

# 1

The third week of June, and there it is again: the same almost embarrassingly familiar breath of sweetness that comes every year about this time. I catch it on the warm evening air as I walk past the well-ordered gardens in my quiet street, and for a moment I'm a child again and everything's before me – all the frightening, half-understood promise of life.

It must come from one of the gardens. Which one? I can never trace it. And what is it? It's not like the heartbreaking, tender sweetness of the lime blossom, for which this city's known, or the serene summer happiness of the honeysuckle. It's something quite harsh and coarse. It reeks. It has a kind of sexual urgency to it. And it unsettles me, as it always does. I feel . . . what? A restlessness. A longing to be over the woods at the end of the street and away, away. And yet at the same time I have a kind of homesickness for where I am. Is that possible? I have a feeling that something, somewhere, has been left unresolved, that some secret thing in the air around me is still waiting to be discovered.

Another hint of it as the summer breeze stirs, and I know that the place I should like to be off to is my childhood. Perhaps the home I'm homesick for is still there, after all. I can't help noticing, as I do every summer in late June, when that sweet reek comes, that there are cheap flights to that far-off nearby land. Twice I pick up the phone to book; twice I put it down again. You can't go back, everyone knows that . . . So I'm never going, then? Is that what I'm deciding? I'm getting old. Who knows, this year may be the last chance I'll get . . .

But what *is* it, that terrible, disturbing presence in the summer air? If only I knew what the magic blossom was called, if only I could see it, perhaps I'd be able to identify the source of its power. I suddenly catch it while I'm walking my daughter and her two small children back to their car after their weekly visit.

I put a hand on her arm. She knows about plants and gardening. 'Can you smell it? There . . . now . . . What is it?'

She sniffs. 'Just the pines,' she says. There are tall pines growing in all the sandy gardens, sheltering the modest houses from the summer sun and making our famously good air fresh and exhilarating. There's nothing clean or resinous, though, about the reek I can detect insinuating itself so slyly. My daughter wrinkles her nose. 'Or do you mean that rather . . . vulgar smell?' she says.

I laugh. She's right. It is a rather vulgar smell.

'Liguster,' she says.

Liguster . . . I'm no wiser. I've heard the word, certainly, but no picture comes to mind, and no explanation of the power it has over me. 'It's a shrub,' says my daughter. 'Quite common. You must have seen it in parks. Very dull looking. It always makes me think of depressing Sunday afternoons in the rain.' Liguster . . . No. And yet, as another wave of that shameless summons drifts over us, everything inside me stirs and shifts.

Liguster . . . And yet it's whispering to me of something secret, of some dark and unsettling thing at the back of my mind, of something I don't quite like to think about . . . I wake up in the night with the word nagging at me. Liguster . . .

Hold on, though. Was my daughter speaking English when she told me that? I get down the dictionary . . . No – she wasn't. And as soon as I see what it is in English I can't help laughing again. Of course! How obvious! I'm laughing this time partly out of embarrassment, because a professional translator shouldn't be caught out by such a simple word – and also because, now I know what it is, it seems such a ridiculously banal and inappropriate cue for such powerful feelings.

Now all kinds of things come back to me. Laughter, for a start. On a summer's day nearly sixty years ago. I've never thought about it before, but now there she is again, my friend Keith's mother, in the long-lost green summer shade, her brown eyes sparkling, laughing at something Keith has written. I see why, of

course, now that I know what it was, scenting the air all around us.

Then the laughter's gone. She's sitting in the dust in front of me, weeping, and I don't know what to do or what to say. All around us once again, seeping unnoticed into the deepest recesses of my memory, to stay with me for the rest of my life, is that sweet and luring reek.

Keith's mother. She must be in her nineties now. Or dead. How many of the others are still alive? How many of them remember?

What about Keith himself? Does he ever think about the things that happened that summer? I suppose he may be dead, too.

Perhaps I'm the only one who still remembers. Or half-remembers. Glimpses of different things flash into my mind, in random sequence, and are gone. A shower of sparks . . . A feeling of shame . . . Someone unseen coughing, trying not to be heard . . . A jug covered by a lace weighted with four blue beads . . .

And, yes – those words spoken by my friend Keith that set everything off in the first place. It's often hard to remember the exact words that someone uttered half a century ago, but these are easy, because there were so few of them. Six, to be precise. Spoken quite casually, like the most passing of remarks, as light and insubstantial as soap bubbles. And yet they changed everything.

As words do.

I suddenly have the feeling that I should like to think about all this at some length, now I've started, and to establish some order in it all, some sense of the connections. There were things that no one ever explained. Things that no one even said. There were secrets. I should like to bring them out into the daylight at last. And I sense the presence still, even now that I've located the source of my unrest, of something at the back of it all that remains unresolved.

I tell my children I'm going to London for a few days.

'Do we have a contact for you there?' asks my well-organised daughter-in-law.

'Memory Lane, perhaps,' suggests my son drily. We are evidently all speaking English together. He can sense my restlessness.

'Exactly,' I reply. 'The last house before you go round the bend and it turns into Amnesia Avenue.'

I don't tell them that I'm following the track of a shrub that flowers for a few weeks each summer, and destroys my peace.

I certainly don't tell them the name of the shrub. I scarcely like to name it to myself. It's too ridiculous.