

PHONE CALLS FROM MY MOTHER

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

It is hot. The garden grows at an astonishing pace, bursting and unfurling so fast I swear I see the plants moving. Whilst I still can, I dig out weeds, endlessly, then in the evenings I sit heavily into a white plastic chair, move my hands in circles over my growing belly. The low sun reflects on the laurel leaves; ferns quiver in the warm breeze.

I collect names in a small brown notebook smudged with wet and dirt:

Laurel: dark, broad, poisonous in enclosed spaces.

Fern: low, plenty, secretive.

Naming a human is hard.

My mother calls often. 'Younger!' she shouts down the phone, 'I said he's younger, than me, can you believe it?'

He is a retired hairdresser and lives in the soft suburbs to the west, where the houses are wide and the world deeply canopied with the darkness of trees.

She doesn't mention her new boyfriend's name; names are not her priority. Dad named me, and he named the dog too.

'We both swiped right immediately,' she says, 'it's a perfect match.'

In my mind, I name him Birch: tall and silver, a new beginning.

I hear her palm muffle the receiver for a moment, a low and distant voice. When she speaks again, she says she has to go, ‘Ta-ra!’

She goes on a cruise with Birch: seven nights to the Caribbean. They don’t touch soil for days at a time, speeding across the vast and salty blue below. In the evenings they enjoy dinners that go on for hours in a pristine room with a sweeping staircase, a chandelier, and a patterned carpet. I look up native flowers of the places they visit: Barbados, Antigua, St Kitts, and lose hours amongst images of oleander, hibiscus and orchids.

Orchid: Prize-winning, spoken of in whispers.

When she comes back, she calls and says travel makes her feel like a girl again: giddy, and light.

And she laughs, and laughs.

In the afternoons I lie down on the cool bed and watch the shadows of trees dance on my belly. Friends visit after work, bringing sweet treats and Tupperware meals, stories of outrageous colleagues and plans for going out-out. At night I dream of Dad in his grave, turning slowly whilst tropical flowers bubble peach and magenta across his earthy mound. I become solid, rooted to the graveside, and sprout dark leaves out of my head. In the morning, I wake up slowly, like a child, and I wish they were both here, with me.

But she is already elsewhere, in the Balkans, on a wine tour.

‘The price of it,’ she says, ‘you wouldn’t believe the quality for the price of it’.

She asks me how I am, and I tell her the garden looks pretty in the sunshine. I tell her that in the Balkans they have bellflowers, edelweiss and buttercups. They bloom across meadows, on mountains, amongst ruined concrete. They are small and plentiful, and they do not bubble: they fizz.

Buttercup: happiness, joy, betrays a love of butter.

I often stand in the shade at the edge of the garden, my mobile pressed to my face or in the deep pockets of my big old dress, which I now wear most days. The soil is baked dust, water sinks in and disappears, and when I push my fingers into the earth it is dry all the way down. The trees speak to each other underground, send water, send help. My primroses, these irises and marigolds of mine have no such luck. They wilt before my eyes and I am summoned again, the weight of the can sloshing water over my swollen feet.

‘You wouldn’t believe the rain,’ she says, from the Irish countryside.

But green, I ask, and mild?

‘We’ve had seafood for days,’ she says, ‘I feel I could burst.’

I notice my hands on my belly, worrying.

‘I’ll be back in a week.’

I grow like the garden: bigger and, the neighbour tells me over the fence, prettier than before.

She leans over to admire the planting. The colours and pairings, she says, are very accomplished. I tell her Dad taught me everything I know about gardens, and about everything, really.

It's a precious time, she says, and I say, quietly, reverently, yes.

Later, I am in the kitchen chopping small cucumbers and green tomatoes, the phone hot between my cheek and shoulder.

'It's all over,' she says, 'another one bites the dust.' Birch has moved away to live closer to his daughter.

I go to the kitchen door and lean against the cool doorframe, stub my toe on the sharp metal lip. Outside the sky is white and everything underneath it heavy. I ask her what his daughter is called.

'Rose,' she says, 'just like you. Can you believe it? I thought it was a sign.'

The clock ticks, the fridge buzzing, the kitchen lino sticky under my feet. I tell her I am sorry.

Rose: some have thorns. Some, do not.

'I'll be over later, then', she says.

It is early when the bell rings, earlier than we'd agreed. I open the door.

Her hair is lighter and she has also grown, but not as big as me. She hugs me, smooths my hair. Her car in the driveway, same old sunglasses on the hot dashboard.

'Well,' she says, 'here I am at last'.

She wants to hear how I've been, and she desperately wants to see the garden. 'I can't believe I made it in this traffic', she says, 'this heat'. And she's forgotten something on the back seat, and she won't be a minute.

In the kitchen, I fill the kettle from the cold tap and run my wrists under the water. A breeze picks up outside and springs the back door wide, the white cloud has broken, and the sun is out again. Against the blue sky the towering fir tree waves.

I stir two and a half sugars into her favourite cup, and I hear her coming, talking to herself about the neighbours' bins.

'They could do with a spruce up,' she says, 'next door'.

She presses an enormous bunch of sunflowers into me, car keys dangling from her fingers. The brown paper is cool and noisy in my hands; the stems are wet and slimy. I hand her the tea, and she holds it with both hands.

Outside, a flock of geese pass noisily across the sky. She turns towards the open door and watches.

'I was thinking about bird names,' she turns back to face me. 'Robin?' she asks, 'like your dad.'

And we go outside, over the hard threshold, to feel the sun close to our skin.

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