

A vibrant, sun-dappled forest scene. A dirt path winds through a dense thicket of green trees and bushes. Large, textured tree trunks are prominent on the left and right sides. The foliage is a mix of bright lime green and deeper forest greens, suggesting a healthy, mature woodland. The lighting is soft and natural, filtering through the canopy.

The Determined Builder

By: Raymond Howell

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Authors Note

In this short story we meet old Gladys and it opens with her wandering through a magical spinney to revisit the best moments of her past, only to reemerge from the uplifting wood into the shadows of an insolent face and the harsh determination of modern greed and desire...

It is not a good encounter, but in its way it ends well.

Or so the Angels say...

Section One

The Determined Builder

(And the magical spinney)

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**T**he spinneys evocative, splendidly rich earthy air, zinged with magical incantations. Gently in ethereal play, the aromas assaulted Gladys's welcoming nostrils as she followed old familiar paths. Without the slightest regret for overindulging, her usual restrained habits were cast carelessly aside as she greedily and dizzily imbibed the air.

The richly delicious, kaleidoscopic tangs caressing her hungry lungs stirred a whole host of memories. From the many secret folds of her stout and robustly forward-looking spirit, they came out-a-dancing to fill her mind to overflowing. From there they passed on down to her almost flat, time-worn ageing feet, urging them on to take a lighter beat.

Those occasionally browbeaten or slightly bemused individuals Gladys accosts and bullies into the latest flower arranging or litter picking scheme while darting with gallivant-mayfly-heart about the village know only her busy-body bustling caring self. Her new calm mood and soft expression as she floated through dreams, would have come as a great surprise, the sort that raises smiles to stretch gossiping lips and twinkles to burst in crow-lined or heavily mascaraed disbelieving eyes.

Although her face was still the shiny makeup-free and slightly wrinkled becomingly round the village folk were familiar with, it was also wonderfully

without its habitually determined frown. Instead, a wistful smile blessed her cheeks and touched her eyes into sparkles, visible even in those shadows so carelessly sprinkled around by her beloved trees. But not about her person in sombre shades of old regrets, for the grey untouchables as they fell around her steps were simply there to please.

Had there indeed been other humans present what they could not have guessed, is that Gladys at that very moment was enjoying a certain early evening in 1943. June the 5th at 18:20, to be exact.

Noticeably to the wood nymphs that flew through the trees to accompany Gladys as she travelled back in time, there were no sorrowful sighs over stiffening limbs. Or her failing hearing, which annoyingly smothered the subtle rise and fall nuances that she knew lay beautifully in all birdsong. But her heart was aware and she could hear enough of their song to set her accompanying memories to breakout in sparkling chorus as she walked that well-trodden path towards her favourite tree. Although the 1943 path of memory was so very different.

It was less worn for one and there was no dried polluted mud either. Instead, it was thickly laid with lush grass that was both figuratively and often daisy-blessed and dotted with red campion and ragged robins and the rest of the one-time floral gangs which blessed the meadows, woods, fields and lanes back then. While of course, sweet wood-forget-me-not were there a-plenty and the idea of rose petals might well have blessed the path's meandering way. In her memory, the path was also wider and easily passed along by two, if walked abreast, hand in hand and in shoulder-to-shoulder rest. There were no stray brambles either to slow the quest. Or deep shadows to dread as the evening sun seemingly startled at being awake so late after a long winter's blight, blazed through the canopy to cast dapple light upon their tread as they walked together in touched, yet untouched, caress. No wonder she was smiling so sweet, so private, so happily complete and so oblivious to

the aches of her swollen feet.

A few steps on in eager longing, she turned an obvious corner in the wriggly path where considerate tree roots decline to roam and there it was. Just a short way ahead. The little clearing she knew so well both night and day, in light and dark and life's many shades of pernicious grey. It was where her special tree stood. The tree, their tree.

And oh..., it's not quite as once it was..., her slowing steps suggested. But then again neither am I, a gradual shy smile acknowledged. You and I have both gnarled somewhat with age, haven't we? She thought sadly while noting the long drooping lower boughs, reminiscent of her late grandfather's long luxuriant eyebrows. With a little silent sigh, she fancied the bark's wrinkles were more deeply etched than memory cared to fetch. But it matters not. For you're still here awaiting my embrace.

