
Opening Extract from...

The Book of Summers

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When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

W.B. Yeats, 'When You Are Old'

prologue

IT IS ON WHITE NIGHTS LIKE THESE, WHEN THE SNOW outside is pushing at the shutter pegs, and the windows are licked with frost, that Marika takes down the book. She turns the pages and she disappears, into all the sun-filled days.

There's Erzsi in the early mornings, when soft light kissed away the dew and tempted them all outside, with blushed cheeks. There she is in the late afternoons, when a ruder heat descended, flattening them, sending them sprawling – on the yellow lawn, in the forest pool, beneath the canopy of acacia trees. There she is in the slow ebbing evenings, when the spent sun dipped towards the faded hills, and they lounged on the terrace, basking in the last of the glow.

Marika looks at the pictures, and, fleetingly, she feels them looking back.

Her relationship with the book is curious. She made it herself, with searching fingers and ink-smudging tears, with paint and glue and snippets and fragments. She took photographs when no one knew photographs were being taken, so the pictures within its pages appear like whispered secrets. The

cloth cover is painted with flowers, swirls and strokes of bright white, blooms that haven't faded. Unlike the real flowers, the ones outside that twine the veranda, and wither and die as night falls. She remembers mixing the colours, the crick in her neck as she bent awkwardly over her square canvas, how she'd heard Zoltán's gentle laugh as he spotted her tongue peeping from her lips in concentration. The lettering was an afterthought, and as such the words are arranged haphazardly between the petals in a lilting, lifting scrawl: *The Book of Summers*. A name that came from the delight of the first, and the anticipation of all of the others to come.

Marika loves and hates the book in almost equal measure. For when she turns the pages she is a time-traveller. When she turns the pages she is bound in chains.

The photographs thrum with life, and tempt her closer. She smells coconut cream streaked on pale skin to ward off scatterings of freckles. She smells woodsmoke lingering in hair, as though there had been a dance through licking flames. She smells cherry sherbets with a taste like a sweet prickle. She dips her head over the pages, caught too much in the moment, and now the only scent she can catch is a papery one. Dry and musty and lifeless.

She hears a voice calling her name. She closes the book and sets it back on the shelf. She goes back to the life she has now. The life she chose, once, above all else. And all that is lost stays between the pages of the book.

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FRIDAY MORNING BEGAN AS ENGLISH SUMMER MORNINGS often do, with a shy but rising sun and wisps of cloud that were blown away by breakfast. My father was visiting, so I should have known it was never going to be an ordinary day, despite its early promise. It was the first time that he was seeing my London home for himself, and I was no newcomer to the city. I was seventeen when I decided on art college, and with the utter resolution that it had to be London. I wanted to lose myself, and it seemed just the place in which to be lost. I can remember the day I left home twelve years ago, my father standing by the car in the station car park, one gnarled hand raised in farewell, the other already feeling in his pocket for his keys. Then the put-put of the exhaust as he passed me at the station entrance, how he didn't see me that time, for he was hunched over the steering wheel like someone who was already late. I watched him go, the only family I had.

Family. A word that has always sat so uneasily with me. For other people it may mean rambling dinners with elbows on tables and old jokes kneaded and pulled like baking dough.

Or dotty aunts and long-suffering uncles, awkwardly shaped shift dresses and craggy moustaches, the hard press of a well-meant hug. Or just a house on a street. Handprints pushed into soft cement. The knotted, fraying ropes of an old swing on an apple bough. But for me? None of that. It's a word that undoes me. Like the snagging of a thread on a jumper that runs, unravelling quickly, into the cup of your hands.

Since college I've lived on both sides of the river, in boxy flats and sprawling townhouses; on my own in a damp basement in Bloomsbury, with seven others in a dilapidated but once grand family house on the Camden fringes. These days, my home is a neat Victorian terrace in Mile End, with a straggle of garden and a displaced gnome. My flatmate Lily sings Frank Sinatra in the bath and has a jet-black bob, shiny like treacle. Our street is in the shadow of a clutch of tower blocks, and there's a long-abandoned Fiat three doors up, its back window cracked like a skating pond. I once saw a cat stretched out on the pavement, black and white and dead all over, an image I've never quite cleared from my head. Another time there was a flock of pigeons pecking at a roast chicken carcass as I stepped out of my front door. I hurried past pretending I hadn't seen, like a twitchy citizen turning a blind eye to a crime. But just five minutes on my bicycle and I can be stretched out in Victoria Park, on a raft of newspapers and books. I go to a café where if the sun's beaming the owner gives me a free cup of coffee and I sit beside her at a rickety table as she smokes cheap cigarettes in her blue apron. All in all I feel settled here. It's a place where I feel I can welcome my father, without more complicated feelings budging their way in.

