

A Hole in the Ground

By Imogen Harris

Read by Sue Sims

Content warnings:

- Depression
- Abusive Relationship
- Rot & decay
- Claustrophobia
- Food (inc. consumption and control of food)
- Nightmares & unreality
- Discussions of: isolation
- Mentions of: insects, disease, emetophobia, blood & physical injury, animal death
- SFX: repeated low drone

[TAPE CLICK]

GERTRUDE

Case 0140226. Ellinore Lowell. Incident occurred in Lynden Woods, September 2013. Statement given 26 of February, 2014. Committed to tape 17th of March 2014.

Gertrude Robinson recording.

Statement begins.

It wasn't a particularly special day when I went for a walk in the Lynden woods. I had been trying to make myself leave the house at least once a week; that way when someone asked what I'd been up to, I could say "I had a lovely walk, I saw a

butterfly”, to sound fine. I wanted people to think I was making the most of this three-month, enforced break. That only boring people needed a job to give their life structure, like preferring school to the holidays, and this, in many ways, was really more like a sabbatical.

The woods are round the back of Lynden House, and the tourists stick to the lawns and the lake. If you follow the path round past the dairy, it turns into this scrubby, heath area, and then there are some trees, and you can mostly be by yourself.

I remember it was very hot, and the grass was full of spiky, heavy seedheads, like the carapace of an insect. The sharp smell of fox piss caught in my throat and the sun was burning my chest, so I turned up the hill and went into the woods.

It was cooler in the trees. I don't know what they were - beeches or ash or something, the kind that lets the light in. But there's a stretch you get to which is all some kind of conifer, and there it gets quiet and dark, the trees are much closer together and they're all the same, almost eerily straight and uniform. Anyway, that's where I heard it.

A desperate little mew. It sounded like it had been going on for hours, and the only thing more exhausting than carrying on would be giving up. I looked around but couldn't see anything, so I closed my eyes and let my head drift in its direction, and when I opened them, I saw an old brick well, a few yards away through the trees.

A wet, cold, rotten smell rolled out as I leaned over it, but I could hear the mew, now echoing up from very far below me. The inside of the well was pitch black, but when I shone my phone down, I saw a pair of eyes looking up.

“It's OK,” I called down. “I'll get you out.”

I looked around. The well must have been more than twenty feet, and anyway, even if I could find and manoeuvre a branch of that size, would the trapped animal even be able to climb onto it? I looked back inside the well. There was a winch, with a few inches of broken chain dangling from it. And I also spotted a set of iron handholds, leading down into the darkness.

It only took me a second to decide what to do.

“Hold on,” I called, “I’m coming down.”

It’s hard to explain how important it seemed to me at that moment. The only thought in my mind was I had to help whatever it was. I had to get it out of the cold darkness and into the light and save it.

The well was narrow, almost brushing my shoulders and the iron rungs were gritty with rust, the scent of the metal mixing with the overpowering smell of cold decay that was all around me. It smelled as though even the smallest drop of water would be loaded with disease, bacteria, flukeworms, the tiny larval stage of parasites that were waiting to colonise me, wriggling and teeming with invasive life. I kept my mouth clamped shut.

The mouth of the well quickly receded into a ragged circle of light. How far down should I keep climbing? What if the rungs ran out? But the mews were close now, and I risked a hand to extract my phone and shine its beam below me.

The well had dried to a sludgy mud filled with sticks and the mulch of decaying leaves. Only a foot away, I could see the eyes, like two yellow half moons and, reaching out as far as I could, I felt cold, wet fur, soaked in black slime. I gripped it and pulled it out of the clinging mud. It scabbled for my shoulder and lay across it, the mud cold on my cheek. I felt a heave of nausea at the smell, the shock of having this strange trembling thing suddenly against me, the pattering of its heart, the pinpricks of its claws as it clung on. And I felt a second of concern about whether it was really such a good idea to take

something, anything out of here. But that was overtaken by a fierce desire to take care of it. *You need my help*, I thought. *I will save you*. My hands raw from the iron, my legs smeared with mud, I carried us both out of the dark and into the light.

