

FRESH APPLES

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When you get oil from a locomotive engine all over the arse of your best blue jeans, it looks like shit, black and sticky. I can see it's black, even in the dark. I stand on the sty and try to brush it away with the back of my hand, bent awkward over the fence, but it sticks to my skin, and then there's nowhere to wipe my hands. Laugh, they would, Rhys Davies and Kristian if they could see me now. Don't know why I wore my best stuff. 'Wear clean knickers,' my mother'd say, 'in case you have an accident.' She'd say *knickers* even when she meant pants. She's a feminist, see. But it's not like anyone would notice if I was wearing pants or not. Johnny Mental from up the street, he said when he was at school the police would pay him at the end of the day to look for bits of fingers and bits of intestines here, before he went home for tea. If it can do that, if it can slice your tubes like green beans, who's going to notice if you had skid marks in your kecks? I can still hear the train chugging away, or perhaps it's my imagination. Over in the town I can hear drunk people singing but closer, I can hear cicadas – that noise you think only exists in American films to show you that something horrific is about to happen – it's real. It's hot too. Even in the night it's still hot and I'm panting like a dog. I'm sure it's this weather that's making me fucking crazy. I'm alive anyway; I can feel my blood pumping so it's all been a waste of time. Forget it now, that's the thing to do. Oh, you

want to know about it, of course you do. Nosy bastard you are. Well I'll tell you and then I'll forget it, and you can forget it too. And just remember this: I'm not proud of it. Let's get that straight from the outset. The whole thing is a bloody encumbrance. (New word that, encumbrance. I found it in my father's things this morning.)

Thursday night it started, but the summer has been going on forever, for years it seems like, the sun visors down on the cafés and fruiterer's in town, the smell of barbecued food wafting on the air, and never going away. And the smell of mountain fires, of timber crumbling and being swallowed by a rolling wave of orange flame. On the Bwlch we were, at the entrance of the forestry. There used to be a climbing frame and a set of swings made from the logs from the trees. It's gone now but we still go there, us and the car and van shaggers. Sitting on a picnic table with my legs hanging over the edge so I could see down Holly's top when she leaned forward on the bench, her coffee-colour skin going into two perfect, hard spheres, like snooker balls, or drawer knobs, poking the cartoon on her T-shirt out at either side. She was drinking blackcurrant, the plastic bottle to her mouth, the purple liquid inside it swishing back and fore. I asked her for some. I wouldn't normally – I'm shy, I'd lose my tongue, but my mouth was dry and scratchy from the sun. Yes, she said, but when I gave the bottle back she wiped the rim on the hem of her skirt like I had AIDS. Kristian and Rhys Davies John Davies, they had handfuls of stone chippings, throwing them at Escorts when they went past, their techno music jumping. Jealous they are, of the cars and the stereos but fuck that dance music, it's Metallica for me. (Don't tell them that.) It's his real name by the way, Rhys Davies John Davies, the first part after some gay Welsh poet, the second after his armed-robber father, shacked up in Swansea prison.

Every time something passed us, a lorry or a motorbike, it grated on the cattle grid in the road. That's how Kristian came up with the cow tipping idea. Only we couldn't go cow

tipping because you can only tip cows when they're sleeping, in the middle of the night and it'd take ten of us to move one, so Holly had to go one better.

'Let's go and start a fire!' she said.

'Don't be stupid,' I said. 'We should be proud of this mountain, Hol. They haven't got mountains like this in England. And you'll kill all the nature.'

'Nature!?' she said. She rolled her eyes at Jaime and Angharad. 'It's not the fuckin' Amazonian rain forest, Matt,' she said. She can be a cow when she wants, see. 'C'mon girls,' she said and she flicked her curly hair out of her face. 'When there's a fire, what else is there?'

'A fire engine?' Jaime said.

'Exactly. Firemen. Proper men!' And she started up off into the trees, shaking her tiny denim arse at us. The girls followed her and then the boys followed the girls. So that just left me. And Sarah.

Sarah, Jaime's cerebral palsy kid sister. She's not abnormal or ugly, just a little bit fat, and she rocks back and fore slightly, and she has a spasm in her hand that makes her look like she's doing something sexual to herself all the time. But she's brighter than Jaime gives her credit for, even when she's got that big, green chewing gum bubble coming out of her mouth and hiding her whole face. I just never knew what to say to her – how to start a conversation. I smiled at her clumsily and tried to giggle at the silence. We stayed like that, her sitting on her hands, chewing her gum loudly so I could hear her saliva swish around in her mouth, until a fireman came with thick, black stubble over his face, fanning the burning ferns out with a giant fly squat because he couldn't get his engine up onto the mountain.

'Come and get me you sexy fucker,' Holly was shouting at him, hiding her face behind a tree. That's when I went home.

On Friday morning, on the portable TV in the kitchen there was an appeal from Rhymney Valley Fire Service for kids to stop setting fire to the mountains.