He was always older than the other fathers, and he made me giggle when I was small, saying he had been born ancient, with

glasses sliding down his nose in his crib, knees already wrinkled. When other dads shouted and laughed, wore Levi's and made makeshift tarpaulin water slides on summer days, my father was in his study, shirt sleeves rolled to the elbow, lost in books. I would slip away and seek him out, guided by the soft closing of a door or the creak of a stair. He'd touch a finger to my cheek and call me his little Betty. I'd cling to the ridges of his cords.

At breakfast times I used to spread marmalade on his toast, and present it to him, flushed with care. He opened the new cereal boxes, wrestling with the plastic inner, shaking cornflakes into my bowl, stealing one for himself. He ironed my school dresses on a Sunday evening, and hung them carefully on rose-patterned hangers, with their backs still creased. And sometimes I would come home and find on the kitchen table, always in the same bottom corner, an offering. A storybook. A newly ruled notepad. A posy of three, sharp-pointed lead pencils. We would make tea and read nonsense poetry together, me going to bed dreaming of Quangle Wangles and a beautiful pea-green boat.

We'd got on famously, with all the appearance of happiness.

Nowadays, we have new terms. Simply this: there are some things we talk about, and some things we don't. As long as the boundaries are observed, all is well. It makes what could be a complicated relationship into a very simple one. This understanding of ours didn't evolve gently over time, instead it began with rushed descent, hurried by splashed tears and spilt promises, when I was sixteen years old. Ever since, we've been quietly complicit. And we get along just fine.

He's never been the sort to just pop to London, on a whim. Our infrequent visits are planned well in advance and I always go to see him in Devon. 'I'm not built for London, Beth,' he's always said, and I've found it a relief, that he's not one of those

enthusiastic parents who is forever making suggestions and proposing plans. Lily's mother permanently scours the paper for exhibitions and new plays, looking for excuses to come and visit. She comes every couple of months and Lily turns into a tourist then. The two of them tumble through the door with crammed bags from Harrods and the V&A. They catch taxis and go to the ballet. They eat at talked-about restaurants and sometimes invite me to join them for dessert. Lily's mother also attacks our domestic space with relish. She scrubs our sink so it looks like silver, and replaces our gnawed toothbrushes with pert bristled ones. She buys us giant packs of toilet rolls and tins of soup, as though we were remote hill folk that might one day be snowed in. I observe such events with interest. I wonder what it would be like, to have the lives of your parents so entangled with your own. Lily's mother's embraces extend to me as well, but somehow her inclusive acts make me feel lonelier than I ever did before. Before I realized I needed a new toothbrush, or a slice of Michelin-starred pavlova.

So it came as a surprise when my father telephoned three days ago to say that he was coming to see me this very weekend. Would I be around on Friday? Would I be free? he'd asked. This was new territory, and he entered it with a sideways glance and a fretful edge. As chance would have it, I had the day off. I work in a gallery and so I often have to do weekends, but that week I was gifted a rare Friday and Saturday of freedom. I'd had visions of a lazy breakfast at the pavilion in the park, a bicycle ride along the canal path, an afternoon in a sunny beer garden with friends who never worked weekends but still celebrated them no less rampantly. 'Of course I'm free, Dad,' I'd said, affecting an easy tone, 'come any time.' I'd offered to meet his train at Paddington and he'd laughed vigorously, saying that he

wasn't decrepit yet. I stole in and asked him then, 'is everything okay?' And he said of course it is. Then he added, 'I just want to see you.' And it sounded simple enough at the time; unexpected, but just about believable. After I'd hung up the phone, I couldn't help feeling a queer mix of elation and worry. I decided to temper both through avoidance. I lost myself in recipe books. Instead of spending the next three days imagining all the possible scenarios that might have provoked his visit, I baked, I cooked, and I dusted, feeling more daughterly than I had in a long time.

