

TLC Showcase
Bethan Roberts



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Introduction

'Littlemore' began, as many stories seem to for me, with two unconnected memories or images suddenly becoming fused. One memory was of chasing my ex-husband through the shrubbery in a National Trust garden until he dropped his camera; the other was of a school friend of mine being admitted to the Warneford hospital with anorexia when we were about fourteen. I'd long wanted to write about my friend's experience in some way, but it wasn't until I connected it with the chasing-through-the-shrubbery incident that something began to take shape. What made me connect the two? I have absolutely no idea.'

Littlemore (To be published by Chatto and Windus in 2012).

By Bethan Roberts

Yesterday, Stephen's daughter Alice was admitted to the Warneford Hospital. They used to call it Littlemore, but the name became another word for *loony bin*, so it was changed. Littlemore was a place from which no woman returned. Nicola, Stephen's second wife, remembers her mother mouthing the word to a neighbour, both women exchanging knowing looks. Nicola had always known that women cried a lot, but Littlemore was where they took you if you started crying too much, too often. It was where you ended up if you started humiliating your husband by shouting in the street, hitting your own children, or rocking back and forth for hours on end in the kitchen, unable even to wash the dishes.

Today, Nicola and Stephen are visiting a garden. They've driven two hours to get to this one, and a pain is ricocheting up Nicola's back from the stiff position she's been holding behind the wheel. Guiding the car into a slot beneath a copper beech, Nicola pulls the handbrake and heaves herself from the seat. Feeling the full force of the August heat, she almost smiles.

Stephen walks ahead, carrying his digital camera in one hand. She hadn't noticed that he'd brought it with him until now, and the sight of it suddenly enrages her. On his laptop at home are files and files of flower photographs, each one dated and labelled. *Crocoshmia, 23rd June 06. Flag Iris, 2nd July 05. Red Hot Poker, 15th September 06.* Once, finding he'd left his laptop switched on in their bedroom, she'd opened each and every one of them, hoping that she was wrong; hoping that, in fact, her husband kept pornographic images on his computer and merely labelled them this way to put her off the scent. But no. Each file — even the Red Hot Poker — sprung open to reveal another crisply shot flower, pulsing with colour.

'Why have you brought that thing?' she asks.

Stephen looks at the camera and shrugs. 'To take some flowers. For Alice.'

Nicola walks deeper into the flower beds until she can no longer see her husband's large and slightly curved back.

She first met Stephen and his daughter in a garden: a newly-opened organic place with small food market attached. Nicola had been buying kale, wishing she could afford a wedge of yellowed local stilton, when she'd seen Stephen and Alice sitting on a bench, staring at the car park. She'd recognised his face, with its bright, compact features, from school, and wondered where Kate, whom he'd married not long after they'd left the sixth form, was.

Alice, Nicola remembers, had looked small and lost; her hair hung limply to her waist, her feet pointed together in their scuffed ballet pumps. Something about her reminded Nicola of her own younger self.

Was it then that she first thought she could make the girl happy? She'd certainly met Alice's gaze first, and smiled.

Having lost her husband over an hour ago, Nicola sits in the garden's café. Steam from her hibiscus tea wets her top lip as she blows, and she thinks of Alice in the hospital. Nicola packed Alice's bag herself, and remembered to include Tampax, in the hope that, during her stay at the Warneford, the girl's periods would begin again. When they'd said goodbye in the over-heated reception area, Nicola touched Alice's shoulder, and although she'd known exactly what to expect, was horrified by what she'd felt. There was no give in that shoulder, no flesh; only bone, bone rigid enough to do harm, or to break clean in two.

When Nicola had first moved in with Stephen, she'd believed that she would change both his and Alice's eating habits for the better. The girl was already thin, but it was no wonder: Stephen's cupboards had been filled with processed food, sugared, packaged and flavoured only with chemicals. Nicola had swept all that away and begun again, and her new husband looked pleased when she came back from the local farmers' market with dirt on the butternut squash and mushrooms as knobbled as branches. Nicola served pumpkin soup with a swirl of coconut milk to finish; Stephen had kissed her hair and said it was good to have a woman around again. Alice had pushed the bowl away after two mouthfuls.

Shifting to try and find a comfortable position for her back, Nicola remembers an episode of *Upstairs Downstairs* she saw as a girl. It was about the suffragettes who were sent to prison and went on hunger strike. One of the young women, clothed in grey and with her hair dirty and free, was force-fed, a wooden bit placed in her mouth to keep her jaws open as the wardens poured in a ribbon of colourless gruel. Still she spat it out and wailed.

They can't do that sort of thing at the Warneford, Nicola thinks, pushing away her tea. It's not Littlemore any longer. It's a civilised place now, with counsellors and psychiatrists and cognitive behavioural therapy. That's what she'd told Stephen when they made the decision to send Alice to the place. Privately, though, she wondered how much talking would help a starving girl. Not, she thinks, that there had been any talking when she herself had gone down to barely six stone, all those summers ago. Had it been the threat of Littlemore that had kept her silent? She can hardly remember now. What she does remember is the feeling that her hunger was her own property, a cherished secret. A silence within her that nobody could break.

