



October, October



by Katya Balen

We stay up so late that the sun is already fat and high above the trees by the time we wake up, and Stig is hissing furiously for more mouse. Dad makes me a cup of hot milk in my favourite mug. I sip the milk, which is a little bit too hot. I've just finished a book that talked about hot chocolate with clouds of pillowy whipped cream on top and sticky marshmallows in pink and white. I haven't ever had hot chocolate or whipped cream or marshmallows but today I can almost taste their sugary sweetness.

I get dressed to go outside because we always plant a tree on my birthday. Dad planted an oak when I was first born and now it's taller than I am but still teeny tiny next to all the oaks that are hundreds and hundreds of years old.

This year I want to plant a silver birch, because they shine like moonlight. You're not supposed to plant them until November but we're nearly there and I said please please please.

We take Stig out into the sparkling morning and she hops around the ground and topples off her talons because she's trying to fly but she doesn't know how and nothing in her body works quite like it should yet. She shakes her ruffled feathers and bounces off again like she meant to fall and we laugh at her, but gently.

We dig a hole in a spot where sunlight can reach the silver birch because they like that, a spot that's not too close to other trees so it can spread and grow and be free. We dig with spades that crack the hard ground like an earthquake. I am on a desert island digging for long-lost treasure buried deep below our feet, and I'm digging for a secret chest full of mysterious riddles that will lead me all around the world and back again in search of a lost magical necklace made of pearly raindrops that will make me magic too.

When the hole is deep enough we are supposed to spread a layer of compost, which is just rotted-down food and scraps. Dad turns round and looks for the sack he's sure he brought out with him, but it's still in one of the sheds so he stumps off to find it. I gaze into the yawning galaxy of black at my feet.

I kneel down and my eyes search and skim and scan and I see marbled stones hidden in clods of earth veined with plant roots. I find a flattened disc of a bullet and I don't like touching something that's whistled through flesh and bone and exploded into death. There are jigsaws of pottery and rusted bottle



caps with edges like teeth. I run my fingers around the grainy earth and pluck prizes from the soil.

And

then

I scabble deeper and deeper

and I find

something magical.

I nearly don't see it. It doesn't gleam or shine because it's so caked in mud and dirt that it could just be another clump of earth. But I'm the best searcher in the business and I know there's something there and I press my hands into the hole and I feel it pressing into my palm. When I pull it out I brush and scrub and the middle falls away and I'm left with a perfect circle.

A ring.

