

CAN SHE USE HER BEGINNINGS TO SHAPE HER FUTURE?



Beginnings



L.T. SMITH



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Beginnings

BY L.T. SMITH

REVISED EDITION



Acknowledgements

(Just thought I would clarify)

Line breaks: ac|know|ledge|ment

Pronunciation: /ə' nɒlɪdʒm(ə)nt

(also chiefly US acknowledgment)

Noun

(There were quite a few definitions before this, so I got rid of them. Go me!)

3 (acknowledgements) A statement printed at the beginning of a book expressing the author's or publisher's gratitude to others. This time it is mine – the author's.

Once again, without Astrid Ohletz's dedication to the publishing profession, I doubt I would've ever seen this book published again. *Beginnings* is, without a doubt, the favourite of all my stories, mainly because I feel there is so much of me crammed within these pages. As with *Hearts*, I still worry about how this story will be received considering the world around us has changed so much since she was first published. But hopefully, love, longing, and childhood dreams are still fashionable enough to warrant a good read. If not, I think I'm buggered with this one.

This version of *Beginnings* has been given a really good spit and polish in readiness to embrace both new and old readers alike. When I say "spit and polish," I mean an ultimate edit of edits. This is all down to the fantastic talents of Day Petersen—the woman I love to work with when it comes to the tough part

called editing. Thank you so very much, Day. You have worked diligently—again—to make *Beginnings* the book I always wanted her to be. Also, thank you, Blu, for combing over the story for the last time to make sure everything is as it should be.

Is it just me, or is the front cover absolutely amazing? I love the red jumper and the love heart—totally inspired and, I believe, my favourite cover so far. Thank you, Amanda Chron, for creating such art for my story. She looks just how I imagined her when I said I'd like “two people holding hands and a red jumper.” You should get a job as a mind reader.

Last, but by no means least, a huge thank you goes out to you, the reader. Without your unwavering support, kind words, and the big thumbs up, I doubt I would've ever come this far in the writing world. I still pinch myself on a regular basis just to check I am not dreaming it all.

L.T. Smith

Dedication

Dedicated to family.

As my mum always said “You can choose your friends, but you can’t choose your family.”

I’m quite pleased about that (apart from our Alan who was definitely dropped on his head).

Part One

Chapter One

1974

The summer of 1974 was hot, sticky, and filled with promise. My days were filled with everything my imagination could conjure, and that could be pretty frightening. Streets were packed with children on school holidays, playing tiggy-it and kerby, and avoiding cars as they raced to retrieve an errant ball. For those who haven't a clue what I'm talking about, tiggy-it is a game in which you run around trying to avoid the player who is "it," and if a clammy hand thwacks you on the back and the chaser screams, "Tig! You're it!", then you then become "it." Kerby is played with a ball and a kerb. Very creative. Space hoppers were the new black—a must for any up and coming child on the street.

I loved my childhood, loved it in my own way of believing everything was wonderful. I was a six-year-old in Levenshulme, once an affluent part of Manchester but now filled with housing for students and ethnic minorities. And everyone was poor, dirt poor. Radios blasted *Shang a Lang* and *Puppy Love* into the street. Mothers bawled at kids climbing the fence alongside the railway tracks where they would flatten pennies, kids who were completely oblivious to the fact that they could be flattened too.

I had five brothers and two sisters, all older than me, and all of whom avoided me like the plague. Except Jo. She was sixteen months older than me and my idol. To my mind, her role on this earth was to be my second mother, and she still holds

that place to this day. We were like Siamese twins, but without the shared organs. She and I looked completely different, but relatives still confused us, and my mother had to resort to colour coding our clothing to differentiate between us. Of course, just to be little bleeders, we mixed and matched outfits, and at family gatherings, Jo hid her pink-rimmed National Health glasses to add to the confusion. Kids. Gotta love 'em.

And my five brothers. Urgh! Every girl's nightmare. If you met them, you would understand why. Patrick, aka Sniffer because of his approach to the opposite sex, is the eldest son. Simon, most commonly known as Ebenezer—need I say more?—is the second eldest. Brian came third, and in the words of my mum, he was “such a bloody liar.” After Brian was delivered, the doctors strongly advised my mother to use birth control to prevent future pregnancies. She paid them no mind.

Aiden popped out, another boy, much to my mother's disappointment, prompting her to initially disown him. Pity she didn't stick to her guns. After Aiden came the crowning glory—Queen Angie, Queenie, Dammer, Screamer.

Who is this bundle of fun?

She's my big sister, sometimes wonderful, sometimes a psycho. I found that out the hard way. As babysitter and tyrant in chief, she was a git to all of us while my mum was working as a waitress at a nightclub. Over the years our relationship has grown, though, most probably because now I can protect myself.

The last of my brothers was quite the prize! Alan. Our Adge. Skid mark. Yup, Skid mark, on account of the very fancy designs that often appeared in his underpants. Finally it was Jo's turn, short for Joanne, the last but one. She had a plethora of nicknames, but Bulber and Mazda, the latter being the brand name of lightbulbs my mum bought when I was a child, were the two most often used, reason being—her head was shaped uncannily like a light bulb, and as a consequence her neck always appeared as if it was having a brilliant idea.

As for me, I had a fine selection of nicknames. So many, in fact, I had trouble remembering my real name, which didn't much help me appear intelligent. I was chiefly known as Bergans, after being left for five hours outside the butcher's of the same name and not missed until tea was being dished out, and Chunky, a generic name shared by many of the family members. I usually introduced myself as Chunky. Other names sneaked in, like Henry the Eighth. I wasn't a fat polygamist with syphilis, nor did I have a beard; it was just the way I ate, as if each bite was the first morsel that had passed my lips in ages.

