

June and Lucky

June sat down to her bowl of granola and turned to Lucky, who was stood up in the middle of the kitchen like a great log - and said to him, crunching diligently, 'that film last night ... I liked how in parts it was almost like a play... that really got me you know'.

'Hmm, sure.' Lucky portioned his response, whilst pondering why the toast hadn't come up anywhere near brown enough, before realising the dial had been turned right down.

June and Lucky could carry on with just one solitary conversation like this for a whole day. Neither of them were ever likely to be going out anywhere special. So there was never much hurry.

At this time of the year June liked to spend the days in the garden, pottering about, finding things to deadhead - and this morning was no different. On days like this Lucky would sit at the back in a deckchair, nestled in amongst the runner beans, holding a book in one hand and a can of coke in the other, gently watching June neaten up their existence.

Today, just as he was about settled, he hesitated a little and stretched his back out of the hessian grab of the chair - as if spotting one of the rarer birds circling overhead;

'How do you mean?'

He then waited on his question as that old grey head turned towards him - away from the blackberries which had been steadfastly darkening her palms.

'Sorry?' she said.

Lucky chewed his lip a little.

'How do you mean like a play?'

June wiped her forehead with the back of a slender forearm, then stabbed the fork out in front, leaning in to face him.

'Pfff ... Hot! I mean how some bits of it seemed staged and some bits were really real.'

Lucky watched her handsome face wriggle a bit.

She continued.

'Ok, for example I loved it when he got up to sing, in front of that whole family, who didn't even know him and didn't even understand a word he had been saying - how frail and old he looked, but still how perfect it all was, like he'd been rehearsing for that moment his whole life.'

Lucky sipped his coke, kicked his flip flops off and stretched his brown legs out into the air. Finally he let out a contented yawn. June observed all this from the position of her fork, already knowing the ending well before he got to the - pulling of his hat down over his face - part. Then she turned back to her day and plucked that heavy implement from the lawn, inhaling its spell of mud.

Later, once the sun had given the main parts of its account, Lucky went inside to cook. He decided to fry up the fish for dinner - he had his vegetables cut ready and the rice was done - he took another swig from a can of beer and scattered some parts of this culinary scheme into the hot pan. Soon the meaningful smell of butter and garlic bought June out of the garden and along into the kitchen. Her loamy scent brought a kind of pregnancy to the cool tiles and tungsten glow of the room. She watched Lucky cook and ran her hand briefly over the tight curls on the back of his head.

'Even those bits in the bar, everything there seemed much more scripted, and loud, you know.... In your face. But it still worked. Don't you think?'

Lucky finished his can and walked to the fridge before answering her.

'yeah, I do. I really do. Have we run out of beer?'

Tired and swollen they went to bed just after it got dark, one after the other, like two drops of condensation. As the TV soothed their aches Lucky rolled over in the bed, draping his old arm over June's chest. He pressed his teeth into the top of her shoulder and mumbled.

'I'm glad he didn't die. At the end of the film. It would have been so easy to let him die. So obvious. You know... triumphant. Life's just not like that.'

June curled over into her favourite position.

'It sure isn't'.

New Bradwell

It was a hot, stuffy afternoon and the few trees on the street laid down their shadows in deference to it.

The street was an unremarkable one – with all the usual allocations. A place full of its people and their particular problems. But, to the stranger it could easily look empty, just like so many of its type. It had a low block of housing on the one side and a meagre run of shops on the other.

Crucially the road through was straight and short.

On days like this the infirm and the out of work stood by their open windows to watch the young playing in the grass below. Those of them considerate to small windfalls took on the role of celebrant on such afternoons - offering words to each other like damp breaths of restoration. Meanwhile, across the road, the small businesses sold their wares without much

fuss, attracting the familiar faces with ease - as those residents only slipped gladly from their boredoms to the offer of quick answers.

Like any day the hours went by without a hitch and over the two sides of the street small meanings were told.

Jack sat facing the Hairdresser's mirror. He squeezed his hands tightly behind his knees as the clippers pressed up against his temple. The machine was quickly ridding his scalp of hair, buzzing, in what seemed to him like self-satisfaction. He said nothing. What it left was shockingly different from the tan of his neck. It had taken him all summer for his skin to apprentice to that good colour - cracking and hardening in the long hot days, then drinking in the wet. Now, against his pale scalp, it all seemed somehow dishonest, something which had been merely gotten.

