

## The Woods

“Tits or arse?”

“What?”

“Tits or arse? What do you look for?”

“On what?”

Si turns his head and swings the rifle in my direction.

“Girls. Obviously.” He punctuates each word with a thrust of the gun.

“I don’t know. Both? Either?”

“Twat. What about you?”

He glances at Tom, but keeps the gun pointing at me.

“Um tits, I suppose.”

The breeze picks up and three empty beer cans topple off the remains of a burnt-out motorbike.

The one left standing, bleached and torn through with holes, gently rocks back and forth like the guy I see outside the betting shop.

“You suppose? Don’t you think you should know? I’m an arse man.”

*You're an asshole.*

A cocky bastard, but recently Si's become a right prick. His parent's split up last year and Tom reckons that's what's done it. We barely saw him over the summer, only coming to the woods a couple of times over the break. I've seen less of him this term too. Different classes and teams in school, different excuses and interests out. He'd come up to me at lunch today and suggested that the three of us meet up. Like old times, he'd said.

Tom coughs.

"Yeah, tits. Definitely tits."

Si unlocks the air rifle and draws the barrel down towards the wooden stock until it clicks. He rests the gun on the inside of his elbow and allows the barrel to hang loose, gently swinging like a thin black arm.

"So who in school does it for you, then? You know, in that department."

As Tom says this, he looks down at the ground, embarrassed, head bobbing like he's listening to music. His blonde hair falls over his face, which he's grown out to hide the spots that cover his cheeks like exploding freckles. He'll just tell you it's because he wants to look like Kurt Cobaine. All across 'year 5', everyone seems to be getting together with someone, it feels like half the class are going out. I'm not even sure if I've got the guts to give Liz Morris the mixtape I've made, let alone ask her out.

"Who does it for me? Well, I've already done Susie Locke. She was all tits."

*Susie Locke? That's bollocks, she's in the year above and doesn't even know Si's name.*

I can't get Liz out of my head, I've created this parallel world in my mind where we are a thing, which makes my inability to do anything a little easier. But also harder.

"I've moved on. I'm working on Liz Morris. Have you seen her arse?"

I'm not looking in Si's direction, but I sense he's staring at me. I can hear the sneer in his words, causing them to crackle in my ears. My cheeks are hot, a swell of inadequacy in the face of his needle-like questions.

"You must have seen her arse. You live on the same road, right?"

"Yeah, Nick's known Liz for years, haven't you Nick? Aren't your mum and dad friends with her mum and dad?" Tom falls over his words, like a drunk man throwing darts.

I glance at Tom. He's working at a spot on his neck, nails pressing deep into red puckered skin, the whitehead remaining resolutely intact. He's always so desperate to please, like a dog humping Si's leg. I don't know why he does it, he gets treated like shit but keeps going back. He and I have become closer since Oli left last year, I like him, but I can't help thinking we're probably only friends because of Si.

The sun's bright and it's still warm despite it being late afternoon. In the last couple of weeks Si's started wearing his hair slicked back, too much gel, and the light catches it. He used to have curtains, little half-moons, hairspray crisp. One of the kids in the year above had called him out on the first day back at school for looking like a twat. Probably Susie Locke's boyfriend. The next day Si's hair was gelled and he'd keep it that way since.

Liz just got a job a Saturday job at HMV. And a nose ring. She somehow gets away with wearing it to school. I like that. I got sent home last year for wearing black trainers.

“Yeah, she lives on my road.” I reply.

“And her arse?” Si asks his question mid-drag of his cigarette, which he holds loosely between his lips. Only his eyes, darting between Tom and I, betray his cool and the time he’s spent in front of a mirror.

“Yes, that’s right, her arse lives with her on my road.”

I watch a lump of ash fall on Si’s spanking white Converse trainers.

Three crows land on a tall tree to our right, hopping from branch to branch, they jostle one another for position. Around us the overgrown nettles are smoking, although GCSE biology tells me it’s the pollen wafting gently into the air, pushed up by the movement of the large hairy leaves in the breeze. I used to get stung all the time, legs covered in giant goose pimples, the initial pain slowly fizzling into a tingly itch right into bedtime.

“Oh, funny. So in that case, I imagine you’ve had the opportunity get a look at that splendid arse of hers. Seeing as both her and her arse live on your road.” His eyes are half-closed, like a wannabe stoner, as he allows smoke to escape his lips and rise up over his face.

*Do girls fall for this? He’s just another fifteen-year-old standing around in a shit school uniform talking bollocks.*

“Yeah, I’ve seen her arse. Ok? I’ve seen her arse whilst it, I mean she, has been walking down the street. In school. I don’t pay it a lot of attention.”

