

of boughs and birdsong

by Madeleine Rose Dobson

The shadows are countless, gnarled, and fanged. Like ivy, they crawl uninhibited.

Cocooned within an old quilt, Camille tracks the sprawl of shadows as moonlight is ensnared, then released, by swarming trees swaying in the dark.

Earlier in the day, the trees were enchanting. During a long drive through flourishing forest, then along a razor-thin road daggered by hairpin bends, Camille took mental snapshots of as many trees as possible. The ones so drastically windswept that their boughs were bent. The ones standing like columns, so tall that they might be holding up the sky.

Now, near midnight, they seem menacing. They have this lonely house in a chokehold. Through trembling windowpanes, they hurl countless shadows at Camille, keeping her from sleep.

She hadn't imagined it would be like this. Camille thought she needed space, some room to breathe. Her late aunt's home – now her own – seemed the perfect respite.

"Lucie," Camille whispers into the darkness, hoping for a reply that will not come.

She last heard her aunt's name uttered at the funeral. It echoed through the empty chapel, bouncing off worn stone: *Goodbye, Aunt Lucette*. Camille had learned to refer to her with formality when surrounded by so-called family. Then, realising how stilted that must sound to the pastor who already seemed to hold her in contempt, Camille rushed to correct herself: *Auntie Lucie*.

After Lucie's coffin was transported away, the pastor threw one last handful of words at Camille. *It's no surprise you're her favourite, is it? I heard you got the house. That's where they're taking her now.* Camille just stared at him until he retreated.

After gathering herself up from the pew, Camille began the long walk down the aisle, pretending not to hear the pastor's final remark: *I suppose that's where she belongs.*

Though her every desire was to turn, charge at him, and strike his withered face, Camille kept going, far beyond the chapel, her feet ablaze with her harried pace.

When she arrived amidst this sprawling forest with Lucie's house nestled at its heart, the isolation delighted Camille. She dropped her bags and rushed to find Lucie's grave, tucked at the end of one of the garden paths, drenched in golden light and graced by lush thickets of lavender.

Lucie preferred a life spent amongst the flowers. She was at one with the world when it was gentle and quiet, especially when that sense of peace was scored by the birds and their chorales. Others might characterise this choice of resting place in the same way they did Lucie — lonesome, peculiar, inconvenient — but to Camille, it seems idyllic.

Nightfall strips all of that away. It devours the forest in a single bite, and with it, the house. Camille has always been alone in one way or another, but never like this.

When the trees to the east bend a certain way, she can glimpse the dull amber glow of the neighbour's porch light. They are separated by labyrinthine trees fighting for purchase across rough terrain.

As Camille curls in bed, watching shadows *piqué* and *pirouette*, she wonders what worries her so. Her solitude is hardly novel. Even when Lucie was still around, they were rarely in each other's company. They connected over a crackling phone line and in messy strokes of ink on precious pages: Lucie's from a proper letter-writing kit, each crisp piece of paper trimmed with daisy chains, and Camille's torn from whatever notebook she could find.

She can count on one hand how many times they were together. Her fourth birthday, when she first came to adore her Auntie Lucie, who came marching into the party, her hair a magnificent shade of fuchsia. Her tenth, when Lucie's friend Billie delighted in painting everyone's faces. A kindness unappreciated by the other grown-ups.

Camille tries not to think about how she begged to keep the facepaint on, nor how hard her mother scrubbed to do away with those glorious arcs of colourful glitter.

Her eighteenth, spent in a rattling car, driving tirelessly to find Lucie, to see her again. A forbidden treat. Lucie pretended that no time had passed, but Camille could see it in the etchings around her aunt's eyes and the greyness near her temples.

That greyness sprawled like cobwebs over the Christmas to follow, and Camille's twentieth birthday, where they drank until the stars swam and laughed until their ribs rumbled.

And then Lucie went away.

It is a childish thing to think of her aunt having 'gone away', but Camille can't bear to put more concrete terms to it. She has seen it all in black and white on documentation that came addressed to her. How odd, to hold such grim paperwork in her sun-freckled hands, those pollen-dots so much more prominent than they were in Camille's childhood. She has long felt that she held onto Lucie with the same hands that reached to play with her fuchsia curls.

