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Lightning Tree

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The Lightning Tree

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To Hame, Samuel and Louis

I

Let us start right here, with a man and a woman in bed by the sea. The woman is Ursula. She is thirty-one years old. She and the man are gazing into each other's eyes, astonished by the love they feel, and as they move together, without speaking, everything around them dissolves; the thin yellow curtains of the bed and breakfast, the polyester sheets, the two white teacups and tiny kettle all fly away to nothing. Ursula sees only this man. She is grateful it is him after all this time, and as they crash on to the shore of each other they touch the earth, the moon and stars.

It is not possible for you to feel this. All this astonished gazing, sea gushing and planetary union is too much, too intimate, too soon! – but I long to communicate love to you. These pages are so dry, the flat of your reading device so cold! If I could I'd jump out, strike you with the full weight of my arm, make your heart pound, tickle you, caress you, do anything in my power to make you feel it. I want to reveal love in all its forms, in a girl skipping, a boy reading; in a time before Ursula, with a laundry worker singing at her tub, or a woman alone on a hill, where a tree rears up, its roots alive, its branches stripped bare like a claw raking the sky, and in a single moment, she is hollowed to nothing

by a blast so bright the world will ever after seem dark to her. I want to show you all this, and more, even the great failure of love, so this is a 'poor do' as Mary would say, and we must begin again, not with lovers by the sea, but at the root of the thing, in another time, or perhaps the same one, when Ursula is at the very beginning of herself, under the ash tree in the garden of 35 Eslington Road, Newcastle. She is only six months old, but already she has done much to be here; existing for billions of years in secret codes, imprinting herself on her infinite family, generation to generation, mud-crawler to bushbaby, hominid warrior all the way to Hubert Tate of Tate's Laundry, Padiham, waiting until her own double helix clicks into place making all her pasts present. Then the inevitable begins, cells slipping, splitting, silently dividing in the warm darkness, heart pulsing within membrane, the sudden bloom of liver, kidneys, lungs, soft sponges of blood, the astonishing hardening of bone, the skin clouding round, the wild free-fall into senses, briny sweetness, murmurs, muted fireworks, and pushing through unyielding skeleton to the shocking air, into the feel of skin, the smell of milk, and Ursula is suddenly material.

She inherits her pram, a wondrous vessel, in which she now lies, oblivious to all that's gone before, gazing up at branches veining the sky like spilt ink. Her blankets are wrapped tightly around her. She strains against the wool, her torso rolling this way and that until, with a surge of force, she reaches out for the black lines of the branches with their black buds swelling from their twigs. She knows them, reaches out to guide them inside her, but the wind blows them away. She gurgles, a light easy splash. They are playing with her! She'll get them next time. She reaches out

again but cannot touch them. Sadness mists her and is gone as quickly as it came. She gurgles happily as the branches thin into whiteness, and she senses distance for the first time, the deep wonder of it, the space between things.

Her mother is apart from Ursula, in the basement kitchen, putting an elastic band around a stack of CND leaflets, Save Our Future: Stop The Madness! This is Joyce. Her mind is always busy with the future. She intends to save the world from nuclear attack, singlehandedly if she has to, but she is also thinking about the children's supper, Peter's meeting, and the best six arguments against non-proliferation. Bethany (seven) and Jonathan (four) are at her feet playing with dolls and saucepans, busy at their tasks, as Joyce tips peelings, plum stones and burnt toast on to newspaper and folds it into a parcel. She opens the back door and puts it outside. There's an old veg box there already with another parcel in, ready to take down to the bins. She looks over at the pram beneath the ash tree, as big as a boat in a bay. She puts baby Ursula out in the garden every day. The fresh air helps her sleep, and if she's inside Jonathan can't be trusted not to reach in and hit her. It's best to keep the children separate; Bethany with her dolls, Jonathan by the radiator with his pans, Ursula outside under the tree.

Inside, she starts a list at the table: Osborne Road, Tankerville, Holland Road, Oak Lane, the route she will take with the leaflets. The children can help put them through the doors, and on the way back they might stop at the park for half an hour. If it wasn't for the baby, she could take them further afield, Heaton, Byker, Wallsend perhaps. Joyce is anxious to raise people's consciousness. Raise them up! Everyone in the city must know about the CND. Campaign for Nuclear

Disarmament. *Seee Unnnn Deee*. Even baby Ursula knows this sound. Joyce talks of little else; the Aldermaston March, Maralinga 1956, Monte Bello Island, Christmas Island where the servicemen were told they could simply wash the radiation off with soap.

