

WHERE  
WATERS  
MEET



# WHERE WATERS MEET

JOHN  
FRANKS

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Alliance Publishing Press

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# Biography

John Franks was born in Nottingham in 1960. He had an idyllic childhood doing ‘boys stuff’ before moving on to study sculpture at Art College. Following graduation, John spent six years working in a rural community for the mentally handicapped, before ‘falling’ into bookselling where he stayed for seventeen years, working up from part-time ‘un-packer’ to senior company level positions. After leaving bookselling in 2007, John joined a charity that helps people escape the blight of debt, running their operations team.

He now lives on a smallholding in mid Wales with his wife - natural history artist Elaine Franks - their teenage son, horses, dogs, a cat and numerous chickens. As well as writing he plays drums and is teaching himself woodland management and hedge laying. *Where Waters Meet* is his first published novel.



*To Mum and Dad*  
*Joan May Franks (1925 - 2012)*  
*Arthur George Franks (1922 - 2013)*





## PROLOGUE

The journey back was like a reawakening, everything new.

Allhan was aware of much that he had been and done, but what was more real to him now was the world that he walked through. He remembered, from the story, how it felt to see his environment as either a resource for survival or a backdrop against which to pursue a largely self-interested search for knowledge, but he had never before experienced it as he did now. From the ragged beauty of the larch that flanked the entrance to the cave he had sheltered in over winter, to the sweep of the high grasslands he could see beyond the dense forest through which he strode, all was fresh and marvellous to him. The complexity of the interdependent life that surrounded him, that lived, breathed, grew, changed, and would continue to do so, whether he was awake, asleep, alive or dead, filled him with awe. With an unselfconsciousness quite new to him, he wanted to understand what it was all doing; not as a backdrop to thoughts, nor as the inventory of a larder, but as a vast multifaceted organism.

What would it all do if he did nothing? What would it do if he did something? And if he did something, what should it be, so that he might take his correct place within it? And why did it feel separate from him? Why was he, perhaps the most sophisticated creature in all this company, seemingly not privy to a connection that looked increasingly as if it was second nature to a weasel, or a woodpecker; even the brambles which scratched his shins?

All this was a wonder to him, and most wonderful of all, the evening, with the light fading, when he realised that he had spent more hours than he could count without once thinking of himself.

That he was scratched and muddied, tired and cold; and he didn't care.

His body was a constant surprise to him, and quite fascinating. He could see that he was tanned, muscular but not heavy, virile but not prodigious, but he could not see his face and he could not judge his proportions. He encountered streams and drank from them, but there was no still pool in which he could see his reflection. He could feel his face yawn and smile and frown, and his fingers could explore and understand the contours of his nose and forehead and jawline, but he could not piece this information together to visualise the whole. And his eyes, what colour were his eyes? If he could have stood back and considered himself, he would have found he was quite tall and handsome – rather after the manner of his father – and that he had brown eyes. Alsoph would have been jealous of Allhan's body, Alaric indifferent, but here it didn't matter. Allhan had beauty, but like the buzzard overhead he didn't know it. He knew the buzzard's beauty, and perhaps the buzzard knew his, but what would it do to either, if they knew their own?

Allhan had emerged from his cave in spring, with the snowdrops over, the primroses in bloom, the bluebells yet to flower. However, for all its fecundity, there is little or no food for man in mixed woodland in March, and as Allhan marched south and the days slipped by, he began to be troubled by hunger.

For almost a month he had eaten nothing; it had simply not crossed his mind, nor did his body protest any need. Eyes, ears, fingers, taste buds, nostrils; they were all drinking in the world around him, never considering their own fulfilment, and nor did his thoughts do anything other than contemplate, in quiet, continual joy, everything laid out before him.

His eyes were enchanted. Not only was the forest in continuous motion – from the pinprick highlights of myriad insects, to the sweeping movement of branches in a high wind – but the light did not stay the same for more than a few moments at a time, so that

colour and intensity modulated continually. He recalled the paintings and tapestries, sculptures and artefacts which he knew and loved in his schooldays, and while these things were not diminished in his recollection, nonetheless he could not escape the thought that they were so slight in comparison to the living art that now surrounded him; less than an artist's sketch compared to the completed fresco. Perhaps like the relation between the word Love, in considered calligraphy, and the truth of the state of Love. And with this thought, Allhan reflected that he had never before experienced love other than as a selfish desire to be nourished or comforted by another. But now he loved: he loved this.