"Just as I hope you will be until the end of my life's race." She whispered, fondly for the tree's noble grace, with the knowledge her heart's wish will journey to join the tree's spirit inhabiting that other invisible world. The one so free of human face and debase, where trees are hailed as majestic and not scandalously felled, or callously defaced to please the human race.

## Section Two

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But the long-anticipated reunion with her past was sadly marred - her steps inconsiderately barred by a fallen tree caught in the act of returning to Mother Earth her splendid gifts. Where so it lay in slow but purposeful softening rot across her seeking way.

As far as Gladys was able to tell as she looked about for an easier path, other than the thickening of trunks and the odd fallen tree the wood was largely untouched by time. While more thankfully, it was also free of the influence of greedy men she happily noted, as it has largely been since that kindly Lord several centuries before ignored that unspoken privileged lore which said, 'give the poor nothing but take it all', and in kindness had gifted the wood to us, the village.

And thereafter, we the locals could gleam the fallen branches and cones for our otherwise empty hearths. Occasionally a tree was taken out when it posed a serious problem to people or new saplings alike, but otherwise and especially so since the advent of central heating and smokeless zones, it's been left virtually unmolested, she decided with a smile, only then to briefly frown. Most of the locals are not even aware it belongs to them, she thought and why are they not told? Who decided that? Which then stirred a memory of standing up in a parish council meeting to object to a parishioner's complaint about what he considered a blight on his sight. "I can't see the fields from me ouse where me daughter rides her orse, cos those blimming trees are in the flipping way. It's time they blimming well went." Or so his selfish anger spilt til spent.

Then her warm smile returned to burn off the frosty frown as she recalled village children using the wood over the years to make camps. Or energetically racing around the paths on their bikes. Or so once they did, she reflected, while carefully prising her coat from the fallen tree's fingers. On other visits she might well have toyed with the idea that the tree was trying to use her to pull itself upright again, but this day her thoughts were with the children. Or more correctly, the lack of them in the wood. For a moment she was uncertain if she was happy about that or sad. Children need to run about, to shout in play, "I'm hiding, I'm hiding - start your counting then come and find me... if you may." But that internet thing, of which she often happily declared I'm a proud virgin, seems to keep most of them locked up indoors. They are imprisoned by an ignorance of the joys of nature, she decided with a shrug. And oh, what a shame. How will they ever learn to socialise and empathise? No wonder there is so much hate, narcissism and bad-tempered destruction going on around us. And won't their contributions to conversations be so empty and lame unless they are talking about their silly online games?

This wood is so sadly empty of those children's voices that once rang cheerfully through the trees, she mused. It's as silent now as a church without a congregation. Only the odd solitary dog walker visits, that is, when they can be bothered to emerge from the village, she thought sarkily. And the occasional soul communing with the wood spirits to try and find themselves again. Much like me today, she thought. Happily, otherwise, my spinney's been left to grow as it wants. Until spring arrives, she happily acceded when nature carpets the wood with a thick layer of bluebells. Then it fills to burst with rapturous visitors armed with those silly cell phone things, all eager to be seen enjoying nature's beautiful spleen.

"Ah..., I can't wait for the bluebells myself" she sighed gently. Only for a smile to touch her lips as she was blessed with the memory of her dear mother whose last wish was to see those very same flowers. "And we

managed to carry you here, didn't we mum" she whispered fondly. Where her fancied wood nymphs carried the words off to add their harmony into the soft music stirred by the gently swaying canopies.

Section Three

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"J ust look at pathetic me..." she murmured scornfully as she returned to real-time with a tut of regret for her age. "I can't even scramble over this fallen trunk when once I would have done so eagerly... Oh, you were a naughty hussy then", she murmured with a smile as she tried again to unhitch her coat from the tree's clasp.

Twisting away from the branch her toes disturbed traces of the tree's slow progression into the very soil it had once sprouted from, releasing pungent aromas of rotting wood, of damp, of decaying leaves, fungal spores and the saliva and pheromones and toileting of beetles and centipedes and all other manner of glorious life that lay in the decomposing earth. As the heady, musky, scents mingled and gambolled they awoke echoes of laughter and giggles and happy sighs from those wood nymphs of her fancy who danced like butterflies on soft cushions of warm gentle air while playing with the ghosts of a particular memory, which would not be ignored. Only then for her to chuckle at the wood nymphs teasing. "You lot have got it all wrong you know..., it isn't one memory I'm reliving actually..., but a whole happy host of them..."

