

Not dead yet, Lily?

With the approach of the thunderstorm Lily was growing more and more restless. As the air became clammier and heavier, every breath stuck in her lungs like sweat. Outside, the sky had darkened to blue-black. The window was open but no draught came in. Four in the afternoon, midsummer almost, and dark enough indoors to have to switch on the light. But she wouldn't.

10 Instead, having struggled to her feet, she stood in the airless front room listening to herself gasp for breath — she'd better wait a moment before setting off to the kitchen for a drink of water. She didn't want to have the likes of Mrs MacDonalld come in to find her keeled over at last. Sometimes it felt as if the whole street was waiting for her to go. All these neighbourly visits about nothing in particular, except to check she'd not died in her sleep. They were being kind, and she supposed she was grateful, but there was always the unspoken pause, the split-second's refocusing of a glance that betrayed the real question:

Not dead yet?

Well, she appreciated their concern, but fuck them.

20 Yes, that was the only language to use. In the last few weeks Lily had discovered the relish of bad language. One morning she'd been woken by Mrs Miller phoning to ask, after the 'not-dead-yet?' pause, if she wanted something from the shop. She'd said no, then hung up.

Now for breakfast, she'd thought, breakfast, bloody breakfast. As she pulled on her dressing-gown she'd started muttering to herself:

'Bloody breakfast, bloody, bloody, bloody, bloody breakfast.'

30 It felt good, stimulating. Like a vigorous marching tune in her head. There she stood in front of the mirror: a kindly-looking, white-haired, elderly woman, frail but dignified - those were no doubt the sorts of words her neighbours used when talking about her — and all the time behind the benevolent smile she was hammering out full-force, 'BLOODY, BLOODY, BLOODY, BLOODY breakfast.' Then she'd grinned to herself — and she'd not done that in months.

In a short time the *bloodys* had given way to *hells*, and the *hells* to *damns* - but getting into *fucks* had been her big breakthrough. It was after the postman went by a couple of days ago: *No letters, well fuck him!* she'd thought, then announced,

40 'Fuck him! Fuck him! Fuck him!' to the clock, the empty armchair and a whole clutch of wedding photographs. Stopping herself in time from getting too loud. Not because it might shock the MacDonalds and Millers or whoever might be passing. She didn't care about them; it was simply because she didn't really want to share these words with anyone: coming from her they were hers, and hers alone.

But her words weren't working today. 'Fucking storm, fucking storm,' she kept repeating as she stood in the kitchen letting the tap run for coolness, but didn't feel any better. The water tasted heavy and tepid. She'd go into the garden.

50 The sky was much blacker than before with everything beneath gripped in sharp, shadowless light, and the air so sluggish she almost had to push her way through it. Nothing seemed to move out here. Across the street she could see the MacDonalds, a group of stuffed figures crouched in a family circle around their patio-table. Who were the MacDonalds, who were the Millers? Where had they come from? Where had any of the people in the street come from with their tracksuits, their baggy shorts, their baseball caps, their mobile

phones and their internets?

The heaviness in the air seemed to have turned that bush by her front gate completely rigid. When she gave one of the branches a tug it shook - she could tell - unwillingly. Her neighbour's brand-new spade was propped just within reach; without thinking what she was doing, she picked it up. Its metal edge clanged against the stone path, a *clang* that seemed to fill the street. Too bad. She clanged it once more and her reward was five MacDonald faces panned in her direction.

60 As she leant towards the bush its perfume stuck to her skin and, in its sultriness, the scent seemed almost a solid thing. Perhaps, the air being so still, if she removed the plant and its scent she could fit herself into the gap left behind, and so withdraw from a world filled with strangers bringing their strange ways.

She started spading out earth. Not so hard really, but with every thrust and lift she had to stop to catch her breath. There was sweat trickling down her face and back. She paused for a moment to wipe her eyes clear — and *there*, up on their hind legs, were a couple of MacDonalds staring over at her. The bigger of them, a wobble of pink flesh, baldness and glasses, was already starting her direction.

70 She carried on digging. Not that she could remember what the plant was called, nor what anything much was called these days, only that some things were alive and some things weren't. Really, who cared? One good tug and she'd have it free.

The wobbly MacDonald was standing at her gate: 'Mrs Williams! Hello there, Mrs Williams!'

Should she pretend to have gone deaf?

Yes.

Taking a good grip of the stem with both hands, feet braced for the effort, she closed her eyes for the Big Tug.

80 'Hello there, Mrs Williams! That's a lovely lilac you've got there: can I help you at all?'

The bush came out more easily than she'd expected, almost first pull, making her stagger a couple of steps backwards. She threw it to one side then picked up the spade again.

'You really should be resting in weather like this, Mrs Williams. What are you doing?'

Before she could stop herself she'd replied, 'Digging my fucking grave. At my age what the fuck else would I be doing?'

When she next looked up the MacDonald had gone.

90 Indoors, it was almost dark. She went through to the kitchen to wash her hands, then sat down as the first rumble of thunder sounded. Heavy drops of rain began spattering the window. Feeling a bit tired after all that digging, she might just have a short nap now — while she was in the mood.

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