His ears were acute, attuned to the sounds between the silences. It was not a music to him – had none of the self-consciousness of music – but rather sound as a consequence of living; from gentle hums and clicks, to bird-talk, mammal-grunts and snickering; from the ever varied whispering and nattering of running water, to the shocking slap and suction of the wind between and above the trees.

Different every moment, every day, never repeated, each moment unique according to the life that inhabited and created it.

He could smell and taste the air. Couldn't stop smelling and tasting it, from the musky to the sweet, heady and clean and fetid and repellent, shocking and relaxing and soothing, fruit, root and herb. Hot, cold and rotten, and as honest as the warm, damp, earth. And as he breathed deep and reflected on his contemplation, Allhan wondered afresh that all these sensations were perceived by him both in unison and in parallel, connected and disconnected. Sometimes he could see what he heard, but often not; he could smell what he could not see; or hear an animal, whom he would smell only later; see a bird sing, but never hear its voice because the wind carried it away. The realisation that not only did every element change and interweave in infinite complexity from moment to moment, but that the experience of each would be different in each instance according to which of the myriad places within the forest he inhabited. And that

whether he inhabited them or not, each of those endless variations would still occur.

But touch brought him back to himself, back to his separation. He could feel and appreciate the quality and variety of textures he encountered, but his experience was changing; he was becoming vulnerable to everything. Even in the occasional patch of grass in a clearing – which suited his feet best – there would be a sharp stone that pained him or a nettle to sting him.

The thorn and the bramble, the spiny needle-paths that grated his soles, the slimy fallen leaves with the cold shock of a fat slug beneath them to lodge between his toes. The smooth, cool rock; but too hard to lie on, too cold to sleep on, and never smooth enough for skin's comfort. Soft earth, but damp and chill, seeping into him. Every surface too hard, too cold, too hot, too unyielding, too coarse, too gelatinous. Too real.

He watched all the other creatures around him, walking, sleeping, brushing aside; nestling within the forest's physique. And now he could not. He became aware of his discomfort, and it joined his hunger.

In the end, he had to start killing rabbits. When his appetite first pricked him, he found a few strips of dried meat taken from the cave in the pouch hung on a thong around his waist – his only possession except for a hunting knife, and a silk scarf that tied back his hair – but these only lasted a few days. He found he had retained the skill to snatch and kill, but no longer with easy indifference. Allhan could not but help see each coney as an individual creature within the creation around him, and killing was a grief to him. The first he ate raw, but then he recalled the method for making fire, and each night he made camp in a sheltered spot, to both cook his catch and provide warmth. On the fourth day of his hunting, as he lay in wait, he saw a fox make a kill before him, and he was comforted. This killing was less than his desire, and distanced him further from his environment, but it was clearly a loss shared with other creatures, and he saw no

regret in the eyes of the fox, no fear of death and its consequences.

On the fortieth day of his return, Allhan reached the southern limits of the forest, and looked out upon cultivated land and the world of men.



# ONE

Elgiva Dunstan was pulling ragwort in a small field shaded by a hazel coppice that clad the brow of a low hill. The grass was quite long – there had been ample rain of late – and she had decided to move the old carthorse onto the pasture before letting the sheep in a week or so later. Her hair was tied back, but strands kept coming loose and blowing into her mouth or across her eyes as it caught in the fresh breeze. She felt awkward and clumsy on the rough ground, her skirt whipping around and pulling against her legs, her apron drawn up to make a sling to load the ragwort into, and her boots caught on tussocks more than once and nearly tripped her.

When she had finished her task, loading the ragwort into the barrow propped against the gate, brushing down her soil-streaked apron, and taking a long drink from the mug she'd left on the gatepost, she retied her hair, looked out across the fields to the woodland beyond the stream, and slowly broke into a broad grin. Her eyes sparkled, she giggled, and her hand came up to cover her gaping mouth. She had a rather round, smooth face, and lively green eyes. Along with unruly auburn hair, her looks suggested she was always ready for mirth, though more often than not loneliness and hard work gave little occasion for it. But today she could give full rein to her glee: A strong, fit-looking man – albeit absolutely filthy with mud and grass stains – had crossed the stream and was walking up Brook Field towards her, and he was completely naked.