Goaded by those echoes she attempted once again to pass by the fallen trunk. After a few more tangles and tussles with branches and a grazed ankle, which was worth it she thought, she finally negotiated the obstacle. Where she made her way over to her prize, that special tree, to stand before it as shyly as once she had with a certain he. In previous visits, she had sat beneath its shade to commune with her past. But not so today. The ground was too damp and she seriously doubted if she could manage to get down and even

less so, to clamber back up afterwards.

Instead, she contented herself with stroking the tree's trunk, where yes she fancied, I was right, *it is* more wrinkled. After a few moments of fond reflections which she kept secret even from the air's aromal search, but not from the wood nymphs, for they were giggling like she once did. With a fond smile, Gladys whispered to those traces of the past. "I love you as always my dear" before continuing along her secret circular path that took her not only through the trees but through many of her dearest memories. Where each as it arose was accompanied by that ever-heady scent and her wonderful giggling wood nymphs.

Such moments when they pleased her were also saddening for their increasing rarity. Breathlessness, heart murmurers and rheumatism along with unsteady feet were slowly stealing her freedom to walk the spinney's paths and deny passage to her joys. But this day was a good one and she intended to enjoy it to its fullest. Hidden behind her liberating freedom lay a thought that is so common to the aged. Who knows... this could well be my last day, not necessarily upon this earth, but certainly the last spent in my beloved spinney.

At her happiest when wandering where the ghosts of her past so peacefully play, she was hardly recognisable from that 'Old Gladys' everyone knew; the stalwart preserver of village traditions, the bustling organiser of fetes and O.A.P bingo nights and other such events. She was also most proudly a survivor of WWII and several tax-increasing and service-annexing governments - as well as two husbands. The last she had loved long and respectfully, while the first she loved passionately as a lover and briefly as his wife for a fortnight before he was prised from her arms and sent back to the war front. How eagerly she had written and so keenly devoured his replies which pulsed with so much love and still do when she reads them in quiet moments. But then her silly darling loving fool got himself killed

during the village's V.E day celebrations.

So keen, so desperate, to be with his love at last and he hoped forever, he had jumped from the back of the army truck which brought him to her and with a thirsty lover's haste he dashed across the road to claim her awaiting arms. Just as she stepped excitedly forward to hasten their reunion - if only by a blessed second. They had barely clasped when a bus driven by a driver languishing deep at the bottom of his celebratory glass took her beloved away, permanently.

This spinney where their young hearts once met often in secret entwine stands as a monument to all their wonderful sighs. As it will until she climbs heaven's steps to join his side once more in eternal time. Or so she lovingly fancies.

She never did and never will understand why vehicular rights are more important than humans, while the taking of life in that manner is never held to be murder. She tries hard not to dwell on the way of his passing as she walks through her memories. But it is difficult. He was taken from her without even a sorry. If anything, it was said he was at fault, for he was in the way of the bus and lorry. In the way! God Dammit! He had just fought for his country and already he was in the way!

Nor do those who profit from those vehicles care to accept the damage such things cause through their making and their running. They pollute my spinney for sure and others like it, but such blights are considered acceptable, necessary even. Where the herbs I once picked at the roadside, if they are allowed to grow again, will be tainted, poisoned, and unfit for purpose. Just like the bramble fruits I collected as a child. Don't pick those at the roadside, health warnings now declare, while also suggesting it is fine for cars to keep running there. "Oh My," she sighs as she senses the wood nymphs deserting her serious side. "How will we ever put this to right?"

## Section Four

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Living as much as she can in the past Gladys happily has nothing to do with the internet and is gladly cell phone free. She is however the proud owner of a black 1950s Bakelite G.P.O phone. Which still functions. Although rarely does it ring. Most of her friends have passed on or are trapped in care homes they have no wish to be in. But modern families have no time for the old, or so her friends moan whenever she visits. Which she reasons is sadly true, for she rarely sees her son from her first marriage. He turned his back on the village a long time ago to cast a future far across the sea. On her maudlin days, she whines, other than Christmas cards he's forgotten me. But that regret on this particular day she had deliberately left behind in the lane to fester on its own.

