

Susanna Thornton

Wild Garlic

I was in the back seat with my brothers, squashed in next to a battered yellow frisbee, an orange beach ball, an old wooden cricket bat, and a case of plastic boules. There were Ordnance Survey maps jammed in the seat pockets, and a pink bucket full of pebbles and sea-smoothed shards of coloured glass wedged by my feet.

Suddenly the car braked to a halt. "Look," said my father. "What's that?"

It was evening, and we were heading back to the holiday house that we'd rented in St Ishmael's, where the far south western edge of Wales slopes down to the azure and glitter of the Celtic Sea. Our car had been nosing along the little road between open fields baked warm from a long day of sun, under the wide sky of Pembrokeshire, with the swish of the roadside bracken and bramble hedges in our ears, and the summery scent of grass blowing in through the open windows. Now we'd plunged into a wood. Dad had been tooting the horn twice each time we came to a corner. Mum was in the front seat. She had leaned back her head and closed her eyes.

When the car stopped, we were in a narrow lane overhung with dense trees. "There," said Dad. We all looked. In a stone wall at the roadside was a gate. There was a board next to it. It was dark in the wood, but we could make out a name on the board. *Monk Haven*. "Let's go see," said Dad. He turned off the engine.

I was eight and it was August, 1976. Normally we went to north Wales for our summer holiday, but this year we'd driven all the way to the south, the longest journey we'd ever made. We'd played cricket at low tide, we'd dammed streams, we'd raced in and out of the sea, spanking the hard sand and shallow water under our bare feet, splashing, pumping our knees up high not to stumble in the foamy waves. We'd dried our swimming costumes on the warm rocks, eaten salmon-paste sandwiches and wolfed down homemade vanilla buns out of Tupperware boxes. We'd touched red anemones in rock pools and watched them flinch. We'd been to see chapels, headlands, castles. Mum had taught me wild flowers. Ragged Robin. Ladies Smock. Herb Robert.

Now that I look back, I realise that as we drove home that evening, Mum was tired, and probably worried about what we were all going to eat for tea, and whether there was any milk left, and whether any of us had any clean clothes, and how much the petrol was costing. "It seems private," said Mum in the sudden quiet.

"Just a quick look," said Dad. We got out of the car and walked through the gate. Mum followed my Dad. We found ourselves on a path between deep banks, in a tiny hidden valley. Noone. It was quiet. The cool shade made the hairs stand up on my bare arms and legs. Little dunes of sand piled up in my sandals and shifted under my toes as I walked. A strange smell hung in the air. "Wild garlic," said Mum. "Look." She bent to show me, and rub the leaves. The valley twisted on. Pale moths flitted in the gloaming. I imagined monks in dark habits, dragged a little and salty with sea water, ropes at the waist, strong bare feet on wet sand. A blackbird spurted out a sudden song from somewhere in the dark branches overhead. Maybe a hermit would be there, alone in a sea-echo cave.

Suddenly the path opened out onto a tiny beach. "Oh," cried Mum, softly. We were in a place of wet stones and shingle and shade, a secret cove. The smell of salt and sea and seaweed. We stepped on tangled eels of wet bladder wrack. We slid on green stones and slippery sea lettuce, and our sandals dipped in mud-floor puddles, where little brown crabs tickled out of sight. I walked to the sea and crouched on a rock, and dipped my fingers in the water. Then I rested my head on my knees, and

looked sideways at the cliffs, and heard the sounds of the sea change. There were no monks. Just the sad gulls crying, the lilt and flip of small waves breaking. The whole tiny cove in deepening shadow. I walked back. Mum was standing next to my Dad. The light was fading over the calm sea.