!* Whatever it was that he was so keen to find, it actually scared him too.

Goosebumps prickle on my arms as I gaze out across the mirror-glimmered waters of the lough. On the far shore a dark cloud of birds rises skyward. For a split second it almost looks like they’re making a ... shape ... I peer down at the map. It’s true – the birds are making the shape of that Ω symbol!

I gasp.

‘What?’ says Mum.

But I blink and the shape is gone. The birds are just birds again.

‘Nothing,’ I murmur. ‘It was nothing.’



*The birds tell stories too
in their patterns
in their shapes*

*And winds?
Winds whisper secrets*

shhhhhhhhhhhhhhh



VIKINGS



‘Eddie? You’ve gone pale as a sheet.’ Mum sounds concerned. ‘Are you all right, sweetheart?’

‘I’m fine,’ I say, trying to paint a smile on my face.

Mum peeks at me out of the corner of her eye and does a funny little half-laugh. ‘If Dad was here now, you know what he’d say?’

I shrug and look away, wishing Mum would stop talking about Dad, *reminiscing*, as she calls it. But Mum loves *reminiscing* so much she doesn’t seem to notice that I hate it.

‘Dad would say: *You look like you’ve just seen a Viking!* Do you remember, Eddie, he always said that when someone looked surprised?’

I shake my head. *Red ... Orange ... Yellow ...*

Then I register what Mum just said and my eyes widen as, in spite of myself, I suddenly remember what

Dad was searching for – on that boat trip, he was looking for something to do with Vikings!

‘Vikings ...’ I murmur.

‘What Vikings?’ says Pip. ‘Where?’

‘Here!’ smiles Mum. ‘Apparently, thousands of years ago there was a Viking village somewhere in Silent Valley. Your dad was obsessed with Vikings when he was a little boy growing up here – he even learned how to do Viking writing and everything!’

My heart does a little flutter. Those symbols on the map – \mathfrak{h} \mathfrak{c} \mathfrak{n} \mathfrak{p} – I know why they’re familiar: they’re Viking writing – they’re runes! We did Vikings in Year 5 for our history topic and we used runes to write secret messages to each other.

‘Vikings ...’ says Pip, dreamily pressing his nose to the car window. ‘Real Vikings!’

‘Real Vikings,’ echoes Mum, smiling. ‘Why don’t you ask Lolly about it when we get to Fortune Farm? She’ll know much more than I do.’

I gaze out across the lough’s flat surface, still as glass, full of sky. Vikings lived here once; of course they did! I *do* remember that now too.

Folding the map with care, I tuck it into my sketchbook as we enter a dense thicket of trees; the branches on either side reach for each other in an arch over the roadway so it’s dark, like being in a tunnel. I roll

the window down and the green, earthy smell is so familiar ... 'Sleuthe Wood!' I whisper.

'Yes, that's just what I was thinking – the Sloof Wood!' declares Pip.

I open my mouth to correct him, but stop myself and gaze into the misty forest – it's eerie and beautiful at the same time; dark; through the open window float smells that I kind of recognise, moss, mud and something faintly flowery too. Mum drives really slowly because of all the potholes and I peer deep into the trees and shadows, where I can see autumn colours just starting to show and—

'What's that?' I say aloud.

'What's what?' says Pip, craning his neck.

'Something ...' I murmur, pointing uncertainly into the dark wood. 'Something moved. There was something there ...'

'Was it a bat?' squeaks Pip. 'Was it? Was it?'

Mum slows the car down even more and we all peer into the undergrowth. 'What sort of animal was it, do you think? Could you tell?' she whispers. 'A deer maybe?'

'Maybe ...' I say, squinting into the shadows. But for some reason I don't say what I'm really thinking. The thing is, I don't think it was an animal I saw running through the woods.

I think it was a child.

FORTUNE FARM



With a little shiver, I give my head a shake. Must have been a trick of the shadows.

The trees start to thin and pale light sneaks in. Mum drives us through the open gate and over the *bumpity-bumpity* cattle grid.

A big *FOR SALE* sign swings in the wind; the word *SOLD* is stamped across it in red. It's funny to think that, even though we haven't been here for such a long time, this will be our last ever visit to Fortune Farm. Mum says it's getting a bit too much for Lolly, living out here all by herself at her age. She'll be moving house next month to a bungalow in Ardonald, near Uncle Alex.

Our car bumps and bounces over the dips and pot-holes in the drive. I lean out of the window, gazing behind me into Sleuthe Wood. I see that solitary magpie again, perched on the *FOR SALE* sign; his beady eyes fix

on mine. The magpie opens his beak as if to squawk at me, but then closes it noiselessly, like he's changed his mind. An ice-cold gust of wind whooshes past my ears with a sound like wheezy laughter. I pull my coat tighter around me and face forward as our car swoops around the final bend and over the crunchy gravel into the farmyard.

We park next to a huge ash tree with leaves like flames. The engine stops. The stillness is so enormous it almost feels heavy.

We've arrived.

Fortune Farm.



*I scramble up the ash tree
I gather an armful of brightest leaves
The car doors open
I sprinkle my leaves down upon them*

*A celebration
Red and yellow and gold*

*Welcome I whisper
as my whirling leaves dance all around*