Happily tired by the journey through joyful yesterdays she emerged slightly flush of face from the arms of the spinney's comforting embrace. Like it or not her tired bones were calling for home and then there was the W.I's evening of baking, shaking the collection tins and two hours of gentle sniping and discreet bellyaching to finish organising.

As always after her walk, her spirit was energised and she was eager to change the world, or at the very least tidy it up a little. Sometimes she positively zinged with zeal and thrill as she once did as a young woman when standing atop a cliff to cheer on the spitfires as they grappled with the Hun over the English channel. With patriotic fervour and indignant anger - partly born from her not being able to lay with her new husband as she so yearned to do - and bursting with pride for those fly-boys, she stood tall in hostile winds to shake a resolute fist while shouting at the spectre of Hitler, whom

she imagined waiting across the English Channel. “You’ll never take us, Hitler,” she cried fearsomely into the wind, “because my darling brave handsome husband is coming to get you!”

Almost as happy and comforted as a child hugging a hot water bottle on a cold stormy night she emerged butterfly-like from the cocooning spinney. But just like all the other times underlying her happiness were those pangs of regret which pulled at her heart whenever she left her beloved realm of nature and fairy where she communes with the spirits of both her husbands. Who each in their ways had loved the wood almost as much as she. Although for quite different reasons.

Her second husband had been an avid birdwatcher. But as for her first love, well..., her memories sighs might well suggest he avidly shared her love for a certain tree. The one where she freely gave up a special part of herself to him - her future first husband Rob and it is where occasionally when she sits by their tree she gladly, although notably far more silently, gives it all up to him again. Then with a smug satisfied smile, she might whisper to the nymphs, “Whoever said it can only be taken once has certainly not met my Rob.”

Wreathed in happy memories she stepped out from the comfort of the wood to stand once more upon the lane’s hard unforgiving tarmac and was immediately assaulted by a hostile glare. But not one caused by her awaiting regret. Nor was it due to the memory of her father’s face when he caught Gladys’s leaving the spinney after having so freely given all to her young Rob, which resulted in their hasty marriage. Rather, it was the glare of an over-bright clear day, which after the warming and cloistered confines of the spinney felt a little chilly. Or was it the future’s cold shadow falling toward her to suddenly cause an instinctive shiver to run in warning riot down her spine?

Usually, during such moments when she swaps fairy skin for her human one, she might blink a few times to readjust to reality - as she thought it. Then, after whispering goodbye until next time she will turn and set off up the slight incline that marks the start of the short walk back to her cottage which sits lone and sentinel-like at the edge of the old village. But this time after those rapid blinks, where thankfully her eyes regained focus - there was always the worry they might not, age can be such an unpredictable thing - they fell upon the unwelcomed sight of the bullish, as she thought him, insolent of pose and sulky of mouth local builder loafing against his monstrous truck on the other side of the lane. Then her temper flared when she noted not only was he parked on the recently rewilded verge, heartlessly wrecking the hard work of her army of press-ganged volunteers, but he was also appraising the spinney rather too covertly for her liking.

Section Five

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"**Y**ou know full well Simon that we villagers spent months replanting that verge" Gladys admonished angrily as she crossed the lane in full anti-Hitler spirit to tear him off a strip, as her late husband was so fond of saying about politicians caught with their pants down.

It was not their dips into immoral waters that angered him so much, or so he had explained. But their denials afterwards when they had clearly been found out. "Own up man" he would shout into the air in the hopes his anger might carry the words off to where they belonged. After which he might follow up vigorously with, "Grow a spine and take your punishment." Which always made her smile, although privately, for his righteous flush-faced quivers were not that dissimilar to her own vigorous responses when in the arms of her beloved Rob. And vigorous is exactly how she felt as she gathered her ire about her in readiness to square up to that odious spectre which had suddenly decided to taunt her peace.

"It's the field over there that's for sale, not this spinney," she said in angry bluster as she crossed the lane.