I think I need to regress in time just a bit further to paint the total picture of the darling child I was. I was born, as David Copperfield said—not the magician, but the sponging whining fucker Dickens wrote of, although his actually says “I am born”—in the Year of Our Lord, Nineteen Hundred and Sixty-Eight. It would be a lie to say I was a beautiful baby. I was very long and very ugly, with a bald head and eyes like a lemur's. Eventually I developed into a fat toddler, but I still had excessively large eyes, which was fortunate as they enabled me to see in the dark when the electric company cut us off.

I was the last of the bunch. One look at me, and my mother finally cried, “No more!” Years later she admitted that if the umbilical cord had not been attached, she would have sworn I wasn't hers because I was so ugly.

Angie loves to recall the day that they brought me home from the hospital. Her job was chief guard, standing at the front door like a bouncer, barring the neighbours from entering so my face wouldn't “frighten the womenfolk and kids.” This tale was told at every opportunity, usually between bouts of hysterical laughter and finger pointing to wherever I was sitting, glowing pink. Like the Ancient Mariner, she felt “cursed” to regale others with it over and over again. She even takes on the characteristics of the decrepit old seaman, with drooling accompanying her overexcitement and spitting. My mother used to bounce me and Jo down the road in a dilapidated pram, trying to avoid well-wishers

in her path. Jo, who was cuddly, beautiful, and smiled readily, distracted people's attention from my owl-like eyes, but on the occasions she wasn't present, the focus of admiration turned to the pram. I didn't care as long as they left me alone to chew through the plastic mattress. The texture was bliss on raw gums—cool, and satisfying.

I wasn't the bravest child. I was even scared by a rabbit once. Yes, a rabbit. You may think that rabbits can't hurt you, but they can. To be more precise, it actually wasn't a rabbit that scared me as much as my disturbed imagination, which I still possess.

There was a woman who lived up the road from us. Weird bugger. Smelt of bleach and cigarettes. She was a creative soul and a bit of an animal lover, and I do mean "a bit." In her back garden, she had erected a majestic centrepiece of mounded soil, and broken bricks and bottles. It was beautiful, in a soily, broken bottle and brick kind of way, almost modern art. And very undervalued by the rest of the neighbourhood.

The rabbit hutch itself sat pride of place, resembling an Anderson air raid shelter sawn in half and lovingly decorated with chicken wire. It was class. I remember what happened as if it was yesterday. Angie led me to the base of a monument that supported the argument that women should never be given free rein with a drill. (This was the Seventies, and I can be Politically Incorrect just this once). All it would take to scale it was the aid of climbing gear and, in the words of the host of the children's show *Blue Peter*, "a responsible adult to ensure the child's safety."

The ascent began. Never in my young life had I been so scared. I had been promised a play with a rabbit, but anticipation of that treat wasn't what was going through my head at that precise moment. I was thinking it was not a rabbit but more likely a terrible monster that would be imprisoned in such a fortress. I started to back off. My heel caught in a broken Dandelion and Burdock bottle, and I fell backwards onto an artistically smashed house brick that was poking from the middle of the mound. It gashed my head open.

It is an odd fact that children initially cry with no sound. Their mouths stretched to capacity, their eyes dry, and not a sound to be heard. Suddenly a low whine is discernible, then gradually grows in volume, culminating in the loudest, most annoying howl audible to human ears— heaven knows how dogs cope—and the waterworks go into overdrive. When my wailing reached its crescendo, many of the elderly neighbours probably thought the Germans were invading, as they had been quietly and secretly preparing for that eventuality for years.

My hands pressed against the cut on my head, I raced away, silently vowing I would never again trust another *Blue Peter* presenter, and needing my mum like I'd never needed her before. All amidst the laughter of the neighbours. Bastards. Concern came later, especially when my family came 'round to sort out the "caged monster" and the smelly weird fucker who would allow an unarmed child to climb her monument.

As I said before, Levenshulme was multicultural, with many residents of South Asian descent. Jo and I were friends with an Indian kid who lived down the road. One day his father gave us an onion bahji. We had never seen one of the strange things before, so Jo and I played catch with it for a while and then bounced it home. How were we to know that this was a special culinary offering from one culture to another? Just think how offended we would have been if we had given them a Holland's Steak and Kidney pudding, and they had played cricket with it. But we were kids. How were we to know?

Jo's best friend, Tina Brace, lived in the road opposite ours. Tina's nickname was "The Rooter," as most of her play time at our house was spent rooting through my mum's drawers and the kitchen cupboards. We used to slag her off, but she did come in handy. If there was something we couldn't find, Tina always knew where it was and would direct us to it.

"Oh, I noticed that when I was going to the toilet. It's in the lads' bedroom in the cupboard in the far left corner, second drawer down, right up the back."

She was but one of many strange friends who would come and go over the years.

I shared a bedroom with Angie, Jo, and the entire Osmond family, especially Donny. Donny Osmond was Angie's idol. Whatever pop tune rattled forth from between that enormous set of teeth was like the national anthem for my sister. The whole family had to stand to attention, in absolute silence, for the King of the teenybopper world. When I woke up frightened in the night and couldn't sleep, being a "whinging little git," according to Angie, she would try to calm me by saying, "Donny's laughing at you."