‘Nine times out of ten it’s arson,’ the man’s voice boomed. ‘It’s children with matches.’ The volume’s broke, see, either it has to be on full, or it has to be on mute.

‘That’s kids, is it?’ my mother said, hanging over the draining board, a red gingham cloth stuffed into a tall, transparent cylinder. ‘I always thought it was bits of glass left in the ground starting it. It can happen like that when it’s hot can’t it?’ My father ignored her, standing at arm’s length from the frying pan, turning sausages over with his chef’s tongs. She gave up pushing the cloth down into the glass and washed the bubbles out under the cold tap. I watched the rest of the announcement, spooning Coco Pops into my mouth, the milk around them yellowy and sweet.

‘The mountains are tinder-dry,’ the man said, ‘so please don’t go near them with matches. While we’re attending to an arson attack there could be a serious house fire in the town.’ I remembered the look of helplessness on the fireman’s face while he sweated over the ferns, Holly asking him to fuck her. He knew that as soon as he’d gone we’d start it again so he’d have to come back, sweating again. I opened one of the blue cover English exercise books my father was marking at the kitchen table before he got up to cook breakfast, and I read some kid’s modern version of *Hamlet*. Crap it was, but I found two new words, *psychodrama* and *necromancy*.

Later, at Rhys Davies’ house, his mother was still cleaning spew off plastic beer-garden tables, and his father was still in jail, so Kristian and Rhys, they were drinking a box of cheap red wine.

‘Matt,’ Kristian said, dropping the PlayStation pad on the carpet. ‘Holly got her tits out last night.’

‘No she fuckin’ didn’t,’ I said.

‘She fuckin’ did and you missed it,’ he said.

‘No she didn’t,’ Rhys said.

They offered me the wine but I didn’t want it. I went to the kitchen and scoured it for Mrs Davies’ chocolate. She

had a shitload hidden from Rhys' sister in Mr Davies' old lunch box, under the basket-weave cutlery tray.

'I wouldn't poke 'er anyway,' Kristian was saying when I went back. 'She's a snobby bitch. She's the only form five girl I haven't poked and I don't want to poke 'er. She's frigid, inshee?'

I didn't know what frigid meant but I made a note in my head to find out and another one to remember to poke some girl before people started to think I was gay.

'Imagine all the new girls when we start tech!' Kristian said. We were starting tech in a month. Kristian wanted to be a plumber. His father told him, with some prison guard standing nearby, that he'd always have money if he was a plumber. Strange, because Mr Davies was a plumber but he tried to rob an all-night garage with a stick in a black bag. Kristian and me, we were doing a bricklaying NVQ because the careers teacher said it was a good course.

'The girls from the church school'll be starting the same time and none of them 'ave got pinhole pussies,' Kristian said. 'Johnny Mental told me, they're all slags.'

I was leaning out of the window watching the elderly woman next door feeding lettuce to her tortoise. It was still really hot but she was wearing a cream-colour Aran cardigan. I was wondering if there was a job somewhere which involved collecting words to put into a dictionary or something, or a course which taught you to play drums like Tommy Lee so I could throw sticks into the air after a roll and catch them in my teeth because I didn't find bricks and girls with big fannies that exciting. I unwrapped the chocolate but it had already melted.

That night we were on the mountain again, standing on the roof of the old brick caretaker's hut, looking down into town at the small groups of women walking like matchstick people pubs in their sunburn, their too-tight trousers and gold strap sandals, the men in blue jeans and ironed shirts. Holly, Angharad and Jaime, they came up via the new road

because they had Holly's collie dog on a lead. There's a farm across the road, see, with a sheepdog in the field, a white one with black patches around its eyes like a canine panda. It barks at the sight of another dog and keeps barking until the farmer comes over and tells us to fuck off before he shoots us. He thinks anyone under the age of eighteen is committing some heinous crime just by breathing. So we missed looking down into Holly's cheesecloth blouse as she passed underneath us. Sarah was five minutes behind them, wobbling over the banking, her thick white shins shining, her short yellow hair bouncing on her fat, pink head. There was some kind of in joke going on with Kristian and Rhys and Angharad and Holly and Jaime. They all seemed to be winking at one another, or talking to one another but with no words coming out of their mouths. I thought I caught Kristian doing a wanker signal behind my back but I passed it off as a hallucination, with the sun being so fucking hot. Then the dog began to cough.

'Holly, there's something wrong with your dog,' I said.

'I think it's dying.'

'Take her to the dam,' Holly said, because she thinks I'm some kind of PA, put on the planet to look after her. I took the dog to the dam, watched it lap up the slimy water and when I came back everyone had gone. You get used to that when you're a teacher's son, your friends disappearing to smoke fags or sniff glue and aerosol canisters without you.

