

FOOTPRINTS IN THE DEW

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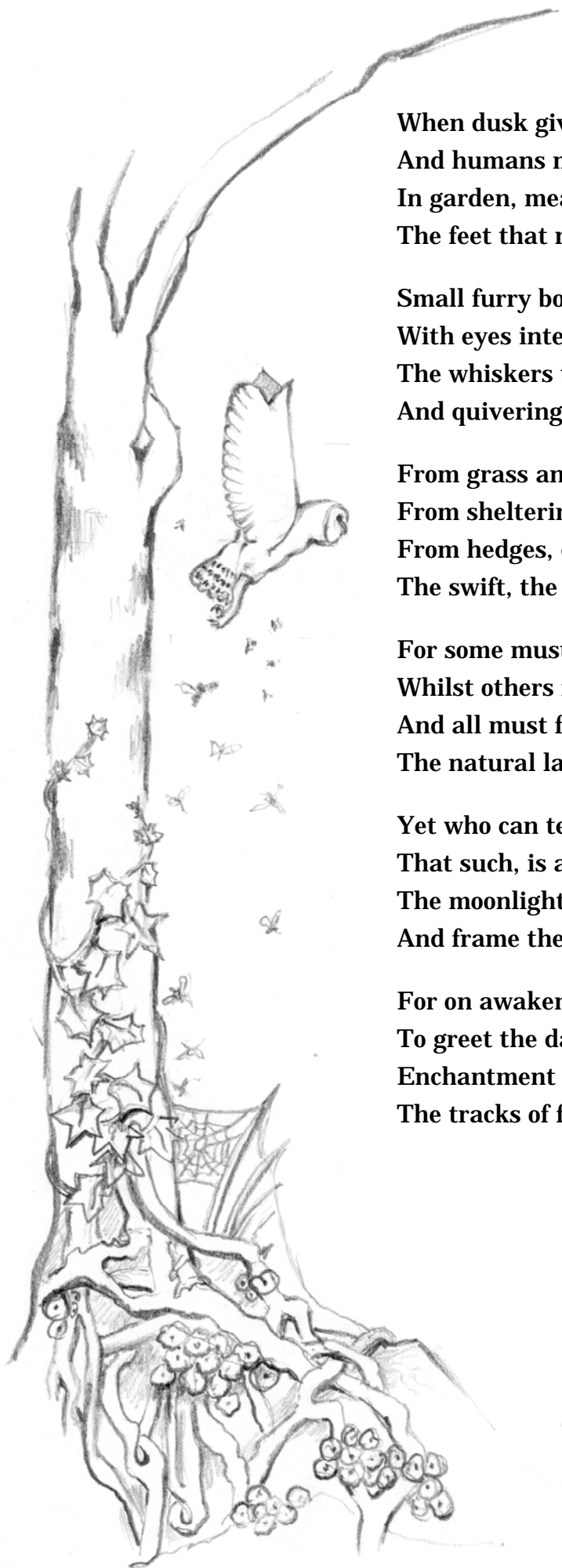
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**For my husband and son who are always there for me
and
Wendy and Dr. Miguda who stood by me in my hour of need**



When dusk gives way to downy dark
And humans mostly are abed,
In garden, meadow, field and park
The feet that roam have lighter tread.

Small furry bodies warm and quick,
With eyes intent, so wide, so bright,
The whiskers twitching, ears aprick,
And quivering tails, are one with night.

From grass and stone the lesser creep,
From sheltering trees the greater fly,
From hedges, ditches, walls there leap
The swift, the slow, the scampering fry.

For some must hunt to find their fare,
Whilst others flee to stay alive,
And all must find a mate to pair,
The natural law: Live to Survive.

Yet who can tell, though it may seem
That such, is all their lives must be.
The moonlight magic's ours, to dream
And frame their world in fantasy.

For on awakening as we must
To greet the day that dawns anew,
Enchantment dwells though there be just
The tracks of footprints in the dew.

A J Main.