Right enough. He was. Wherever I looked, he was grinning at me. Even when I opened the drawers, he was flirting with me through the mound of my underwear. God, I hated him, smarmy bugger, and the rest of his family! I hated *Puppy Love* and bloody *Paper Roses*. I wished that he would get distemper, and that someone would pour petrol over Marie's roses and delicately kiss them with a lighted match. This whole Osmond thing should have scarred me mentally, but it just made me stronger, so when Jo's Cliff Richard obsession kicked in, I was prepared.

Before I share what happened to me when I was six, I need to explain how I became the distrustful person I am today. It was really nothing spectacular, but it was definitely a lesson learned when I was only four years old.

I think that anyone would be tempted by a free glass of lemonade. Especially if all they usually got was Corporation pop (water), except for when their mum was flush and they got the fruity drink, Vimto. I was tempted by the offer of lemonade. Very.

It was an ordinary evening, atypically quiet, and my sister Jo asked me if I would like a glass of lemonade. Of course I did! What sugar-craving child wouldn't? As free gifts usually do, the lemonade came with a catch. I had to carry her on my back, on all fours like a donkey, for half an hour. I should have guessed that Jo did not have any lemonade—she did not have any money to buy lemonade—but I trusted her. She *was* my second mum, after all.

On the floor I went—not even four years old and scrabbling around on all fours, building up my thirst. I periodically asked when I was going to receive my well-earned refreshment, only to be told, “Soon. Soon.” Looking back, the crooning tone of her voice should have told me something was not right. The innocence of youth, eh?

Eventually exhausted, I rebelled and demanded that I be paid in full for my services. Jo paid in full. By God, she paid in full. My payment came not in lemondade, but pee, all over my back. I can still hear the laughter in her voice as she shrilled, “Enjoy your lemonade. You deserve it!”

All I can say is it’s a good job that she hadn’t promised me chocolate. To this day, she still can’t tell me why she did it. She just mutters something about being possessed. Whatever her motivation, the seed of distrust had been sown.

The story doesn’t end there, I’m afraid. My brother Patrick’s latest victim—sorry, girlfriend, Stella, was staying with us at the time, and every time a police car went past, she wanted to play a game that I had never heard before and have never heard about since. I should have known by the panic in her eyes that *Let’s Hide Under the Bed* might not have been an actual game after all. Further proof that children are so gullible. Nowadays I would be at the bedroom window screaming “She’s here, in here under the bed!”

When I was older, I found out the police were looking for her for Benefit fraud.

We didn’t always hide underneath the bed. Sometimes we would get in it. All of us, Stella, Jo, Angie, and the Osmonds—all of us in one dilapidated double bed.

The day that Stella walked into a puddle of pee, I thought the shit was going to hit the fan. Almost like the calm before the storm, it was her pause, the quietness after her realisation that she had slipped in something that wasn’t a spilt drink that alerted me that the next noise I would hear would be deafening. Stella’s shouting surely must have penetrated the brick of the

house, and I was surprised the police didn't hear her as they were circulating the neighbourhood. Stella assumed I was the culprit, as I was the youngest and the most likely to be the one with the weak bladder. She called me a disgusting degenerate—my face said “huh?”—and promptly stormed off to sleep with my brother.

Many years later I realised this was her way of generating the opportunity to get between the sheets with Sniffer under my parents' roof, as she could claim it wasn't right for her, as a guest, to have to share a room with a kid who randomly peed on the floor. Also, the passage of time made me realise that even though Stella had made me feel as if I was a freak of nature, I actually wasn't. I'm still not entirely sure if Jo is a freak of nature, though not many people pee on another's back after promising lemonade.

I haven't really gone off the point here. What I mean to say is that I trusted people so easily when I was younger. The rabbit hutch, the free lemonade, the *Let's Hide Under the Bed*, and even the putting blame on me when someone else wanted to manipulate a situation to their benefit—like Stella wanting to shag my brother and using me as an excuse to make it happen. Each was a silly thing in its own right, but had a huge impact on a small child whose life was about to dramatically change and maybe not change for the better.

The summer of 1974 was hot, sticky, and filled with promise. My days were filled with everything my imagination could conjure, and that could be pretty frightening. Streets were packed with children on school holidays, playing tiggy-it and kerby, and avoiding cars as they raced to retrieve an errant ball. Space hoppers were the new black.

I was six years old. It was Levenshulme. And that's where I first spotted Ashley Richards, or Ash, as I found out she liked to be called.

Chapter Two

Ashley Richards. Even today, when I say her name my whole body smiles. I still vividly remember the day she fell into my arms, into my life. Yes. Fell.

In the corner of our front garden, there was a huge tree, and I do mean huge. I loved to climb up as high as I could to get away from the brood, and even at six years old I could get pretty high. To this day, my mum doesn't know I used to climb it. She would be bellowing into the streets the litany of my siblings names, all in rank order, announcing, "Your bloody tea's on the table!" and I would be sitting in the branches right above her.

Amazing what power you possess by being just a little higher than everyone else. I felt on top of the world. Every teatime it was the same. Until one memorable Sunday.

I had climbed up one branch higher than usual and was perched there, gloating. Mum had been and gone, and I watched my brothers and sisters trundle in the front door one by one, ready for tea. I had just climbed down to the ground when I heard a distinct rustling of leaves coming from overhead.

It was, or so it seemed, a split second later when something landed on me. It was big. It was heavy. It was wriggling like crazy on top of my battered body. As I was soon to find out, it was my introduction to Ash.

The girl's blue eyes were wide with shock and panic, and pain...if my own aching backside and stomach were any gauge. My arms instinctively wrapped around her, and our squirming

bodies mashed together. Black hair tumbled forward, and a strand of it went inside my mouth, an obvious distraction from me trying to scream.

