

BEGINNING

STREETS OF TREES

Call me Isobel. (It's my name.) This is my history. Where shall I begin?



Before the beginning is the void and the void belongs in neither time nor space and is therefore beyond our imagination.



Nothing will come of nothing, unless it's the beginning of the world. This is how it begins, with the word and the word is life. The void is transformed by a gigantic firecracker allowing time to dawn and imagination to begin.

The first nuclei arrive – hydrogen and helium – followed, a few million years later, by their atoms and eventually, millions more years later, the molecules form. Aeons pass.

The clouds of gas in space begin to condense into galaxies and stars, including our own Sun. In 1650, Archbishop James Ussher, in his *Annals of the World*, calculates that God made Heaven and Earth on the evening of Saturday, October 22, 4004 BC. Other people are less specific and date it to some four and a half billion years ago.



Then the trees come. Forests of giant ferns wave in the warm damp swamps of the Carboniferous Era. The first conifers appear and the great coal fields are laid down. Everywhere you look, flies are being trapped in drops of amber – which are the tears of poor Phaeton's sisters, who were turned by grief into black poplars (*populus nigra*). The flowering and the broad-leaved trees make their first appearance and eventually the trees crawl out of the swamps on to the dry land.

Here, where this story takes place (in the grim north), here was once forest, oceans of forest, the great Forest of Lythe. Ancient forest, an impenetrable thicket of Scots pine, birch and aspen, of English elm and wych elm, common hazel, oak and holly, the forest which once covered England and to which, if left alone, it might one day return. The forest has the world to itself for a long time.



Chop. The stone and flint tools signalled the end of the beginning, the beginning of the end. The alchemy of copper and tin made new bronze axes that shaved more trees from the earth. Then came iron (the great destroyer) and the iron axes cut the forest down faster than it could grow back and the iron ploughshares dug up the land that was once forest.

The woodcutters coppiced and pollarded and chopped away at the ash and the beech, the oak, the hornbeam and the tangled thorns. The miners dug and smelted while the charcoal-burners piled their stacks high. Soon you could hardly move in the forest for bodgers and cloggers, hoop-makers and wattle-hurdlers. Wild boars rooted and domestic pigs snuffled, geese clacked and wolves howled and deer were startled at every turning in the path. *Chop!* Trees were transformed into other things – into clogs and winepresses, carts and tools, houses and furniture. The English forests sailed the oceans of the world and found new lands full of wilderness and more forests waiting to be cut down.

But there was a secret mystery at the heart of the heart of the forest. When the forest was cut down, where did the mystery go? Some say there were fairies in the forest – angry, bad-tempered creatures (the unwashed children of Eve), ill-met by moonlight, who loitered with intent on banks of wild thyme listening furiously to the encroaching axes. Where did they go when the forest no longer existed? And what about the wolves? What happened to them? (Just

because you can't see something doesn't mean it isn't there.)



The small village of Lythe emerged from the shrinking forest, a straggle of cottages and a church with a square clocktower. Its inhabitants tramped back and forward with their eggs and capons and occasionally their virtue to Glebelands, the nearest town, only two miles away – a thriving marketplace and a hotbed of glovers and butchers, blacksmiths and vintners, rogues and recusants.

In 1580, or thereabouts, a stranger rode into Lythe, one Francis Fairfax, as dark and swarthy of countenance as a Moor. Francis Fairfax, lately ennobled by the Queen, was in receipt, from the Queen's own hand, of a great swathe of land north of the village, on the edge of what remained of the forest. Here he built himself Fairfax Manor, a modern house of brick and plaster and timbers from his newly owned forest oaks.

This Francis was a soldier and an adventurer. He had even made the great grey ocean crossing and seen the newfoundlands and virgin territories with their three-headed monsters and feathered savages. Some said he was the Queen's own spy, crossing the Channel on her secret business as frequently as others crossed Glebelands Green Moor.

Some also said that he had a beautiful child wife, herself already with child, locked away in the attics of

Fairfax Manor. Others said the woman in the attics was not his child wife but his mad wife. There was even a rumour that his attics were full of dead wives, all of them hanging from butcher's hooks. There were even those who said (this even more unlikely) that he was the Queen's lover and that the great Gloriana had borne him a clandestine child which was being raised in Fairfax Manor. In the attics, naturally.

It is fact, not rumour, that the Queen stayed at Fairfax Manor in the course of escaping an outbreak of plague in London, sometime in the summer of 1582, and was observed admiring the butter-yellow quince and flourishing medlar trees and dining on the results of a splendid early morning deer hunt.

Fairfax Manor was famous for the thrill of its deer chases, the softness of its goose-feather mattresses, the excellence of its kitchens, the ingenuity of its entertainments. Sir Francis became a famous patron of poets and aspiring playwrights. Some say that Shakespeare himself spent time at Fairfax Manor. Keen supporters of this explanation of Shakespeare's famous lost years – of which there are several, mostly mad – point to the evidence of the initials "WS" carved into the bark of the great Lady Oak and still visible to the keen eye to this day. Detractors of this theory point out that another member of the Fairfax household, his son's tutor, a Walter Stukesly, can claim the same initials.