*I don't want to be talking about Liz with Si.*

Tom's right, I've known Liz since I was a kid, but over the last couple of years we've done less together as families. Liz and I sometimes walk in together, we talk, but once we get to school we drift into different groups. I'd decided to give her the mixtape this morning, but then left the house too late and missed her. I don't think she has a boyfriend. I'm still not sure if the songs are right or if she'll like them.

*The Charlatans, Just Lookin'*

"Ah look, so you've noticed. Bless. Well, I wouldn't want to get in the way of true love." Si takes a final drag. "But you let me know if you want me to step in at any point."

He flicks the butt towards the remaining can, but it falls way short; there's a burst of sparks as it hits the earth and the tip glows briefly before it goes out.

'Prick.'

I meant to keep it in my head, but my lips involuntarily shape the words. Barely a whisper, but Si notices, frowns and then breaks into something like a smile. A mouth full of large white teeth, like milk bottles on the front step. We're caught; neither of us move until Tom breaks the silence, a role he's grown into since Oli left.

"So Si, where's the weirdest place you've done it?"

I step away to get out of earshot. I can hear the sound of the main road that runs up past the woods and on towards the train station. Si always has to be in control. How long before we decide

this thing we all have isn't worth keeping? What will that mean for Tom and I? As hard as I try to walk away from Si, from them, we seem to fall back. Next year is college.

*The Farm, All Together Now*

The sound of traffic in the near distance and the wind in the trees wash their words into distortion, like my brother's white noise tapes at bedtime. I look around. We've been coming here for years, this patch of ground seemingly forgotten by anyone who would care. Ever since we were trusted to leave our houses alone to meet friends. Hide and seek, It, building camps, riding bikes, setting off fireworks, smoking and shooting air guns. A sort of graph of our childhood, different stages and phases. My parent's know about it, but I've never been here with them and I've never heard them talk about it. The place doesn't have a name, or at least not one anybody knows. We've always called it 'The Woods'. So I suppose that's its name.

It's got smaller every year. It used to feel massive. It's basically a triangle; the 'hypotenuse' is the railway line, the 'adjacent' is a row of garages and then the 'opposite' is the London Road. We come in at the 'right angle', where the chainlink fence has been pulled away at the corner of the garages. It's hard to say how big it is, maybe half a football pitch? Trees, I don't know what kinds, those ones with the helicopter seeds, but no conkers. Lots of brambles, nettles and other sorts of plants. Paths run all over the place like veins. Good bit of rubbish. People come and drink cans and little bottles of booze at night. We've never been in the woods after dark, but we find the empties in the morning. Sometimes they have fires because we find burnt circles on the ground with bits of old furniture and mattress springs.

Last year, we found a whole pile of *Daily Sports* hidden behind a tree. We tried to look at the pictures, but the pages were a bit mouldy and stuck together. Si wanted to take them home, I think we all did, but we ended up setting light to them instead. The pages went right up. I got scared the fire brigade would come, but no one did. We stank of smoke for a couple of days after. The funny thing

is, me, Tom, Si and Oli - before his dad got the job with the Channel Tunnel in Kent - have been coming to the woods for six or seven years, but we never see other kids. There's lots who live on our roads, but none of the young ones turn up to do the stuff we were doing when we first came here. It's weird, but it's always felt like it's our place. Our secret.

*Saint Etienne, Only Love Can Break Your Heart*

I hear the sound of the rifle go off, the *pphhuuttt* of compressed air and the twang of the lead pellet hitting the petrol tank of the motorbike. I turn and sense something pass my ear, a vibration in the air, as the ricochet misses me by millimetres. I don't have time to respond, but see that Si is doubled over in laughter and Tom is giggling to one side.

"Twats. You did that deliberately."

Unlikely, but still, it could've taken my eye out. I walk over to Si, who's re-cocking and loading the rifle, and take it out of his hands.

"My go!" says Tom.

"Fuck off Tom. You and Si have been hogging it ever since we arrived."

I lift the butt of the rifle into my shoulder, adjust my hand on the grip and curl my finger around the trigger. I feel bad for telling Tom to 'fuck off', it just came out wrong.

*Blur, There's No Other Way*

I follow the outline of the bike through the sight until the beer can comes into view. Lining it up carefully, aware of my breath, I gently squeeze the trigger. The rifle jolts, the barrel jerks up, as the can flips up into the air, spins backwards and is sent skittering across the ground.

“That’s how you do it, wankers.”

It feels good to get it first time. Si points at the cans lying on the ground and gives Tom a kick in the arse.

“Chop, chop Tom. I need to get home early tonight.”

