



DREAMING PURPLE BARLEY SUGAR

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The council's unashamed love affair with the Japanese flowering cherry died abruptly on the seventh day of December 1941. For some years previous to the attack on Pearl Harbour, what was thereafter firmly known as *Prunus Kozan* had been one of Cheltenham's most widely planted trees. Hardy, fast growing, blooming with prolific abandon, the muted browns of its ridged bark decorative even in the depths of winter, specimens flourished in every park and municipal garden. A considerable number had brightened the sombre hearse-route through the cemetery. Though not considered sophisticated enough for the Promenade — in spite of the vulgarity of its gushing Neptune — there were plenty lining the more plebeian streets radiating from the centre.

Of the dozens in St Marks, only the one immediately outside 14 Spenser Road mattered to Caroline. This was no ordinary tree. In the dream-like theta state she sank into when left to her own devices, she'd glimpsed its massive heart, had seen that the slender trunk contained in microcosm the whole of the swirling galaxy. The experience was reciprocal, though what the tree discovered within her

remained a mystery. Nothing repellent at least, because ever since that afternoon it had begun leaning over the gate, slowly dropping onto its elbows as it strained multi-fingered branches towards her window.

What had been encouraged as endearing signs of a vivid imagination up to the age of four was declared incipient madness at six. So the vision remained secret. As did the knowledge that *something* was going to happen — whether good or bad she couldn't tell — sensed, not by the pricking of her thumbs, but through an awareness, a *knowing*, the skimpy remnant of greater powers which had skipped a generation on the distaff side. Approached sideways-on, as one might attempt to glimpse the Little People out of the corner of the eye, Caroline understood that it was connected with the blossoming of her tree.

Visualising its great Blodeuwedd cloud-head in bloom soothed her terror. Of being abandoned. And of not.

The family was falling apart, nuclear only by virtue of the constant fear that some careless word, some trifling incident, might spark the chain reaction which must inevitably culminate in an instantaneous roaring release of savagely destructive energy. Her mother's wild grief, unspoken, half buried but still fermenting, was taking its toll. She had become unpredictable: one day, sullenly contemptuous, the next, playful, distributing post-rationing largesse in the form of Five Boys' chocolate and packets of Spangles, the whole punctuated by swift hugs and even swifter violence. Night after night, Caroline dreamed of a huge playing field filled with hundreds, no thousands, of women, all but one replicas of her mother, in rows disappearing into the distance like the pale, sad crosses on war graves. Up and down the lines she trudged alone, peering into faces, looking

at hands, seeking for some sign, some warmth, listening for a tell-tale sigh, which would indicate the one she should choose and lead back to the land of the living.

Finally, she would grab at random.

It was always the wrong one. The true mother would emerge from a line never more than three or four clones away, weeping the deep guttural sobs of last winter and casting recriminatory glances in the surviving daughter's direction.

Her mother's preoccupation with dirt started around this time. Every day the house would be scoured from top to bottom. Comforting muddles of toys, hair ribbons, crayons, became a thing of the past: each room turned into a bleak cell, barrack-room-tidied on the hour. The insanely proud boast that the linoleum on the kitchen floor was 'clean enough to eat your dinner off', meant it suffered so much elbow grease that patches wore right through to the canvas backing. Frenzied attention to personal hygiene left both Caroline and her younger brother scrubbed red and raw, forever trailing the carbolic stink of Lifebuoy. In addition, two cautionary posters, donated by a district nurse who'd overseen the tragic countdown, appeared over the living room fireplace. One depicted Careful Jane, a skinny waif with a short straight bob, small eyes and mean lips, decidedly plain but scrupulously clean. Caroline hated her on sight, siding with dimpled and wavy-haired Cat-lick Sue, powdered, perfumed, and smiling happily in spite of dirt behind the knees and a visible tidemark round her neck.

Sue reminded her of the tree.

Prunus Kanzan produces unrestrained masses of large, double, deep rose-pink flowers against a background of copper-tinged young leaves. The blossoms have a full-blown, unselfconscious flooziness.