Perhaps Master Stukesly was the author of the magnificent masque (*The Masque of Adonis*) which Sir Francis ordered up for the Queen's entertainment during her

midsummer visit to Lythe. We can imagine the theatricals being performed, using the great forest as a backdrop, the lamps glimmering in the trees, the many mechanical devices used in the telling of the tragic tale, the youthful Adonis dying in the arms of a young boy Venus under the Lady Oak – a young, handsome oak much of an age with Francis Fairfax that once stood at the heart of the heart of the forest and now guarded its entrance.

It was not long after the Queen's departure from Lythe that Francis's wife first appeared, a real one made of flesh and blood and not kept in the attics, but none the less an enigmatic creature whose beginning and end were veiled in mystery. She arrived, they said, at the door of Fairfax Manor one wild, storm-driven night, dressed in neither shoes nor hose nor petticoat, dressed in nothing in fact but her silk-soft skin – yet with not a drop of rain on her, nor one red hair on her head blown out of its place.

She came, she said, from an even grimmer north and her name was Mary (like the dreaded Caledonian queen herself). She did not persist in her nakedness and allowed herself to be clothed in silks and furs and velvets and clasped in jewels by an eager Sir Francis. On her wedding morning Sir Francis presented her with the famous Fairfax jewel – much sought after by metal detectors and historians – well documented in Sir Thomas A'hearne's famous *Travels around England* but not seen for nearly four hundred years. (For the record, a gold lozenge locket, studded with emeralds and pearls and opening to reveal a miniature Dance of Death

believed by some to have been painted by Nicholas Hilliard, in homage to his mentor, Holbein.)

The new Lady Fairfax favoured green – kirtle and petticoats and stomacher, as green as the vert that hides the deer from the hunter. Only her cambric shift was white – this piece of information being offered by the midwife brought in from Glebelands for the arrival of the Fairfax firstborn. Onlyborn. It was, she reported when she had been returned to town, a perfectly normal baby (a boy) but Sir Francis was a madman who insisted that the poor midwife had her eyes bound in every room but the birth-chamber and who swore her to secrecy about what she saw that night. Whatever it was that the poor woman did see was never broadcast for she was conveniently struck by lightning as she raised a tankard of ale to wet the baby's head.

Lady Fairfax, it was reported, was strangely fond of wandering into the forest dressed in her green damasks and silks, her hound Finn her only companion. Sometimes she could be found sitting under the green guardianship of the Lady Oak, singing an unbearably sweet song about her home, like a Ruth amid alien green. More than once, Sir Francis's game steward had frightened himself half to death by mistaking her for a timid hart, bolting away from him in a flash of green. What if one day he were to shoot off an arrow into her fair green breast?

Then she vanished – as instantly and mysteriously as she had once arrived. Sir Francis returned home from a day's hunting with a fine plump doe shot through the

heart and found her gone. A kitchen maid, an ignorant girl, claimed she saw Lady Fairfax disappearing from underneath the Lady Oak, fading away until her green brocade dress was indistinguishable from the surrounding trees. As Lady Fairfax had grown dimmer, the girl reported, she had placed a dreadful curse on the Fairfaxes, past and future, and her monstrous shrieks had echoed in the air long after she herself was invisible. The cook clattered the girl about her head with a porringer for her fanciful notions.

Francis Fairfax fulfilled the requirements of a cursed man – burning to death in his own bed in 1605 along with most of his household. William, his son, was rescued by servants and grew up to be a sickly kind of boy, hanging on to life just long enough to father his likeness.

The Fairfaxes abandoned the charred remains of Fairfax Manor and moved to Glebelands where their fortunes declined. Fairfax Manor crumbled to dust in the air, the fine parkland reverted to nature and within a handful of years you would never have known it had ever been there.

Over the next hundred years the land was parcelled up and sold at auction. An eighteenth-century Fairfax, Thomas, lost the last of the land in the South Sea Bubble and the Fairfaxes were all but forgotten – except for Lady Mary who was occasionally sighted, dressed all in green, disconsolate and gloomy, and occasionally with her head under her arm for good effect.

The forest itself was gradually removed, the last of it taken during the Napoleonic War for fighting ships. By

the time the nineteenth century really got going, all that remained of the once great Forest of Lythe was a large wood known as Boscrambe Woods, thirty miles to the north of Glebelands and – just beyond the boundaries of Lythe – the Lady Oak itself.