In her pram in the garden Ursula follows the black lines of the tree. They are nothing more than herself, broadening and hardening, stretching outwards. She hears the sweet shushing sibilance of the wind. She is creating it all, blowing through her lips, making the wind blow, the clouds scud, the branches sway. The ash tree loves her and she loves it. She hears the click-shush of the back door. Her lips start to open and close, making plosives, suckings, kisses, coaxing the kitchen faces closer. She senses life, pans, intentions, voices, and her mother soft in woollen green with brown moons and milky skin. She wants her to come. No one comes. Great howls rise from inside her. She has heard them before. They come from deep within. She is a wonderful siren. She cannot stop the cries. They leap out of her, twisting her body, contorting it, searching for certainty. She reaches her arms high towards the branches. They are widening cracks in the sky. Something is changing. The branches are spreading. The branches fatten and flap, cawing and shrieking.

Mummy! Look! shouts Bethany, looking up from her dolls.

Jonathan pulls at Joyce's skirt at the window, Birsss! Birsss!

Joyce looks out into the garden. The hood of Ursula's pram is blown out of shape, jagged like a broken umbrella. Shreds of black stick out, jostling. A crow is on the baby. Joyce's body moves before her mind, up the steps and down

the path. The crow is pecking, flapping, positioning itself. She runs, arms waving, her screams as primitive as the bird's.

Aaaaaaaaagh. God . . .! Shooooooooo!

The bird lifts into the air, pumping oily wings. Others wheel down from the branches, and they fly off screeching across the Town Moor. Joyce clutches the baby to her, half expecting the woollen bundle to burst with blood. The bird has killed her. Joyce's heart pounds as she runs back to the house. Jonathan stumbles to meet her, watching, frightened by her mask of horror. She looks like the women on the statue on the walk home from Fenwick's, he thinks, frozen in black bronze, wailing for their dead. He starts to cry.

It's alright, my darling . . . It's alright.

She pushes past him down the steps. Under the orange lamp, she uncurls her arms. Ursula stares up at her, her mouth shut tight, a short straight line.

There there . . . they've gone now, Joyce rocks her.

Is she dead? says Bethany.

She will make a bottle and comfort her. Thank God. No harm done. She'll put the pram nearer the back door next time.

Bethany leans in close.

Caw caw! she croons.

Ursula is stiff as a corn dolly.

There there . . . says Joyce, and starts to sing, Ride a cock-horse to Banbury Cross, to see a fine lady upon a white horse, rings on her fingers and . . .

As she holds Ursula close, her voice is high and soft. She puts milk into a pan. Strands of hair fall on to her face and she pushes them away. She lays Ursula gently on the draining board, and cuts thick slices of bread. She gets butter,

breaks two eggs into a saucepan, puts a match to the grill, lowers the hissing blue jets.

It won't be long, not long, she sings, sliding the slices under the grill. This is the way we make the toast, make the toast . . .

She pours warm milk into Ursula's bottle, turns on the radio, serves the eggs to Jonathan and Bethany, sits in the armchair, and in one arm Ursula nestles, her little fingers gripping the bottle as she sucks. *Listen with Mother* begins. Ursula's eyes start to close. The wildness of the crows dims in her and she sleeps.

The attack by the crows is Ursula's first experience of the world as utterly separate. You might think it will stay with her, haunt her as she grows up; that some irreparable damage has been done to her that will influence her life and how she lives it, but the truth is she will remember nothing of it. She will grow up in what you might call a reasonably ordinary way. Far bigger birds will come for her in time; one greater than the rest, it will carry her clean away, and strip her of everything. This bird will be far harder to survive, but for now Ursula is sleeping, and the telephone is ringing in Eslington Road, and Joyce is answering it, Ursula still held in her arms . . .

Joyce . . .? Oh Joyce! Oh . . . the voice is desperate.

Mum, what is it?

They're here again . . . They're in again. I daren't go downstairs. Oh Joyce.

Call the police, Mum!

Oh God . . .! I can't . . . I . . .

I'll call them.