An impromptu spirit was clearly in the air, for Lily announced she was going sailing for the weekend, with her new boyfriend, Sam. I pictured her windblown and salty, laughing at the breeze. I was disappointed that she wouldn't be at home. My father would have enjoyed meeting her, and I'd have appreciated the way she'd have taken the conversation and steered it along in an effortless way.

'Will that chap Jonathan be with you?' he'd asked on the telephone, and I'd had to remind him that Johnny and I had broken up six months ago. He easily forgot things like that, and for my part I downplayed them, if I played them at all. Johnny had taught geography carelessly at a Lambeth comprehensive, he had a dishevelled beard and laughing eyes. We spent nearly two years together, and in that time I'm not sure I ever got to describe myself as his girlfriend, something I somehow never minded. One day he told me he was leaving to travel South America and asked me if I wanted to go with him. I thought about it, as he talked of crashing waterfalls and jungles so deep and thick that they were black as night by day. But in the end I turned him down more easily than I'd thought was possible. We made love that night for the last time, Johnny collapsing on to my chest afterwards, me closing my eyes and folding an arm

about him, as if he were the one that needed comforting. As if I was the one leaving. And on the last morning, he took my chin between his finger and thumb, and looked into my eyes. 'If only you'd let me really know you,' he said. Then, with more assurance, 'I think I got closer than anyone, Beth. I think I knew you better than you think.' I'd closed my eyes, and when I opened them again I could see that I wasn't to be his puzzle any more. He was as good as gone.

In trying to decide what to do with my father while he was with me, I thought straight away of the gallery. It's just off Brick Lane and I love the space I work in. The vast, glass panes let the best of the sunlight in, and inside there's an organic feel, lending the impression that you've fallen into a sun-filled glade in an otherwise dark and tangled wood. When I was a student, I always believed that art was there to show people something new, not something old, and this has stayed with me. For the last week, though, we'd been running an exhibition comprising the work of three landscape artists. Their gentle, pastoral subjects were not our usual fare, but Luca, the owner, had one day woken up with a yearning for something 'kinder' he'd said, that 'harked back to altogether simpler times'. I could imagine my father enjoying the work, peering close to the canvas to admire a swell of hillside, or a blooming tree in the middle of a pancake-flat field. He'd see something of Devon in the pictures, and feel at home perhaps. And I would be pleased to show him my place of work at last. He'd never seen it, and I'm sure he imagined it was all dismembered mannequins and incoherent spray paint, the kind of thing he saw now and again in the supplements of Sunday papers.

For the evening I'd bought some films from one of the stalls along Roman Road, old black and whites with stuttering

soundtracks and footsteps in the dark. Settling down in front of the television was one of the things we'd always done together, conversing aimlessly and gratefully about whatever we were watching. And for our supper I'd made a huge pan of chili, and bought tortillas from a Mexican shop in the Bethnal Green backstreets. He hadn't said if he was staying, but I'd folded towels and fresh sheets in anticipation. I'd cleared up the junk mail that carpeted the communal hallway, and put a bunch of tulips on the table in the kitchen.

There's a sad kind of poetry in the unsuspecting. For every catastrophe that befalls us there was a time before when we were quite oblivious. Little did we know how happy we were then. If only we could learn to celebrate the ordinary days; the ones that begin unremarkably, and continue in unnoteworthy fashion. Days like yesterday, and the day before, when the irksome things were slight and passing; the fuzzy edges of an early-morning headache, the spilling of a little coffee as I stirred in the sugar, the sudden recollection that I had biscuits baking in the oven and their sweet smell had turned a touch acrid. These are the days to prize. The days on which to pause, to give thanks. And in doing so to acknowledge that we're ready, we're poised. If the skies were to fall, we'd have a chance of catching them.

My father arrived just after midday. I heard the idling of an engine outside and spied his taxi from the window. I ran downstairs, skidding on the landing in my socks, reaching the door just before he rang the bell.

'Dad!'

He moved to kiss me, but had bags in both hands so we bumped each other clumsily. I reached to take some of his load but he shook his head.

'No, you go on, I'm all right. Where are we going, up these stairs?'