Here, Lucie is much closer than she was throughout Camille's dreary adolescence. She is woven through the house, stitched within treasured books and knick-knacks. The garden flourishes in every shade she ever dyed her hair, and then some. Camille recognises her while wandering the yard, grazing her fingertips over flowers that she knows not how to care for.

Not yet. Answers are likely lurking in Lucie's journals, the dozens of them filling the shelf below her collection of du Mauriers.

Whenever Camille picks up one of the journals, she is overwhelmed by the not-quite-silence: the tip-tap of branches on glass, the anonymous creaking coming from the walls. When she plucks at the pink ribbons serving as bookmarks, those whispered sounds accelerate into a roar, until it sounds like a giant is lumbering through the forest, crushing trees in his wake.

On and on the roaring goes while Camille surrounds herself with journals, huddling amongst them atop trembling floorboards. As soon as they were freed from the confines of the shelf, the journals burst open, and now they lay around her, blossoming into a rustling meadow of pages.

While poring through those pages, Camille's gaze leapfrogs between words: *Billie* and *can't* and *please God*. Inevitably, it comes back to God, in journals old and new. In the entries written days before Lucie's passing, her faith was as pronounced as her longing. Just as the forest sounds like it is bound to collapse in on itself, Camille returns the journals to their rightful place. The roar subsides, the rustling stops. Camille is unsettled by the ensuing silence. She can't bring herself to read on, but she knows her search must continue.

Eventually, Camille finds Billie's phone number. She calls while wandering back and forth between Lucie's bed – now her own –

and the mahogany wardrobe by the window. The cord only stretches so far. The crackle in Camille's ear fills her with a familiar fondness. *How lucky*, she thinks, to have grown up knowing that someone was out there. Far away, yes, but there in the world, and there for her.

Wherever Billie is, it isn't at the other end of the phone. Eventually, the ringing is replaced by a steady *beep-beep-beep* that falls in stride with the *tip-tap-tip-tap* of a crooked branch outside the window. It seems as if it is pointing to the wardrobe, that great beast of a thing which looks like the kind of magical portal Camille grew up reading about and yearning for.

She lets the phone rest on the windowsill where it goes on *beep-beep-beep*-ing. Camille waits by the wardrobe, staring down at her hands as they reach for the brass handles. Yesterday, she lay outside, basking in the sunshine streaming through the canopy.

Today, the house is dark. The garden isn't nearly as sun-kissed as it usually is. When Camille glances out the window, she is struck by the cavernousness of the trees, gathered into a tangled procession, hunched wearily over the flowers. The blossoms are furled, like they ought to be at dusk or dawn.

Shaking her head, Camille looks away. She grasps the handles of the wardrobe and wrenches it open.

A portal it is not, but for a split second, she is fooled. There is a single shelf running through the middle of the wardrobe. It is home to a jewellery box, small and heart-shaped, its golden exterior gleaming despite the gloom. Camille grazes her hand over its glossy surface momentarily. She becomes absorbed by the back of the wardrobe, which has rotted away, as has the plasterboard behind it.

Crawling through from the outside are branches. They are webbed across what once was the rear of the wardrobe, forming a wall in their own right, with not so much as a pinprick of light blinking through.

Instinctively, Camille reaches to open the jewellery box, which contains two rings, bound together with ribbon.

The wind swells into an echoing wail. Camille recoils. She kicks the wardrobe doors closed and grabs the phone, which is still *beep-beep-beep*-ing. Back into the cradle it goes, landing with a rattle.

Just as Camille steadies herself, there is a gargantuan pounding at the front door. It sends her heart a-skitter.

Nobody should be here. She ought to be alone.

After creeping up to peer through the peephole, Camille recognises the next-door neighbours. They have come with a basket of preserves, each jar labelled with pristine calligraphy.

Those butter-wouldn't-melt types, Lucie once said, cocking her head when she and Camille hurried by that picture-perfect cottage, the front yard razed back and glossed over with lawn. To this day, it is, without fail, meticulously manicured.

When she opens the door, the neighbours begin to babble. Camille can barely hear them over the wailing wind and the *thump-thump-thump* of the trees. They don't appear to notice the racket. They ramble ceaselessly, offering up hollow sympathies. After thrusting the basket at her, they go, arm-in-arm, never looking back.