"Well I don't know about that" he grunted brusquely as he finished jotting down the rough dimensions of the useless wasteland, as he cared to refer to the spinney. "But thanks anyway" he offered without a trace of gratitude. "But I'm not interested in that field, it's too expensive, there won't be enough profit in it and I've gotta earn a living. But this" he said expressively, indicating the spinney with a wide excavator-like sweep of arm, which ended in a large ruthless grab-as-much-you-can-in-it hand, "is much

more like it.”

“I don’t know what makes you think it’s for sale! Because it isn’t!” She spat, as hotly as her beloved spitfire’s guns had, except that her cannons bristled ready with emotional grapeshot, ranging in bore from outraged to absolutely aghast and beyond, which she delivered in a wide arcing scour. “And if you didn’t know, it’s an ancient spinney. It’s been here since before Henry VIII’s time - if you know who that was. So understand this Simon. The spinney is important. And people come here in spring to see the bluebells, including your very own Mother I might add! It’s loved by the village too. And it’s not for sale. Not ever. Get it! So if you try to take it, you’ll have me to answer to, young man. And you don’t want that!”

Believing her task done and that the Hun was suitably aware of the fight to come and hopefully stunned, she turned in a bluster to storm off home to rally the troops. But his next remark chilled her to the very bone and snapped her right back to face him.

“I think you’ll find it is for sale.”

She nearly fainted as those poisonous words slivered from his contemptuous tongue, where upon entering her ears they set about crushing her soul.

Brimming with victorious conceit, he revealed ever so slowly, but firmly, to ensure the words caused maximum distress. “And... what’s... more... my... offer... has... been... accepted... by *your, yes your*, Parish council.”

“It can’t have been...,” she yammered as her guns jammed. “It can’t have!” She protested again with growing dread that he may well be right. It would just be like Bertie the chairman to take the builder’s coin while

persuading that hussy of his, Sally, to go along with it.

“But it’s not been put to us,” she growled at his smug insolence and her possible betrayal while inwardly reasoning - I’m as sure of that as I can be, without being certain. Where her spinning spirit sought something, simply anything to hold onto, which it found in the word vote. “It hasn’t been voted on,” she declared strongly as she loaded her reserve guns. “And it’s certainly not been put to the village. They will have to agree and I can’t see them doing that.”

“Sounds like you need to read your emails more closely” he offered smugly. “For it was all agreed last Tuesday in a special Parish council meeting.”

Suddenly, figurative bells tolled sombrely for her breaking heart. Weakened, but needing to keep her standing and fighting, her heart barely granted the strength for her whispered, “But I didn’t know...”

“It would seem you didn’t” he laughed, triumphantly. It had been so easy manipulating the Parish council into leaving her out of the voting process. Her love for the spinney was well known and she would have stopped his plans for certain. But once he heard about her lack of cell phone and internet use he knew how to outflank her. Along with many of the other backward villagers too. How right he had been to arrange a special meeting to be called at short notice via email with only his supporters able to attend. It had worked a treat.

Gloating like a hyena after stealing a lion’s kill without injury, he snickered. “It’s been lovely talking to you, but now I’ve gotta go. I have deals to make and houses to plan for this site. Cheerio!” He added with a chortle as he climbed into his monstrous truck.

Then with exaggerated revs, which set the rear wheels spinning and churning her cherished wildflower speckled verge into mush, the human beast ended the moment with an insolent blast of horn and arrogant wave of hand which nicely hid his growing sneer. Then giving his metal steed its full reign and with a final churn of mud, which as a parting insult splattered her coat, in a farewell dark storm of exhaust fumes and a heartless laugh, beast and slave roared rapidly and merrily away.

Cold air rushed in anxiously to fill the vacated space where its narcissistic 'I'm in everything' touch sucked out her hopes, dreams, and life. Leaving her shivering alone in the lane, empty of spirit, devoid of purpose and brutally defiled and broken. Even her tears, those happy or brave or sad glistening orbs that unasked will accompany so many occasions were too devastated to swell and fall.

Only her feet seemed to know how to respond, when slowly in funereal step they turned her about to face what had suddenly become the long insurmountable incline back to her home.

## Section Six

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With sombre heart, wreathed in the bitter fumes of man and steed she instinctively dragged her broken self home.

With her happy memories floored and unable to rise to aid her, old outrages scrambled to take their place. Remember the beauty spots you knew as a child and as a young woman now sadly obliterated by his kind? Built on and insulted, sullied even with grand names. The spinney, the meadow, badgers mount, hares wood, larks view, primrose walk, swallows rest, otters bolt and all without a whisper of the nature they were carved from to be found anywhere.