Allhan had hesitated under the eaves of the forest. He knew that he must go on, that he had no choice, but his heart was full of regret for what he was leaving behind. He saw the young woman in the field,

and felt fear, yet he could not stay. He was hungry, and understood that the woodland could not sustain him. He was tired and cold, and although only a few days before he had not been conscious of himself in this way, now he was and the reality could not be denied. As he looked at the young woman, he remembered a story that his mother had told of a baby that had been raised in the woods by wolves and had been content until the yearning for his own kind had grown within him and he'd had to leave his simple idyll and learn the challenging complexities of being a man. Allhan had reached a similar place, but he could recall from his past the error and grief that had arisen from that 'adult' life, and crouching at the foot of a young birch, he was afraid of going back. What would he say or do? He still knew words, but had used them so little for so long; had not spoken aloud for weeks. In addition to this, watching the girl in the field, his mind began ringing with a half-remembered mixture of erotic compulsion and selfish romanticism, and he realised that he had no idea how to relate to a woman at all. And why did the first person he was to meet have to be a young woman, and with such lovely hair? At length, with a gesture of thanks back to the north, deep into the innocent woodland, he turned and walked out into the cool spring sunshine and forded the stream.

Elgiva carried on smiling to herself as Allhan approached her. She chewed a wisp of hair while she considered him – an old nervous habit her mother had chided her for. The man seemed completely unconscious of his nakedness, but the turn of his head and his gaze set mainly on the grass before his feet suggested he was shy or nervous nonetheless. He stopped in front of her, looked her in the eye and, to Elgiva's complete surprise, bowed to her, making a leg as if he were a gentleman or a soldier in a marketplace, not a filthy, naked vagabond.

'My lady...?' he said, in a rough, cracked voice.

'My lady?' Elgiva replied, amused.

'I'm sorry, I not said, I mean, I've not said – spoken – for a



long time. Words seem... difficult.' Elgiva carried on watching him, chewing...

'I... I'm... My name is Allhan, Allhan... Cooper. I've been...' he struggled to explain. 'I've been... away.' He paused, and looked up at her. 'Can you help me?'

'Perhaps I could.' She took the hair out from between her teeth, and looked him up and down. 'I could draw a tub for you I suppose.'

'A tub?'

'A tub - water.'

'Water?' Allhan was suddenly, acutely, painfully aware of his thirst. 'Water would be a blessing my lady, but I cannot ask you to receive me into your... your... your drawing room.' Elgiva watched him for a moment; was he playing with her? The man's gaze returned to the ground at his feet.

'I can receive you if I want', she said, 'but the drawing room's got a couple of spring lambs by the range, so I'll put the tub in the back yard.'

'You are very gracious, lady.' He bowed again. Elgiva swallowed a laugh and reached out to take his hand. She decided she liked him, he reminded her of her carthorse: nice manners but perhaps not very bright.

'Come, sir. Let's see if you scrub-up a gentleman'.

The walk back to Elgiva's cottage didn't take long, they were only a field away from where it nestled in the lee of a domed hill; quite pretty with its whitewashed walls, fairly new thatch, and a well brushed yard enclosed by flower and vegetable beds. They walked side by side, Elgiva a little in front leading the way, but they did not speak until they arrived at the front door.

'Welcome, stranger... Allhan, sir,' said Elgiva, with a little mock curtsy, and a kind smile, 'to my simple home. Downstairs is mainly kitchen, though we do have a parlour, if not a drawing room.'

'Thank you,' Allhan replied, and stepped over a couple of hens on the threshold into the kitchen.

It was a low-ceilinged room with a stone floor, a deep fireplace with a range to the right – the promised cade lambs in a box in front of the firebox – and another chimney breast to the left over an open fire. There were settles under the two leaded windows, a pine table and chairs near the range, and two ladder-backs and a rocking chair by the open fire. Logs were stacked neatly in one corner, a large black kettle simmering on the range, an oil lamp over the table. It was a quiet, neat, orderly place. An old sheepdog looked up from his bed and then padded over to smell the stranger, while a sleek, fat tabby considered the intruder with suitable disdain from where he sat enthroned on an old sack near the open fireplace. Elgiva left Allhan making a fuss of the dog, while she retrieved, filled, and then manhandled a huge pan onto the range next to the kettle. She poured two mugs of small beer from a jug on the table and offered one to Allhan. He drank it down greedily and she poured him a second. He sipped at this one, his thirst slaked, and gently paced the room. On the wall next to the kitchen dresser there hung a mirror. He caught sight of himself, started, then studied what he saw. Elgiva watched him in silence.

‘I’ve never... I mean I hardly recognise myself.’

‘Not surprising, given your state of filth,’ Elgiva replied. ‘I’m full of questions, but they can wait until you’re washed.’

Allhan continued to study his face in the mirror. He looked puzzled. Then stepping back, his arms swinging away from his body, he looked down at himself.

‘I’m naked’, he said.