* * * *

Even after a bath the smell of the cold mud lingered. The creature was entirely passive as I washed it, the tepid water flattening its coat against its bony frame, soaking its tail down to a pointed straggle, every vertebra visible. I wrapped it in a warm towel and rubbed the long, pointed ears dry. It showed no interest in food or water, so I made up a cosy bed in a cardboard box in my room and gently stroked the dark fur between its eyes with one finger, until it began to make a small noise, midway between a purr and a squeak and closed its eyes.

That night I dreamed I was still in the well, the cold smell surrounding me. I was climbing frantically for the tiny circle of light above me, but my hands were dream-clumsy and weak, slipping on the rungs, my legs refusing to push me up. Then the circle of light narrowed, as though someone was closing the lid of the well, I had a moment of utter terror and then I awoke, heart thumping, chest heaving. The creature was curled up beside me, its nose beneath my jaw.

* * * *

“What is it?” Beth sounded doubtful.

“A fox cub.” I was stung by her tone; Beth usually went gooey over animals.

“Are you sure? Aren’t foxes red?”

Beth was in the habit of dropping round a few times a week. She said it was because she was in the area, but I knew it was to keep an eye on me. She

sometimes gently asked what I had planned for dinner, or talked vaguely about how much better it made *her* feel to have a shower everyday.

“The baby ones can be darker.”

“It looks more like a - oh, what are those horrid ones with the pointy faces you get in America? Opossums.”

“It’s a fox cub. A fox cub I rescued.” This was not what I had been expecting.

“Or a badger, but with a rat head. Except its paws are like little hands.”

“It’s a fox, OK? It fell into a well and I climbed down to rescue it. I saved it and now I’m looking after it.”

Beth regarded the creature. Although it had only been three days, it whined and cried if I was out of its sight for a few seconds. It regarded Beth in return from its perch on my shoulder, then scrambled down my arm and slunk around the corner of the sofa.

“No way that’s a fox’s tail. Maybe it’s a raccoon. What does it eat?”

“I just give it a bit of whatever I’m eating. What do raccoons eat?”

“Anything. Do you think it’s a good idea to give it your food?”

“It’s fine.”

In fact, I didn’t have much choice. By the end of the first day, the creature was still uninterested: cat food, dog biscuits, fruit, canned tuna, birdseed, a lovingly prepared plate of fresh vegetables and even mealworms from the reptile department of the pet shop. It was the same with water: tap, mineral, boiled,

chilled, in a bowl or poured enticingly from one container to the other. The creature ignored them all.

But when I sat down for lunch, it raised its head from my shoulder and, just as I brought the sandwich to my lips, it insinuated its own pointed snout and tested the bread with its teeth. I held my breath as, slowly, the creature took a single bite. There was a long pause where it showed no further interest, until I raised the sandwich to my mouth again. The creature once more slid to intercept it.

Since then, the only way for either of us to eat was in this fashion. If I tried to give the creature the same food as me on a separate plate it would simply sit and look at it dolefully. If I attempted to eat without allowing it to intercept, it would get frantic, whining and mewing, scrambling to get onto my shoulder. This even applied to food it did not like which it would repeatedly spit out: a bahn mi laced with fresh slices of red chilli had ended up almost entirely down my shirt in small gobbets, as the creature rejected bite after bite. It soon became easier only to eat foods the creature approved of.

“It’s fine,” I said again.

“Well, I suppose it’s not forever. You can let it go soon.”

“What do you mean?”

“Take it back and let it go in the wild. You’re not keeping it.”

“How do you know what I’m doing?” Annoyance at her dismissal of my heroism and frank dislike of my pet simmered over.

“I just want to make sure you aren’t taking on too much.”

“Well, I’m not. And I can’t just ditch it. I need to make sure it’s OK.”

“It looks perfectly fine to me.” Beth got to her feet and began looking around for her things. “I don’t know how you can stand that funny smell, anyway.”

The creature reappeared from behind the sofa, staring at her with a flat, unfriendly gaze.

“Jen is having a few people next month for a barbeque,” This was another of our well worn rituals. The gentle offer of some low-stakes social event that I might possibly consider attending. “I’ll come by and pick you up if you fancy it?”