I looked at him with new fascination, the way we always do when we see people out of their natural habitats. I was almost surprised to see clothes that I recognized, his camel-coloured coat that was too warm for the weather, his blue cotton shirt that was frayed at the collar but remained a favourite. In the living room I stood back from him, shy almost, and watched as he set down his bags. A navy holdall, a hessian carrier with a turtle on it, the kind that have replaced plastic bags in smarter supermarkets, and a string bag that appeared to be filled with newspaper packages.

'Are you staying the night?' I asked.

'I wasn't sure,' he said. Then added, 'But I could of course, if you wanted me to. Oh, you're looking at this lot. It's vegetables mainly, from the garden. I thought you'd like them.'

He started going through the string bag, drawing out bundles of radishes and a plump lettuce.

'I got up early this morning to get them,' he said. 'There's some new potatoes here too.'

The vegetable patch was another of our common grounds. When I was small I'd helped him sow and dig, my knees pointed and muddy, my hands swallowed by a giant pair of cotton gardening gloves. As I'd grown older, and my visits home had been more sporadic, he'd made it his duty to appraise me of developments in the garden. Whether it was frosty grass splintering underfoot or slippery mud, a slither of moon in the sky or full sun, we'd always walk down to the bottom of the garden, soon after my arrival home.

With my arms now loaded, I went through to the kitchen.

'You can stay if you want,' I said. 'I mean, you've come all

this way. And you've never been before. And, well, it'd be nice, wouldn't it?'

'My ticket's a flexible one,' he said. 'I can go back on any train.'

I knew how meticulous he was, and that all possible trains between now and tomorrow afternoon would be noted down in his minute and precise handwriting, on a piece of paper, folded in his pocket. He'd have asterisked the slow trains, the ones that trundled through Wiltshire or stopped in Bristol. But his apparent flexibility was novel, and I approved of it. I was beginning to relax, believing in the spontaneity of his visit, after all.

I called back through to the living room, 'Do you want to go to the gallery? We've an exhibition on that I think you'd like, and you'll get to meet the people I work with too. Then we could have some lunch somewhere, and then come back here in the evening for dinner. But it's up to you. I mean, we can do anything, really.'

'Oh, I don't mind, Beth. It's just nice seeing you,' he said. 'Is there a cup of tea going?'

I walked back into the living room, carrying a plate of biscuits. 'Kettle's on. Look, I baked, maple and walnut cookies. They're a bit burnt at the edges, but . . .'

He was picking up the hessian bag with the turtle on it, and he jumped when I came into the room. He set it back down.

'Beth . . .' he said.

I'd heard him say my name like this before. Countless times, each of them years and years ago.

'What?'

'Before anything else, there's something I need to give you. Perhaps you want to sit down.'

His voice hit the low notes, with a tremor at the last.

'What is it?' I said, and was surprised at how calmly the words came out.

He turned back to the bag, and picked it up again. It seemed to take a considerable effort, as though it was immensely heavy. His fingers tightened on the handle, and I thought then how claw-like his hand looked, the skin tight over the giant knuckles, the sharp thumb. His face had turned grey, his eyes swam with apology. And I knew then that there was a reason for him coming to London so suddenly, after all. It wasn't just to see me, or just because he'd wanted to. We weren't those sort of people, those happy and spontaneous types who did that kind of thing. I wish he'd kept me fooled for longer. We could have prolonged the spell that way, even if its hold was thin as mist.

'Something came in the post for you,' he said, 'and I thought I'd better bring it straight away.'

He held out the bag to me. I stared at the cartoon green turtle printed on its side, with its round eyes and stumpy feet. The words 'a friend for life' were stamped beneath it. I looked back at my father.

'What is it?' I said.

'I don't know, Beth. I haven't opened it.'

He looked pained as he spoke, and I felt a sudden flare of anger. A heat in my chest, that flickered then settled. I pulled at the string of my necklace with its tangle of charms, my fingers twisting the silver chain. I met his eye, and he blinked first. He shrugged. 'I just thought it might be important,' he said, quietly.

I set the bag on the floor and knelt down beside it, reaching inside. I drew out a parcel wrapped in brown paper, book-heavy. I turned it over, and saw a smeared postmark and a

clutch of foreign stamps. *Magyarország*. Hungary. A place that once, a very long time ago, said *summer* to me. The handwriting was faintly familiar, spiky and picturesque, every word a mountain range a mile high. It was addressed to Erzsébet Lowe.