The more we tried to separate, the more entangled we became. A voice from above me hollered, “Stop!” and like the good girl I was, I did. I allowed my scrawny arms to flop lifelessly to my sides and then lay there completely rigid as the blue-eyed girl systematically pulled herself free.

“Are you okay?”

The tears that welled up in my throat—the ones I was trying to swallow though they were as big as footballs—miraculously disappeared at her concern. Silent, I nodded, looking at the girl towering above me. I wasn’t okay, but damned if I was going to admit it to her.

She held her hand down towards me to help me up, and for a split second I considered refusing, but the pain shooting up the cheeks of my arse told me to stop being a martyr and accept.

Her hands were cool in contrast to my clammy, dirty ones, and with one deft movement I was on my feet. I don’t think I even had a chance to bend my knees. I staggered forward, only to be captured by her arms again as my head hit her chest. Jesus. She was so tall. The feeling I had whilst lying on the ground came back. She still towered above me!

“Sorry about that.” Her eyes flicked to the tree. “I kind of lost my footing.”

I stared at her, gobsmacked. I wanted to demand why she had been in my tree in the first place, but nothing would come out. I must have appeared simple, and I think for those few minutes I was.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

A quick nod was all I could muster, as my arse was still throbbing.

After about a minute of staring back at me, she stuck out her hand. “Ashley Richards. Erm...or Ash. I just moved in down the Avenue about two weeks ago.”

I was about to respond. My mouth had formed around a word and was ready to let it slip through my gormless lips when I heard, “Bloody hell, Lou. Your tea’s on the table. In!”

Mum. And she was pissed off, big time.

I turned back to Ashley and flashed her a smile. “Got to go. See ya around, yeah?”

Her face lit up with an enormous grin, and she nodded, her hand still outstretched.

On impulse, I grabbed her hand and pumped it up and down like I had seen my mum doing to people she had just met. Her cool fingers clutched at mine for a brief moment before my mum’s rising ire ended the encounter.

“Inside now, young lady. You can talk to your friend tomorrow.”

A smile lit my face. My friend. I liked the sound of that.

Before I could say anything else, Ash was gone. I turned around and wobbled indoors. The cheeks of my arse were still screaming, but the smile on my face said, “Stuff it. I have a new friend.”



Sunday night was always nit inspection night. My mum was like a woman possessed when it came to our six-legged friends who liked to party in her kids’ hair. So Sunday night was known as The Treatment Night.

Every Sunday was the same—bath, clean pyjamas, and a thorough grooming, ready for school the next day. Unfortunately the de-lousing regimen didn’t stop just because we were on school holidays. And let me tell you, if you have never had the “pleasure” of Derbac...well, you’ve been lucky. At least it didn’t set in your hair like Suleo.

Mum would line us up in order of age and douse the lice with the most foul smelling lotion ever invented. Even today, I find dog farts less noxious. It wasn’t just the lotion, either, it was

the combing. I think the person who invented the comb must have done so with the help of a microscope and evil intentions. My hair tangled easily, and it was agony having something scraping through hair so fine. The result was tearstained cheeks, red rimmed eyes, and Christopher Lee hair. The lot of us were like a band of extras in a Hammer House Production of *Dracula*.

Over time, the victims of this regimen dwindled down to just Alan, Jo, and me, as the others had grown enough to adamantly refuse. They used to sit smugly in the front room, while the “infested trio” would have to stay in the dining room and were only allowed to go into the best room if we stayed away from everyone—especially out of draughts from the windows, which would waft the smell around the room. We could have been hired out on safaris, as the smell would have stunned an elephant at twenty paces.

This Sunday was no different—the agony, the screaming, the pleading for mercy. And that was just Alan. He was such a boy sometimes. It was funny. In retrospect. Especially watching my mum crack the little critters between her fingernails after she caught them in the comb.

Word of warning—never struggle with your mother when she is de-lousing you. There is only ever one winner, and it sure isn’t you. And, this is a biggie, always be ready to run in case her cig sets your hair on fire. Okay, that’s an exaggeration. She always properly balanced it on top of the gas fire, making sure the tip never came near enough to actually catch us alight.

But Alan... Alan was a mard-arse—always was and most certainly still is. It still makes me smile to remember him in the throes of what looked like a classic rain dance after Mum had de-loused him, wailing to the gods, his hands scratching at his scalp, informing everyone and everything he hated them with all his heart. Alan liked to blame the world for everything, and the burning of the Derbac didn’t help his mood on those occasions. He was always the main attraction on Sundays. We probably could have charged admission,

but we were used to it. Every week, the same, until this particular Sunday.

The doorknocker sounded. The insurance man had dropped by for Mum's payment, and we didn't even have time to hide behind the furniture. Not that we could have gotten away with it, as Alan was in the throes of his jungle fever.

It is only now, with the benefit of hindsight, that I realise my mum was embarrassed by the smell and the noise. No one else actually paid any attention to what was going on. In a household our size, it was very unusual to have quiet time.

All the while the insurance man was there, Alan danced. Every question the man asked, my mum had to ask to be repeated because of Alan's rantings. Jo and I just sat on the floor, quietly doing Christopher Lee impressions, but inside laughing our arses off. Alan was a knob head, still is.

I believe this episode scarred my brother, mainly because that night he had the lotion on longer than the requisite thirty minutes. The medication soaking through his scalp and him breathing in all those fumes whilst screaming must have taken its toll. It could even be the reason he has never advanced intellectually. Or maybe it's just because he was, and always will be, a wanker. Who knows for sure?