Chapter 1

Footfast– Still Fancy Free

It began with a pair of feet. They had come very far that night, they were tired and they ached. Hard leathery feet they were, but they ached. If they hadn't the sequence of events that followed might never have happened, or if events have to be used up like ice-cream (before it melts), they would have happened to someone else, somewhere else, some other time. The owner of the feet, a thick-set rustic looking fellow, peered down at them in the dark, wiggled them a little to test how they were getting on, sniffed, rested and thought. He sat beside the new by-pass being built round the town of Notting Cross. This had been his territory. He had worked it. It had supported him until the coming of the bull-dozers, the pile-drivers, cement mixers and the rest, had driven him farther out into alien country. Who would have thought of a road coming through here? Always a hitch! That made him chuckle for he was H I T C H. Hitch Hog. The name suited him, hitch being another name for a hedge, and because he hitched about the countryside a great deal, hitching himself together as he went.

Following the chuckle he drew in his breath as he lifted his gaze to the sky. The blinds of darkness that protected the little creatures going about their affairs, were lifting. A new day was beginning as every feathered throat gave voice in song, bursting forth in the dawn chorus.

It would not be long before light would be everywhere. People would be getting up and their business beginning. Smaller folk would be seeking a resting place, a hidey-hole, until it was safe to venture forth again under the cover of friendly darkness.

Hitch stirred on the strip of gritty, hard beaten earth. He felt annoyed with his feet. They ought to be more considerate than to make themselves felt at this time. He needed all his concentration at the other end of him. There was so much on his mind. The decision he had to make was a difficult one. Should he go on, or go back and take his chance among



the difficulties and dangers he had hoped to leave behind? The pine forests that men had planted were cold and dark places. He couldn't scratch a living there! Many hedges had been dug out to make bigger fields, so numbers of homes were no more. Finding food might not be difficult, but it was so likely to be poisoned. Who could know what sprays the farmers used?

Now if he went forward he would find shelter more easily in the many back-gardens, hedges, verges, homely scrub, park and golf-course rough. There was still some risk of poison, but it was a smaller risk. Why hesitate then? One very good reason. The WAY to the better life lay before him; a frightening maze of box-like sections with steep sides and dusty gritty wire-mesh covered bottoms that was the unfinished by-pass. It would be all too easy to lose the way or even break a leg. Then after that there was still the old roads to cross.

He stood up, a rugged little figure and faced the roadway. His aching feet had decided him. It was better to try to overcome that which lay in his path than 'slog' all that way back. Along the side of the road he went looking for a place where he could climb down. There seemed to be none. He must have missed some likely one, surely? Back he toiled. It was quite light now. In fact, men already busy with their machines were taking their breakfast-break. He must find a place quickly if he was to cross in any safety. Ah! That stretch there looked likely. Funny he hadn't noticed it before. He was not to know that 'it' had not been there when he had passed. Indeed, men had been very busy.

Gripping the edge of the curbing stone he gingerly lowered himself. He travelled light; his worldly goods stowed about his person. He had toyed with the idea of using a polythene bag that he had found in a hedgerow where some thoughtless, untidy picnicker had left it. It would keep his possessions dry and in order while at the same time it would prevent some unfortunate cow from eating it. Cows, he well knew, were often lackadaisical creatures in their eating habits and the polythene could cause acute stomach-ache, maybe even death. It was certainly something to be treated with caution; he had even heard of a fellow hedgehog who had squeezed into one, using it as a sleeping bag. His sleep may well have been a good deal longer than he had bargained for if there

had not been a human on hand to help him out of it! So in the end, being wiser, Hitch had left well alone.

Among his belongings he carried a certain item, though he was shy of mentioning it. Fortunately he hardly ever had to use it. Having it there made him feel safer at least, just in case of trouble; a small stink bomb. It so overcame his enemy that Hitch gained time to make the next move.