When her husband comes into the café, he's carrying a paper bag with the garden's name on the side. Nicola guesses that it contains at least ten packets of seeds, even though there isn't an inch of virgin soil left in their garden. Stephen's flowerbeds are densely packed and brightly coloured, like supermarket shelves.

Sitting opposite her, he releases the ring pull on a can of Coca Cola. Nicola is surprised they sell such a thing in a place like this. He lets the black liquid glug into a glass and knocks half of it back in a few gulps.

'Let me have some,' she says, reaching for the cool glass. It tastes sweeter than anything she can remember.

Stephen watches her as she drinks, and when she's finished, snatches back the glass and pours what remains of the Coke into the bottom.

Nicola says, 'I thought they seemed nice, at the hospital.'

He stares at the empty can of Coke.

‘They’ll help her, Stephen.’ Nicola places her hand over his. Despite the heat of the day, his fingers are cold. ‘She’s in the best place.’

He won’t lift his eyes to her, so in the end Nicola gives up and pushes back her chair. Gathering up the empty glass and can, she states, ‘We’ll go back via the farm shop. We need something for tonight.’

Stephen stands and stares at her. ‘Haven’t you got enough already?’ he asks.

Out in the walled garden, Stephen lets his camera dangle from his wrist. Before Nicola knows quite what she’s doing, she’s snatched the thing – an Olympus MJU – from him and she’s running ahead. Jogging backwards, she manages to press the button halfway down and her husband’s image gains definition in the viewing square. She fires one off. Then, increasing the pace of her backwards-jogging as Stephen strides towards her, his hand held out ready to snatch the camera back, she zooms giddily in, so all that’s in the frame is his sunburned forehead and the shocking blue of the sky.

There’s a moment when she thinks he’ll laugh – the set of his mouth is wonky enough for that to happen – but instead he sighs and turns away from her.

Undeterred, she follows, snapping him. Whenever he stops to take a closer look at a rose or a chrysanthemum, she pauses, too, and takes a photograph of his hand touching a petal, or his nose close to a stamen. She notices how humbly he approaches these flowers, how delicately he fingers them. How he stoops to take in their loveliness.

She’s not sure who starts running first, but Stephen’s footsteps gradually increase their pace, and Nicola finds herself almost chasing him through the shrubbery, the camera hot in her hand, her lungs beginning to shudder. An uncontrollable giggle breaks forth from her mouth. She keeps snapping as she runs, zooming in and clicking, hardly knowing what she’s taking.

Finally her husband comes to an abrupt stop and turns to face her, and that’s when she thuds into his chest and loses her grip on the camera. It lies in the dirt at the foot of a clump of moon daisies.

Stephen picks up the camera and delicately brushes the dirt off. ‘The last resort,’ he says, dropping it in her hands. ‘That’s where my daughter is.’

At one in the morning, her back is still stiff and she’s unable to sleep, but Nicola already has tomorrow’s menu in her mind: a fresh pea and mint risotto. Over the meal, she’ll suggest to Stephen that when Alice comes home, when she’s released from Littlemore, it’ll be better if it’s just the two of them again. Father and daughter. At least for a while. A *trial period*, that’s what she’ll call it.

For the moment, she can’t imagine what her husband’s reply to this statement will be.

An hour later, sleep still hasn’t come, and Nicola rises from the bed and goes to Stephen’s study, with its familiar smells of lavender polish and printer ink. She

sinks into the leather seat and, for the first time that day, her spine relaxes a little. She's brought the digital camera with her, and after the computer has sprung to life with four deepening notes, she begins to download the images she took in the garden.

Scrolling through, she finds she hardly recognises some of them — they're just green blurs or blue streaks. In one picture, Stephen looks as though he's about to take a swing at her: his hand is raised, his mouth is an angry gash. But in another, one in which he's half-obscured by the dense green of a yew hedge, his features have been softened by the movement of the camera and he looks young again, almost like the boy she remembered from school when she saw him on the garden bench with Alice. It's too blurred to be sure, but she thinks she sees his right hand touching a needle of the yew with great tenderness and humility.

It's this image that she attaches to the email she sends to Alice. And as she clicks on the mouse to deliver it, she hopes the girl will recognise her father and forget that Nicola was the one who sent it.

About the Writer

Bethan Roberts was born in Oxford, grew up in nearby Abingdon, and now lives in Brighton. Her first novel, *The Pools* (Serpent's Tail, 2007) won a Jerwood/Arvon Young Writers' Award. Her second novel *The Good Plain Cook* (Serpent's Tail, 2008) was serialized on BBC Radio 4's Book at Bedtime and was long-listed for the Spread the Word Prize. She was also awarded the Olive Cook Short Story Prize 2006 from the Society of Authors, and her stories have been anthologized in various publications and broadcast on BBC Radio 3. Her first play for radio *My Own Private Gondolier* was broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in 2010 starring Fiona Shaw. She has worked as a television documentary researcher and as a lecturer in Creative Writing at Chichester University and Goldsmiths College, London. Her new novel will be published by Chatto and Windus in 2012.

