

VERSION

She rode off. She did not ride—as he'd departed and she'd arrived—along the drive to the gate and the road. Old habit and old secrecy made her take the old route. Past the stables, through the rhododendrons, past the vegetable plot, the potting shed, the cold frames and greenhouse, then along mere threading paths and through narrow gaps between neglected shrubs into a jumbled outer region that led to a copse. Every twist and turn, every screening outbuilding and clump of vegetation was familiar to her. They had met among them and made use of them often enough. It was even his standard directive: 'the garden path'.

The secret back route from Beechwood to Upleigh would remain always in her head, such that she might at any time have easily drawn its map, like the map in *Treasure Island* or of David Balfour's wanderings in the Highlands. She would retain the ability, but of course it would be a contradiction, a betrayal, actually to draw a secret map.

'The garden path, Jay.' And, once, with a strange echoing sincerity, 'I won't ever lead you up it.'

The copse led to a small wilderness of rough grass and brambles, then a straggly hedgerow, where there was another way out of what was still Upleigh land. It involved lifting the bicycle fully over a stile, but she had done it enough times. She might, of course, have left the bicycle—it was her usual practice—safely hidden in the hedgerow. But his crisp command had simply empowered her. The front door.

Beyond the hedgerow—it was dense and spreading at this point and it seemed that even in the space of hours the hawthorns had sprouted more green leaves and more white frothing blossom—there was the curve of a narrow minor road. Once on its surface, she could speed anywhere, a mere carefree wayfarer, out pedalling on a heavenly Sunday afternoon.

Though for a crippling moment she didn't know which way to turn. It must have been perhaps three o'clock. She had half the afternoon yet. To turn left would have been the quickest way back to Beechwood, so the obvious choice was right. But where to? Pushing off, she decided that it didn't matter, the main thing was simply to be riding, careering through this warm exhilarating air, and since the road to the right took her down a long sunny swoop then up a gentle rise (it was the back of the Upleigh grounds) her decision, to be indecisive, was confirmed.

Pedalling hard at first, then freewheeling and gathering speed, she heard the whirr of the wheels, felt the air fill her hair, her clothes and almost, it seemed, the veins inside her. Her veins sang, and she herself might have sung, if the rushing air had not stopped her mouth. She would never be able to explain the sheer liberty, the racing sense of possibility she felt. All over the country, maids and cooks and nannies had been 'freed' for the day, but was any of them—was even Paul Sheringham—as untethered as she?

Graham SWIFT, *Mothering Sunday* [2016], London, Scribner, 2017, p. 90-92.