Joyce . . .

I'll call them, Mum. I'll tell them to come. I'm putting the phone down now . . .

Hurry, says Mary as she sinks back down into her bed. She cannot move. The eiderdown is pulled up to her nose. Her round face stares up at the ceiling, searching for help in the cracked plaster. This is Joyce's mother, Ursula's grandmother, two hundred miles away in Padiham, Lancashire, with unknown men downstairs. They have put her under their spell, robbed her of movement. If she moves the ceiling will crash down, the floor open up, she'll be dragged under Pendle Hill itself and sucked into the bowels of the earth. Their noise entered her dreams, woke her, in the early morning. She heard them downstairs prising open chests and cupboards. She's been lying there ever since. Last time they broke down the back door. Dennis and Iris from next door had called the police. Dennis and Iris had moved since, left their house unoccupied, retired to a bungalow in Morecambe, damn them. The sea air was good for Dennis's respiration, Iris had said. The way she said it, pompous. Curse them. Curse his bloody resp-ir-a-tion. Without them, she's easy pickings.

She longs for sleep, to stop what is happening happening, to let the past flow through her, so wonderfully light, while her body lies heavy in the hollow made in the mattress, fifty years her burrow. She can't tell if they are still down there, poking about, opening the walnut chest, rummaging amongst bags, touching her china. A church bell peels feebly in the distance, barely penetrating the thick velvet curtains at the window. Damn God. He's not coming for her. She

moans aloud. Joyce said she'd call the police. She must get up, do her hair. She heaves herself to sitting, swings her legs to the floor, and shuffles along the worn path to the dressing table. She opens the curtains a crack. The sunlight is a blasted reminder of her darkness. The church steeple postures like a witch's hat against the sky. She lets the curtain fall, slumps to the velvet-covered stool, and feels for her ivory comb in the gloom. She parts her hair, scoring a line down the back of her head. Her thoughts prick as she starts to plait, her fingers snappy like knitting needles. What have they taken? The Chinese vases? The glass pictures? The ornate Chinese dogs? All her beautiful things. She is afraid to think of it. As she plaits, her thoughts turn in on themselves, repetitive and entangled as her braids. Nothing has ever been right. The man from the corner shop didn't give her a bag for her chocolate yesterday, Dennis and Iris had taken the magnolia tree with them when they left, dug it out of the ground and put it on a truck though she'd begged them not to, done it to spite her, she's sure, to rob her of its brief, astonishing flowers, and Wally, blast him, dead twenty years, never had ambition, never gave her more than the housekeeping, never paid for the luxuries she craved. All her craving had been for nothing; it's why she started the shop but nothing sold, Padiham folk had no taste. It's why her house was so stuffed with beautiful things, they were all from the shop, the remainders; filled her heart they did, and now the robbers were taking them, sadness and anger fold into her like the outer strands of the plait returning to the centre, the raw hurt of her. Life is unfair. Joyce is to blame. She should have stayed at home with her, her own mother, but she ran away, married a runt, spawned a brood, and lives like a slave

looking after them and her no-good husband, wasting her time with politics. What's it to her?! When will it all end?

Her twisting fingers reach the bottom of her hair. The plait reaches to her waist; she secures it in her left hand, unwinds a length of cotton with her right, pinches the thread tight against the hair, wraps it five times fast around the plait and bites off the cotton with her teeth. The police will be here. She coils the two plaits carefully and pins them into buns.

Next the hat: secured with the pewter pin. Not her best silver one with the gemstone head, that's in the lacquer box in the front room wrapped in tissue paper with an elastic band round it waiting for things to be different.

The doorbell rings. She opens the bedroom door, hair done, hat on, still in her vest and bloomers. The air is cold. The front door is open wide, her house exposed, violated. She grips the banister and shuffles downstairs. She can see an empty space where the ornate dogs stood. The drawer in the sideboard's open. The hall cupboard has gone. The whole thing. Good God, they've taken furniture. Huge pieces, spirited away. Two policemen appear in the open doorway. Mrs Paige from the paper shop is behind them, her sweet face appalled. Oh Mrs Morely! Oh what have they done? A face of hypocrisy and contempt. Mary can't stand her.

My beautiful things! Oh . . .

Tell us what has happened, Mrs Morely.

They must have had a bloody lorry. What is to become of me? All my bags!

