



Source: Rory McCarthy, 'The hills are alive', *Guardian Unlimited*, 25/08/07.

Tags: countryside, plants, death  
Writer/s: Paul Byrne

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

Once upon a time there was a man, although time is a concept perhaps you understand better than he. He was a simple man and one who liked nothing more than to go for walks in the woods that surrounded his house. Every day at 6pm he would get up from the fireplace, where he sat, for he was almost always cold, and struggle into his large boots, before fumbling with his coat, hands shaking as he attempted to direct the toggles into the loops. Lastly he would place his hat upon his head and stride with full purpose out his door into the woods, where he would walk, listening to the singing of the birds and the rustling of the undergrowth, all of which he hoped would remind him he was alive. Sadly, however, this man, this simple man was already dead.

But do not worry, for this is not the tale of his demise, which would be best left to your own imagination and I'm sure you would weave a tale most grizzly—too grizzly to share. Instead, we will say that his was not a pleasant death and leave it there.

So let us rejoin him on his walk through the woods and notice him for the first time, underneath his hat. His face, which at first we thought we had seen, seems to have gone, almost as if it had just been hinted at earlier, but now is nothing more than a blank canvas where someone, as though they were past caring, has neglected to sketch even the colour of the eyes. His shape, too, has changed and what was at 6pm a strong young man striding out into the world with purpose now is hunched and walking slowly as if the deeper he walks into the woods the older he becomes. But perhaps this is all just a trick of the light. It is dark here in the woods, after all, and hard to tell from just the outline of the shapes what is what.

At around 6:42 a bear appears in the woods and for all intents and purposes makes as though to gobble the man up. The man, however, ignores the bear and just continues on walking, ever forward on his route which leads him around the woods and back to his house. The bear, confused at this, leaves the man alone and later on questions himself as to whether the man had been there at all.

The man has always taken these walks, for as long as he can remember. Back when he was a little boy he walked this same route with his father. Later on in his teens he had walked his dog the same way, a collie, black and white, who understood everything he had ever said, and was the only one he had ever said it to. Now however he walked along to the singing birds and the rustling undergrowth and from time to time, the patter of

raindrops far overhead as they tried in vain to break through the leaf ceiling which blocked the clouds from view. He couldn't remember the last time he had seen a cloud. In many ways he missed the clouds more than his dog.

A little while later the man reaches a clearing in the woods, an almost perfect circle of woodchip and dirt surrounded on all sides by trees. Here the man stops to sit for a while under a giant oak to think. He thinks about his past, his present and what he is going to do tomorrow, although this plan never evolves past walking in the woods. Now and then he dozes a little, always awakened by the cry of a bird or a small rodent scuttling through the leaves above. Then he spots it over the circle: almost opposite the great oak—a mound of dirt. 'That,' thinks the man, 'is a perfect place to plant some flowers.'

And off he wanders to find some flowers in the woods nearby. He prefers white flowers as they remind him of clouds. Returning to the mound of dirt, he begins to prepare the area to plant the flowers. Yet, in doing so his hands clasp upon something odd, a cold clammy object which he uncovers and then reels away from in disgust. A dead body lies there planted in the dirt, a body which reminds him of someone that he had known long ago, with eyes that have rotted away and leave no trace of their colour. This seems a particularly careless fate, thinks the man. Then it dawns on him that it is he himself lying buried in the dirt. He stands to shake the thought from himself and tell himself not to be so foolish.

He covers the body over again and places the flowers on top, before quickly walking away from the clearing and round the path that takes him back to his home. As he comes in he takes off his cap, coat and shoes and returns once again to the fire for, as I have already explained, he is almost always cold and is even more so now. Here he dozes a while before moving to his bed and sleeping until tomorrow when he will take another walk in the woods, listen to the birds and rustle of the undergrowth, pass the bear that never harms him, before coming to a clearing and resting under a great oak and finding the perfect spot in which to plant some flowers: flowers which never seem to remain there or grow but then again time is a concept the man does not really understand. He simply knows one day he will find flowers where he lies and on that day he can take a different path through the wood, a path that perhaps, if he is lucky, will take him once again to the clouds.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Paul Byrne.*