

The Mahogany Pod

a memoir of endings
and beginnings

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Saraband 

Prologue

THE YOUNG MAN WAKES with the dawn. Taking care not to disturb his girlfriend, who is still curled up in her sleeping bag, he unzips the tent flap and crawls out. He has put aside some leftovers from last night's meal and plans to fry them up for breakfast; all he needs is a few leaves and sticks to coax the heap of ashes back to life. Pulling on his sneakers, trying not to scratch the insect bites peppering his ankle, he makes for the woodland that borders the clearing where they have pitched camp.

The sun is already fierce, beating down on his back, and he's glad to reach the shade of the trees. He pauses under the first one, resting the flat of his hand against the grey bark, which is flaking off in circular patches to leave an overlapping pattern. The tree is thick-trunked and tall, with a huge spreading crown. He tips his head back to take it all in: a mosaic of green leaves; blue-winged butterflies shimmering in and out of the sunlight; birds hopping from branch to branch.

Out of his range of vision, on the topmost twig of the tree, hangs a shrivelled red petal. Over the past few weeks it has fruited; a pod has grown and swelled and dried, and last night, as the temperature fell, the stalk snapped under its weight. Perhaps the young man even heard it in his dreams, a faint explosion as it hit the ground and spat out its contents.

Suddenly he spots one of the seeds lying at his feet. It's the size and shape of a bullet, a dense velvety black, and topped with a pleated cap, bright as red plasticine with a child's pinch marks still in it. He picks up the seed, weighs it in his hand, holds it up to the light to admire its sheen and the indents running along its length.

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If there's one, there should be more. He drops to a crouch, starts searching among the dust and leaf litter, and almost at once finds a second seed, slightly larger, then a third. He's greedy with excitement, pulling forward the hem of his T-shirt to make an impromptu carrier, stashing the seeds inside it. As he moves, they jostle together with a knocking sound.

And then he sees the pod – half-moon shaped, and as big as his hand, made of two flattish brown halves joined by a short stem. It has split open along its length, just wide enough for him to post the seeds back in one by one. Ten slots for ten seeds, their red caps lined up like a box of matches. Perfect; he's got them all.

He hurries back to camp, the firewood forgotten. His girlfriend is awake, sitting in the mouth of the tent, her face uplifted to the sun. He stops in front of her, silhouetted, so she has to shade her eyes to look at him.

'I've just found something unbelievable.'

And he holds it out to her.