‘Sure, that’s the truth. I noticed something of the like when we first met in the field.’

‘I’m... I’m sorry.’

‘No need. I’ve a brother, and I’ve seen one or two men before now, and you look better than most, just a lot dirtier.’

‘Yes, I...’

‘Hair first, I think.’

A practical hour or two followed, endless soaping, scrubbing and rinsing. Allhan waiting, shivering while a second and then a third pan of water boiled, and again when Elgiva took a break to lead the urgently whinnying carthorse to his promised pasture before he kicked down the stableyard gate in protest. At last Allhan stood by the range, drying himself gingerly, glowing skin sore from scouring.

‘It seems I’ll need to beg you for some clothes, as well as thanking you for your kindness.’

‘Yes, I’d thought of that. Shame really, but I’ve put out a shirt and breeches of my dad’s for you. We’ll worry about boots tomorrow.’

‘Nice hair, now it’s clean and cut’, she said, walking over and touching it with the back of her hand. ‘And you’re better for the shorter beard too.’ She stepped back and reached out to brush Allhan’s arm at the same time. Her mouth controlled a smile by biting her bottom lip.

‘Welcome again,’ she said, curtsying once more, blushing this time. Allhan watched her, quizzically. She coughed. ‘Best put your pants on now sir, I’ll lay out some bread and cheese.’

While Elgiva busied herself in the larder, Allhan slipped on the shirt and breeches. They were a loose fit, and wearing clothes felt infinitely strange to him, but he was warm and relaxed; even the small amount of beer he had drunk affected him – so unused was he to any alcohol – and although part of his mind was wrestling with the fear of being back amongst people, more than anything he was tired. He curled up on the rug in front of the dormant fireplace, and slept.

‘There’s food ready,’ Elgiva called out as she returned to the kitchen. But a glance across the room made her fall silent. She walked across to where Allhan lay, and looked down at him. She wondered who he was, wondered at herself for having invited him into her home. And she was full of foolish hope. She rather liked him. He seemed gentle, and he was handsome enough. Actually, she thought he was gorgeous, and she’d been running away with fantasies of romantic picnics by the river, days at the market together,

curling up against him in bed on a cold night. It was absurd! He could be anybody. He could be a criminal, or crazed – more likely for a naked vagabond. He'd barely told her anything about himself, in fact nothing except for his name. But she had to leave this place at some point, make her own life. There were no prospects on the farm, few in the neighbourhood; she needed to marry, and she was already twenty-four. At least this man seemed different; perhaps he wouldn't mind her being so old? She blessed her father for being away at the market for another two days: there was time. She tore herself away from standing and staring at Allhan, cut herself a slice of cheese, poured a mug of milk, and tried to think of something really nice she could cook for supper. What would he like?

When Allhan awoke he could sense that night had fallen, but it wasn't completely dark and the light wasn't that of the moon. He couldn't smell the usually frowsty, dank forest floor, and the only breeze he could detect was warm. Cautiously, he lifted himself up onto his elbows, felt the unfamiliar friction of his clothes, saw the half-remembered shapes of the cottage kitchen in a new, yellow light, and suddenly recalled where he was. His mind tumbled, dizzy with disorientation, but his arms pushed his body up from the floor, and brushing hair away from his eyes, he turned to see Elgiva standing by the kitchen table. Embarrassed – some deep memory of it not being right to sit, let alone lie down in the presence of a standing lady – he sprang to his feet. He stared at the woman; who was she? He didn't recognise her. And then it came to him: she had changed her clothes. A clean white blouse, a cream bodice and an ankle-length, deep green skirt. It was the woman who had bathed him. He quieted his mind and concentrated, trying to recall experience from his former life. Though far from confident, his thoughts not yet coherent, he knew that now was the moment that he must step back into the social, human world. Remaining an outcast retained a tremendous appeal for him, but he had become self-conscious, it

had changed everything, the forest could not harbour him now, and he had to move on.

‘You’re awake, sir,’ Elgiva observed. Allhan looked at her rather vacantly. ‘Don’t worry, I’ve checked the stock, the ducks and hens are in, and I’ve milked the cow. There’s beer on the table and I’ve cooked a shepherd’s pie.’ She glanced at him nervously. ‘You do like shepherd’s pie, I hope?’

‘Why, yes,’ Allhan replied. ‘Yes... thank you’.

‘Could you light the fire, sir? It’s getting quite chill.’

‘Yes, of course.’ He saw the tinderbox on the mantelpiece and remembered.