After the insurance man had gone and Alan had been given a good telling off whilst his hair was being rinsed clear, Jo and I were sent to bed under the watchful eyes of Donny Fucking Osmond, et al.

It was only after Mum had gone back down to give Alan another pasting to stop his crying, go figure, that Jo asked me where I had gotten my bruises. Her eyes held concern, and I knew she must have been worrying about them since bath time, as the bruise started at the base of my spine and curved around one butt cheek. There is no way she wouldn't have noticed it, although Angie hadn't. She was too busy trying to get us sorted so she could get up to the park with her mates.

Donny was smiling at me as I turned to Jo. “I was standing under the tree—”

“What have I told you about climbing that tree? I’ll tell Mum if you go up it again.”

“I didn’t fall out of it. Ash did.”

“How on earth can ash cause a bruise like that?”

I started laughing.

“It’s not funny, Lou. You’ll end up killing yourself, or worse.”

I didn’t get it—killing myself or worse? I shrugged. “Not ash. Ash!”

She looked at me as if I was an idiot.

“Ashley. Ashley Richards from down the Avenue.”

Her look was still vacant.

“She moved in a couple of weeks ago.”

I could see realisation replace the blank expression. It was short lived.

“What do you mean Ash fell out of the tree?”

I loved my sister, but sometimes she was too overprotective. It was a full twenty minutes before she was satisfied I had not been ambushed.

As I snuggled into the dilapidated double bed I shared with Jo and Angie, I smiled to myself. I’d got a friend. Then I silently wished Donny goodnight, as Angie had trained me to do.

I couldn’t wait to see what the next day would bring.

Chapter Three

It wasn't long before Ash and I were firm friends, although she was Jo's age. As for Jo...well, she wasn't too pleased that my affections had been split. But being her, she took it on the chin and allowed me some respite from her constant mothering.

Our days were spent in childish adventures. Ash was so much fun, although she barely said a word to anybody else. Mum called her my shadow, as she was always standing quietly behind me whenever she was in the company of any of my family.

Don't get me wrong, my family was friendly, there were just a lot of us. The only person Ash hadn't met was my dad. I hadn't seen him myself for quite a while. He was a long distance lorry driver and spent a lot of time on the road. When he wasn't on the road, he was in the pub.

I remember when I was about four, my mum had got me up in the middle of the night, or so it seemed, to introduce me to him. Years later I realised they had been in the middle of an argument. To put it mildly, my father was a tosser. He didn't give two shits about his family; all he cared about was himself and the pub. I can still remember him sitting there in the front room, sunglasses on at night time, listening to Dean Martin's *Everybody Loves Somebody Sometime*, and singing along really badly.

Mum ushered Jo and me into the room, and it was like the rabbit incident all over again. A feeling of trepidation flooded through me, just like when I was climbing up the mound.

My heart was hammering in my chest, and I had a feeling of foreboding. Who was this man who sat in the chair singing whilst wearing sunglasses? Even to this day, I read people's eyes. I don't trust people if I can't see their eyes. I learned that the hard way.

It was only because Jo seemed to know him that I let down my guard. I wish I hadn't bothered.

Enough about him for now. You'll hear more about that tosser later.

Ash. Every time I thought of her, I felt like skipping. She was a lot taller than me, probably because she was nearly eight. Well, she was seven and three-quarters, eight in October, but she seemed to be more grown up than me. Her face was tan from all the outdoor activities we shared, but the most striking thing about her was her eyes. They were blue, light blue, a twinkling blue that captured the sun's rays and made them dance.

She became the centre of my world. Everything I did, I wanted her to be a part of it. Everything I saw, I wanted her to see. We were inseparable. It was fantastic.

Jo started to spend more time with Tina, but she assured me I was always welcome to hang about with her anytime I wanted. I didn't know why Jo didn't really take to Ash, but at the time I didn't give it much thought.

Summer days were spent in play, in adventure. Things I had done a thousand times on my own took on a different lustre when I did them with Ash. She even showed me how to climb that damned tree properly. Although I still had the memory of her plunging down from quite a height, I trusted her completely.

I fit quite nicely into her family, too. She had two brothers, Stephen and Anthony—one older than her, one younger. Her dad used to torment her, saying it was an Ashley sandwich. I could tell she was their pride and joy.

It was strange to watch her family together. Her parents were always interested in what each of them was doing, taking time to chat with them and ask how their day had been. Her mother was a

full-time mum, always there for them. Her father was a policeman. He made both my brothers and Sniffer's girlfriend nervous.

It made me reflect, in my childish way, about my own parents. I loved my mum so much. She worked as hard as she could to provide for us, considering my dad was AWOL most of the time. Now I'm an adult, I fully realise what she had to go through—eight children to provide for, and barely two pennies to rub together. No wonder she had to work at a nightclub to earn enough to clothe and feed us. A man can't support both the pub and his family, and my father chose to support the local brewery.

Ash's family sort of adopted me. We spent a lot of our time together at her house, reading. I especially loved it when she read to me. This treat sometimes followed us up the tree, where we would sit, hidden from view, and she would read to me. I had to be careful I didn't relax too much and fall backwards.

Ash, her two brothers, and I used to perform ABBA's *Waterloo* in her bedroom. I don't think Stephen and Anthony really wanted to be Benny and Bjorn, but they didn't have a say in the matter. Ash could be quite persuasive when the mood took her.

We practised for days trying to get the moves right, turning our heads at just the right moment. I still haven't got the hang of coordination, but that's beside the point.