As Si says this, he notices the ash on his trainer and leans over to brush it off. I watch with some satisfaction as all he manages to do is smear it across the top of his shoe with his blunt nail-bitten fingers.

He straightens and sees me looking.

“What’s so fucking funny? I only just got these.”

I ignore him. Tom returns from propping the cans up on the motorbike.

“Nice one Tom. Do you want to go next?”

“No, I’m going next. It’s my gun and like I said, I’ve things to do. Not like you losers.”

Si snatches the rifle from me and drops it on a battered filing cabinet that sits off to one side. The sound is louder than any of us expect and it causes the three crows rise up from the tree in unison, an echo of grating caws, wings beating against the sky. Two of the crows fly off and out of sight,

but one wheels back around and lands on a tall wooden pole just beyond the bike. It settles itself before holding still, looking at us. We stare back. We seem to take it in turns to breathe.

*Stone Roses, Fools Gold*

The air gun lies uncocked on the cabinet, the barrel angled away from the wooden stock like a broken leg. Next to it, the tin of lead pellets lies open with a few scattered in the upturned lid. The shadows are warm, dust and insects seem to hang motionless in the air, backlit by the sun. The woods stretch out before us. The bird hasn't moved, a tear in the fabric of the blue sky. It's jet black feathers appear slick, like a shiny piece of coal, and I wonder if I'd be able to see my reflection on it's wing.

*Inspiral Carpets, This is How It Feels*

Si moves first, reaching for the rifle. The wind picks up and the bird moves it's head a fraction.

We'd all gone to the same nursery. Same primary school. Now at the same secondary. It was a given that we'd be friends. Thrown in together. Proximity and convenience. We'd seemed to like the same things, viewed the world in the same way and the fun had come easily as it does for kids. It's changed slowly. We've gone along with it for a while, but we know it's happening. We're growing further apart and our differences now seem to shout loudest.

*Pulp, Do You Remember the First Time*

*I wonder if she'll think its about sex? It's not, I don't think.*

My parent's will have a field day if I start going out with Liz. I can see it now, 'we knew it would happen' from Mum and 'I didn't think you'd ever get around to it' from Dad. A million questions. Thinking about it isn't helping. But nor is the fact Si's twigged.

*Ppphhuutttt.*

I look up. The four cans are all still standing. Si, with a fresh cigarette jammed into the corner of his mouth, is hurriedly reloading. He fires and misses again.

"Fuck. It's the wind!" He says to no one and everyone.

"Have another go Si." Says Tom. "You'll get one."

"Shut up Tom."

Si's voice is distorted by the fag in his mouth, but it's higher than normal, threatening. I smile at Tom.

"Yeah, no pressure Si. Would you like to move closer?" I goad, talking to a child.

*Ppphhhuutttttt.* Miss.

The laughter comes out of my nose. In one movement, Si draws the barrel down, the spring resists and strains until it's set and the mechanism becomes loose. Rolling a shuttlecock-shaped small lump of lead between his thumb and forefinger, he brings it up to the chamber of the barrel and places it so that it sits flush.

"What are you going to do now?" I ask. "Third time lucky?"

Si looks at me, draws his thumb across the chamber and snaps the barrel shut. The cigarette in his mouth holds a body of ash at its diminished tip; it curves precariously but holds. He leans back and stares at the bird. Moments later, he thrusts his arms out, elbows at full extension, before he coils them back and readies himself. His face is obscured by the wooden stock.

“What are you doing Si?” I feel an uneasy wave move up my legs. Like I’m standing on the ferry to France with my mum and dad earlier in the summer.

“What are we doing shooting cans like a bunch of kids? I want a challenge. I’m gonna to shoot this blackbird”. His voice sounds different, the words come out in jolts.

“It’s a crow.” I’m not trying to be a cock, it’s all I can think of to say.

“Ok, I’m going to shoot this crow.” Si calmly replies.

Tom coughs and hops from one foot to the other. I can see that he wants to say something, but he can’t find the words. Fear and excitement leave him mute. I too feel my tongue catch.

“Why are you going to do this? What’s the point?” I ask, trying to keep my voice level. I’m smiling, like when mum told me about gran dying. I can’t seem to control my face.

“Because I can.”

I think about walking away. I think about pulling the gun out of his hands. But I stay where I am and watch. I tap the cassette case in my pocket.

*What would I do if Liz was here? Would I stop him?*

But she isn't. And I don't. The crow is still. I can feel time passing, moving in and around us like water. I see Si breathing heavily and think about him as a ten-year-old at the cricket club. Catching practice. Ball hit hard and high, name called out, he runs from the group, positions himself under the ball as it comes down, I imagine the sting of it on palms as he brings it into his chest. Fearless. Always desperate for his name to be called, while I sheltered behind the taller kids.