It had been an hour before I thought of something to say to Sarah and even then I didn't say anything. She blew a great big bubble; I saw it growing from the corner of my eye where I was sitting next to her on the grass. I put my finger straight up to her face and burst it. For a second everything smelt like fresh apples. That's what made me want to kiss her. I just pinned her to the ground and kissed her, my eyes wide open, her tiny blue eyes smiling up at me. Inside her mouth the chewing gum tasted more like cider. I found her tits under a thick vest but there was no shape to them. Her whole chest

was like an old continental quilt, all soft and lumpy under its duvet cover. I kept on kissing her, my front teeth bashing against hers. She didn't flex a muscle, just lay there looking amused by me. When I had her bush in my hand, her pubes rough and scratchy, that's when I noticed the dog looking at me funny, its brown eyes staring down its long snout. I tidied Sarah's clothes up the best I could and ran away sniffing my fingers and I thought that was the end of it.

On Saturday morning – the next day – Kristian, Rhys Davies and me, we were sitting on the pavement in the street flipping two and five pence coins. It's the main thoroughfare, see, for the town. When it's sunny we just sit there watching women going shopping in cotton dresses, pushing prams with big, bald babies inside. Our street was built during the coal boom, my father said, a terrace with a row of small houses for the miners and their families on our side, and a row of bigger ones with front gardens opposite for the mine managers and supervisors. Johnny Mental was sitting on his porch wearing sunglasses, drinking lager, his teeth orange and wonky. Someone was painting their front door a few yards away, with a portable radio playing soul music, Diana Ross or some shit. A big burgundy Vauxhall Cavalier came around the corner, real slow like an old man on a hill, until it stopped next to us and I saw Jaime in the back looking worried, her eyes tiny and sinking back into her head. Her father got out, a tall broad man who looked like Tom Baker in *Doctor Who*, and he picked Kristian up by the collar of his best Kangol T-shirt because that's who he was closest to.

'You raped my daughter, you little prick,' he said. My stomach did a somersault inside me and got all twisted up. I looked at Jaime through the smoked glass of the car but she had the back of her head to me, looking at Johnny Mental. He'd stood up and was watching us; the lager can tilted in mid air towards his chin. Jaime's father punched Kristian in the midriff, cleverly so that none of us could see it, but we all knew it. 'Look at you – you dirty fuckin' paedophile,' he

said to Rhys Davies and he spat on the pavement next to his feet. ‘Won’t be long until you’re eating breakfast with your father, will it?’ he said, but he didn’t touch him. He picked me up by my ears, *by my ears*. My heart stopped beating then and my blood drained away. I don’t know where it went but I felt it go. ‘Was it you?’ he said, and he knocked the back of my head against the brick wall of the house. ‘Did you rape my daughter, you sick little cunt?’ I could feel myself disappearing in his grasp when I heard Jaime shouting, ‘C’mon. C’mon Dad, get in the car.’ I heard the door slam behind him but it didn’t sound anything like relief.

‘You’ve gone all fuckin’ white,’ Rhys said, looking down at me when the burgundy car had been out of the street for a good two minutes.

‘So have you,’ I said, even though I couldn’t see him properly. All I could really see was the bright yellow light of the sun but I imagined Johnny Mental smirking at me from across the road. I was thinking that if a stick in a bag was actually armed robbery then just having a cock could make a kiss and a crap fumble into a rape. I tried to look as confused as Kristian and Rhys were, as we all looked at each other, pale-skinned and speechless, and I tried to drift back to myself.

I never really got there. My parents went to the town hall that night to watch a play about an old writer dying of the consumption. I went walking. I walked through the comprehensive school, even though I thought I’d done that for the last time after my exams three months ago. I didn’t have the energy to lift my feet but at the same time they seemed to lift all by themselves. Over the running track I kept thinking about Sarah. I tried not to. I tried to think about words but the only ones which came were the ones that came out of Tom Baker’s mouth with a spray of bitter saliva: *sick* and *paedophile* and *rape*. And underneath them I could see Sarah on the grass, smiling at me, her skirt hitched up her fat legs. There was no way it was rape or even molestation,

she was fucking smiling at me, and she's fourteen, not a child. I'm not a paedophile. Jaime's sixteen and she's sucked the whole village's dick – that's what I told myself. But the longer I looked at the picture the more her smile turned into a frown, like looking at the Mona Lisa too long, and she was starting to shake, her arms flailing on the ends of her wrists. Then I was here, on the railway track, lying down, the rails cutting into my hamstrings and the small of my back. I wasn't sure if I wanted to die. No, I didn't want to die. Not forever anyway, only until it was over, until it was all forgotten. I remembered Geography classes in school, where the teacher would talk about physics instead because he was a physics teacher really and we'd get bored and stare down here to the track and talk about how many people had died here. Kristian said there was a woman who tied herself in a black bag and rolled onto the track so that when the train came she wouldn't be able to get up and run. I didn't need to do that. I stayed perfectly still. Didn't even slap the gnats biting my face. When the train came, the clacketyclack rhythm it made froze me to the spot. I just closed my eyes. When I opened them again the train had gone, gone right past me on the opposite track and splashed my legs with black oil. I don't know now if I'm brave or just stupid. It isn't easy to be sixteen, see, and it isn't that easy to die.