Allhan ate with relish; the complex flavours a delight. Elgiva watched him; pleased she had made a good choice. They said little. Elgiva opened her mouth to speak now and again, but unsure what to say ultimately said nothing, while Allhan was so enthralled by the food that it drove virtually all recollection of table conversation from his mind, though he did observe, rather abruptly, that her hair had changed.

‘Yes. I’ve let it down and brushed it out. Do you like it?’

Allhan looked up and studied her hair intently. Elgiva found it rather unnerving. At length he replied. ‘It is a beautiful colour, and as rich as the brush of a vixen. The way it falls reminds me of the manes of ivy that envelop the oaks in the heart of the forest. No, more fluid than ivy, let me rather say like the cascade of the perfect waterfalls I have seen along the woodland streams half shrouded by ferns.’

‘Sir,’ said Elgiva quietly, looking down and blushing.

‘I’m sorry,’ Allhan replied, afraid he had offended. ‘I only speak as I find, and perhaps not...’

‘No, no... it was lovely. Are... are you a poet then, with those lovely words?’

Allhan caught her eye as she looked up again. He was smiling, his eyes full of good humour. ‘Yes, I was once, I suppose. A writer

at any rate.'

Allhan resumed his silence, but after a few minutes Elgiva broke in on it, an impatience was upon her now. 'Have you finished?'

'Yes.'

'Do you smoke tobacco?'

'I don't think so.'

'Good.' She paused. 'Then take your beer and sit down by the fire, and tell me who you are. I can't stand waiting any longer. I want to know everything. And then you can ask about me.'

'Well, I was born in Watersmeet.'

'Watersmeet? Where's that?'

'Near Wetheridge.'

Elgiva looked blank.

'Near Rockpoint?'

'Rockpoint! Down by the sea? That's nearly two weeks away by horse; I've never been so far. What brought you up here?'

'It's a long story.'

'I like stories.'

'Well, I've done a lot...'

He told her he'd been to a school and had an education, that he'd travelled abroad for years, been a mariner and a publican, that he'd worked as a farmer, a teacher and a cooper – 'My family were coopers, that's where my name comes from' – and that finally he'd been a village Elder.

'It was after that that I travelled north, far north of here, alone. I lost everything, lived like a hunter and a hermit. I had to go...'

Elgiva studied his face. He had spoken clearly and plainly until this point, but now he seemed confused, disturbed.

'What happened?' she asked. 'Why did you have to leave?'

Allhan looked up at her, then stared into the fire, twisting his hands together, fidgeting on his chair. 'I don't remember properly. I don't seem to be able to remember...'

Elgiva tried to be patient, but she waited a long time and still he said no more. She wanted to know what had driven him to become a naked vagabond, of course, but another part of her mind had a more pressing concern. She was beginning to feel that Allhan Cooper was just the kind of man she wanted: educated, capable. Clearly he could make something of himself again, whatever had caused his fall, but there was one thing she must know, one crucial thing. After more waiting, more silence, she felt she could raise the subject without it sounding rude or too obvious.

‘Did you have a wife, Allhan?’

He looked at her now, and his body seemed to quieten a little. He blinked and rubbed his chin.

‘Yes, I did.’ Elgiva’s heart dropped into the pit of her stomach. ‘I did, yes... yes, but she left me.’

‘She what?’

‘She left me,’ he went on, more animated now. ‘She was from the east, another country. Beautiful, strong... a wild spirit. We had no children, she couldn’t bear that... you see for her a child bound the marriage. It’s her people’s way, so she left to find another. Soon after, I came north.’

‘Well, I’m not surprised. Oh sir... Allhan’ – her hope was flooding back. ‘So you’re not really married at all, then?’

‘But there was something else.’

‘Pardon?’

‘The night I set out, something else happened. There was a fire, I think, but I can’t remember.’

‘Can’t remember what?’

‘Sorry? I’m sorry... what did you ask me?’

Elgiva felt awkward now, and she didn’t want to say it again. What had he been talking about? A fire? ‘I said I suppose you aren’t really married, then.’

Allhan looked at her, puzzled, as if he didn’t understand the question. He was desperate to remember what had happened during

his last days in Watersmeet, but beyond scattered images of his parents' house, Alsoph's cottage, an Assembly meeting, and fire, there seemed to be only an oily blackness he couldn't penetrate. He tried to concentrate, to break through the veil, and as he did so, a plethora of strong emotions, predatory, domineering compulsions, surged through him; unbidden, irresistible. He felt as strong and confident as a rutting buck, and desperately wanted to express himself physically. Run hard, hunt, kill, fight. Or fuck...

