

Ross Raisin

God's Own
Country





god's own country



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To Margaret

1948–2005



Ramblers. Daft sods in pink and green hats. It wasn't even cold. They moved down the field swing-swaying like a line of drunks, addled with the air and the land, and the smell of manure. I watched them from up top, their bright heads peeping through the fog.

Sat on my rock there I let the world busy itself below, all manner of creatures going about their backwards-forwards same as always, never mind the fog had them half-sighted. But I could see above the fog. It bided under my feet, settled in the valley like a sump-pool spreading three miles over to the hills at Felton.

The ramblers hadn't marked me. They'd walked past the farm without taking notice, of me or of Father rounding up the flock from the moor. Oi there ramblers, I'd a mind for shouting, what the buggler are you doing, talking to that sheep? Do you think she fancies a natter, eh? And they'd have bowed down royal for me then, no doubt. So sorry, Mr Farmer, we won't do it again, I hope we haven't upset her. For that was the way with these – so respect-minded they wouldn't dare even look on myself for fear of crapping up Nature's balance. The laws of the countryside. And me, I was real, living, farting Nature to their brain of things, part of the scenery same as a tree or a tractor. I watched as the last one over the stile fiddled with a rock on top the wall, for he thought he'd knocked it out of place weighting himself over. Daft sods these ramblers. I went toward them.

Halfway down the field the fog got hold of me, feeling round my face so as I had to stop a minute and tune my eyes, though I still had sight of the hats, no bother. They were only a short way into the next field, moving on like a line of chickens, their heads twitching side to side. What a lovely molehill. Look, Bob, a cuckoo behind the drystone wall. Only it wasn't a cuckoo, I knew, it was a bloody pigeon.

I hadn't the hearing of them just yet, mind, but I knew their talk.

I followed on, quick down to the field bottom and straight over the wall. Tumbled a couple of headstones to the ground as I heaved myself up, but no matter. Part of Nature me, I'd a licence for that. They couldn't hear me anyhow, their ears were full of fog. I was in the field aside theirs and I slunk along the wall between, until they were near enough I could see them through the stone-cracks, bobbing along. I listened to them breathing, heavy, like towns always breathe when they're on farmland. Weekend exercise for them, this was, like sex. Course they were going to buy a pink hat to mark the occasion.

A middle of the way down the field and they stopped. They parked down in a circle like they fancied a campfire but instead they whipped out foil parcels and a Thermos and started blathering.

I've got ham. Who wants ham?

I'll have ham.

Oh, wait a moment. Pink Hat inspected the sarnies. We have a choice – ham and tomato, or ham and Red Leicester?

He gave them each a parcel, then stood the Thermos in the middle of the circle.

Nasty old day still, he said. Wish it would perk up a little.

Doesn't look too promising, though, said one of the females.

I teased a small stone out the wall and plastered it in sheep shit.

That is such nice ham.

Isn't it? Tesco, you know.

Crack. I hit the Thermos bang centre, tea and shit splashing up the fog.

They hadn't a clue. It was a job to keep from laughing as they skittled about and scanned the sky as if they were being bombed. Or maybe they feared they'd pissed the cuckoo off – upset Nature's balance, sitting in a field. Didn't think to look over at me crouching behind the wall. So down I went for the shit pile and I threw another stone, but it missed and hit a female on her foot. I might've flung a headstone at her and she'd not have felt it through them walking boots but that wasn't going to stop her screaming her lungs out her windpipe. Behind the wall, there's someone behind the wall, quickly let's go. Quickly! They were all on their feet soon enough, grabbing up the picnic and escaping down the field. Run for your lives, towns, run for your lives. When they were out of range, Pink Hat turned and blabbed something about a peaceful day out, they meant no harm please leave them alone.

But I couldn't be fussed with them any more. I waited for them to scarper then I started back to the farm. The pups would be needing a feed, and I was rumbling for a bite myself.

Near the top the field I looked round to see how far they'd got, likely they were halfway to Felton by now, they were that upshelled. So I was fair capped when I saw they'd come back. I couldn't rightly make out what they were up to at first, all I could see was their heads huddled behind a wall and Pink Hat galloping up the hillside. He snatched something up off the ground and it glinted an instant before he put it in his rucksack. They'd left the tin foil behind.

In the old stable the pups were asleep, the four of them piled up snuffling against Jess's side. She had an eye awake, looking on while I took a plate of chopped liver off the shelf and lay it by for when they were ready. Then I went in the kitchen, and there was a smell drifting about that got in my nostrils and reached down my gullet. Biscuits. I opened the oven, but it was empty. Door was warmish, mind, like a cow's underbelly, and I pressed my hand against it a time, letting the heat slug up my arm before I stood up and went for the cupboards. No biscuits in any of them, so I sat down by the fire.