But this is what he had come in for, what he had asked for, and still the response, as always, came as a surprise to him. Answers often had that habit for Jack, even when he knew their shape in advance.

It was stupid, he thought, asking for this. He had uncles who were experts in stupid questions, always ready with the stupid answers. He imagined them now, smirking, rolling those answers over their tongues like boiled sweets. No matter he was only twelve and they were like, what, forty? They were his mum's brothers. Always together like two rotten teeth. Either peering into a car bonnet, or leaning through the mouth of someone else's door - always eating at something.

He hated them.

'Where you off to?' Michael yelled at him as he made his way over to the hairdresser's.

Michael looked like his mum - but fit to burst, as though it was her, but reflecting back from inside a horrible pink balloon.

'To the park', he yelled back.

The other one, Pete, was stood behind, readying to laugh. Pete looked like that same family balloon, but with most of its air already leaked out, wrinkling up in some corner.

'Well give these to your mum will you.'

Michael started to chuck a load of wet cider cans onto the grass below. Each one made a dull thud before Jack could catch it. He pushed the handle of his carrier bag to the top of his forearm and gathered them up.

'Does she need them?'

'No she just wants to make a chandelier with them - what do you think?' The pair of them laughed. The red dent on Pete's forehead flashed in and out of the shadows like corrected punctuation.

He soon got out of their sight, dumped the cans in a bin and went to look for Jill.

Now, he watched his own face redden and bloom in the mirror, it looked really dumb, and soon everyone was going to see that. Jill was sat over by the door, pretending not to be surprised. It was ok for her, she looked pretty normal, still in the same t-shirt and shorts she had been wearing all summer. Her t-shirt had a face on it that was coming away in flecks, its smile looked a bit broken, but still, it looked happy enough. Right now Jack longed to press into it.

As Jill squirmed about in the chair you could see glimpses of her white flesh - those bits where the summer hadn't got. Now she had a matching outfit left on her skin by the sun. Each time she shifted about her bottoms would ruck up and show a shock of that white, wrapping around her skinny thighs like a pair of cycling shorts.

She could never sit still.

The hairdresser looked over at her.

'What's your name?'

She stretched her back in self-aggrandisement.

'Jill'.

'That's a bit old fashioned isn't it?' He asked, smiling.

She wasn't quite sure how he meant, so hedged her bets.

'Thanks'.

He laughed and nodded over to Jack.

'And his? Your friend over here' Jack agonized in his chair.

'He's Jack.'

She leant forward and smiled. She liked being asked questions. Even easy ones.

'Jack', the man snorted. 'I see, I see. I bet you two are a right pair'.

He flicked the clippers back on and itched his nose with the back of his hand. Jill liked that they were a right pair. It sounded true. Edible.

Jack shifted in his chair and pushed the carrier bag under with his heels. He didn't want anyone picking it up.

Jill had noticed Jack was quiet. She worried that he was annoyed with her. But they did so much together, that often, they didn't even need to speak. So she sat and hummed along to the noise of the clippers. The place reminded her of the launderette, but a little less boring. Here it felt to her as though summer itself was being laundered and folded away. Another chore, and this was the sound of it. *Bzzzzzzzzz*.

Anyway, it was his mum who had told him to get a haircut - *too long, school's starting* - she said, shoving a fiver into his hands. Not even enough. Jill had to get another pound fifty from her own mum. Said it was for pencils.

Now, his hair was falling off in chunks from his head, like a stricken iceberg. It looked a shame to her. But she knew it was too late. *Summer's up*, is what her mum kept saying - *time to get ready, get yourself sorted, I can't do it all for you anymore*.

She imagined his blonde locks arranged across a table in School Assembly; tufts placed like sheaths of wheat, there wedged between tins of beans and someone's Rice Crispie cakes. She tried really hard to picture something special alongside those tins, but

most of what she could conjure with was the kind of things you already had at home. The picture didn't quite work. In her mind the bits and pieces stacked up awkwardly, like everyone's kitchen cupboards meeting for the first time. *Creamed Coconut meet Tinned Ravioli, and this over here is old Plum Sauce. He's seen it all. Welcome!*

Then, she had the letters HARVEST FESTIVAL hung beneath it all, painted badly onto triangles of paper. Not very special. It's not true, she thought, that you can imagine whatever you want. The things she imagined were often a disappointment. They never made much sense.