He swivelled his head around towards Elgiva, his hair shielded the intensity of his gaze. He could smell her, and without thinking he started to rise to his feet.

But then, suddenly, there was a new voice in his head; loud, passionate, protesting, 'No, you can choose!' and instantly the fire drained out of him. He stepped back from the darkness in his mind, looked across the fireplace to see an intense, uncomfortable expression on Elgiva's face, and he remembered her question. 'No, I suppose you are right. I have no wife, now.'

And Elgiva relaxed.

They settled back into their chairs, strangely exhausted by the intensity of the last few minutes, but both at peace once more. Elgiva happy with her answer, Allhan's heart at rest and his mind pleased with both the homely comfort of the cottage and Elgiva's company. He considered her. She was kind and generous, and he was thankful she was the first person he had met. He knew little about her as yet, but he wanted to find out more. He smiled at her.

'Will you tell me about yourself now, Elgiva?' – it was the first time he had used her name – 'And why you take in naked vagabonds?'



## TWO

The twins Alaric and Alsoph Cooper were born in the village of Watersmeet on a bitter day in December.

Their father, Edmund Cooper, came from a family of brewers and coopers; hence his name. In his late twenties Edmund had inherited his uncle's business in the village of Watersmeet. The woman who subsequently pursued and ultimately enthralled him – Una Shepherd, now his wife – was a daughter of a prominent family from the more northerly upland village of Wetheridge. Una's father, Hal Shepherd, had made his fortune in the woollen business, but after the untimely death of his wife, Hal's spirit had broken, and in his grief he took to drink. That same year, during the months of Una's pregnancy, she and her younger sister Bryony had taken their father in hand, sold his business for a good price, and brought him to live with them in Watersmeet. With 'them' because Bryony too had moved. She had spent that same year struggling with an ill-conceived marriage to a distant cousin; a farmer, Seamus Shepherd. It had been a grim time, which had culminated in Bryony leaving, and with her suffering a miscarriage just a matter of days before Una came to term. A painful year, and the family looked forward to Una and Edmund's new babies' arrival – the doctor had confirmed twins – not just for the pleasure of the children themselves, but as a symbol of a new beginning.

In the last days of her pregnancy, extremely uncomfortable and – according to her doctor – also late, Una became so frustrated that against advice she rode out one morning on her chestnut gelding to try and induce the birth. Although she alarmed her husband and

family by doing so, it nonetheless worked; when she returned from her ride she could barely stand, she experienced the first contractions, and the midwife was called in. The twins were a long time coming. In her discomfort, Una kept moving around, changing her position, until she finally settled on crouching with her back pressed against the bedroom wall. The midwife offered encouragement, Una ground her teeth, whilst Edmund mopped sweat from his wife's brow.

At last, the first child came. Big, and as soon as the head was out the child uttered a yell of remarkable violence, which shocked all three adults present. To the midwife's consternation, after the shoulders were out, the rest of the body seemed reluctant to follow. She was even more alarmed – though she sought to hide it – when she discovered that the second child was going to be born feet first, no chance of turning, and that he or she seemed, as far as she could tell, to be holding onto the first child's thighs; their legs all but interlocked. With gargantuan effort, and with the midwife carefully guiding and smoothing the tangle of tiny limbs, Una bore down hard with her final, body-wracking contractions, and the twins were born, the cords cut, and the babies gathered into a clean sheet. While Una recovered in her husband's arms, the midwife took the twins and washed them both. An easy enough task, but prising the second child's hands from the legs of the first took some effort, provoking a predictable wailing. In the meantime, Una, quickly recovering from the first wave of her exhaustion, called out,

‘My children; bring them to me.’

‘They're here for you,’ the midwife answered, and, as Una took them from her, one into the crook of each arm, the midwife ended by saying, ‘Boys they are; both boys, and the bigger one the elder.’

Over the next few days, Una thought on names for her sons. She'd decided on the old way: names with traditional meanings. The older child was clearly strong-willed and loud, and his red hair was, unusually, evident on his legs and buttocks as well as his head. He

was a handful to feed, nipping violently, and Una was grateful that her sister Bryony offered to help by acting as wet nurse; though this created some tension as Alaric was clearly more peaceful with Bryony than with his mother. The younger son was very different. Completely bald, smaller than his elder brother, he seemed inquisitive but almost preternaturally quiet and passive, with intense, staring eyes. The twins could not have been more unlike, and, in the end, with considerable prescience, Una reflected this in their names. The elder she called Alaric Griffith, 'red-haired leader'; the younger, Alsoph Casimir, 'peaceful thinker'.