Once they are out of sight, Camille hangs in the doorway, processing their largely one-sided conversation. After the stock-standard commiserations and all of that bilge, there were prying questions about her intentions for 'the land', as if Lucie's home weren't held in the embrace of this wild and wondrous plot.

Before Camille could answer, the husband cleared his throat — a harrowed hacking followed by a phlegmy cough — and then he droned on about finding Lucie, how strange it was, how strange *she* was.

An odd old bird, he said, not meeting Camille's eye. His wife's mouth scrunched, her head tilting slightly as if she were about to shake it disapprovingly.

Odd indeed, she muttered, staring at Camille with a painfully sharp gaze.

With a flinch, Camille closes the door. There is a warmth in her left palm, a moistness. Unclenching her fist, she finds the rings still clutched there, practically embedded, the stones cutting into her flesh, the gold bands and the pink ribbon rosy with blood. Camille slips the rings into her pocket and gravitates back to the door, which she deadbolts.

For a spell, she rests her hands on the wood. It feels like the trunk of a tree, creaking amidst a gust of wind.

Outside, the day is as still as Camille, who doesn't move until the sun has long since sunk. On and on the creaking goes. She remains frozen, listening, attuning. With time, she realises the house is singing out.

In coming to think of it as a song, she is coaxed into a contented sway. After waltzing off to bed, Camille sleeps easier, comforted by the company croaked out by her home and caressed by threads of moonlight dancing through the branches tumbling out of the wardrobe.

At daybreak, the light vanishes. Camille sits up in bed and stares into the wardrobe, at those tightly clustered branches. Most are tangled, but some are unravelling across the floorboards. They come from the trees overhanging the bedroom. Now that Camille looks carefully, she can see that there is a great bough draped over the window.

Up she gets, padding around in Lucie's old slippers, the fuzzy toes hand-embroidered like the curtains and cushions in the family room.

Can it be called that, Camille wonders, if Lucie was so bereft of family? If she herself is, especially with her only close kin now long gone?

'Long gone' are words that wallop Camille right in the chest. *She's long gone*, her father spat when asked why Lucie wasn't at her eleventh birthday party. Perhaps her parents say the same about both of them now. One dead, one as good as.

In search of reassurance that Lucie isn't 'long gone', Camille rushes outside to that dense copse of lavender. Somewhere up above, the sun is gleaming in a cloudless sky. Camille is only distantly aware of that blazing blue, for the garden is sheltered by trees and lavender bushes.

Even in the gloom, the flowers are thriving, brushing up against trees, yearning to reach just as far into the sky.

Camille sinks to her knees by the grave. She traces the L-U-C-I-E carved into the stone, which she insisted upon as adamantly as she insisted on having Billie paint butterflies all over her face. That was the first time she could remember feeling like herself.

As midnight approached on her tenth birthday, Camille lay in bed, her face red-raw and aching, her chest once again burdened by weight that had always been there, and which remained until she fled. Even now, hunched over this resting place, that weight is gone. Her ribs feel more likely to rumble with laughter as she remembers dancing with Lucie around this very garden.

When Camille looks up, the sunlight is smudged out. With an almighty creaking accompanied by transcendent birdsong, the

trees close ranks. They swarm the house, fortress-like in their grasp, but there is much to them beyond their strength. There is an elegance to their formation, and the longer that Camille admires it, the more it feels like a cathedral.

If ever there were a place to be, it is here. She will be alone here, perpetually so, ensconced within this wooded fortress.

Camille lies down and revels in the scent of lavender and eucalyptus. She matches her breath to the melodic creaking and begins to learn the rhythm of the birds, their murmurations and their chatter.

That chatter ceases when a trilling suddenly sounds. The birds retreat to the trees, silent and still.

Confused, Camille frowns up at the arched boughs guarding her from all that lies beyond this safe haven.

The creaking quiets. In the hush, it becomes clear. That trilling is the phone, and it is ringing off the hook.

Billie, Camille hopes, her heart beating wildly.

As she clambers up and breaks into a sprint, the trees bellow with all their might, and the birds begin to sing again.