

Anticipating the Fall

“You could be pregnant.”

“No!” Maggie says, shaking her head. “I’m fifty. Fifty last week. I can’t be pregnant. It’s the start of the menopause isn’t it?”

Maggie thinks the doctor can’t be much older than her daughter. Emily is twenty-seven. The idea of another child now is preposterous.

A slash of low October sun shines through the slats of the blinds. It glints off the objects in the clinic room. Maggie puts her hands to her head feeling dizzy. The doctor says, “Well, your symptoms of nausea, poor sleep and irregular periods can all be signs of the perimenopause. But as you’ve not had a period for over two months I suggest you do a pregnancy test just in case. We’ll do some routine bloods as well.”

Maggie walks back to her car in a daze.

First Trimester: Acorn

The device in Maggie’s hands feels alien. The last time she’d done a pregnancy test was in the previous century when all you had was a stick with a blue line. This sophisticated piece of plastic tells her she is over 3 weeks pregnant.

The rocking chair in the bedroom creaks as it moves back and forward. The motion is comforting. From here Maggie can see the oak tree at the bottom of the garden the shape of it as familiar as her own body. The skeleton branches are becoming visible now the leaves are starting to fall. Some people like a seascape, others fields or mountains. But Maggie is happy with her view. She’d nursed Emily in this very chair. Breast fed her late at night looking out at the branches of the tree, soothed by the moon caught in its grasp.

Emily is working and travelling in Australia and had sent her a birthday card saying, ‘The Big **5...0**’ Time for a new adventure?’ with photos of Emily surfing, skydiving and drinking. Maggie grimaces at the irony. Another child will definitely be a new adventure.

The tree has always reflected Maggie's mood with its ever changing shape, a rhythm that connects with her life. Maggie shakes her head. Tendrils of hair cloud her face and she thinks of the grey concealed underneath highlights. A few leaves flutter from the tree in sympathy, beckoning her.

She hasn't climbed up to the tree house for years, but she manages to scramble onto the planks. She's forgotten how the world looks different from the platform. Through the years she's watched the tree noting how it gradually changes from bare branched to full cover but then there is a day when suddenly the leaves have all fallen so that the tree is exposed once more. Today, sunlight catches the leaves that remain, turning them gold. Below her on the ground an amber pool shimmers where others have fallen. The wind blows in little gusts and they lift like playful butterflies but quickly settle again.

Maggie is aware of buildings, the hum of the nearby town, but is removed from it. She looks up at the lingering leaves moving in the breeze, as if they are talking with their neighbours, perhaps discussing whether it is time to go.

Every now and then a leaf twirls past her. How would that feel? To fall from the tree. Leaving the only place you'd ever known and dropping into the unknown. Perceiving the sensation of air carrying you for the first time.

On the platform is an old acorn. Its shell mottled bronze. Maggie picks it up and examines it on her palm. Soon the embryo inside her will be this size. She senses it multiplying within. Something like terror shudders through her, she isn't sure she can face pregnancy again. Her life is taking a completely different direction from the one she was expecting at fifty.

"Hey You!" A shout from the garden below; her husband Ben. His voice lifts Maggie from her reverie. "What are you doing up there. Are you okay?"

"Just reminiscing."

Ben has come to the trunk and peers upwards to the platform.

"Is this because you're fifty? It's not so bad you know. Just think of all the things we've got to look forward to." She doesn't respond and he continues, "That's why I'm taking you out for lunch. We'll make plans."

“I need to tell you something.”

“What? I can’t hear you. I’m coming up.”

Maggie hears him grappling with the ladder and swearing at the effort of pulling himself up. It must be years since he last climbed up into the tree. Maggie smiles as she sees first his salt and pepper hair and then his familiar face appear. Finally he is sitting beside her on the planks. After catching his breath he asks, “How was your morning off?”

“You know I had an appointment at the doctor’s?”

“Yes...it’s not bad news is it?” Ben squeezes Maggie’s hand.

“I can’t work out whether the news is good or bad.” It takes a moment for the word to form in her mouth, it seems so big. “...I’m pregnant.” Ben grins as if he suspects Maggie is joking. When she doesn’t smile back he says, “You’re serious.”