“I’ll think about it,” I said. “Thanks.” I felt ashamed of myself and annoyed by her understanding.

“No problem. I’ll forward you the details so you can have a think.”

She smiled at me again, and reached for her phone. There was a pause, then Beth said,

“Your pet has shat in my handbag.”

* * * *

After a few weeks, with no change in size, I had to concede that, whatever species the creature was, it was not a baby one. It had many qualities of a juvenile: a need for body contact at all times, a timorousness about new things which sometimes seemed almost put-on, a naive curiosity that led it to destroy objects if left alone, pulling things down from shelves or methodically emptying cupboards. It seemed to have an unerring instinct for finding the thing that would be most frustrating or expensive to replace, the thing which had only been left unattended for a few moments.

I ruminated on the barbeque. It loomed larger and larger in my mind, not helped by lack of sleep. The creature insisted on curling up under my chin, sometimes with its whistling nose tucked in my ear, or its sharp claws resting on my cheek. My skin underneath it would start to feel clammy, almost damp, as if the well had seeped into its fur in a way that would never fully dry. But I didn't mind the discomfort, or that its constant stirring and twitches kept me awake: it seemed as though every time I closed my eyes, I was back in another nightmare. Dark tunnels, the cold smell of rot, smooth, featureless walls that were impossible to climb. When I woke from these, filled with dread, at least I was not alone.

Finally, after Beth had sent three messages that hinted at an answer and one that flat-out demanded it, I responded:

Really sorry to flake but I can't make
it this time. Give Jen my love

I hoped she would have the grace not to reply instantly, but instead she pinged straight back:

Aww, come one, everyone really
wants you there! Jen even said you can
bring that animal if you have to, as long
as it behaves itself and stays in the
garden.

I felt a stab of annoyance. Why was everyone being like this? If Jen had helped an animal and took it around with her, people would cluster round and want to stroke it and say how marvelous she was. They were jealous. Jealous that I'd done something cool and daring and wasn't just their unfortunate, troubled charity case they could patronise and feel superior to. I replied straight away:

Wouldn't want to spoil anyone's perfect

afternoon, so we'll give it a miss, thanks.

Don't be like that, its a BBQ, everyone is in the garden. Jen just means not to let it get into the house or make a mess or anything.

They didn't understand. I couldn't leave the creature behind - it would destroy the house in a rage if I left it alone for more than a few minutes. And if it came to the barbeque, it would eat my food, interrupt my conversations, slink off to find its way into something. I couldn't defend it against my friends' disapproval. I needed them to be on my side, telling me everything was fine. Instead, I sent back:

Actually I have other plans Saturday, so this is a pointless discussion. Have a good day.

A few seconds later, my phone rang. I ignored it.

* * * *

After a month I began leaving, first the windows, and then the back door open. Maybe the creature would transition slowly, from its post on my shoulder or lap to a cautious sniff outside, then finally to a wild and free life, returning once a year to show me that everything was well. Maybe it would even bring its own young to visit, to show its gratitude. I didn't want to trap it here against its will. But it never put even its nose outside. I didn't like leaving the house with it, since it drew stares, although usually of suspicion rather than interest. I started avoiding places where I knew other people would be.

One day, I drove to the edge of Epping forest and parked the car. I wasn't thinking too hard about what I might be possibly considering doing, and I meandered down the path, the creature snuffling at my feet. Its ears pricked at every rustle of small creatures in the leaf litter. Whatever it was, it was clearly a

predator. It took a few steps into the undergrowth to investigate a tangle of bracken, and suddenly I had turned around and was running back to the car, the keys clenched in my fist, my eyes on the door handle. I reached it, fumbled the keys and as I reached down to snatch them back up, the creature caught up to me and sank its teeth into my hand.

The drive back was very quiet. The creature sat on my lap staring at me, my bloodied hand on the steering wheel a kind of penance. When we got home, I silently prepared the creature's favourite meal, and patiently allowed it to take a bite from each spoonful before placing it in my own mouth. That night, the nightmares were worse: I found myself aware this time that this was a dream, but unable to wake myself, and with the sensation that I had been trapped in this hole for many weeks.

