

When the Wasps Drowned

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That was the summer Therese stepped on the wasps' nest and brought an end to our barefoot wanderings, when the sun shone every day and everybody commented upon it. Old ladies on park benches, fanning themselves with well-thumbed issues of *Woman's Own*, would sigh, 'Oh, isn't it hot?' And I, hungry for conversation, would sit
5 tall on the wooden seat and smile as I agreed, eyes darting to see if they might say anything more. The heat was all anyone ever seemed to speak of, and I knew that when the weather changed we'd still be talking of the same thing, only then we'd be blowing at our hands and complaining of the cold.

The chemist sold out of after-sun that summer, and flower beds dried up, and people
10 had to queue to get into the swimming pool. With towels hung over their arms or squashed into carrier bags, we'd see them waiting along the wall outside, listening to the shouts echoing on the water within, envious of those who emerged coolly with hair slicked damp and eyes pinkened by chlorine, carrying bags of crisps from the vending machine.

15 It was the first time the garden walls seemed confining, when finally I was tall enough to peer over their mossy tops and look across the line of gardens and see sheets, dried out in the heat, listless in the still air, and hear the tinny music of distant transistor radios, and the ache of cars moving slowly in the hot sun, their windows wide as if that might change anything.

20 That was the summer they dug up Mr Mordecai's garden.



We heard her screams from inside. I was standing at the sink, barefoot on the lino, washing up the breakfast dishes, soaping them lazily as I watched the light play on the bubbles. Tyler was curled under the kitchen table pushing a toy truck back and forth, smiling at the rattle of its metal wheels. Her screaming, the way it broke the
25 day, so shocked me that I dropped a glass, which smashed on the tap and fell into the dishwater below. She was running in circles round the garden, shrieking, a halo of angry wasps blurring her shape, her pigtails dancing.

For the first few moments I just stood, mouth agape, watching her through the grime of the kitchen window not wanting to go anywhere near Therese or all those
30 wasps. As I ran to the back door, Tyler rose and toddled after me. I remember him laughing as I turned the hose on her – he thought it all a joke. Dripping with water, her sundress clinging to a polka-dot of red welts, Therese continued to scream into the afternoon. Around her on the grass, wasps lay dark on their backs, legs kicking, wings too sodden to fly.



35 Mum was out at work all day. She left us to our own devices. Sometimes I'd take them out, Therese picking at her scabs, Tyler strapped in the buggy. We'd walk down to the park and I'd sit by the swings and watch the boys. They'd stand in a huddle by the public loos, puffing on cigarettes.

Other days we'd just lie in the garden and absorb the heat. I'd fashioned a bikini
40 from a pair of pink knickers and an old vest which I'd cropped just below my nipples. I had a pair of green plastic sunglasses I'd bought at the corner shop and the yellow flip-flops Mum now insisted we wear. I'd sunbathe while Therese scoured the grass for wasp corpses. When she found one she'd place it on a paving slab and, using a stone, pound its body to dust. Tyler would squat sagely beside her. I'd watch them
45 idly, lift an arm perhaps to point out another dead wasp lodged between blades of grass.

It was maybe early August when she and Tyler started to dig under the garden wall. Sitting in its shadow, they scratched away with sticks, collecting the dry earth in a plastic bucket. 'Help us, Eveline,' they'd say, 'we're digging to Australia,' but I'd
50 just roll my eyes and turn the page of my magazine. The task would occupy them for a while and then they'd come and loll next to me, Tyler flat out on his stomach, snuffling as the grass tickled his nostrils, Therese plaiting together thin strands of my hair.

So we'd lie and wait for Mum to come home, her uniform sweaty round the edges.
55 Then she'd sit, her legs up on one of the kitchen chairs, complaining how her feet were swollen, watching as we prepared the fish fingers or chicken nuggets.



In that heat, everything seemed an effort. There was a day I remember; I was lying on my side, eyes closed. Therese, finished her digging, was flopped next to me. One plump arm was curled in a damp embrace around my knee. She was breathing hotly
60 against my hip. I opened my eyes in a slow squint against the sun. Therese's other arm was flung out above her head.