Una rose early from her bed. Remarkably, she had only torn a little giving birth, had no fever, and wanted to press on with her life as quickly as possible. Her first task was to prepare the open house, a traditional hospitality. Seven days when all comers would be welcome, to greet the newborn and share food and drink to celebrate their entry into village life. Aside from the family, one of the first to visit was Evelyn Francis.

Evelyn was the village farrier. A well-built man in his thirties with a tendency to fat, exacerbated by his love of beer. He was also the village's self-styled storyteller, ribald and fool; always ready to provide entertainment at dances, weddings and the like. Something of a legacy of elder days, his skills were much appreciated nonetheless, especially by the village children. He was a man seemingly troubled by nothing, and inclined to a light touch in all his dealings. Despite his public face, he was essentially a very private person, and kept himself apart; but in as far as he was anyone's friend, he was Edmund's.

Evelyn greeted Una and the newborn twins jovially, tickling the babies' feet in turn.

'Two. Why two, I must ask? Surely one would have been sufficient? Are not two rather indulgent? Would not a single one, neither so loud nor so quiet, have been simpler?

Una smiled broadly and Edmund thumped Evelyn's shoulder good-naturedly.

'To both of them,' Evelyn continued, raising the glass of beer Edmund had proffered, before proclaiming in theatrical style. 'Each man alone struggles to be complete, perhaps between the two of them they will manage it. And health to the disgustingly smug parents. Still friends I trust?'

'Still friends,' Edmund replied, laughing, and raised his glass in turn.

Other visitors were less convivial. Upon their departure Edmund and Una heard any number remark, in supposedly confidential whispers, upon the hairiness of Alaric and the eerily quiet, staring Alsoph. Una became wearied by these graceless mutterings; Edmund was angered. As one couple were leaving he overheard the words, 'An odd pair; devils both', and felt afraid that his family would become victims of superstition. But on the third day, the doctor called.

'Each generation brings forth a number of hairy, or otherwise particular, children. I will turn foolish opinion whenever I encounter it.'

At that moment Alaric let out one of his piercing cries. Una reached for Edmund's hand. 'Find Bryony for me, love.'

The twins grew. They were healthy, they were loved, but they could not have been called easy children. The night Alaric tried to push Alsoph over the bars of their shared cot; later, the numerous fights Alaric fell into with village children; the occasion of Bryony's second marriage to the traveller John Woodman, when Alaric had yelled uncontrollably and smashed a stack of plates and bowls set out on the wedding party tables, while Alsoph wandered off unseen into the surrounding fields and took anxious hours to find; any number of days when Alsoph drove his family and friends to distraction with a stream of questions as to what the moon was made of, why

clouds don't fall down, why water doesn't have a colour, and so on, endlessly...

Alsoph came to be deeply interested in schooling, as might have been expected; Alaric something of a prodigy regarding practical skills, as well as a natural leader and an object of awe and fear amongst his peers. Una, Edmund and their family were encouraged by the twins' evident strengths, and consoled themselves after difficult incidents involving Alaric, that he would learn greater self-control in time. Hal – Una and Bryony's father, who after his time of grief, so quickly gained the respect of the village community that he'd recently been elected Elder – summed up the feelings of many, one night after a shared meal,

'Alaric's like the dominant pup in a litter. Is he going to be your best working dog or is he going to be trouble?'

'He's only a child,' countered Bryony.

'For a little while,' said Hal. 'And he must become a man, not "trouble".'

During Alaric and Alsoph's eleventh year, there came a hot day in June when a party of children ventured upstream of Watersmeet along the banks of the Marish - the smaller and quieter of the two rivers that converged near the village, and so-called because its meandering channel cut through, and fed, marshy ground in the belly of the valley. A path by the bank was kept clear throughout the year for fishing and fowl, and as the most direct route to the lambing sheds and remote grazing at the head of the valley. But it was also a favourite place of the children. In the summer the dry path was smooth and warm underfoot for running, while reeds and rushes made a lush jungle for concealment. Some liked to find and pick the numerous flowers; arrowhead, frogbit, water crowfoot and long purples, while many liked to swim. Best of all, along the side of the path, crack willows stood at regular intervals; ancient pollards with broad, bulbous crowns topped by young whiplash branches.

The older children would climb onto the crowns then dive over their companions' heads, through the screen of flowering rushes and cat's tails and into the water.

