



## My Ladybird

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There is no real time or place I can prescribe to this memory other than what I have patched together, for this is my first memory. I presume myself to be two or three years old; a tiny toddler with golden ringlets bouncing everywhere and eyes far too big for my face. I am in Wales (my mother tells me) staying in a retreat owned by the Metropolitan Police to support their officers. We were sent here for respite after my Uncle's cancer diagnosis. I'm here because I'm currently the closest thing my Aunt and Uncle have to a child. My mum, dad, uncle, aunt, and grandparents are with me. My brother may or may not have been there as well, though if he was he was far too young to be anywhere but in someone's arms.

The sun is shining, and a lazy heat has settled for the afternoon. I am playing alone on the grass. It's tall and wild, littered with dandelion seeds and buttercups. Towering over the garden is a colony of Scots pine trees swathed with pear-coloured leaves. It has been so hot that the grass is scorched to sage green and sways stiffly in the fleeting breeze. A dusty gravel path takes me by the wildflower beds filled with purple and yellow blooms. The trail dips up and down along the uneven garden, my small, buckled shoes kicking up the dirt behind me. It becomes a game; to allow the momentum of running down into the small dips to get me to the top of the next one.

I am in a white summer dress with scalloped edges and embroidered holes along the hem. I can still remember the texture. Dry, and oddly crinkly, like it had been air-dried. The sun on my shoulders feels like the heat in my consciousness. Even in that moment, I knew that I was doing something important. The sense of duty that came with the outward performance of being the lonesome golden child of the family. Like a

role I knew I needed to perform, but I didn't know for who. This strange, mature knowledge secretly urged me to misbehave. Like a call to do what other kids my age would do. This, obviously, was strange as I wasn't an outsider to children my age, I just felt like I was missing out on misbehaviour.

I keep running up and down the small hills. Up, and down. Up, and down. Up, and on to a straight run. Toddling along, my eyes on my unpracticed feet, I spy a ladybird in my path. She looks giant to me; with her shining eyes and seven black spots on her glossy red back. Completely still and unassuming as I stare down at her. My heart races. It feels like dread and catharsis and all those other words I won't learn until much later in life. *Stand on her*. Something rotten inside me yearns. I have enough of a grasp of morals to know that killing is wrong, but I still urge myself to do it. It is one of the moments I am most ashamed of, which is probably why it stuck with me. For the longest time, I couldn't understand why I would do it, other than some profound lack of object permanence. Now, I know it was the start of a lengthy battle with intrusive thoughts, and this was just the first time they won. It would be okay, wouldn't it, if I had been running and didn't see her and stepped on her by accident? *It would be an accident*, I told myself. *They can't see me*. Her bright red form stands out starkly from the brightening path in the blinding sun.

I did stand on her. With my right foot. It felt like nothing. To kill her did not feel like anything when I put my foot down. Though I do not think it would have been any better if I could have felt the crunch of her shell.

Stepping back, I peer over the toe of my shoes, heart in my mouth. A tiny orange smear clumps to the dust and dirt. The same orange as a clementine, or a dried peach. All the guilt hits me as I rehearse how it was an accident. I had been running and I didn't see her. It feels like a swelling in my neck.

Standing straight, with my head held high, I look away and hope for it to disappear. How strange for a thing that felt like nothing to feel like everything. I run off again, back to the adults and away from the regret chasing me. It was an accident. I wasn't the sort of toddler to be harsh and hurtful and brutish like that.

It still sticks with me; even now I see that ladybird crushed under my foot. It is also strange how that of all things, this is the earliest memory I have. There must be some irony, beyond my grasp, about how taking a life makes me aware of my own. It feels like an irony that I do not have the perspective to see from within myself. This ordeal brought with it that beautifully gut-wrenching twist of my stomach that haunts everything I have done since. Every moment of my childhood that ensured disaster and destruction on my part produced that same sickly feeling that still clings to me now. The feeling is so synonymous with my upbringing that my own mortal dread is nostalgic.