

## THE TREES OF NATURE

Lying awake at night. That's when I hear her. Hear Daisy singing. Her voice – that sweet voice – running lightly under the hum of late London traffic. Then it's gone. Noisy silence. Drowned in the scream of police sirens screeching like gulls.

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I was visiting St Kilda. I'd come to see the colonies of gannets. When – for no reason I can think of – I found myself remembering Simon. Simon in his black jacket. The two of us in St James's Park. But that's the way with memories, isn't it? They come to us in ripples. Then they're gone.

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'The Enterprise' was a rundown London pub near Chalk Farm where, in those days, a traditional English folk club used to meet on Sunday evenings in an upper room. Beer-stained floor, ill-assorted wooden chairs, two old church pews at the side and clouds of cigarette smoke:

*O love it is pleasing, and love it is teasing*

*And love is a pleasure, when first it's new ...*

I was there with my usual group of my friends. The room was hot and jolly. A crowd of sound, more joyful than melodious. I paused to lift my glass when, behind my shoulder, I heard her voice, as clear as a hillside stream.

*... But as it grows older, so love it grows colder*

*And fades away, like the morning dew.*

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He turned round to look at me. I'd no idea what he going to say.

'Your voice. It's lovely.'

I looked down. I wasn't used to compliments.

'You're very kind.'

'I'm not being kind,' he said. 'It's true.'

'Thank you.'

He had unruly, biscuit-coloured hair. Kind eyes. A friend's smile, open and uncomplicated. As if he and I had known each other for years. He was wearing a black corduroy jacket that looked a size too big for him.

'I'm Simon,' he said.

'Hello, Simon. I'm Daisy.'

And that was how we met.

In the interval he asked me if I'd like a drink.

'Don't worry,' I said. 'I'm fine.'

'You're sure?'

'Yes, sure.'

It was our last year at school. We none of us had much money to spare.

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That summer – an interlude before university – Daisy and I spent most of our days together. Galleries, museums, lunch-time concerts. And, in between, we walked in London's parks: Regent's Park, Green Park, Kensington Gardens.

One particular incident in St James's Park still sticks with me. Daisy and I were sitting on a bench, and I was telling her about Chloe or Zoe or Daphne or whoever I was seeing at the time – Daisy was always such a good listener – when suddenly she gripped my arm.

'Look, Simon!' she said. 'Look over there! That pelican has just swallowed a pigeon.'

And it had.

We sat and watched, appalled and fascinated. There was nothing we could do, of course.

The pelican took about twenty minutes to swallow the pigeon completely. Then it was gone.

Daisy was still gripping my arm. There was a moment when we looked at each other.

Then I smiled. And she let go.

\*

Simon wrote to me every week. Sometimes more often. That was a time when everyone wrote letters. I wrote back reasonably often but I'm pretty sure that

Simon enjoyed writing his letters to me more than reading mine to him. My life, after all, was much less full than his.

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The next summer Daisy and I didn't see so much of each other. We were busy doing different things. Although our paths did cross once or twice.

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One night, Simon and I found ourselves at the same party somewhere in South London. I don't know who he'd come with but, by the time the party finished, she wasn't there any longer and the underground had stopped running.

I had a bedroom in a flat I shared in Balham and a sleeping-bag, a tartan rug and two spare pillows.

'You can come back to my place,' I said.

'Can I? Thanks.'

Simon looked so uncomfortable on the floor. I rehearsed what I was going to say to him. Then I said it.

'Are you cold?'

'Yes. A little,' he said.

'You can come and sleep in my bed if you like.'

It was a biggish bed and I didn't take up too much room. Simon fell asleep right away but I lay awake most of the night. I'm not sure what I'd expected. Or if I'd expected anything at all.

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It seemed to me a great shame that Daisy would never sing on her own. She was, she said, happier singing in a crowd, or with her sister, Rosie. She didn't like singing by herself.

Rosie was always slightly sharp with me. I could never understand why. It might have been nice to know her better but I didn't get the opportunity.

Yes, Rosie was lovely to look at – trim and sweet-featured – and when they sang together, it was Rosie one watched on the stage but Daisy one listened to.

\*

One spring, out of the blue, Simon invited me to join him walking in Wales. He'd planned to go with someone else, I think, but she must have let him down. It didn't worry me. I went anyway. Rosie thought I was being very foolish. The wind blew ferociously and it rained for three full days but I loved it. The Pembrokeshire Coast Path can be perfect in early April and, for much of the time, it was.

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We were there together in the tent. I was lying in my sleeping-bag and Daisy was sitting up, combing her hair and reading by torchlight.

'What are you reading?' I said.

*'Bāsho. The Narrow Road to the Deep North.'*

Her head was bent over the book and her hair was a delicate curtain against the coarse canvas.

'You have beautiful hair, Daisy,' I said.

She put down her book and looked at me. I expected her to be smiling but she wasn't.

Instead her eyes filled with tears and she turned away and switched off the torch. I'm sure there was something I should have said but I didn't know what it was.

We went home early the next morning although the sun had come out at last.

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There were a few moments when I found myself thinking about Simon but – by that time – not many. He had, I thought, slipped out of my life. It didn't worry me. Rosie and I were perfectly happy, sharing a flat in Putney, and we were busy most evenings. It was a complete surprise when he telephoned.

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I arranged to meet Daisy at 'The Lamb And Flag' in Rose Street. It was a pub we'd been to once or twice when we saw more of each other. While I was waiting, I re-read what I'd written:

*When finally we parted*

*Those shy creatures*

*Of our love-world*

*Wept bitterly and died.*

For several weeks I'd been feeling wretched about Amy. Writing poetry seemed to liberate me a little from my misery. I knew, of course, that showing a poem to anyone else was going to be a risk but I felt I needed to share it.

I watched Daisy reading. I waited. But she didn't say anything.

'Well?' I said. 'What do you think?'

'What do you want me to say?' she said.

I had hoped for a rather different response.

'Maybe Amy isn't right for you,' she said, handing back my poem.

'Well, maybe. Perhaps she isn't,' I said.

But I knew that I believed she was.

\*

I'd returned from a week's walking on the Isle of Mull. A visit to Iona. A time of reawakening and quiet reflection. There, waiting for me on the kitchen table, was a pearl white envelope. I certainly hadn't expected an invitation to Simon's wedding and I wasn't sure whether to go or not. I thought about it for the rest of the day and then decided I would.

Amy was the perfect bride: enchanting, untouchable, faintly ridiculous. I drank two glasses of champagne and talked to several people I didn't know and would never see again. When Simon asked me to sing, I said I would. I still don't know why.

Nor do I know why I chose to sing what I did:

*The tree of life my soul hath seen,*

*Laden with fruit and always green:*

*The trees of nature fruitless be*

*Compared with Christ the apple tree.*

There was a short silence and then light applause. I left the party soon afterwards, happy to let it continue without me.

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When her sister, Rosie, married an architect, Daisy left London and went to live in Scotland. The West Coast, I believe. I lost touch with her which is something I regret. There are times when I feel it would be good to see Daisy. To sit side-by-side, talking as before.

I picture her living in a croft by the sea. Racing clouds, crashing waves, her hair blowing in the wind. She's singing. Standing by herself at the water's edge. I strain to hear her but the voice is fading. Fading away from me.

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Simon? Let me think. What do I remember? The Pembrokeshire Coast Path. Wonderful walking. An appalling poem he made me read in 'The Lamb and Flag'. A sleepless night, cold and alone in my bed in Balham. So long ago now. A lifetime away.