When we thought we had perfected it, we put the single on the small box record player and performed our masterpiece for her parents. As usual, I followed her every move and shrilled out, "My my... At Wa-ter-loo Na-po-le-on did sur-render...yeah yeah."

The applause from her parents was deafening, nearly as loud as our singing. I felt on top of the world.

One of my favourite memories was the day Ash and I went to Concroft Park. It was the day I realised Ash was everything I would ever want or need in my life.

It was quite a walk from our house, and we were toting carrier bags full of sandwiches and pop to consume on our day out. The bags also held two books, Ash's jumper, an old blanket, and a ball. It was looking to be a good day. It was.

The very first thing we did was feed the ducks. We stood there, side by side, looking for all the world like a pair of ragamuffins, not speaking but fully content to just...be. I think we gave the ducks nearly all our sandwiches, but we didn't care.

Swings, slides, roundabouts, and reading. In that order. Then we did it all again, but this time we had a game of catch before we lay back on the grass to read.

I didn't know how long I had been asleep when I suddenly woke to a splodge of rain hitting my skin like an ice cube. Again and again, until it was constant. Ash loomed above me, her shadow blocking my view, her body sheltering me from the downpour.

"Lou. Come on, Lou. We need to go." Her voice seemed echoey, distant.

The chill of the rain made me shiver. I was wearing only a t-shirt and shorts, and I was freezing.

Ash was shaking with cold too. Her hand was trembling as she reached down to me, rivulets of water running down her bare flesh. "We need to get back."

I grabbed her hand, and she pulled me to my feet with one deft movement.

"Here."

She thrust a jumper in my direction. My eyes looked into blue, which were clouded with worry.

"Put it on. You'll catch your death."

"But—"

"But nothing. Put it on, no arguments."

I pulled the jumper over my head, missing the sight of her as the thick red material fell over my eyes. The jumper was barely in place before she grabbed my hand and began to pull me along.

Rain lashed us as we struggled against the downpour. It looked as if it would be with us for quite a while, and we had to get back home. Neither of us wanted to worry our parents.

The ball forgotten, Ash had the blanket and books shoved under her arm, her other arm pulling me along, my short legs

struggling to keep up. We had gone a little way before she pulled me under the bus shelter just outside the park.

“We can’t get the bus, Ash. We haven’t any money.”

“Shhhuuuusssshh. We’re not getting the bus. Here, hold these.”

She thrust the books into my hands and started fluffing out the blanket. Her face filled with concentration as she struggled with the chequered cloth, her long black hair plastered to the side of her face.

I was freezing, and by the looks of her shaking body, so was Ash.

“Come here.” Her voice was quiet, barely a whisper, but I went without question. “I’m going to try and keep us from getting completely soaked.”

I looked up at my friend in awe. She made me feel so protected. I knew she would take care of me, whatever happened.

“I’m going to hold the blanket over us while we walk. Here, put your arm ’round my waist and hold on.”

Because of our height difference, it was quite an effort to slip my arm around her, but then we were off, the slick pavement almost a blur beneath our feet.

Though Ash was determined we wouldn’t get any more wet than we already were, the books did not fare as well. The bag in which we had brought the books had unfortunately gotten lost some time in the course of the day, and they were becoming soggy and heavy. My grip tightened about them with grim determination. I wanted to keep up with my sole responsibility.

It seemed like forever that we slogged along. The rain really slowed us down, but I wasn’t frightened or worried. Ash’s presence calmed me, made me feel secure, and, strangely enough, happy.

When we reached her house, I fully expected her to dash in and send me on my way, but she didn’t. She insisted on seeing me to my front door, with a mumbled, “That’s what friends are for.” Secretly, I was pleased.

The front door drew us like a beacon. She slowed down a little as we approached it, stopping as we reached the small front gate.

“Go on. You get in,” Ash said.

I impulsively threw my arms around her neck and planted a kiss on her cheek. I think I surprised her, because she dropped the blanket to her shoulders and looked me square in the face.

“What was that for?”

Her voice was quiet, but I heard every word as if it had been shouted. “For taking care of me.”

“Don’t be daft.”

But I could see she was pleased by my words.

She planted a little kiss on my forehead before she gave me a gentle shove. “Go on. Get going.”

I raced toward the door and hammered the knocker, turning to face Ash whilst I waited for someone to let me in.

The image of her standing there will forever be etched into my mind. Rain pummelled down on her, but she just stood there, staring back at me. Her hair was a tangled mass of wetness, clinging to the sides of her face, her fringe dripping water into her eyes. The pale cream t-shirt was like a second skin, transparent and heavy. Rivulets of water raced down her legs and collected at the tops of her ankle socks. Splodges of dirt speckled her calves and knees, but they were beginning to wash away.

“Bloody hell, Lou! You’re pissed wet through!” Mum’s voice broke through my thoughts, and I turned to face her. “Get in and get those clothes off before you catch your death.”

Ash’s jumper! I still had it on. I turned to speak to her, but she was on her way out the gate, the blanket wrapped around her shoulders.

“Ash!” She stopped, and turned toward me, a question in her eyes. “Your jumper!”

“Keep it. I’ll get it later.” Her face broke into a dazzling smile, and I forgot about the rain, forgot about the jumper, forgot how cold I was. That smile lit up my world and made me feel warm inside.

“Come on, Lou...in!”

“Later, Ash.”

“Later’s.”

And she was gone. Racing through puddles, water splashing up her legs, the blanket billowing out as only sodden blankets could do.

But there wasn’t going to be any “later’s.” “Later’s” had to wait for another ten years. My father was responsible for that.

Bastard.