She looked up towards the back of Jack's head. With each pass of the clippers little was left but the rude light of his scalp, apparently there hidden all that time.

As she played with its bristly ends in her fingers, she wondered what might be found beneath her own dark hair. Her mum always insisted on cutting miniscule amounts of it in the kitchen - muttering things like, *I don't know really I don't know*, over and over, like her own comforting music.

She liked the hairdresser's, any hairdresser's, because they always smelt clean, a sort of special occasion clean. Full of good smells. Like all the perfumes and aftershaves at her Aunt Sandra's wedding. That was some day; her mum wore a red dress to the church and after the dinner her skin went all pink and rosy; she got the giggles because Polly's dad said *she looked like peaches, good enough to eat*, or something; which didn't last long, because she cried and fell over in the car park; they all had to lift her to bed - still in her dress.

Whereas the kitchen just smelled of old food, of things she couldn't believe she'd been made to eat.

Soon enough the bad weather had rolled fully across the dome of Jack's head. She watched the hairdresser's quick hands at work. With his left one he was constantly finding

different parts of the skull to hold steady, whilst the right busied back and forth with its ploughing. The buzzing sound gnawed through the empty shop.

His hands seemed much more interested in the task than his eyes, which Jill had down as the brown and sleepy kind. He could probably be called *good-looking*, she thought - like her dad. But this man's eyes were only really half open - the lids hung down almost disinterested, set in a square face that had her thinking of the newsagent's - closing their shutters just as you're running up to get the milk.

Her dad's eyes were a bit like that. Whenever you asked him a question they would turn towards you reluctantly, still half-asleep under their thick brow. Her mum always said he had looks that made him lazy, but Jill always thought she might have meant it the other way round, that he looked lazy. How can looks make you lazy?

The hairdresser rolled his eyes across the mirror, almost at nothing. Mostly he glanced just to the side towards the sports on the TV, and then back to his work. Now and then, using the same mirror, he would cast a more purposeful look around - each time he would catch Jill's brittle eyes - he could see her waiting so he would give her a quick smile, before gazing through the big letter H of the shop window, to briefly follow whoever was walking down the high street.

There was a lot more to see out there in the summer; people hanging out of windows; squat dogs breaking loose; old arguments simmering in the heat; and then there were the many strange games they all had; each governed by little more than their own discrete ends.

'So what's your name?'

Jill flinched at the temerity of her own voice.

The hairdresser puffed his lips out a little.

'Harminder. Well, Minda really'. He frowned, annoyed by her sudden smirking. Jack quickly realised as much.

'She has a cousin, called Harminder as well. They fight. '

'Oh. Ok. Fair enough.'

As the hairdresser fiddled with one of his instruments the shop fell silent. Jill blew her gum in little rasps to remind Jack that she was there. He didn't look over, but she continued anyway, just to fill the time and space some. She concentrated on making the bubbles as round and nice-looking as possible. The gum had lost its taste and was making her feel sick, but she kept chewing anyway, steadily, pacing it like her own breathing. It was a reassuring, swishy sound. A bit like her brother's heart, when the nurse let them listen to it, coming straight from her mum's stomach.

Now, some nights she will crawl up to her mum on the settee, and rest her head on her big belly, just to feel those two bodies shifting for the right rhythm.

Bored, Jill held her legs straight out from the chair. They looked longer, which was kind of good. She was short for her age. She had been promised that they would grow. That any day now she might suddenly *spurt*.

The hairdresser interrupted her thought by shouting above the noise of the clippers.

'You two are brother and sister right?'

She saw Jack look at her from the mirror.

'No.' She said.

The man went quiet, grinning to himself. But something about his thick back, still quietly facing her, made her think she should have said more, that she hadn't understood. She looked up at his reflection. It was spread over the mirror as though spilling from his sweaty back.

'Well you look like brother and sister to me'

She wondered if this was true. Jack didn't even look like Jack much anymore. He was so still. All summer he had been limbs hanging from trees like ready fruit - in and out of doors - always on the go. Here, now, his face moved less like a brook of water, suddenly he

was small and contained, nothing but his skin.

She too had said, that yes, he should do it. Just because it was something to do. But now she thought about his curls, which had gone lighter through the summer. Where were they now in that mess on the floor? He had those tiny blonde hairs you get on the neck. You could only see them if you were close. Close enough to move them with your breath. She thought of him laughing, but trying not to, pushing her away as she pursed her lips to blow. Maybe those hairs would still be there.

