

*Reading by Lightning*

JOAN THOMAS



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A brilliant summer day, and an early version of me steps out of the general store in town. I'm wearing a yellow dress with tiny blue flowers on it, not a hand-me-down but a dress made especially for me from a proper bolt of cloth. My mother, who's behind me, has on a white cotton dress faintly patterned with grey worms (black and white daisies, this dress once was, although you would have to have known her for five years to know that).

I run down the wooden steps and there's Charlotte Bates standing beside the ice chest with a boy. Both of them are drinking root beer from bottles. Hello, Lily, says Charlotte in her warm way, and the boy looks up. He's dark-haired and strongly built, not tall but taller than both of us. A cottonwood grows so close to the street that the boardwalk was built out around its massive trunk, and this tree drops moving green shadows onto his face and Charlotte's in the bright sunlight.

We're off for a drive, Charlotte says. Russell has Dad's car. Lily, this is my brother from Montreal. You meet at last! Lily Piper, Russell Bates!

Charlotte gestures prettily from me to Russell and smiles

to acknowledge my mother, but my mother (who is unacquainted with the formal introduction) just keeps walking, one shoulder lower than the other because she's hauling a jug of vinegar for pickling. She doesn't even say, Come on, Lily, and surprise flits over Charlotte's face.

Come for a drive in the country, the boy says, looking at me.  
Lily's *from* the county, says Charlotte.

My mother's climbing into the truck by then, but I stand on the boardwalk in my tie-up farm shoes, pinned down by their attention. I'm outlined in black by Charlotte's words, by *from the country*, I'm struck mute. But still I see everything. The fine texture of Russell's white shirt and the way the sun picks out individual dark hairs standing up from his forehead and shows the red in them. The geometrical framework of his cheekbones and temple, the way friendliness livens his face, as though it's nipping at his cheeks here and there from the inside. I see him solid in the sliding patterns of shadow and sun, and I also see myself, a girl pretty enough to stand there being looked at by this boy from the east: with a lift of gladness I see that I'm all right, I'm the best thing anyone could patch together with the ingredients I had at hand.

That was seven or eight years ago, and when I look back it seems to me that this boy from the east was a sign that life might drop something *real* into my lap, that I might not have to make it all up myself, like the girl in the fairy tale wearing herself out trying to spin straw into gold. So you'd think I might remember every single thing about that day (which by some sort of miracle I did spend with Russell Bates). But actually I recall only parts of it, and all of those memories are a little ragged now from being played over and over in my mind. I also hung on to a lot of irrelevant detail, the way you do. I remember a woman in a farmyard as we rolled by, a thin woman in a brown dress standing halfway to the barn as though she'd just come to herself with no idea of what she had

in mind to do. And a turtle broken like a saucer on the river road, its white eggs spilled out into the dust. I remember also the way rain smacked against the windshield of Russell's father's big car while we were parked up at the Lookout, the clean circles the raindrops made on the dusty glass.



I wonder how you choose what you're going to remember. *That's what happened*, I say about any particular event. But of course we recall only a tiny fraction of everything that occurred. If every day that went by, I'd saved a whole other set of details and impressions, my life as I tell it to myself would be completely different. This is a rather crucial human limitation. If your situation changes dramatically (if, for example, you're walking down a road and are suddenly scooped up in a whirlwind and deposited somewhere else, like that man in the Bible was), you may need to start thinking about your life in a whole different way. But how can you do that when all you have for information is what you chose to remember at the time?

I've tried to understand this. I remember talking about it with George when I was in England, far from my prairie home. While we were out walking one day, rain falling on the shoulders of our mackintoshes in the noiseless way it always falls in England, I asked him why you remember what you remember.

It's all electronics, George said. His hair was plastered to his forehead in clumps from the damp. He launched into an explanation of how the brain stashes everything away, and then an electrical impulse homes in to retrieve what you want. I just read a novel, he said, in which people wore *helmets* with electrodes attached to various parts of their brain. Every time an electrode lit up, the wearer of the helmet would think he was somewhere in his past. He would feel the things he felt back then. But there was no special importance to those moments.

Do you notice me wearing a helmet? I believe I said to that.

We were walking along the hedgerows into town, our shoes squelching wet. The narrow walls of privet were like a maze we had to navigate, and in the dim light his thin face gleamed — he had the sort of mushroomy skin that goes pale with exercise instead of flushing.

Or think about epileptics, George said. When an epileptic has a fit, everything happening at the moment feels familiar, dead familiar. That's because the fit fires up the part of his brain where his memories are kept. Everything feels *momentous*. But it's not, it's just the usual detritus.

The hedgerows ended abruptly just then — this was where the turnpike sliced across the countryside at a diagonal. George climbed up the gravel bank of the turnpike and shouted back over his shoulder: *And others when the bagpipe sings cannot contain their urine.*

Oh, that was George.