Chapter Four

After sharing a hot bath with Jo, our usual ritual, it was tea and an early night. I felt so happy going to sleep, but the happiness didn't last long.

Voices woke me. Not gentle voices by any stretch of the imagination. These voices were raised in argument, spewing words that no child should ever hear. It was my parents. Funny thing is, even though my mum and dad didn't get along as well as other parents, they rarely argued. This was a shock, and I was filled with fear.

"You all right, Lou?" Jo's voice filtered through the darkness, and her hand landed on my arm and stroked up and down.

The shouting was getting closer, the anger rising. Tears spilled from my eyes, and I began to shake. I was scared and confused. Jo tried to comfort me, but I could hear the fear in her voice. If she was scared, this had to be really bad.

The raised voices were right outside our door, their words clear. We were leaving. Tonight. Mum had found out about the affairs my father had been having and that his girlfriend from Scotland was carrying his child.

Only later did I understand the full import of these accusations. Only later did I overhear my mum telling one of her sisters of a letter she had found, addressed to her, in his work bag—a letter from a seventeen-year-old, who was three-and-a-half months pregnant. Only later did I fully understand what a total wanker this man was.

Even Donny didn't seem to be laughing anymore.

Light blinded me as the door flew open and my mum stormed into the room with a roll of black plastic bags.

“Come on, girls. Get yourselves up. We’re going on a trip.” She tried to keep her voice cheerful, but we knew this trip wasn’t to Butlins. “Here.” She tore off some bags and passed them to us. “Pack as many clothes as you can into these. Angie’s, too.”

“Over my dead body!” my father bellowed.

“That can be arranged.” Mum’s voice was a growl, and my father slunk back, knowing that she would rip his head off if he so much as made a move in our direction.

Not that he would have put himself on the line like that. He was not brave, nor did he give a damn about anyone but himself. As far as I could tell, his kids and family meant nothing to him.

My body was shaking as I randomly grabbed everything and anything, and haphazardly shoved clothes into my bag. Jo was crouched next to me, tears trickling down her face as she carefully placed each item into her sack.

My world was falling apart...falling apart...falling apart. The refrain accompanied the motions of my hands as they silently lifted my few belongings and packed them into shiny black plastic. Panic and fear vied for dominance. And then it struck me—Ash.

When could I see Ash? Could I say goodbye to her? I didn’t want to say goodbye.

A noise danced in my throat, a wail waiting to be released into the silent room. I didn’t want to leave Ash; she was my friend. I didn’t want to leave.

The wail escaped as my tears flowed freely. I wiped at my tears, but ended up just smearing the wetness across my cheeks. My nose bunged up, and breathing became difficult.

“Come on, sweetheart. It’ll be all right.” Mum was crouching next to me, trying to calm me, her hands on my shoulders, rubbing the knotted muscles. “We’ll still be together.”

That made me cry harder, as I knew Ash wasn’t going to be a part of us still being together. Gentle hands slipped underneath

my armpits, and I felt myself being lifted into the familiar scent of my mum.

“Shush there, sweetheart, I’ve got you.”

She rocked me back and forth, stroking my back. It was ages before she let me go. Jo stood silently next to us, her fingers sifting through my hair.

That was just like my sister. She must have been feeling just as scared as me, but still she worried about me. That was why I loved her so much.

An hour later, we were in the back of a black cab—Mum, Angie, Alan, Jo, and me, with five bin bags and not much else. We looked a sorry sight. The rest of the lads decided to stay with their father—*their* father, as he was no longer mine. He had never acted like a father, no matter how inescapable the biological fact was.

I can still remember every detail of the taxi driver reversing into Ash’s road, and my eyes staring up at the dark window of her room. I wanted to wake her up, to tell her that whatever happened, she was still my friend and I loved her.

As the taxi pulled away, I felt a part of me staying there in Levenshulme. I could only hope that Ash would find it and know I hadn’t wanted to leave her. At that moment, I took scant comfort from the knowledge that no matter how long it took me, I would find Ash again.

That was a promise.

Chapter Five

1984

Loads of things had happened in the ten years since the cab carried us from Levenshulme, too many to go into detail about, but the main thing was, I'd never had the opportunity to see Ash again, never had the chance to say goodbye. It was only years later that I realised we hadn't actually moved very far away from where I grew up. It was definitely within walking distance. When you're a kid, everywhere seems like a million miles away, but on the map, North Reddish was actually right next to Levenshulme, three miles max. However short a distance, those three miles separated me from my life with Ash and dumped me into my new life without her.

Every time it rained, I thought about her. Weird, I know. To this day, whenever it rains heavily, I see the image of her standing there, drenched to the skin, smiling at me even though she was freezing cold.

I still have the books from that day, too. They look like concertinas, all bevelled and swollen. The pages barely separate, and they look tired and old. I keep them wrapped up in a bright red jumper. Her bright red jumper. They were the only things I had of hers, and there was no way I would part with them. Ever.

After my mum left my dad, I found out she had actually been seeing someone else. It was funny in a way, because I had met him on more than one occasion. He was the head chef at the nightclub where Mum worked, so I had not thought it odd when my mum had taken me and Jo around to his flat to meet him.

I thought he was wonderful. He always had time to chat, took an interest in whatever we were doing. In retrospect, I realised he thought the absolute world of my mum. It was good for my soul to see her so happy. Years had been wasted with a man who had told her nobody else would ever give her a second look, and now she was with a man who thought the sun rose and set because she was on the earth.