Perhaps the thing which gave him most confidence was his hair. He wore it very long down his back and dressed in spiky fashion. Being shy, except with his own kind, he could be private behind it. In time of trouble he could put it to very good use. There might be trouble ahead now but he'd risk that. He was a born optimist.

Down over the curb now, he peered at the stretch before him. It reached for quite some way and looked level; this was very much better than he had even hoped. So between relief at finding the way easier than expected and the fact that his feet were troublesome, he did not hesitate but set off. Sniffing the air though with his usual huffily snuffle as he went, in a little while he noticed, beside their gnawing ache, an odd feeling in his feet. What was the matter with them now? They were behaving in a manner quite unknown to him. With each step they grew heavier and heavier until at last he was forced to stop. He stood rooted to the spot so to speak and quite at a loss. He had a habit of saying when surprised: 'Well shake my spines!' or when angry: 'Well sharpen my spikes!' At this moment he was speechless. The full terror of it burst upon him. Was he to stay like this forever? The rest of him felt as cold and heavy as his feet. He strained to be free but it was useless. Nothing could be worse than this he thought, until he heard human voices. Friend or foe? He almost died of fright. It was in this state that he was found by the workmen when they returned from their break.

"Now who's thrown an o1' loo-brush on my nice new stretch o' concrete?" exclaimed a voice.

"That's no brush, look, it's an 'edge'og," came a second voice.

"Why so it is," agreed the first speaker. "What's he doing there besides making his mark?"

“Tryin’ to get across I shouldn’t wonder, but the cement’s collectin’ on ’is feet and settin’,” rejoined his mate.

“Poor little perisher,” said the first man sympathetically, “that would get anyone bogged down. Ha! Ha! Just you hang on there a minute an’ I’ll have you out in a jiffy.”

By this time, Hitch was becoming used to his fright and beginning to feel cross.

“Hang on, indeed! I’ve ‘put both feet in it’, so I’m ‘stuck in,’” he fretted.

Presently the man returned carrying a long plank and a piece of sacking. Carefully, so as not to touch the concrete, he laid the plank from the curbing stone to the edge of the wooden mould. He walked along the plank and reaching out to his full arms length he laid the sacking gently around Hitch and lifted him clear of the quickly setting mass that trapped him.

“Funny little geyser,” commented the second workman looking at Hitch with interest. “Always so independent too. Must ’ave been pretty worryin’ ’avin’ somethin’ like that ’appen to yer.”

