

LORE

By Bryony Kimmings

HUM OF TUNE

I'm physically fine. As is the baby.

I feel like those baby blues that they said would have lasted just a few days post birth have stuck around. Like, I'm physically fine, the baby is physically fine. And everything is meant to be okay... Everything feels dangerous. Everything feels like its coming. Like the thatched roof - it's going to catch fire. And I have to watch out of the window to make sure the orange glow isn't coming from above.

When I was walking down the edge of the river I thought of us both drowning, gasping for breath and I couldn't, I couldn't save him. And the other day I went into the kitchen and when I came back in he'd got hold of the remote control and he was choking he's choking he's....he's choking.

But he wasn't. He was just chewing on it.

Everything everyone said would be beautiful, joyful, life affirming is the opposite.

I'm not a mad person, I've never been a mad person, I haven't had thoughts like this before, you couldn't say it was coming, it's just switched on and now - I'm not a mad person but I'm mad.

They'll take the baby away and give him to someone else who can do it.

They will tell me I've fucked him up forever.

They'll make me stop breastfeeding, they'll make me take tablets, and they'll put me in hospital, and then my mum will come and everyone will judge me for not being able to do it properly.

I won't let them take him away, I won't I won't...I...I won't go into hospital and no one needs to know that I've infected him.

I can't stop picking at things. Like I've picked off all his cradle cap even though I know I'm not meant to. And then I've started to pull apart that blanket Mum gave me, the blue blanket, I've started to pull at the thread and now it's unravelling and I, I should probably learn how to knit so I can put it back together.

Great grandmother

It's 1918. Stratford, London.

Alexandra Crowther is 24 years old. Daughter of a rag and bone man and a teahouse worker. Raised in the slums of Bethnal Green. Moved to Stratford in slum clearings. These flats, although promised paradise are not much better. A large estate of tenement blocks. Dirty, loud with no green space.

Alexandra Crowther fell in love with a dockworker called Harry and married him at 20. They moved into the same council building as her parents and started trying for a baby. 3 miscarriages later and Alexandra birthed Betty on her bed at home.

The midwife was local and had delivered her neighbours babies too. Wrapped in the blue blanket she had knitted Betty was a healthy girl with a ferocious appetite that Alex couldn't seem to provide enough milk for.

Alexandra couldn't stop crying. So Alexandra hid. Closed the curtains, stayed inside and didn't speak about the tears or the feelings of failure. Didn't say she wasn't coping, because that language didn't exist.

Then in autumn 1918, just when they thought they had managed to avoid it Harry was called up. Last ditch attempt to win the war. He is packed off and the flat is empty, and the situation ripe for what was to come. The wheels came off.

It's a cool September night. The flats are relatively quiet save a shouting man drunk on the corner of the close. Betty hasn't stopped crying for what seems like days and Alexandra hasn't slept. Mastitis in both breasts, feverish and delusional from fatigue she is certain she can hear her neighbours talking about her.

I've had enough of it. Their comments. Their threats to call the police.

"Harry's not coming home, such bad luck called up like that".

She unlatches the window and she clutches the baby in its blue blanket and begins to howl into the night.

Waking up half the block and as people start to come out it's clear that Alex is about to jump and her baby is going with her. Even her parents can't coax her down. Wild eyed, like an animal.

At my wits end.

For a while it seems like both mother and baby are done for. No-one knows quite what to do. So they call for the doctor and they call for the police.

I'm not mad. I'm not mad.

Flanked by 15 other women in similar states they keep each other awake at night with shouting and writhing and crying in the Mental Hospital. Whilst 15 babies wail elsewhere for their mothers.

I can still hear them talking. Where's...where's Harry?

Poor women. Their babies got taken away.

Where's Harry - where's my baby?

Alexandra won't see her baby again. After being diagnosed with Purpureal Insanity which they put down to poverty, madness in the family and some kind of 'problem' in her milk. She's separated forever and her baby is adopted.

If she were alive now, chances are it would have been different, right?

HUM OF TUNE

He's choking he's choking he's choking

Grandmother

It's 1947.

Betty, daughter of Alexandra is now Betty Lyle. Wife of a medalled flight navigator. Living in a nice new house, with a nice household budget on a nice air force base at the end of the war. Her fortune very different to the mother she never knew. She thinks of Alexandra sometimes. But mostly tries not to. She went mad. Was mad. Institutionalised. No medical records. So all she has is the name of her mum and the blanket she was adopted with, and the vague memory of a song. Something about a bird.