It was the first time that Alaric and Alsoph had joined such an expedition and the eldest boys of fourteen and fifteen held forth about their knowledge and experience of the Marish and its entertainments, directing their boasting and worldliness to Alaric in particular, as he was nearly as tall and strong as they – while only ten – and consequently both their most promising initiate and greatest threat. By the time they had reached a favoured spot, Alaric was hot with irritated pride. Alsoph saw the building tension in his brother and tried to distract him with talk, pointing out birds and flowers, offering food from his satchel, reminding him of the Assembly meeting they would attend with their father the following day. But his attempts had misfired. The older boys told him to stop his mouth, which reflected badly on Alaric, who then rounded on Alsoph in turn.

‘Go and play with the little children, brother.’

It was the custom for younger boys and girls to wear a simple tunic in summer, cut to the thigh and tied at the waist. They ran barefoot. From twelve or thirteen the girls wore skirts and dresses or, like the boys, trousers. These adult clothes denoted rank within the children's hierarchy. Alaric had worn trousers from infancy, to hide his hairiness from ignorant eyes, and he wore them now. His peers no longer commented upon them but the older boys felt compelled to jibe. They began coining nicknames for him.

‘My name is Alaric,’ he protested.

‘We know it is, little man. Little Man Trousers.’

Alaric bit his tongue, and walking under the shade of an ash, leaned casually against its trunk, feigning indifference. The older boys began stripping off their clothes. One of them called out. ‘Can you dive, Little Man Trousers?’

Alaric undid his belt and pulled his shirt over his head. Then he

stepped out of his trousers and silenced the boys' clamour; his legs were covered in curling hair, his groin thick with it. Hair covered his buttocks but grew thinner across his hips and faded into a smooth belly. But his chest was no hairier than a man's, nor were his arms. The children began to laugh; now Alaric really was Little Man Trousers. His anger high but his courage sapped by mockery, Alaric covered himself roughly with his clothes and retreated to sit by his brother in the shade of another tree. Burying his face in his hands he began to cry.

Alsoph moved closer to his brother but chose not to touch him. He opened his mouth to speak, but was cut off. From high in the diving-tree, two boys – brothers, the sons of a farmer from the south of the village – shouted down to Alaric once more.

'Crying, Little Man? Scared you'll get your pelt wet?' And laughing, they both dived. The spring of their legs pushed them up above the platform, and then forward in an arc through air, reed, and smoothly into the water, side by side.

Humiliation finally driving all but anger and pride from his mind, Alaric jumped to his feet with a cry and running to the diving-tree climbed quickly onto its crown. Barely pausing, he leapt out into the air, uncollected and inelegant, but nonetheless drove into the water between the two brothers. In his rage he turned to the younger and grasped him by an arm and a thigh. Wading to the bank, he dragged his victim through the water beside him and at the last heaved the struggling boy out of the river and slammed him hard onto the path, on his back, breathless. Alaric then turned to the elder brother, who was in pursuit, and punched him in the face. Blood broke out from a split lip in a torrent across the older boy's chin, he fell backward into the river and sank to the shallow bed. Alaric plunged down beneath the surface and the children on the bank began calling for help. Alsoph watched swirls of mud and strings of bloody mucous rise in the water and carry away in the gentle current. Then, suddenly, Alaric's head broke from the water. His eyes were closed, his head

straining upward, hair plastered down his neck. Upon his back – arms pulled around his neck, head across his left shoulder – the elder brother, his lip bleeding down Alaric’s arm. Alaric let out a deep gasping crow of triumph.

Striding through the water to the bank he climbed easily onto the path, still holding the farmer’s son across his back, lifted off the ground. A girl ran to Alaric, put her arms around his waist and kissed him. Alaric stared into her face; saw eyes wild with excitement. Rosabel. He had heard his mother saying that Rosabel was a woman now. He did not understand; he knew her to be fourteen. She smoothed her hand down Alaric’s bloodied arm then wiped it across his face, finally hooking a sickly sweet finger into his mouth. Alaric’s eyes never left hers. He said nothing.

She said, ‘You’re no Little Man. I’d call you a horse with a tail like this.’ And as she spoke she took him in her hand. Alaric saw that her eyes were green. He did not rise to her hand, he did not understand her touch, but he saw in her face a compelling excitement and a need stronger than the passions he himself had known, and been cautioned for, in the past. He knew then that they, everyone – family, Assembly, village – had seen him but mild yet. He released his hold on his burden’s wrists and caught Rosabel in a powerful embrace. The boy’s body fell to the ground behind his knees, pushing Alaric forward, and Rosabel’s hand gripped harder.