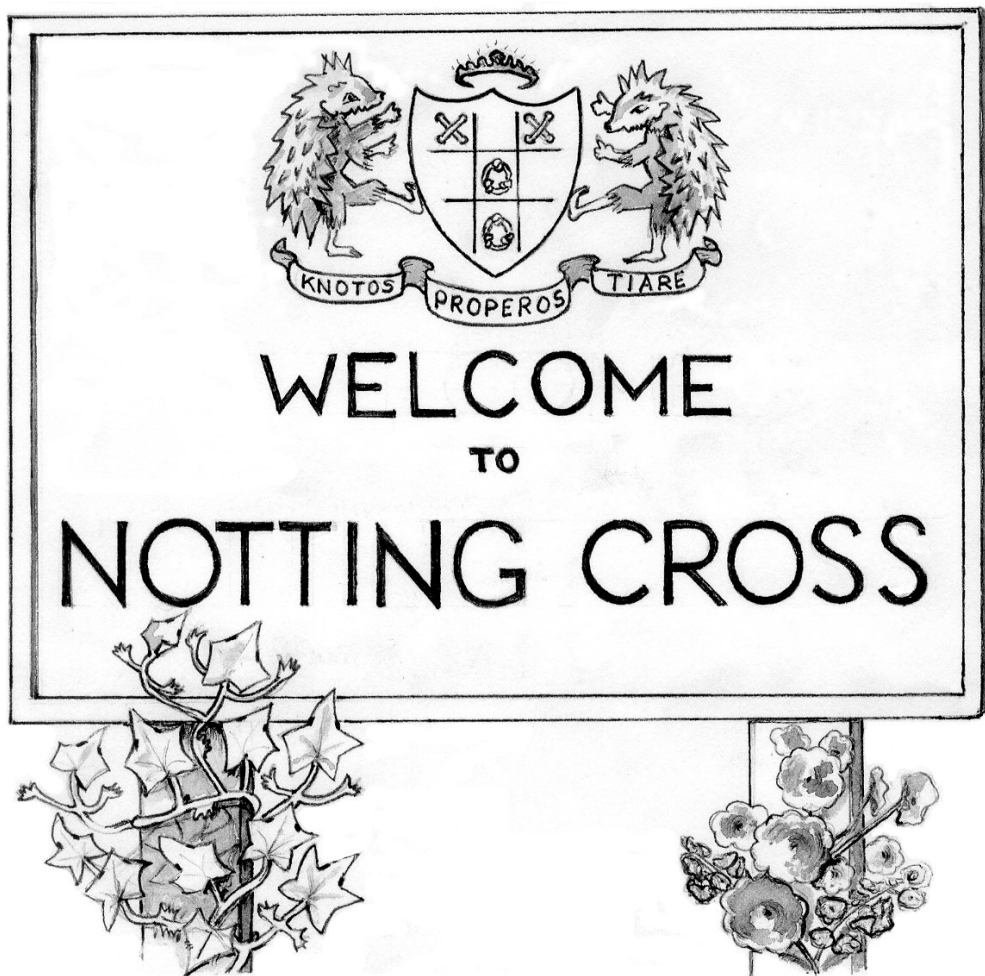
Hitch warmed to them both. He no longer felt the hurt to his pride. It could have happened to anyone and so he recovered himself without fuss or theatricals.

“Look the cement crumbles away easily enough now,” his rescuer remarked as he gently pulled it away and brushed off the last of the powdery crumbs. “No harm done. Wonder where he was going?”

“eadin’ for the golf course or the model village I’d say, by the looks of ’is trail,” volunteered the other man. “e’s still got to cross the main Nottin’ Cross road, then ’e’ll be down across the fields an’ along by the lake.”

Still holding Hitch in the sacking, his rescuer nodded agreement as he answered.

“Better put him across the road then, or like as not he’ll be hit by a car – reg’lar death trap that bit o’ road.”



Hitch was overjoyed to hear this; what unexpected luck. Across the clutter made by the road builders and the strip dividing the by-pass from the old road, they went. Over the macadam ribbon with its hooting, screeching, hurtling daymare of traffic to the safety of the roadside ditch he was carried. There he felt himself lowered to friendly sheltering scrub and bramble.

“There you are ol’ lad. Rest up a bit, you’re on the right side now. Just follow your snout an’ I reckon you’ll be O.K. Good luck,” and the man was gone.

Limping a little but light of heart, Hitch trundled along the ditch until he came to a spot where he could look down across the countryside. Leaning



against a white painted post he looked about him. What he could only see hazily, his nose and ears brought into keen focus. This was hedgehog country. The sign above him left him in no doubt of that. Nodding ivy twining the post, reaching for sun and air, whispered the message it found on the board. WELCOME TO NOTTING CROSS. Supporting the 'Noughts and Crosses' badge of the town were two hedgehogs RAMPANT. Noughts and knots, crosses and ties, hitches and hogs; it was all quite plain to him.