She's kept all of them over the years, in drawers, stockpiling them as though they were pound notes, little green ones from Grainger's, white paper ones from the corner shop,

brown from the fruit shop, plastic from Benham's. She likes to lay one out on her knee, iron it flat with the palm of her hand, fold it neatly and return it to a drawer. Bags have comforted her over the years, but now the robbers have got them all. The policemen take her into the kitchen. Her chair and table are still there as they were, covered in newspaper. Mary never wipes a surface. It is a low slavish task. Her resolve never to engage in domestic cleaning is integral to her. She lays down newspaper to cover any mess. Her living space in the house has dwindled to worn pathways from bedroom to bathroom, kitchen to front corridor. She opens the drawer in the newspaper table and rummages inside.

My father's watch! His pocket watch! Gone! Gone . . .! Oh . . .

One of the policemen crouches next to her.

Now, now, Mrs Morely. Let's go through everything slowly.

The policemen make notes as Mary lists everything that's been taken in exact detail – the Peking China dogs on either side of the fireplace, the magazine rack of carved walnut, the Poole pottery filled with roses made of stiffened silk, so lifelike, the brass monkeys with the Indian faces, the Wedgwood clock, the glass paintings from Holland, the chaise longue, the glass lamp, all thick with dust but the robbers knew what they were doing, the lacquer box with the gold sovereigns, the Chinese fan, the German chest, her corn plasters! She cries out, thinking of them. They were unused. She left the rings of pink lint on the handle of the walnut cupboard. The bloody thieves'll have their hands on them now.

The policemen exchange glances. They're not sure whether to call for an ambulance. That glazed look. They've seen it before.

Why have they done this to me? What did I do to deserve this?

The church bells ring out in mockery. Mary hears the voice of her mother in them. You deserve what you get, Mary. You were not put on this earth to be happy. The sound blows her backwards through the years. She sees her mother's face, the deep lines carved out of something sterner than flesh, her grey disapproving eyes, Annie Tate, fierce and furious in her sudden hatred; her dreadful love of God.

Mrs Morely, says the older policeman, you can't stay here any more.

She's a daughter in Newcastle, says Mrs Paige, her number's in the table drawer.

May I use your telephone to ring your daughter, Mrs Morely?

Mary is coming crashing into Ursula's story. What has this old bird to do with love? With anything? Ursula doesn't want her; she doesn't need a bitter grandmother in a mushroom hat, with her bitter chocolates, and her bitter past. If she could she would unclasp herself from her mother, step down from her lap, take the train across the Pennines and give those police a piece of her mind. No! You can't ring anyone! Stop! Don't send her to me! This fearsome old vulture will corrupt and poison me. Keep her in her broken house of knick-knacks. Nail her in! She will crush me. She will suffocate me. The slim strands of Ursula's beginnings have survived the crows but may not withstand this. But no one can stop Mary, not Ursula, not even Joyce. She is

coming. She is storming into Newcastle like a dark cloud, making the sky spit with rain.

Ursula is in the garden of Eslington Road when she arrives. Five painted beads are tied to either side of her pushchair. Purple, yellow, pink, green and blue. Ursula watches them, all at peace. Purple and yellow fall against each other, green and pink fall against each other. Blue is separate. She moves it to join green and pink. It drags against the string. She shunts purple and yellow along to make a tight row, a caterpillar, five painted knuckles. She slides the blue away, and moves it back. Away and back. Sometimes it seems like the head of the caterpillar, sometimes the tail. Sometimes all the beads seem joined together even when they are separate. Sometimes beads, string, pram, and her own hands all seem joined as one.

Her mother's voice is coming closer.

Ursula, say hello to Ganny Mary.

Bulging eyes, bulbous nose, loose and sagging cheeks push into the pushchair. A smell of sweet caramel and face powder. A voice coos softly.

What a chicken . . .!

Mary pops something dark into her mouth. Ursula stares up, watching her chew and suck.

What a little chicken!

Mary places a small dark rectangle in Ursula's mouth. A black, intense secret. Ursula is astonished.

Bourneville, whispers Mary, and starts to cry.

Ursula cries too. The darkness of this secret is dreadful. She tries to get it out of her mouth with her fingers.

There, there, says Mary, something sweet, for a sweet girl.