

# Beacons

By

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Lily squats over the pond, poking her stick at the frogspawn, a wobble of tiny black jelly-clad commas. On another day they might make Richard think of his pancreas, but Lily is rapt. Her raptness fills him with a glow, like he has swallowed liquid gold. Richard is Lily's father, only a wafer of himself - a slither like a new moon. One day soon he will blow away, a dandelion seed in the breeze. This is how he'd like to tell it to Lily, when he has to - that she will see him in the fields, a seed on the breeze, rising, watching over her.

Dandelion is one of the words.

A tiny movement pierces the waters' surface and flippers away down into the reedy darkness. She stirs the water with her stick.

'Where's it gone?'

'It's a newt,' he says.

'Newt?' she pouts the word - on her lips, words sparkle.

Newt is another one of the words on the list.

A few months ago, Rich received some crow-black news that has steadily pecked at him. It was around then that something else was bothering him. He'd read about it. Words were dropping out of books, of heads, of use. Becoming obsolete. How could they? Acorn, gone. And Bluebell - the overnight spread of purple, like a tide. Apparently, no-one says these words. That can't be true. Conker. Imagine a childhood without Conker? And Starling. And Wren - tiny virtuoso soprano, pluckiest of creatures with its tail pointing at the sun. Wren, for God's sake! He is incensed. Splenetic. Pancreatic. Ha.

He is also galvanised. Words. What you can't say you can't picture, and what you can't picture you can't love. *Lily Lily Lily*. Trapped in her indoor life.

You could say it was an epiphany; the call to fatherhood exploding inside him for the first time, a firework in the chest, almost but not quite too late. Fatherhood, father, Dad. He hasn't been much of one. He hasn't been one at all. Now he knows. He knows that before he goes, he must get his daughter to look up: she needs to know what she won't have words for.

Every month he has looked into the dark eyes in her oval face and thought to himself *Where did you come from?* The answer, of course, is the woman who seduced and discarded him almost twelve years ago. She had chosen him, Rich the fool, as he might live up to his name. Ha. And because she knew he had no desire for offspring. She kept the child to herself, until the summer of the girl's ninth year, when she decided it was time for Rich to make his appearance.

Once a month these past two years Rich and Lily have sat side by side in dark cinemas, across from each other in pizza places, strings of cheese swinging from their lips in lieu of

conversation. What did he know of children? Leaky, howling, insatiable, mayhem. And now, stranger still, a poised mini-woman with black-rimmed eyes and sparkling nails; polished, impermeable. How will he get through? Little white stumps of earphones poking from her ears, singing tunelessly, alarmingly, of 'sweet slow kisses from my baby', and always looking down.

On a Saturday in early February he drives her up to Beacon Hill under a moody sky. Windscreen wipers bat at the drizzle. He glances at her in the passenger seat. She's not come prepared - her shoes resemble ballet slippers, a tiny striped bag sits in her lap covered with inexplicable multicoloured zips.

'Up here there's an awesome view,' he says, his voice bright. Lily nods and unzips a zip, then another, pulls out her earphones.

'Top of the world,' he says, gripping the wheel.

They park near the top. He'd planned a longer walk but he is losing his nerve. They make their small ascent side by side on spiky ground. Mercifully the rain has stopped. He wants to take her hand. He can hear her humming -faint atonal peeps from under her hood. Should he ask about the music? He strides on, he must show her, he *must*. If he could, he would have waited for primroses, the evening scream of swifts, an orange sunset. Instead, they stand beside the thick grey obelisk in tufts of colourless grass, brown fields tumble away in front of them criss-crossed with hedges in dark clumps. Even this evokes a bleak beauty. At the bottom, the city sprawl nestles low against a burgeoning sky. To his left, a line of yew trees scratch their way down the hillside. Two large black birds crouch in the branches. He fills his lungs and looks around but Lily has strayed from his side. On a flat patch of ground to his right she's jumping from side to side.

The birds take flight, a sudden spray of black against the lumpy grey. He runs over to join her, ready with his spiel. She's looking down at her feet, practising something.

'They're ravens,' he points, and without meaning to, starts reeling off words. 'Fern, bramble lark- and magpie! we saw one on the way here -'. She takes a step backwards as he carries on, his pitch rising. 'And- and heather! I'll find you some,' he scans the ground. What is he thinking? They're not high enough. He looks back at her, she's got her head cocked to one side.

'Heather's in my class,' she says. She takes an earphone out, looks up at the sky, takes the other one out. 'She has to have a special teacher with her.' Rich waves this away as a gust of panic rises in his throat.

'Heather's one of the *words*,' he flings out his arms. 'You need all this! It could save your *life*!'

Her face is blank.

'Words are vanishing, Lily.' His arms drop to his sides and his voice slides back to normal. 'I don't want all this lost to you.'