“Yep.”

“Shit. I didn’t think...”

“No nor did I.”

Ben loosens the grip on Maggie’s hand but keeps hold of it. He looks upwards as if the tree might give him a clue as to what to say. The wind has risen making the branches rattle. Pigeons shuffle above them, eaves dropping on the conversation.

“Do you think that’s the best bit of a leaf’s existence...the fall?” Maggie asks.

“Can’t say I’ve ever thought about it.”

“Well I was wondering if they experienced ecstasy or fear. Tugged from the only place they’ve ever known and falling...falling down.”

Ben doesn’t answer immediately. They watch a few more leaves twist and turn. Then he says, “Do you remember paragliding? There’s that moment of anticipation and then exhilaration as you run over the edge, you can’t go back but you’re held. Flying. That was one of the best things I ever experienced. So maybe it’s the same for a leaf.”

Second Trimester: Blackbird

Maggie climbs up onto the treehouse platform again. It's become a regular occurrence; particularly when she's had another test or scan at the antenatal clinic. She's had more appointments and tests than when she had Emily because of her age. But she doesn't feel old. She feels healthy. She's joined a yoga class and every day she goes for her usual walk even if it is round the block in her lunch hour. At weekends she and Ben go for longer excursions.

Maggie watches the clouds move across the baby blue sky. It is so clear she can see the moon. It resembles the white, not yet opened petals of the snowdrops nestling beneath the tree.

The weeks are passing quickly, day light arriving a little earlier and leaving a little later. The tree trunk and branches remain grey, apparently unchanging, but Maggie knows that life continues unseen inside its limbs preparing to nourish the new buds when they come.

Later Maggie observes the first new leaves unfurling from buds. What has been dormant is now leaf. The pregnancy guides match the size of the developing baby to fruit and vegetables, but as Maggie watches a blackbird search the lawn for worms she thinks her baby is about that size now, curled in her belly, maybe sucking it's thumb. The birds are busy flying back and forth making their own nests. Their songs are sweet and rich and echo off the tree branches seeming to make the tiny oak catkins waver. As she watches she feels a flutter from her womb and realises it is the baby kicking.

Third Trimester: Pigeon

Maggie isn't sure which season she prefers, but sitting under the green canopy in full leaf is wonderful. The leaves act like draped voile, making her feel secret and warm. The sumptuous comfort of a four poster bed with clean sheets aired in the sunshine.

She's brought a blanket up so she can lie down and watch the leaves murmur and move above her. When Emily had been a baby Maggie would park the pram under the tree and Emily had been content watching the flicker of leaves and the shapes they made like a natural mobile. Emily had loved the tree later as well. After they'd

built the platform Emily would say, "I'm going on an adventure," and take toys, books and snacks and stay up in the tree for hours. As a teenager she'd disappeared when she'd needed to escape and think. As the breeze lifts the leaves Maggie can see fragments of blue sky and the snowy trail of an aeroplane. Emily will be coming back in a month.

Maggie finds it soothing to rest here, as if she is in a nest protected from the rest of the world. Being at the centre and observing the tree's life cycle she has been reassured. Her initial panic has faded. Above her fat pigeons *coo...curr...coo...* a sound of contentment. Maggie likes to think of her baby hearing bird song and the movement of the wind through the tree.

"Once upon a time there was an acorn..." she begins out loud. The tree and the birds seem to pause in their business as if to listen. She continues to make up a story knowing her baby is developed enough to hear her. Maggie smiles as she feels the stronger kicks of the baby, responding to her voice.

Baby

It is a sunny afternoon at the end of August. The oak tree is still covered in leaves but if you look carefully there is a bronzing to the edges of them, a reminder of the autumn that will follow.

The pram is parked under the tree. The boy's eyes are open. In them the patterns of leaves moving above him are reflected. He gurgles.

"He's so gorgeous," Emily says, "I can't believe I've got a baby brother."

Maggie holds her hand, "I'm so glad you're going to be back for a while. I need all the help I can get."

"You're doing brilliantly," Ben says, kissing her.

A breeze blows through the tree creating patches of light and shade, touching them all with shadow butterflies.