Betty Lyle is 29. She already has a baby. A healthy bouncing boy. Born the year the war ended. What a celebration. And her second baby is due. Any day now. She knows the drill. The doctors take care of it for you. Pain relief. Bedrest. Helpful clockwork nurses in starched uniforms who bring your baby to feed at regular intervals. No problem.

But when she is sent home she can't shake the feeling that there in the crib, is a changeling. Not her baby but a fairy baby. It's been swapped. Ugly and alien. But there is dinner to make and drinks to mix and paddling pools to fill up and ovens to put your head in. So she leaves the baby alone for the day when she heads out with her little son. And the neighbour calls the social services.

Betty is in a mother and baby wing. The baby is still with her, thank god they say. Not that Betty cares. And she is being talked to like a baby herself by red faced matrons with wise words.

It's 'Post Natal insanity'.

The term changed but the symptoms the same as her mums. But unlike her mother, Betty isn't from a council block, with twitching curtains and whispering neighbours. So her madness manifests differently. Appropriately to the things around her and the time she is living in. Around Betty is silence, and a vacuum of emotional connection, clean sterile home appliances, starched shirts and collars. And this is the time of the refrigerator mother so Betty goes cold.

Lesley Alexandra Lyle will be the girl with the cold mother, Betty is sure of it. She will never feel loved, will always feel anxious and Betty can't do anything about it. So she keeps her distance.

And she never tells her daughter about what happened in those early months, so her daughter always feels at arms-length, longing for closeness. Betty is pleasant and kind but never quite present. Keep that dark cold feeling away from your daughter. In case you further infect her.

If Betty were alive now, chances are it would have been different, right?

Mother

HUM OF TUNE

Every is telling me to call my mum.

It's 1981.

Elizabeth Alexandra Lyle lives in rural Scotland Ayrshire. She wears linen smocks, has long unkempt hair and makes corn dollies and natural tinctures in her tiny homestead paradise.

She hitchhiked her way around Europe in her late teens, worked bars during her twenties in southern Spain, she danced away her early thirties in Camden; she married at 37 and got the hell out of England once and for all.

Lesley is drawn to natural birth. She wants to be present. She wants it to be at home. No drugs. She reads the books, she makes her plans, the only remanence of her own birth is the blanket she was given by her mother in the post this past week with the briefest of notes. That could have been written to the milk man.

They take babies away. Cold mothers create cold children. Doctors can't be trusted. They take babies away. Cold mothers create cold children. Doctors can't be trusted. They take babies away. Cold mothers cold children. Doctors can't be trusted.

Mum, what are you not telling me?

Darling I'm so happy I got to share this experience of your pregnancy with you, and you've been asking for advice, and it feels like we're getting closer now you're becoming a mummy. Your grandma and I, we didn't really get a chance to do any of this stuff so it's really good to share that with you.

I've popped the blanket into the post, it was mine as a baby but it was also grandmas' as a baby, and grandma got it when she was adopted so it's the one thing she had from her mother so, super precious, keep it safe. There was a song, I will remember it and send it to you.

It's all in bits, every little bit of it is in bits. I pulled a thread of the blue wool - I just couldn't stop myself - I just kept pulling it and pulling it. It took only about 35 minutes and it was really satisfying. Really satisfying. And then I felt dreadful. I've wound it back up into a ball and put it in the cupboard, underneath the spare nappies.

Everyone is telling me to call my mum.

I don't need your bloody blanket. I don't need your tinctures. You can't fix this. I need to know that I'm not going to jump out of the fucking window.

I don't want to feel shame, or that you're ashamed of me. I don't want you to say that I infected him. I know why you'd take a baby away, I get it but please don't take him. I need to know if this was always going to happen, if this was something in my DNA or that I caused it to happen?

I need to know that I'm not going to be talked about in hushed voices by all of you. I should have been surrounded by women all day, right from the start I felt like that, I needed to be in a nest, not in a house on my own with some dude. I'm not saying that you failed me, I'm not I promise, I'm just saying that I stupidly only knew one story. And I wasn't prepared for it. Instead I just got this blanket and a song that no one can bloody remember.

I need to know how it began. And how it ends.