Developers... Developers... Developers... her tears finally rang in bitter chime, as they thickly fell with purposeless rhyme, while blurring vision so it took her trembling hands a few attempts to insert a large black iron key into the ornate lock of the front door.

Almost for the first time ever, she took no pride in knowing it had been crafted from planks that once saw service in Elizabeth I's fleet. Neither did she smile fondly at the generations of her family's feet who had worn the soft sandstone door cill into a bowed cherubic smile. Almost somnambulant she passed through the low entrance into her shadowed and humble, dark but welcoming little cottage where immediately like the ghost of her faithful spaniel she was greeted by the gladdening smell of the sweet pea she raises in her back garden. Her first husband's favourite, which she picks in his honour and lovingly arranges in little cut crystal vases, or favourite memory-filled chipped mugs to place in each room to mask the odours of slightly over-

strewed cabbage and the sharp acrid tang of rising damp.

Picking up the threads of her dismay she thought tiredly... developers have wreaked more havoc on this area than those German bombers ever did during the whole of WWII.

“Oh, my dearest two”, she whispered forlornly as tiredly she climbed the creaking stairs to enter the bedroom and into the always listening shadows of her dear departed husbands. “What is to become of the world?” She despaired, “And of me and you?”

Weary of heart and tired of humankind’s relentless need to destroy her cherished nature for greed and pleasure, she lay on the bed and gave herself up to her tears. Eventually, worn out and wracked by deep sorrow she slipped between the covers and slowly closed her red-rimmed eyes on nature’s past glory. Very shortly after in a faint protesting gasp, her past disappeared right along with it.

The empty cottage attracted a lot of attention and none more so than from the builder.

Illegally cracking open the back door he crept inside for a quick nose. There in her beloved home, while abstractly fingering the thick shroud of mournful dust which had, in her absence, settled upon her age-darkened heavy furniture, he sneered contemptuously, “What a strange old biddy she was.” But still, he thought with an appraising smile. This gimcrack place of hers will tear down nicely thank you and I reckon if I do away with the front and back gardens, I’ll be able to squeeze in two fair-sized 4-bedroomed town-houses. Then another thought invoked that smile to spread so far and high across his bulbous face that it nearly turned to laughter. And they’ll nicely match with the ones I intend to build on that bit o waste ground up the road that the stupid old biddy so royally messed her smelly oversized bloomers

about.

Section Seven

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**H**appy with his lot Simon climbed into his giant land-crusher-cruiser to head off to appraise yet another patch of land in a village a few miles away which had served for centuries as their communal green, where witches were ducked, maypoles twirled and fetes held, as were Sunday school picnics in happy yells or difficult rebels.

It was where summer evenings echoed with the thwack of cricket balls on polished bats and loud howaz thats, and lover's softer sighs sent like incantations to strengthen the moon's watery spell or the odd cross word asking... Why? But he had no want to ponder long on such pointless things as he raced along the lanes. His fantasies of black and white could not image those were merely the extreme end-markers to many wonderful shades of grey, were all about the number and style of houses he planned to build, if he could, everywhere and every day.

Yeah... Those old houses do have a nice view of the green, he mused, but not for much longer, he grinned. "And it's amazing what a bit of pocket money can do to loosen stubborn objections," he chuckled while flooring the monster-truck's throttle, delightfully giving the massive V12 engine its full head. Chortling like a schoolboy clutching a smutty mag his heart raced along with the engine's increasing revs. Smug and as high as a king admiring rows of overflowing coffers he chuntered happily. "I knew I'd get the bloody waste ground and I'll get the blimming village green too I will."

He was so caught in the moment as he sped around a tight narrow bend he never saw the large lorry backing out of a hidden driveway. Nor did he

have time to read the company's name so proudly emblazoned in gold lettering on the green cab. 'Heritage Gardening Suppliers'... but it was most certainly imprinted on his glazed retinas when they finally managed to cut his lifeless body out of the mangled wreck...

## Section Eight

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The parish council called yet another special meeting to discuss ways of honouring Gladys, their past officer, who had given so much of her life to the village.