Those ten years in North Reddish were not easy, by any stretch of the imagination. My dad took great joy in divorcing my mum on the grounds of adultery. In his statement, he expressly emphasized that he would never forgive her for leaving him, “for another man, at that.” He failed to acknowledge his own shortcomings—the affairs, the lies, the pregnant girl who was only a year older than his daughter. He clearly believed it was a man’s right to do all these things.

My brothers’ behaviour apparently was founded on the same beliefs, as they followed steadily in his footsteps as womanisers and drunks. All except Alan, initially, but as soon as he was old enough, he was off to join the gang. He was an idiot.

In time, Angie married a man who looked like Brains from *Thunderbirds*, although most of the time he reminded me more of Joe 90 from the spaceage show of the same name. Four of my brothers got married, and then three of them got divorced. They were definitely like their father. Aiden was remarried, and wife number two was already getting sick and tired of his absences, and I am not referring to the times he spent in nick, either. I doubt they will ever learn.

At sixteen I left school and went to do my A levels at Stockport College. As newbies, we were constantly the butt of everybody’s pranks. When we asked for directions, we were sent the opposite way. We were told stories about teachers to make us wary of the staff. They took the piss out of us constantly, but that was to be expected. All in all, we dealt with all the pranks the older students played on us, as we knew it was part and parcel of college life. We survived initial taunting, and everything started

to settle down. Until the incident. I still cringe about it to this day, but I realise if it hadn't happened, I might never have seen Ash again.

I had been at college for two weeks and had made a few friends who insisted I go along to the karaoke night at the Student Union. I couldn't hold a note, still can't, but I agreed, on the understanding I would not be getting up and making a fool of myself.

Big mistake. I should have stayed home and washed my hair, watched telly, read a book, even studied. But no. Karaoke night it was.

My friends were there, all cramped around a table with some older students, laughing and fitting in well. I bought a Coke at the bar and joined them. They seemed like a nice bunch, although slightly pissed already and it was only eight o'clock.

As the night wore on, more people were getting up the nerve to sing. Not me. I just sat there and sipped my drink, laughed in all the right places, and chatted—mainly with Mandy, a girl who was in my A level Sociology course and at whose house I would be spending the night.

I felt quite relaxed. I think it had something to do with what Ray, an older Art student, kept slipping in my drink. He thought he was being sly about it, but he was too pissed to realise he was being obvious.

Then came the joints. I had never even smoked a cigarette, never mind a joint, but hey—it was college, and everyone else was doing it. Another big mistake.

I swear I only had a couple of drags. Honestly, Your Honour, just the two. But I felt like I had smoked ten. And that's how I found myself on the stage, in the Student Union, singing *Waterloo*.

The lights in the place were blinding. The smoke in the air was making my throat even drier than it had been, but for some reason I didn't care. I was waving my arm above my head and croaking out the jumbled words to Abba's winning song. I was killing it. That is to say, I was slaughtering the poor song, hanging it up and slitting its metaphoric throat.

About a third of the way through, I felt someone come up behind me on the stage and begin to sing with me. I was overjoyed, and not a little zealous, to thank this person for becoming part of my act. I turned and stumbled into something warm and tall. I knew it was female, because my face was pressed into some very impressive breasts. A laugh escaped as I stumbled back and looked up into...pale...blue...eyes.

I froze. The eyes had me.

Ash. My Ash. In the flesh. Bigger, taller, darker, and absolutely, positively the most gorgeous woman on the planet.

Even though it had been years, the vision standing in front of me was someone I definitely recognised. I don't know why I stepped away, maybe it was to focus my attention on the whole package and not just the amazing blue eyes gazing intently into my own.

Drinking alcohol as a minor, smoking pot, murdering an Abba song—they had been mistakes, kind of. But stepping back, stepping backwards on a tiny stage and not paying attention, that was the show stealer.

I landed squarely on top of a table full of empty cups, surrounded by amorous young men, ready for a woman to drop into their lives. Plastic glasses flew in all directions as my arse hit the edge with enough force to tip the table forward and slide me gracefully to the ground.

The music stopped. The room was silent for what seemed like an age, and then the laughter began, raucous laughter that ricocheted off the walls and pounded my befuddled ears. The room began to spin—not a good sign, especially as my stomach began to spin with it.

A concerned face hovered in front of me, and I struggled to control my wandering eyeballs, which were moving about their sockets without direction. They landed on blue eyes, twinkling blue eyes that captured me in a tractor beam gaze. I was transfixed. My body ceased squirming, my eyeballs focused on the vision before me.

“Lou?” That voice—so familiar, yet so different. “It is you, isn’t it?”

I couldn’t answer. I was struck mute by the circumstances, the alcohol, the pot, and her eyes.

“Louise Turner? It’s you, isn’t it?”

She reached out and stroked my cheek, and my eyes fluttered closed.

“Ash.” The word left my lips on the wings of hope. I couldn’t believe it was her, couldn’t believe after all these years she had just popped into my world again.

“In the flesh.”

I opened one eye to focus on her, taking in her classic beauty. My reaction to this wonder was one I bet many people have experienced at one time or another.

I threw up. All over her. In a bar full of people. And then I threw up again.

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About L.T. Smith

L.T. is a late bloomer when it comes to writing and didn't begin until 2005 with her first novel *Hearts and Flowers Border* (first published in 2006).

She soon caught the bug and has written numerous tales, usually with a comical slant to reflect, as she calls it, "My warped view of the dramatic."

Although she loves to write, L.T. loves to read, too—being an English teacher seems to demand it. Most of her free time is spent with her furry little men—two fluffy balls of trouble who keep her active and her apologies flowing.

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