At school he would get told off. There wouldn't be time for it to grow back any. But that's what they had all wanted, that was the point. His mum wouldn't care much - about how short it was. Jill pictured herself and Jack, standing at the doorway of his front room - together like the McDonald's golden M - his mum looking up from the settee, but just not seeing them.

The hairdresser finished. Everything was a *Zero* - that was the thing to get. Mostly nothing. Maybe it would grow back, just as it was. Exactly the same. For now Jack wore the wrinkled expression of those just born, something still expanding into the universe.

As he climbed off the chair the hairdresser held out a lollipop for him. Jack gave him a face.

'Strawberry', he exaggerated.

Jack watched him tear the cellophane wrapper off and stick the glossy disc in his mouth. To Jack it looked as if the man had speared his own head and turned it into a ridiculous dripping version of that sweet.

'Hold on, don't be forgetting this.'

The man bent down behind the chair, the stick still poking out of his teeth.

'Yours?'

Jack looked embarrassed. He took the carrier bag from the man's finger.

'If that's your mum's shopping you better get it home.' He put his hand on Jack's head and nodded to the door.

'Go on!'

Jack marched off in front.

It was still baking outside.

She wanted to tell him that there was this big mole at the back of his head - I bet he never knew that she thought. He'll like being told. Everyone likes things to be noticed about themselves, nice things - I'll tell him that it's a nice thing.

They sat in the park, opposite Jack's flat, watching the square of light from its window emerge with the evening, slowly, slowly, then fully like a fridge door creeping back open. He still didn't say much, only fidgeting now and again in some acknowledgement of the goings-on of the exterior world. Hoping to soon hide under the covers of night.

Eventually, through that window they could see his mum, her head at the bottom, watching the blue of the TV - sat there like a forgotten, and once idealised piece of fruit.

He angled his body towards the road and lent his back into Jill's shoulder. Now she made an offer to him, through silence, in chorus with the crickets and the distant pattern of car doors opening and closing. But Jack didn't get it, he just stared ahead, his forearms stretched out behind to hold his small frame to witness. Everything seemed to be waiting. Soon the other windows of that block lit-up like glasses of orange juice, tinkling their cure to the hot pavement. But still they both remained, mostly in silence, quietly watching the action unfolding behind those windows.

To Jill each window was like a Punch and Judy show, but after all the usual dramas; the actors were now relaxing with cups of tea; sharing notes, and cooking their dinners. She could smell chicken frying somewhere, it mingled with the smell of green, a smell she now realised how much she had missed.

'Jack. What's in the bag?'

He glared at her.

'Nothing'

Without a word he stood up and walked towards the woods at the edge of the park. She quickly flipped over, her belly kissing the damp grass, and watched him stride in a straight line towards that black smear of trees. The wind picked up and shivered the branches in still deciding strokes. This cool lash gathered her quickly from the turf and she ran towards him before he was lost to that knot of dark.

'Jack. Wait up.'

He quickly became almost indistinguishable from the largesse of the night. As she caught up she could hardly make him out beneath the blackened trees. It was as though the borders of him had bled, like grazed elbows in a fight, and he stalked about amongst the branches, now seeking further dissolution from the bruising encounter.

Only the seldom flash of his teeth kept her believing in him.

She tried to think of things to prod him with, just to get him talking. But her voice came out like a cut she couldn't stop tonguing.

'Did you know my dad's a quick walker? Mum says. Sometimes I have to run a bit to keep up, then I'll walk a bit, but he'll always be getting away. So I'll have to run a bit again. If my mum's with us she'll tell him off. But that doesn't happen much.

I'm good at running,

but I don't like it.

It's...

You know'.

But he said nothing. She couldn't even see his face well enough to decide if he was thinking. She began to wonder whether she should go home, but she wasn't sure of the way anymore, it was so dark.

Then he said something strange.

'Sorry?' She said.

'Nothing. Doesn't matter.'

The silence engulfed them again. She could tell that he wanted to say something. That maybe he was sorry about his hair, or that he was worried about his mum. But there was nothing she could think of that might distract him enough from the sound of his own voice - to let him speak unheard. All he seemed interested in was bouncing that carrier bag onto his knees, making its dull squishy sound each time he took a step. Eventually this is all she listened out for, confused as how to strike something in him, to get him to talk.