Tail-ends of March winds, lingering to meet April showers, pluck them from the trees in handfuls to lie in thick drifts as short-lived as pink snow. It was the colour of this blossom which attracted her: Venus pink, the colour of love, neither as strident as the disappointing shell of pink Smarties, nor as milky as the hated blancmange, but nearer the shade of the sugared almonds which her grandmother kept in secret pockets of her commodious brown shopping bag. Caroline had been allowed no contact with her since before the coronation, when Gran had queued for hours to see the young princess wave one gloved hand in her direction, yet could not bring herself to visit the hospital.

But the blossoming of the tree would change all that. It would change everything.

Which was why, every morning, whatever the month, Caroline flicked back her curtain to check for swelling buds, even though the official line was that the tree flowered only in spring, around the time of her birthday. Adults were not to be trusted with dispensing certain types of information to children. A little knowledge equalled a lot of power.

She double-checked on her way to school.

Problems began when she was arbitrarily moved to the bedroom at the back of the house, looking out over concrete lawn and a weary, grey-tinged lilac that was all leg. As in any autocracy, the household had copious regulations. Slippery, mutable, unwritten, subject to intricately detailed subdivisions, tangential addenda, and tergiversation, most revolved round '*keeping ourselves to ourselves*', a policy rooted in the deep shame caused by past poverty and nurtured by recent agonies. No friends ever called. The misery of the family was guarded like state secrets. After the Pole moved into number twenty-

five, 'no swinging on the gate' was extended to 'no playing in the front garden'. Never mind that in his own land he had been a professor: you never knew with foreigners.

Already the nights were drawing in. Anything could happen between Friday afternoon dusk and Monday morning school. Feeling that *something* fast approaching, Caroline grew desperate. The tall privet hedge blocked her view from the downstairs windows. The letterbox couldn't be levered open from inside. She wasn't allowed into her old room, which was now her brother's, and had never dared venture into that of her parents. Skipping, being old-fashioned, was an approved activity, an excuse for being out of doors. Rope in hand, Caroline waited until her mother was busy over the sink, then sidled along the wall, crawling on all fours beneath the kitchen window, to scuttle round to the front and stare anxiously up at the tree. It was changing colour. A few red and gold leaves lay scattered on the path. There was no sign of blossom.

The Polish ogre looked through the hedge. "Why so sad, little one?"

Torn between fear and curiosity, Caroline tried to explain that she had hoped for flowers. He pointed out daisies speckling the uncut grass; a sunburst of dandelion; the last calendula, surrounded by dirty-toe-nail seed heads. And when she turned up her nose, murmured, as if in admonishment, "*Lepszy wróbel w garści niż golab na dachu!*" ("Better a sparrow in the hand than a pigeon on the roof.")

Many years later, when she understood what he had said to her in front of his unlovely pebble-dashed council house, in a land which accepted him with grunts of resentment and disinterest in his achievements, she wept for the smallness of his sparrow. How many of his brothers, uncles, friends, fellow academics, were among the

Polish army officers murdered by Soviet security services and shovelled into that mass grave in the Katyn Forest outside Smolensk? How many of his loved ones shuffled into Auschwitz and Treblinka one by one by one until an unimaginable five million casualties had been inflicted on his people?

But now, she trembled, for it was she who had been caught in forbidden territory.

Her mother had perfected the knack of turning her name into a siren shriek, rising sharply on the last syllable where it was held until the summons was answered. Standing just out of sight of passers-by, eyes narrowed, arms akimbo, she beckoned with a purse of the lips, a jerk of the chin. Caroline reluctantly obeyed, walking as slowly as possible, breathless with fear, shielding her head in advance from the familiar flurry of blows — hands, fist, feet, tea towel, wooden spoon, hairbrush — which buffeted her into the house, up the stairs, under the bed, where she lay for an hour or more listening to the furore fade and become the muffled thumps of obsessive housework. Experience told her that she was safe for a while. She emerged, and risked dropping her doll out of the window so that she and her brother could clandestinely bury it among the blackcurrant bushes, a re-play of the funeral never to be spoken of, an exploratory tongue searching for the exposed nerve of an aching tooth.

But this time the amnesty was shortlived.

At teatime her mother returned to full frontal verbal attack. In addition to the long list of her shortcomings, she now learnt that God 'only took the good ones'. Which meant, Caroline supposed, that she was one of the bad ones, unwanted even by Him. From under downcast lashes, she saw her mother's face reddening, her eyes grow hard and wild. Foam speckled her lips. Her fists clenched.