Erzsébet Lowe. Two words, a name, one that meant jagged baby teeth, the last of which was swallowed in sleep. Sandals that left a tread of flower patterns in the dust. A fringe hanging on the tilt. Eyes wide like saucers, pushing through fronds in the hidden wood. And later, sharp elbows and long legs, a sunburnt chest and kisses by a dark pool. Tears that stung and rattling breath. A shattered mirror and a sudden escape. Unless I stopped them, the fragments of my Hungarian summers would come skittering back; first as paper pieces, blowing in the wind, and then a maelstrom.

I had to be resolute. Erzsébet Lowe no longer existed. She was a figment, a fading trace of breath on a pane, a pattern of tea leaves, swirled and disappeared. Long lost, long gone.

I glanced up at my father. He was staring down at me, his hands loose by his sides. His face was wrung of all colour and creases streaked his cheeks.

'Why did you bring it?' I said, dropping the parcel back into the bag, snapping upwards. 'Why did you think I'd want it?'

'I'm sorry, Beth, but I thought it had to be important. Not the kind of thing to just forward in the post.'

The word *important* smacked of cold formality, brown envelopes with 'not a circular' stamped, and civic meetings where pie-hatted do-gooders stood up to protest. It was a cold and static word.

'None of it's *important*,' I said. 'You should have just binned it.'

I saw it then as it might have happened. The parcel taken to

a post office and pushed under the glass, a heavyset woman in a creased blouse licking the stamps and slapping them haphazardly. Tossed into a sack, as the sender, a dark shadow, turned to leave. A package, bound with worn string, crossing the continent in a jet plane's hold, to sit propped in the porch in Harkham, a snail leaving a sticky trail behind it. Then the final leg, a train to London, my father sitting in the back of a taxicab as it rumbled through East London streets, the weight of the thing in his lap. His hands closed around it, protective, fearful.

This was how the past travelled towards the present. Such was its journey.

I stood up, wiping my hands on my dress as though it was dusty.

'So you came here to give me this?' I said. 'Why couldn't you have told me that was why you were coming? I'd have said don't bother. I don't want it. Whatever it is, I don't want it.'

'I didn't think it was just a parcel,' he said. 'It's been such a long time since anything with that postmark came to the house, Beth. I just thought I should come . . .'

'But you never come, Dad. You've never seen this place, not once. I don't mind about that. It's how it is, it's fine. But, honestly, of all the wasted trips. Please take it, just take it away with you. I don't want it.'

'I didn't want to upset you. I really didn't. It was rash of me to come.'

'It wasn't rash, it was normal. For other people, it would have been normal. But not for us, Dad. I should have known that there'd be a reason behind you coming. But *this*? Why couldn't you just say? Why couldn't you have told me what was going on? Instead of pretending you were just swinging by on a social visit, with a bag of radishes, for God's sake.'

'I didn't know how to tell you, Beth. I knew what it would mean to you.'

'Dad, why is it that after all these years, we still get it wrong? Nothing's changed, not one thing.'

'Would you rather I went?' he said.

'What, home?'

'Yes.'

I considered it, and felt an old familiar feeling turning in my stomach. Guilt and sorrow, mixed.

'Well, you only came to give me this, and now it's given. But, I mean, you *could* stay. We could just pretend that everything's okay. That you didn't lie about why you were coming. That you didn't just give me something that is completely irrelevant but is now going to be stuck in my head for, oh I don't know, forever. We could do that, yes.'

My voice was extraordinarily high-pitched, as though I was a stringed instrument tightened beyond all reason. I clapped my hands to my mouth to stop myself talking.

He took the bag from my hand. I saw the tiredness in his face then, the lines about his eyes like cracks in plaster. He picked up his holdall. I imagined it contained his neatly folded pyjamas, a change of shirt, a pair of balled woollen socks. Things that he'd need in case he'd stayed the night after all. What had he thought? That after the parcel I'd want the comfort of his presence? That we'd walk in the park and look at paintings and eat chili and watch films then say goodnight on the landing, and all would be well?

We stared at one another. He opened his mouth to say something then hesitated. He closed it. The time to speak, to make things different, had been and gone and neither of us had taken it.