Somewhere beyond the trees a car backfires, but the noise is muffled, held under a giant pillow. We wait. The moment loses its urgency, the tension cracks and softens. Some time passes before Si drops his arms and walks over to me.

"Can't be bothered with the bird. You think you're so good, see if you can hit one of those cans in this wind."

Si thrusts the rifle at me. I take it and walk around the cabinet, lining myself up with the motorbike. I place the first can in the sight. A slight breeze blows across my left cheek. I'm aware of my breathing, the rise and fall of my chest. At the bottom of a breath, I pull the trigger and send the can tumbling to the ground. I can hear a faint whistle from Tom and feel the presence of Si behind me. Ignoring them both, I reload the rifle and take aim at the second can.

*I'll pop around Liz's house on my way home. Drop off the tape. Ask her out. Maybe. Definitely the tape.*

"So, this Liz Tranter."

Si's voice is close, almost a whisper in my ear. I try and block him out. The top half of the can sits perfectly in the foresight of the rifle, the barrel gently bobs up and down.

“She’s fit. Very fit. Just my type. Don’t you think?”

I don’t answer, there’s nothing for me to say. I wait.

“You know she let me touch her tits last week. Under her bra. I’m seeing her again tonight and I reckon she’s going to let me go all the way.”

Si’s voice is like warm honey, it pours into my ears and coats my brain.

“You’re full of shit.” I reply.

“Am I? She’s a nice girl. I even met her mum, Patricia isn’t it? She’s not bad herself.”

I pause and turn to face him, swinging the rifle down towards the ground. He’s looking at me, smiling. I step towards him. As I do so, I notice a flicker of movement around his mouth, it’s there one second and gone the next. I stop. My dad would call it ‘flinching’.

“Leave it Si. Leave it.”

His smile stutters like a stuck drawer but is soon fixed. His eyes are wide and wet.

I turn back to the motorbike.

*He’s just trying to wind me up. One more can.*

I can hear Si moving around behind me, his feet kicking up the dirt like a bull.

“I’d thought about letting you have her, but you’d just fuck it up.” He says.

Sweat pricks my lower back. I blink once, twice.

*One can.*

“Why do you think I want to leave early? I told her I can get tickets to see that new band she’s been going on about, Blur. They’re shite, but worth it if they can get me in her pants.”

My palms feel wet against the wood of the rifle and my stomach balls up like a fist. I lift my cheek.

“You’re a fucking prick.”

My voice is more breath than words. I hear him laugh and smack his lips in satisfaction.

“You can have her when I’ve finished.”

His words come out slow, they momentarily hang in the air before they come clattering over me like football studs on tile.

I pivot my shoulders up and to the right. I pull the crow into the sight of the gun and draw my finger back across the trigger. The loud expulsion of air is followed by an unnatural and unexpected sound. A tennis racquet slapping a mattress. The noise fills my ears and lodges itself deep inside my head. The bird flails, tries to take flight, stutters and then slowly falls from the pole, like thick black paint running down a wall. My stomach pitches to the floor and I know in this moment that I will never come back to the woods. I watch as it collapses, claws, craws, coughs. Still. I want to rewind. I want to run over, lift it gently in my hands and thrust it into the air and back to life. To hear the beat of it's wings and watch until it's just a speck. Far away. Gone.

I've a metallic taste in my mouth. I spit into the dirt. Turning around, Tom has his hands in his hair. He's looking across at the bird, crumpled in the dust like a pair of black jeans on a bedroom floor.

He looks at me.

“What the fuck you do that for, Nick?”

I ignore him. Si has stepped back, into shadow, face blank. He isn't looking at the bird, but at me. I walk towards him and he cranes his neck to look up. His school uniform seems to hang off him, giving away his mum's ambition that it will last him the year. I throw the rifle onto the ground in front of him. I stand there, a quiet heave rises in my throat. I swallow. And again. The feeling subsides, but I don't trust my voice to speak. In that moment, I'm reminded of my eleven-year-old self, fighting and crying in the playground one week into the first term of school. There's none of that now. I walk over to the cabinet and pick up the open tin of pellets. I pour them into my hand and throw them into the undergrowth, they scatter and give away all that lies out of view.

*Time to go.*

I pass Tom, stop, and briefly place my hand on his shoulder, but he keeps his eyes on the ground.

“See you later Nick.” He says.

“Where the fuck are you going? You owe me money for those pellets, you knob.”

I ignore Si and turn my back on them both. The sun is low and it casts deep shadows across the ground where I walk. A train passes and it seems louder than normal. As I step through the fence, I feel the edge of the cassette case in my pocket bite into my thigh. Two crows fly overhead and are gone.