“Now then” a voice heckled from the back of the full meeting, “What’s this we ear about youse trying to sell off our spinney? Ey... tell us maties! Is it true? Cos I tell ya, I ain’t agreeing to it and I don’t agree, and I won’t ever either agree, see.”

That brought gasps from those who had no idea and cheers from those who did. A couple of boos also emerged but they were quickly smothered by those rioting voices rising ever higher in outrage.

A couple of the councillors, those whom the builder had monetarily encouraged to take his view, murmured weakly, “But it’s of no use sat there as it is. We might as well capitalise on the land. We’re sure someone will be happy to buy it. And we can share the proceeds between us somehow. Maybe there will be enough to do up this hall, for it certainly needs a makeover.” Where privately he wondered, and maybe we can make a sizeable donation to the local golf club...

"Now you wait on...", a lady shouted out, somewhat more strongly than she had intended, but the words buy it had inflamed her. Unaccustomed to making a spectacle of herself crimson splotches decorated her cheeks as she arose and started speaking hesitantly. but then more determinedly as the other voices fell silent.

“This meeting you said is to find a way to honour Gladys’s memory. But selling the spinney the way you propose won’t do that, will it.” That earned her a splattering of applause to lift her courage to carry her forward. “In case you didn’t know” she went on, “I’m sort of related to Gladys through her first husband Rob. And she left me everything on the condition I use it to benefit the village.”

She paused to let the oohs and wows and various well-done you recede where she then explained. “It’s a tidy sum too and it will easily cover the cost of repairing this hall and re-equipping the children’s play area as Gladys wanted to do, but you lot always refused her. Then, what’s left I say we use to buy the spinney and that will keep those few villagers who hoped to profit from it happy. But I will then gift it back to the village for their use in a trust, with the condition that it can never be sold again. And I propose we name it Gladys’s Retreat.”

Her proposal was duly carried by one and all.

Then as Gladys’s last will had requested, a few days later - after the fallen tree that snagged Gladys’s coat was shifted enough to ensure safe passage - the villagers in happy and not solemn possession entered the spinney. For some, it was their first time and caught by the beauty of the trilling birdsong they wondered, why haven’t we visited here before? It’s so beautiful and peaceful. It’s like another world.

Once they were all gathered and had exchanged greetings in the little clearing around the tree, the local vicar added into the breathless waiting air a blessing for Gladys. Then, as the murmured amens reached the sheltering birds to jolt them into song suddenly one of the children loudly urged while pointing eagerly upwards, “Look look look there are twin rainbows in the sky.” It was difficult for disbelieving eyes to tell through the thick canopy whether there were rainbows there or not, but what was clear and certain was

that at the very moment when Rob's relative began sprinkling Gladys's ashes about, a shaft of sunlight struck the tree, alighting its canopy in a spray of golden glorious splendour. It is just like what happened to the queen some whispered as they made their way home.

The sun was not done yet. It followed their steps through the wood and when they emerged golden rays blessed the new sign, 'Gladys's Retreat' as it will do far into a future where the children of her favourite tree will gladden those many true-of-heart lovers who care to lie beneath their comforting canopies and in time nourish the wood with the richness of their happy memories.

Section Nine

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NB.

**U**pon the builder's ignoble passing his empire collapsed with the charm and grace of a pig's prolapsed uterus. As he was rapidly forgotten by all but his mother his metal steed was pulverised into a square block and smelted for other needs. Hopefully, good ones some might murmur. And who knows, maybe it will be turned into the wire needed to mend the occasional tears in the spinneys fence as, under the circumstances, would be both fair and just.

And as for Gladys...

Well, she's much happier now, it is said.

Otherwise concerning Gladys's new future that is all this tale is able to reveal. But with that stated, the teller can point with a broad smile to the celandine and snowdrops and occasional primrose that have arrived since her heavenly reunion to bless the tree's roots in early spring. And mention the later anemone and hellebores which at the approach of winter so beautifully sing to her beloved wood nymphs. Or to any other whose hearts care to join in loving twin with the wood and the calm which Gladys's Retreat so gladly brings. And then there are those in the know who, when listening carefully, can hear Gladys's feet walking the paths with Rob and his own tender rhyming falling beat while giggling together like those wood nymphs, without which no spinney can ever truly be complete.

The End