Unclenched. Clenched again. Backwards and forwards she strode, sink to table to dresser, growing more agitated with every step. On the stove the kettle began to shriek. Coconut cakes, which Caroline hated, were banged in front of her. The refusal to eat them was taken personally.

The fuse was exposed. The match flared.

The outcome was inevitable. Only a profound silence could have kept them apart. But Caroline made the mistake of asking when her errant father would be coming home.

Fuse and match snapped together, knife-blade to loadstone, ship's nails to Agib's Magnetic Mountain. With the howl of a wounded animal, her mother snatched up the screaming kettle and flung it at her. Caroline ran. But not far enough. Her shoe caught in a new hole in the lino. The kettle hit her just below the shoulders. Scalding water cascaded down her back, soaking straight through her clothes to poach the epidermis. There was nothing to do but leave. She floated above herself, watching her body stumble forward and collapse across the doormat, heard it whimper and mew like an orphan kitten. Her mother bent over her, laying blame, hissing instructions. Look what you've made me do say this say that don't tell anybody what happened otherwise Mummy will get taken away and put in prison and you and little James will go into a Home. The ambulance. Nerve endings sprouting pain. The endless screaming of the kettle close by. Needles and cold dressings and fuzzy voices and intermittent blackness...

"How did this happen?" asked the tired doctor.

She mumbled rehearsed lies into the pillow. "I was playing with my hot water-bottle and it burst."

"Hmmm."

Her mother visited with comics and magazines: *The Girl* , a

shilling *Adventures of Rupert Bear*, *Sunny Stories*. She didn't seem to notice that Caroline couldn't read lying on her stomach, her back covered with dressings. But she talked to the nurses in a voice that carried about what a silly girl her daughter was, playing about like that, and how hard this was making her life on top of all the other things she'd been through.

Caroline pretended to sleep. Her mother left. The worst of the loneliness left with her.

Ten days before Bonfire Night, she was allowed home with her silver-scarred-forever back. The first thing she noticed was that the last of the leaves had been stripped from her tree. It swayed towards her, groaning and creaking as she was carried into the house. Strong winds built up to gale force during the nights that followed and, on the morning she was judged well enough to return to school, she found it had fallen, lying across the hedge with half its roots and arms pointing skyward. A thin wind grizzled through its branches. The entire length of the trunk was stippled with flaking silvery-brown scars, which, she imagined, were similar to her own. Whilst her ordeal seemed to have made no impact on anybody, the tree's death had pulled up pavement slabs for yards in every direction.

For a few days she lay there, her stars fading, surrounded by warning signs and reflective lamps, waiting to be sawn up and carted away to some municipal bonfire. Perhaps it was warmer at that level, or perhaps it was the tree's swan song, that opening of a few clusters of rogue blossoms within the cage of clawed fingers. Caroline picked every one on her way home from school and placed them in a fish-paste jar on her windowsill.

That night she dreamed purple.

The colours were of such intensity that they intruded on all her

senses. She floated across heliotrope skies over imperial purple lakes smelling of sweet violets and lavender, startling great flocks of mauve and lilac flamingos into flight. She bit into amethysts that tasted like purple barley sugar. Fat blackberries burst against her tongue. Plum velvets caressed her into deeper and deeper sleep.

When she woke she knew that this was the something for which she had been waiting. A message from a dimension not constrained by sensible things, and delivered on the last breath of the tree. For a brief interval she understood that only the power of her imagination could see her through what lay ahead.

Realisation faded rapidly, sinking into her unconscious like April showers into dark loam, leaving only shadowy reassurance and a familiar sadness.

In time she would know that creativity is what confirms us as gods. It reaches into the pits of deepest depression. Sustains through poverty and hopelessness. Lifts us above mere existence. Promises the world, and nothing in it. It is the spark which motivated dirt-poor settlers to fashion quilts that were works of art from the detritus of their domesticity: scraps and remnants and worn out clothes. It is what sends a woman into the field for a posy of wild flowers to gladden the meanest table. It is a reason to go on living when love has fled.

But for now, all that was left to Caroline was the memory of violets and a purplish stone. When she returned from school that evening, she found her mother had already thrown the blossom away.

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