* * * *

Finding a moment to sneak away to make the phone call was tricky. But finally I locked myself in the bathroom and dialled the number.

"Hello, Ilford Animal shelter, how can I help?"

"Hi, I found an animal in the woods, and I think maybe," I paused, "Maybe you should take care of it."

"What kind of animal, love?"

"It's a racoon," I said firmly.

"A racoon? You found a racoon?"

"Yes, and I think - I think it would be better with you."

“We can’t take a racoon, love.” The woman sounded doubtful, as if she thought I was pranking her. “Non native, they are. We’d have to put it down, most likely.”

“What? You’re an animal shelter. You can’t kill things.”

She sighed. “It’d be against the law to release it.”

“OK, well, maybe it’s not a racoon. What’s like a racoon?”

“What do you mean, like a racoon? What kind of animal is it?”

“Look, it doesn’t matter. Can I call you back? I need to think about it.”

“Sure, love. Sorry about this - it’s not us, it’s the law. You have a think and call us back.”

“Right, thanks,” Although the idea of getting the creature out of my house, to no longer have its eyes watching me, its insistence on closeness, the mud rot smell of it on my clothes and hands and pillow, was shamefully appealing, there was no way I could lead an innocent creature to its death.

But what if it's for the best? I found myself wondering. Very sad, but invasive species can't just be allowed to -

I opened the door. The creature was sitting outside the bathroom, its halfmoon eyes staring up, so that I stepped straight into its gaze. I felt a stab of fear that it had heard me. *I should have run the shower. I'll pay for this tonight.*

* * * *

I struggled on through the next few weeks. I didn’t leave the house, I didn’t speak to anyone, I did not have a moment alone without the creature. Its favourite thing

was to drape over my shoulders while I stroked it, mechanically, repetitively, for hours at a time. If I stopped, it would squeak and wiggle, then finally begin to chitter, a warning sign I had learnt to recognise.

If I kept it happy, the nightmares were lessened, and I might have whole stretches of normal sleep in a night, and awake feeling almost refreshed. If I annoyed it in some slight way - and the size of the offence required to trigger punishment shrank every day - then I felt a sinking dread at what was to come.

I was standing at the stove, preparing a bolognese. The creature had started to reject simple, quick meals like sandwiches and fruit, and instead was fixed on elaborate, home cooked meals, which at least gave me something to do with my day. The thought: *I wish I'd left it in the well* flashed through my mind.

One moment I was stirring the sauce, and the next, the world clicked to the left, like an old-fashioned projector displaying the next slide, and I was in the well. The stench of rot filled my mouth and nose, my skin shivered at the cold, and then just as smoothly, the world slid back into place and I was standing at the stove again.

That was the last straw. It had isolated me from my friends, controlled what I ate, insisted on being part of every moment of my life and enforced its arbitrary rules with punishment. This was no longer a small, helpless creature who needed me and for whom I was responsible. This was my enemy.

I reached down and grabbed the creature. It seemed to sense the change in me, and it wriggled and hissed, making a fierce, gurgling ululation I had never heard before. Holding it firmly by the scruff, I thrust it into a sturdy canvas bag and tied the handles shut, then grabbed my car keys.

It was dark, the car park closed and the house itself shuttered, but there was no way of locking the entrance to Lynden Woods. The creature had ceased hissing and was now making a plaintive cheeping noise, trembling in the bag, as if

hoping to inspire the same compassion that had made me take it home the first time.

I found my way to the well unerringly; perhaps having spent every night of the past six months in its depths had burned it in my brain. I leant over its pitchblack mouth, untied the bag's handles and shook it hard. I had a final glimpse of the creature: its halfmoon eyes wide with rage, long, clever claws scrabbling at thin air, and then it vanished into the darkness.

I turned and walked away. I knew that it would wait in the darkness, wait until someone else came along to save it and love it and take it into their home, and I wondered how long they would last, or if they would spend the rest of their life making it happy. *But at least, I thought, it won't be me.*

[TAPE CLICK]

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