'What?' she says, wrinkling her nose, 'what words?' He sees her shiver. Any minute now she will stomp off to the car. He longs for her to stay with him here on the hill, to open her eyes in wonder.

‘Words to name the world,’ he says, - *now* she will understand what’s at stake. Lily thinks about this and looks at him, confused.

‘Is that what you’re sad about?’

‘Ah- No. Huh.’ What was he saying? It was urgent but it’s gone. He stares into her face. Her dark brown eyes look steadily into his, giving nothing of her world away. Brambles knot his thoughts, Lily twirling on the grass just a minute ago. He opens his mouth to a tendril of smoky breath but no words. Feeling winded he squats down, still their eyes are locked. She’s taller than him now.

*Is that what you’re sad about?*

He has to look away.

Lily squares her shoulders, raises her chin.

‘There’s too many words anyway,’ she says with authority. What? Rich may have to lie down. Something is being pulled from him, unravelling somewhere.

‘And there’s always new ones,’ Lily says with a shrug.

‘New ones,’ he repeats. He’s lost his grip. Words. He was trying to open her eyes. He pats the ground behind him - too wet to sit.

‘Like Hashtag,’ Lily says, with her head on one side making him think of a robin. ‘Blog,’ she switches sides, ‘Twitter.’

He reels. He feels like he is balanced on a ledge, he mustn’t look down. His knees are hurting in this squat.

‘What I wanted,’ he starts slowly, putting a hand on the ground in front to steady him, ‘was for you to-’ But Lily’s not listening. She’s heading back down the hill, away from him. His heart is so heavy it might grind them both to a halt. With great effort, Rich unfurls himself to standing and heads after her.

Almost at the car he finds her hunkered down, swiping at the ground, picking something.

She swipes again, turns and shows him a clutch of pointy green leaves.

‘For next door’s rabbit,’ she says. With her free hand she rips another handful, and holds up two fistfuls. ‘He *loves* dandelions.’

Inside his chest hope flaps in great beats, like a heron rising from a lake.

After he takes Lily home, he goes to his friend’s cottage by the sea. Standing on the rocks he allows himself to be hypnotised by the swish and suck, the raking crackle of the tide going out, peels of scattered spume falling in a heartbeat to calm. He understands he is the sea - inside his chest rage builds, roars, spits, then drops away. *There’s too many words anyway.* He smiles now at the wisdom in this in spite of the grammar. Yet on his slow walk back to the cottage, salt in his nostrils, his own new words jab at him in sharp pricks: ductal, histopathology, metastasize. Palliative.

The month passes. They sit across from each other at his kitchen table, he taps at his laptop for inspiration, she swipes her small pink-cased screen as the day crouches at the window, dank and mocking.

Bingo. He turns the laptop to face her. She looks up from her 'phone.

'Smoke,' she says, unimpressed. He shakes his head.

'Birds,' he says, nodding at the screen, making an upward spiral motion with his finger. She leans in.

'It's smoke,' she says. 'What's burning?'

He laughs, 'Seriously, it's starlings, thousands of them. I've seen them do it.'

'If you say so.' She goes back to her phone. He feels like a squashed bug. He leaves a long pause.

'What would *you* like to do?' he says finally, trying to keep his voice level, free of his creeping desperation. Then, like the jewel-flash of a kingfisher, an idea swoops in. He slaps both palms on the table.

'Let's go to the sea.'

She looks confused, 'On *holiday*?'

'No, the *ocean*, cliffs, wind in your hair-'

She curls her hair around her index finger, a sparkle of blue pokes through on the tip.

'Come on,' he says.

Lily picks her way like a careful stick insect down the knobbly path, mud and stones flanked by a high hedge either side. The short walk takes forever. When the hedge drops away, they're battered by the wind. And there is it, the March sea, wide and grey and seething. A gull like a small plane sweeps by, too close, Lily stumbles back, shrieks.

'Come on!'

She grips his fingers as he leads her further out. They pick over the rocks together and stop at the furthest point.

'Look!' he points at a gannet bobbing in the froth. Lily follows his gaze, the bird dips down and vanishes. The sky brightens a shade as the sun pushes at the cloud.

'-going to die?' Lily shouts. He jerks his head towards her. She says something else but the wind snatches her words.

Is she asking him?

A crag of silver outlines the cloud, like lightning, and disappears. Rich can't decide where to look or what to say. The gannet pops up again. He's about to point it out when a lazy wave crawls up onto the rock and over Lily's feet. She squeals, looks murderously at the sea, at her shoes. She retreats at a run, away from the lapping enemy.

‘They’re soaked!’ she cries from a flat rock, ‘suede’s not supposed to get *wet!*’ With the last shrill word the wind whips her hair right over her face. She squats down on the rock hugging her knees. She might be crying. He goes to her side and kneels beside her.

