

## Dragonflies

Sally Jubb

That day on his shoulders I felt like a giant. No-one else mattered. Hot sun on my cheeks, a rash of dozy flies above our heads, the hum of bees, his warm grip around my ankles.

My father is tall. He wears his dark red jumper, the one he always wears, his hair floppy brown, lips, soft and full, eyes sparkling dots. Black dots. When he smiles our secret smile, they crinkle up and disappear. My mother's eyes are different. Wide open pools, grey clouds drifting over.

We come here most Sundays, depending on how things are. Through the woods and scrubby tracks, over bridges, streams and ditches. Sometimes we get lost, wandering for hours until we find a corner of the golf course, a clump of trees we've seen before, a sign.

Beneath shimmering trees we go, the August sky ribbon trailed by aeroplanes coming from Heathrow. He slips me down, catches my hand. Soon he'll squeeze, crunching my fingers between his, making me want to laugh and cry at the same time. It's something we do.

Hang on, my mother says, I need a pee. She disappears inside a bush. I look back and fancy she was never there.

We switch tracks. I hear my mother calling. We fork off again as if we knew we would. She keeps calling, her voice crying out.

She fades. We keep walking, the two of us, no talking, the crackle of sticks beneath our feet. The lake spreads out before us.

We're in luck, my father says, the dragonflies are back.

We watch them skim the water, darting between reeds, disappearing and re-appearing somewhere else. He squats beside me, pointing out their strange and slender iridescent forms.

People gather in little groups by the water's edge. My father asks a man for a light. He talks to him and a woman in a straw hat who also smokes, as screaming children hurl sticks into the lake. A dog jumps in, swims round and round in circles, barking at ducks and geese and the children scream louder. The man looks at his watch. My father shakes his hand and the man and woman move off, the children and the dog charging on ahead.

Shaking hands is what my father does. Sometimes he shakes mine and says, how do you do.

Best get back, he says, after a while.

We stroll beneath a canopy of darkness. At the top we pause to look back at the lake. He lights a cigarette.

My mother sits on the grass beside the car.

What happened? my father says.

She climbs into the back, doesn't speak or help me with my seatbelt. She just keeps looking straight ahead.

I remember the dark red weals across the sky, the hot evening traffic, the silence in the car and the look on my mother's face.