The townsfolk were self-respecting people. Being so tidy in everything they took pride in their motto— KNOTOS PROPEROS TIARE— which means of course 'Tie proper knots'. Anything more fitting would be hard to find you'd agree. However it must be confessed that some; those in fact who had played noughts and crosses during Latin lessons, translated the motto as 'Get proper knotted with your tiara'. Hitch was no scholar and knew no Latin, so he did not know that Pliny, the Roman naturalist, had met some of his ancestors as much as two thousand years ago. He remembered clearly though, the tales his Granny had told him of escapes from being rolled up in clay to be baked and then eaten by gypsies. She had known all sorts of weird and wonderful things too— how to make the milk curdle to make cheese using the flowers of that little plant there, Lady's Bedstraw. She knew the cures for all one's ills that could be made from the purple Self-Heal. Thoughts like these whiled away some of the hours as he rested among the Pennywort, Goat's Beard and Scarlet Pimpernel, waiting for dusk. Otherwise he slept or dozily studied the fields before him, without thought or care of passing cars. The meadow that fell away directly before him stretched golden with buttercups dancing in the arms of the soft summer breeze. From it a lark rose pouring out its paeon of praise that a blackbird in a nearby oak matched with a cadence of liquid notes. Below the meadow the land stretched green to tangles of trees and shrubs, their roots overlain with coverlets of monkey-musk and cushions of king-cups with yellow iris fringing the waters of the lake. The lake itself was a long mirror-like sliver of sapphire blue framed in the secret shadow of the trees. Beyond the lake and Wych Elm Wood to the left lay the rolling, mounded, sand-pitted golf course and far to the right, the town. Many back gardens made up a patchwork that was herringbone-stitched with fences and embroidered with flowers. Some were decorated gaily with flags of

washing fluttering in strings or flying around on whirligigs. On summer Saturdays and Sundays the air was loud with the echoing chatter and whirring of lawn mowers and heavy with the scent of new-mown grass.

Directly beyond the lake and between the town and the golf course lay a small world that was the delight of children (of all ages). It was a world in miniature, laid out to scale in every detail; complete with Lilliputian houses, churches and shops. Railways and roads joined the villages and towns and linked them with Industry. All was there to delight the visitor from Easter to Summer's end and to provide help for charities from the takings at the gate. It was to this pleasing mini-land called Knotty Cot that Hitch was bound.

The golden day slipped by taking with it the weary soreness from Hitch's feet, leaving them fresh with the itch to feel familiar ground again. Mothy dusk gave way to moon-silvered dark. It was time to go. Keeping to the path that followed the hedges still hazy with the white of hedge parsley, down the sleepy meadow and over the drowsy fields he went, murmuring a snuffling-huffing song to himself. He felt content and it showed in his quiet manner and strolling walk. Not far to the lake now. Suddenly this mood was shattered as his nose damped and his ears pricked to sense F O X.

"Well shake my spines!" he snorted.

A fox in this district was certainly quite a surprise, but there, the changes in the countryside had upset and displaced many beside himself. Although Hitch was not usually a fast mover, when there was need he could run with the best. The fox was still some way off and he decided to try to keep himself at that distance. With legs outstretched to the full he cleared the ground at surprising speed. It was not enough however; the fox was obviously gaining on him. He chided himself; there was no need to lose his dignity and flee. He turned, set his ground and prepared his defences. In next to no time at all he was an armoury of quivering spears. With a final bound the fox was upon him. Then just as hastily he drew off and nursed a tender nose. Weighing matters and gauging distances it seemed that his best plan was to roll Hitch along and into the water and as he attempted to swim away, attack. At the first fumbling pat from the fox glove (paws can be tender too), Hitch guessed the plan. There was only



one thing to do. To get away he must use his last line of defence. He did not like making himself disagreeable. A distant foreign cousin of his, Skunk, made a habit of it and who would want the name he had? This however was a matter of life and death. Taking a quick movement he hurled his stink-bomb at that elegant red fur coat and ran.

The fox leapt back, furious and indignant. Failure and anger made him rude.

“You– Pincushion, Conkercase, Claybake!” he snapped in a high pitch. Then as the choking smell rose again to his nose and Hitch went further away, he screamed, beside himself with rage and disappointment.

“You

S-T-I-C-K-L-Y P-R-I-N-K-E-R, oh no, you S-T-R-I-C-K-L-Y P-I-N-K-E-R..... oh!.....” He managed to get it right at the third attempt. “You - P-R-I-C-K---L--Y S--T--I---N but by then Hitch was out of earshot.