'Shall we go now Jack?'

'Go where?'

'Well, back home.'

'I'm not, you can.'

She decided to stay, to follow him to whatever he needed to say or do.

He led them out of the woods, right to the edge of the town, to the place where the bridge over the motorway sticks out of the hill like a tongue. The air was still warm and the fragrance of the hedgerows and rubber wafted up to them from far below.

Jack had finally stopped.

She felt giddy and elated as they leant over the railings, letting the rush of cars cool their fervour. The sudden light and noise felt like relief. Immediately it overcame their silence and spoke for them.

Jack cupped a hand to his ear, so she did the same, angling her palm for the cool obliterating sound of waves.

'What are we doing Jack?'

Jack squatted down on the path of the bridge, beginning to tear open the plastic bag he'd held onto all day - not even attempting the tight knot. He held it close into his lap, and

once a hole was ripped through she saw its dark furry interior moving in glints between his knees.

It was an animal. Maybe a rabbit. Something from the road. It looked too mangled to tell. She didn't know what to say. Whether she should say anything. It all came at her like a thought she had no control over. Like it was crawling up her throat from her stomach. Maybe she should just pretend to not understand. She didn't understand. Then he said it again.

'Sorry?'

He stood up, letting the bag fall to the floor; he reached behind his neck to pull at his t-shirt; leaning over to face the road. He pulled the top from his back and flapped this second skin into the void as though flagging down some distant vehicle. Off the whip of the t-shirt bits of hair flew up - briefly becoming visible as they were caught in the lights of the passing cars. Then he laughed, his gurgling laugh, catching the bitumen and the steel on its way through. With one hand still clasping the t-shirt he bent himself fully over the railings and rubbed his head furiously with the other. He smiled weakly at her from behind his shoulder. She went over and rubbed his head for him, felt its plush itch. It scared her a little. Then, gently, with her finger, she traced each letter of her name into the side of his head, watching as little floods of red followed her nail.

'She was sleeping on the washing, In the machine. I didn't know. I just thought it would open. She was always scratching and biting. She hissed whenever I tried to pick her up. I just thought it would be funny, I was going to get her out straight away. That she would jump out when I opened the door. I didn't know it wouldn't open. I couldn't wake Mum. I shook and shook her. She just shouted crap at me. Wouldn't even open her eyes. It was too late by then. I knew it. I had to just wait. I had to watch and wait until it would open. Then, I kept thinking Mum would wake up and come in.'

The glint of those small teeth came in a great torrent, some sound of him had broken through, flooding her detail with its own weight, he spoke of many things, quickly and unchecked, ranging over everything, darkening all beneath it. She could only stand up and nod, let it pass as it only would. He looked again at the bag; he spoke of *it*, reverberating the dark matter between them.

'She never even fed her. I did. I didn't know what to do'.

Jill had never seen anything dead before, but somehow she knew its shape. It wasn't that surprising.

He bent over and pulled the kitten up, with two fingers beneath its red collar, as if to really show her. Jack's eyes glistened around the edges, raw, like oysters ripped open for pearls. Jill's tummy grappled in seeing the slack limbs of the animal - hoping they might begin reaching through the air again - for something solid to pull itself up on. Jack just stood there, new and sad. His half-naked body caught the headlights of the traffic across one side.

Those lights recast him as a pale man, shaking with each passing car, before collapsing to the floor like sticks. Then soon rising again, trying to become whole.

He dropped the kitten to his feet. And she hated him for it.

She bent down and stroked the lifeless thing, not expecting it to purr, but still, shocked at the feel of the bones through its coat. She pulled Jack's t-shirt towards herself and gently scooped the kitten into its middle - gathering the four corners together she tied the t-shirt up, like her mum had shown her once, into a knapsack around the poor thing's body.

Jack stood by the railings, not even looking, the cars still racing beneath him. She got up and reached over the barrier, pulling down a branch that overhung the road. Carefully she

looped the handles of the t-shirt over that fibrous limb, then let it lightly pull back, dangling deep into the heart of the bush.

Jack leant over the railings and spat.

Slowly the saliva pulled away from his mouth, down the long distance to the road. He watched, then did it again, even slower, hoping this time the line would reach a little further.

Jill ran along the bridge into the thick mantle of the hillside.

'Jack', she shouted.

'Jack! Come on.'