‘The sea’s a menace, isn’t it?’ He sits right beside her so she can lean on him. She doesn’t move away. ‘It’s full of treasure though.’

She gives him a stern look and sniffs.

‘I used to swim in this, you know,’ he says, remembering with a jolt of grief the tingling zing of his skin, like an alarm on the outside of the body.

‘In winter?’ she says, wide-eyed.

‘In winter,’ he says, then adds ‘in a wetsuit.’ He thinks how alien his life must seem to her.

‘What kind of treasure?’ she says, rubbing at her shoes with her sleeve.

‘Everything you can imagine. I was thinking of the wildlife kind,’ he checks he hasn’t lost her here, but she’s waiting. ‘Somewhere in the ocean there’s a fish that can give itself a sex-change. It goes under a rock male, and ta-da! comes out female.’

‘No way!’ Her mouth drops open, he can see her back teeth.

‘Fact,’ he says, ‘I saw it on a documentary.’ Lily takes this in, nods to herself.

‘At least it comes out a *girl*,’ she says, with a sly smile.

‘Ha! At least. That is indeed a bonus.’ They look at each other, both with something on the tips of their tongues. The wind drops. Lily picks up a pebble and taps it on the rock, leaving little chalk marks.

‘I’ve got two fish,’ she mumbles to the rock, Rich thinks he may have imagined it.

‘Wibble and Wobble. I know they’re crap names.’ She scratches a ‘W’ carelessly, flicking at the stone. ‘Only goldfish. Mum’s boyfriend won them at Downsfest. I keep hoping they’ll die so I can get better ones.’ Rich watches creases form on her brow.

‘We could bring them here,’ he says, then with a grin, ‘feed them to the gannets.’

She puts her hand over her mouth to cover a smile. It is all he can do to stop himself lunging towards her with open arms. He keeps talking.

‘Stick them in a plastic bag, filled with water-‘

‘Or a Tupperware,’ Lily says.

‘Tupperware, genius!’ he almost bellows. ‘Ha! They won’t know anything, they’re not the brightest.’

‘They might like it better,’ Lily says ‘more space.’

‘They might,’ his throat is thick, his heart sings. He looks at his daughter. ‘They might like it better.’

The sea churns in front of them, all the way to the horizon.

The air grows warmer, reaching towards spring. He pleads for an overnight contact, is staggered that Lily agrees. She must know something. He pitches the tent, though they may not sleep in it - he'll take her home if she changes her mind. They lie on their backs and gaze up at the winking ink-black sky.

'All the way out there, all the iron in your blood, that's where it was made.'

'Stop telling me things,' she says.

'Sorry.'

'Shhh,' she says, 'I'm looking.' Then after a short while, 'I'm freezing.'

It clouds over, they light a fire and stare into the leaping flames.

'What did you want to be?' she asks.

'Hmm?'

'When you were eleven,' she says 'what did you want to *be*?' Her face flickers pink and orange. A thrill shoots through him; she really wants to know. Then a tumbling panic. The answer is forensic pathologist. He won't speak here of dead bodies, of scraping under fingernails. He needs something poetic, impressive.

'An inventor,' he says. She looks back at the fire. A spark jumps out and lands beside her foot, they stare at it as it pulses and fades.

'I wanted to invent a time machine,' he says, believing it now himself.

'I think someone's already doing that,' Lily says. Ludicrously, he is put out.

'Who?' he scowls.

'Someone at Nasa,' she says. 'I want to be a choreographer but Vanessa says I won't make it because I'm still not on points. Basically, I only want to do Street and Rockjam though, so it doesn't matter.'

This huge, incomprehensible speech is sublime to him. Vanessa's clearly a fuckwit.

'You'll be a fantastic choreographer,' he says, wishing he was young and hip.

Lily shrugs. 'I don't think Dance is on the options at Moorland Green anyway.'

'Dance is always an option,' he says. A whispery hoot comes from the woods. He cocks his head to listen. Lily doesn't notice, she stands up to fumble in her pockets, and pops her earphones in. The fire crackles, another breathy hoot. He checks to see if Lily's heard it, but she's bobbing her head to her own music, eyes on the dwindling flames. He'll take her to the pond next, there might be tadpoles.

He leans in to place another log, savours the heat, almost burning his face and warm across his chest. She mouths words he can't make out, her face flickering pink. Her shoulders start to rise in small rhythmic movements: left shrug, right shrug, left, right. Now she lifts her legs a fraction, one at a time, now her arms fan out and she makes a wave with her whole body. He's careful to keep his eyes on the fire and watches her from the corners. She doesn't seem to mind him being there while she dances.

Shrug, shrug, step, step, arms wide, wave.

It is just the two of them in the corner of a field, a tiny glow in the night. Another hoot comes from the woods. Calling to him. Them. His whole life is here; flapping, sweet, perilous.