It was the glint that caught my eye. I only saw it as she jerked her hand at the buzz of a fly. Wedged on her thumb was a thin gold ring, studded with small diamonds. There was dirt lodged between the stones, but still they caught the sunlight and
65 glimmered. At first I didn't react. I just lay there, watching.

'Therese,' I said finally, 'where'd you get that ring?'

'Found it,' she sighed.

I heaved myself up by one elbow and took her hand in mine to look more closely at the small piece of jewellery. 'Where?' I asked.

70 Therese yawned before rolling onto one side and up. She walked me to the hole they'd been digging. It was deep and long now, tunnelling under our wall and into Mr Mordecai's garden. We knelt down and peered into its depths. It was too dark to see much. Therese took my hand and guided it into the hole. Straight away I knew what it was I could feel, but I told Therese to run in and find the torch. She came back a moment later and we angled the light. At the end of the tunnel, a pale hand reached towards us.

We said nothing as we looked. The skin was mauve in places, the fingernails chipped and clogged with soil. Suddenly the day around us seemed unbearably quiet, as if everything was holding its breath.

80 'Therese,' I said eventually, 'I think we'd better fill up the hole.'

We collected the plastic bucket and shunted the piles of earth back where they came from, patting the ground flat with our hands.

Leaning across to her, I took the ring from Therese's thumb and slipped it onto my right index finger. She didn't protest.



85 And so the digging stopped. We ignored the bald patch of earth by the fence, the mark of the aborted Australia project. The ring I cleaned with an old toothbrush and wore sometimes, but only ever while Mum was at work.

The long days continued to melt into one another. Mum would put us to bed and it would still be light outside. Beyond the curtained windows the world continued and we could hear it all, even clearer than winter nights when it was dark. Tyler and Therese were too hot and tired to feel they might be missing anything but I would lie awake under the sheets, listening to the street and the muffle of Mum's radio downstairs.



95 One night Therese woke crying from a bad dream. She padded through to Mum's room and I could hear them across the landing, Mum's voice comforting and sleepy, Therese's diluted by her tears, 'and I was watering the garden, Mum, with a blue watering can, and it started to grow ...'

'Sleep now, my love, shhh.' I wanted Mum's gentle shush in my own ear. When I closed my eyes I could see Therese's dream, the arm growing up through the soil.



100 The holidays began finally to peter to a close. The days were still stifled by the heat and, at a loss as to how we might fill them, we'd even begun to miss going to school. Very occasionally, Mum would leave sweet money. Then we'd buy Smarties, lick

the shells of the red ones, and rub swathes of scarlet food colouring across our lips. That's what we were doing when we heard the doorbell ring. I flip-flopped through
105 the cool of the house to open the front door. A man and a woman stood on the step.
'Is Mum or Dad in, love?' As she asked the question, he peered over our shoulders into the hallway.

I blinked up at them through my sunglasses. Therese and Tyler were both clinging to my bare legs, Tyler fingering the elastic of my bikini bottom. Pouting Smartie-red lips,
110 I told them Mum was at work, wouldn't be home until six. I held my right hand behind my back.

The woman bent towards us and smiled. I tried to stand taller. 'Maybe you can help us then. We're from the police; we just want to ask a couple of questions.' She held out a photograph of a late-teenage girl. A holiday pic. The girl was sun-browned,
115 smiling at something beyond the camera lens. 'Do you think you might have seen this girl?'

We all looked, then shook our heads.

'Are you sure?' She held the photo closer. 'You wouldn't have seen her on the street or anything?'

120 We all shook our heads again. The man loosened his collar, wiped a trickle of perspiration from his forehead. He caught my glance and smiled. I didn't smile back.

'Well, that's all then,' said the woman, lowering the picture to her side. 'You've been very helpful, thank you.' She stretched out a hand to ruffle Tyler's curls. He pressed closer against my leg.

125 I shut the door and we waited a while, heard them walking down our garden path and unlatching Mr Mordecai's gate next door. My fingers, fiddling unconsciously, played with the ring for a moment as we stood together in the dark hallway. None of us said a thing. Taking Therese and Tyler by the hand, I turned, and we stepped back out into the sunlight of the garden.