At Ward Street Grammar School in Oldham, Lancashire (where for several years I impersonated an English schoolgirl), we looked at the memories in rocks, limestone sliced open so the ammonites inside made two beautiful coiled snakes. I learned that a whole civilization, Phoenicia, was built on a passion for *indigo*. I learned the French words for *umbrella* and *nightmare*, and I saw a coloured plate of a fetus in a woman's womb. Occasionally details from the farm would float into my mind like strands of spiderweb and cling there. I'd be swinging up the street in Oldham with my book satchel over my shoulder and I'd see a flypaper slowly twisting against the cloudy sky. Or the pitchfork from the barn, straw and manure drying into wattle on its tines. I hated it all, I wiped it off with a shudder. That was me sitting on a polished bench in the library in a navy pleated skirt, my coarse brown hair falling over my eyes, but as the world nudged its way into my brain, I

was *changing*, my skin smoothing, the poison ivy scabs dropping off, the dirt and raspberry juice scrubbed out from under my fingernails, the sins that stained me fading with my tan. While my desk partner muttered in Latin, I propped my history book up in front of me and let it fall open at random and my eyes slid onto the words Elizabeth I etched onto a window with a diamond when she was held prisoner as a girl: MUCH SUSPECTED OF ME, NOTHING PROVED CAN BE.

It was a new future I was glimpsing, not at all the future I'd pictured when I was growing up — which was not on this earth at all.



Straw is piled on one side of the loft and hay on the other. Our church is an open space between the two piles. The people sit on rough benches made from planks, and Mr. Dalrymple has a pulpit at the front where he stands with his back to the loft opening while he preaches. I'm nestled with other children in the hay under the eaves. We can't all fit on the benches so we're allowed to sit up there, from where we watch barn swallows plunge into the loft just over Mr. Dalrymple's ear, and the frantic beaks of their chicks strain up out of the row of mud nests plastered to the centre beam. *Some glad morning, when this life is o'er, we sing, I'll fly away. To a home on God's celestial shore, I'll fly away.*

With his back against the only light, Mr. Dalrymple's a cut-out figure, his outline soft where fat bulges over the waistband of his trousers. The sky is grey with dust, and he's a darker grey. *I'll fly away, oh glory,* he sings in a flat, dogged voice. The grey in the air around Mr. Dalrymple could be his distaste for this world, a distaste he shares with God, who is about to abandon the whole mess, pluck out the handful of people he wants and leave the rest behind. Not a glad morning, as Mr. Dalrymple pictures it, but a fearsome day. You can see

the earth gearing up for it, the sky darkening and lightning flashing without a drop of rain ever falling, grasshoppers rising up like a spray of bullets when you cross the yard, the sunsets daubed with blood.

The hay is fresh and springy and not well packed. As the sermon starts I'm not even trying to sit still — I'm wallowing along the haystack in my blue cotton dress and tie-up shoes. Who knows why I'm working my way towards the front of the loft? Even I don't know. Without warning the hay surrenders and I sink down onto something awkward — a leg, attached to my cousin Gracie. Her mouth turns down in an eager apology (everything is her fault). Or my shoe scrapes an arm — my brother Phillip's. His hands dart up (it's a reflex, if I don't move fast he'll give me a snakebite).

Now I'm above Mr. Dalrymple. I can see the oily black hair smeared across his skull like molasses, and the adults sitting motionless in front of him. The front of the loft is open for light and for the easy removal of Christians, who will be snatched any minute from where they hunch with their heads sunk into their shoulders and carried up to heaven — not flying like birds, but carried upright with their arms at their sides, as though pulled by wires under their armpits. Mr. Dalrymple prays for the Rapture to come during church, when the Lord's chosen are gathered together in this humble abode for beasts. *In a moment, he cries hoarsely, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump. For the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible. And we shall be changed!* There's a practised excitement in his voice, but underneath he sounds naggy: this is a threat, not a promise.

There are those who long for the Second Coming and those who dread it. Although (I think, reaching a furtive finger behind me to dig at the hay caught in the elastic of my underpants), isn't it possible that even those who are born again will dread it? They'll hear the trumpet, and they'll feel a stab of

fear and disbelief. They'd rather keep on weeding the garden, or whatever it is they're doing, but they'll be sucked up anyway, up over the shelter belt, their houses and barns and the parched earth falling away, the cattle in the pasture lifting big heads in surprise. But then as they fly they will be *changed*. They'll discover that they're dressed in beautiful white robes. They'll peer through the clouds to see who else made it — spying their friends, calling in astonishment, *He came! We were right!* — not thinking about the ones left behind, because (and I reach for a rafter to steady myself) this is *heaven* they're going to. Worry will fall from you — your heart has to change too, become the unthinking heart of a baby.

*And I looked*, Mr. Dalrymple reads out, his voice going up a notch, *and behold a pale horse. And his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him!* He prods at the text on the page with his index finger: these are God's very words. *And I looked* (I breathe as I inch my way towards the opening), *and behold a pale horse!* All I can see of my dad is his two long legs stretched out straight and crossed at the ankle. My mother's between me and him. She's taken her hat off, it's on her lap. She's lifted her face to Mr. Dalrymple with a listening expression, but her eyes are moving steadily along the haystack, looking for me, filled with helpless fury. The rope of her fury zigzags through the air toward the haystack, probing for me, and Mr. Dalrymple's voice fills the loft like oily smoke coming off the burn barrel, and I climb unsteadily, just out of their reach, working my way clumsily towards the loft opening.



On a weekday there's a special, quiet air to the loft, as though the prayers trapped in people's hearts on Sunday finally escaped and are hanging now in the dusty golden air. I sit up there, my legs dangling out the opening, and watch my mother out in the big garden we call the field plot, picking the tasteless