By 1840 Glebelands was a great manufacturing town whose engines thrummed and throbbed and whose chimneys smoked dark clouds of uncertain chemicals into the sky over its crowded slum streets. The owner of one of these factories, Samuel Fairfax, philanthropist and manufacturer of Argand gas burners, briefly revived the family fortunes with his mission to illuminate the entire town with gas lamps.

The Fairfaxes were able to buy a large town house with all the trimmings – servants and a coach and accounts in every shop. The Fairfax women wore dresses of French velvet and Nottingham lace and talked nonsense all day long while Samuel Fairfax dreamed of buying back the tract of land where Fairfax Manor once stood and making a country park where the people of Glebelands could clean their sooty lungs and exercise their rickety limbs. He was hoping that this would be his living memorial – *Fairfax Park*, he murmured happily as he looked over possible designs for the massive wrought-iron entrance gates and just as he pointed to a particularly rococo pattern (‘Restoration’) his heart stopped beating and he fell face first on to the pattern book. The park was never built.

Gas lamps were overtaken by electric ones, the Fairfaxes failed to see the new technology coming and grew

slowly poorer until, in 1880, one Joseph Fairfax, grandson to Samuel, realized where the future lay and put the remaining family money into retail – a small grocery shop in a side street. The business gradually prospered, and ten years later 'Fairfax and Son – Licensed Grocers' moved into the High Street.

Joseph Fairfax had one son and no daughters. The son, Leonard, wooed and won a girl called Charlotte Tait, the daughter of the owner of a small enamelware factory. The Taites were of stern Nonconformist stock and Charlotte was not above lending a hand in the shop when required, although she soon fell pregnant with her eldest child, an ugly girl named Madge.

The villagers of Lythe meanwhile waited for Glebelands to crawl across the remaining few fields towards them and swallow them up. While they were waiting a war happened and took three-quarters of the young men of Lythe (three to be precise) and as the war drew to a close no-one cared very much when most of the village, along with the land where Fairfax Manor had stood, was sold to a local builder.

The builder, a man called Maurice Smith, had a vision, the dream of a master-builder – a garden suburb, an estate of modern, comfortable housing for the post-war, post-servant world of small families. Streets of detached and semi-detached houses with neat front gardens and large back gardens where children could play, Father could grow vegetables and roses and Mother could park Baby in his pram and take afternoon tea on

the lawn with her genteel friends. On the land that once housed Sir Francis and his household, Maurice Smith built his streets of houses. Houses in mock-Tudor and pebble-dash stucco, houses with casement windows and porches and tiled vestibules. Houses with three and four bedrooms and the most up-to-date plumbing, porcelain sinks and efficient back boilers; cool, airy larders, and enamelled gas cookers.

Streets with broad pavements and trees, lots of trees – a canopy of trees over the tarmac, a mantle of green around the houses and their happy occupants. Trees that would give pleasure, that could be observed in bud and new leaf, unfurling their green fingers on the streets of houses, raising their sheltering leafy arms over the dwellers within. Different trees for every street – Ash Street, Chestnut Avenue, Holly Tree Lane, Hawthorn Close, Oak Road, Laurel Bank, Rowan Street, Sycamore Street, Willow Road. The forest of trees had become a wilderness of streets.

But at night, in the quiet of the dead time, if you listened carefully, you could imagine the wolves howling.

The Lady Oak grew on, solitary and ancient, in the field behind the dog-leg of Hawthorn Close and Chestnut Avenue. Points of weakness in the tree had been plugged with cement and old iron crutches propped up its weary limbs but in summer its leafy crown was still green and thick enough for a rookery and at dusk the birds flew *caw cawing* into its welcoming branches.

At the end of Hawthorn Close was the master-builder's first house – Arden – the one he built as his

showpiece, on the long-lost foundations of Fairfax Manor. Arden had fine parquet floors and light-oak panelling. It had a craftsman-built oak staircase with acorn finials and its turret follies were capped with round blue Welsh slates, overlapping like a dragon's scales.

The master-builder had intended the house for himself but Leonard Fairfax offered him such a good price that he couldn't bring himself to refuse. And so the Fairfax family returned, unwittingly, to its ancestral abode.



Charlotte Fairfax had given birth (difficult though it was to imagine this) to two more children after Madge, in order – Vinny (Lavinia) and Gordon ('my baby!'). Gordon was much younger, an afterthought ('my surprise!'). When they moved into Arden, Madge had already left to marry an adulterous bank clerk and moved to Mirfield and Vinny was a grown woman of twenty, but Gordon was still a little boy. Gordon had introduced Charlotte to a new emotion. At night she would creep into his new little room under the eaves and gaze at his sleeping face in the soft halo of the nightlight and surprise herself with the overwhelming love she felt for him.

But time has already begun to fly, soon Eliza will come and ruin everything. Eliza will be my mother. I am Isobel Fairfax, I am the alpha and omega of narrators (I am omniscient) and I know the beginning and the end. The beginning is the word and the end is silence. And in between are all the stories. This is one of mine.