

THE MOONLIT PAGE

Nothing in the Flask



The flask was the last thing on the picnic table.

Amal had collected two paper cups, a bottle top and a leaflet announcing an event that had already happened. Then she had gone back along the path to put the rubbish in her work bag.

When she turned, a fox was standing on the bench.

It stretched its nose towards the flask.

Amal stopped where she was. There was no need to go closer. The fox had the open path into the trees on the other side of the table, and the flask was in no hurry.

It was hers.

She had set it down during her earlier break, then walked away with the admirable intention of leaving no litter behind.

The fox sniffed the lower edge. One black paw rested on the tabletop. It lifted its head, looked towards the trees and listened.

Amal listened too.

Something small moved in the dry leaves beyond the clearing. The fox turned its ears, took its paw off the table and stepped down from the bench. A few moments later, there was only the pale tip of its tail between the trunks. Then that was gone as well.

Amal waited a little longer before walking back.

The flask stood exactly where she had left it. Nothing had been taken, opened or moved. She put it into the side pocket of her bag and checked the ground beneath the bench.

Her colleague Ben came along the wider path, carrying the sack from the next picnic area.

“Anything left here?”

“My flask.”

“Good thing someone checks.”

They held the work bag open between them while she tied its liner. The clearing was empty now, apart from the tables and the long, narrow patches of afternoon light.

At their vehicle, Amal unscrewed the flask.

She had finished the coffee at lunchtime. She knew this. She checked anyway.

One cold drop fell into the lid.

Ben looked at it.

“Worth going back for?”

Amal put the lid on and tightened it.

“The flask, yes.”

She set it beside her bag, where she would see it before leaving the vehicle, and helped Ben fold the empty sacks for tomorrow.

To remember

1. Amal collects picnic-area litter, then notices a fox investigating the closed flask she has forgotten on the table.
2. She waits at a distance with an escape route open; an ordinary sound in the leaves draws the fox away without human intervention.
3. After it has gone, she retrieves her unchanged flask, checks the ground and ties the work-bag liner with Ben.
4. Back at the vehicle, the supposedly empty flask yields only a cold drop; she puts it where she will remember it and joins Ben in folding the sacks.