Mum was in the other room, and she was all I could hear but for the fire and the honeysuckle flapping against the window. She was on the phone to Janet. That, or she was talking to the budgerigars. Fat little fuckers, up to nothing all day but rubbing their heads together and gawping in the mirror. I got up and pushed the door to the other room, just a nudge, to poke my eye in. She was on the phone, and she had the biscuits. She was gobbing them whole while she yammered on to Janet.

Happy as a pig in trough he were, Janet, happy as a pig in trough ...

I went for a gleg in the freezer to see if she'd done another batch, but it was just bags of sprouts and vaccination packs like always, so I gave up the biscuits and stood by the window, where just a chunter of talk came through the door-crack with the scratch of fingernails on the tin. The fog had cleared some and I could see the lump of Felton Top other side the valley. I knew them rambles were headed

for the Top, filing downriver till the path jutted left up the hillside. Blimey, it's a fair old climb, but not to worry, there's a pint waiting for us on the other side.

I settled into the chair by the fire and let my body go to rest. The pub round the Top would be thronged today, full of ramblers. I didn't think on it much longer, mind, for I dropped off soon enough, I was that snug, only the tap of honeysuckle on the window to listen to. Mum had quieted – Janet was on one – so I drowsied on, my head bare of thought until the wind got up and the tapping hardened. Is there no peace round here? I said, the one eye open. The honeysuckle wasn't moving, though, and I knew right away that sound, it was Father's boots on the path, and I straightened up.

He came in, didn't speak. In his left hand he had a dead rabbit. I could see by his face something was nettling him. He strew about the letters and papers on the tabletop, turning them over and knocking the salt so as it sprayed on the cloth. Then he was in the cupboards, leaving them all open before he turned back and the rabbit's head banged on a chair. He had it by the legs and there were spots of red on the floor where he'd walked through the kitchen. He took the cushion out the armchair beside me and jammed his hand down the back of it. He wasn't after the biscuits, then. I kept lipped up while he frisked the inside of the chair, dangling the rabbit by my feet, and Mum came in, the tin in her hands.

Guy. Have a biscuit. She offered him the tin, but he ignored it. What you looking for? she asked. Whistle.

Here. She picked his whistle out the egg bowl then righted the salt up. Near went through t' washer it did. You left it in your other trousers.

He put the whistle in his pocket and slumped into his chair. Bending toward the fire, he set the rabbit on the hearth, laid out on its side so as it seemed to be stretching in the warmth with its eye fixed on me. Mighty fine spot for a snooze, this, it said. Father gave a stab to the fire and the room swelled with heat.

He looked at me. Them who've bought Turnbull's farm move in day after tomorrow, d' you know that, lad?

No. Who are they?

Towns. And you'll let them alone, an' all. He took himself a biscuit from the tin. They've a daughter.

I sat up top the field and watched them all the afternoon while the pups scuffled about me and my arse proper boned into the rock. I'd been in the yard messing about by the sheep-dip when I heard the cattle-grid rattling other side of our hill and I thought, hello, they're here, for I could tell between rattles and that wasn't one I had the knowing of. I was in my place before they even showed on the skyline. A mighty blue van coming along the track. I watched as it took the fork toward Turnbull's old place, slowing for each cattle-grid, until it disappeared a moment in the thick of trees in front the farmstead before pulling into the gateway. I fetched the whelps and sat them two each side of me, fooling myself they'd be mooded for staying put, and I settled in to view the doings half a mile down the hillside.

And look who was first out the van. The girl. Young. Fifteen maybe. The others got out – mum, da, kid brother, two furniture lugs – and they went at clearing the van, mum and dad pointing commands the fridge, yes, that goes indoors, as if they feared the lugger-buggers might set it in the vegetable

plot, and the boy skittering about, unsure, like a louse on the flat of your hand. The girl got stuck in, mind, bounding back to the van after each round, her ponytail flop, flop on her shoulders.

I watched on, the whelps racing and tussling round me on top the rock, never losing sight of me or jumping down. Mighty jump for them that, small souls that they were. They were seven weeks. Not a bad lap of life, when fighting is just play and most the times you're not asleep you're chasing Twat the cat around the yard, and seven weeks was old enough they'd live on. The first month is the parlous one, while they're still soft to the cold and the cat, and to each other, so that each morning you have to ready yourself for a warmish lump or two trod into the straw by the other little guzzlers. We lost three the first few weeks. You had to be fair solid, being a sheepdog. Or a farmer. Or a furniture-lugger, come to it, carrying fridges about the place all day.

The lugs were taking a break, one of them sat in the van and the other searching about for something. He was looking all round a big cabinet on the path, well blow me, I know I left it someplace here I wonder where, until the girl came over and set him straight, pointing at something on top the cabinet. A mug of tea, seemed like. It must've gone cold for he slurped it straight down, both hands, the knobbly-arsed monkey.

Sal was biting on my finger. I let her, because it didn't smart that much and she needed to train up her teeth. She was the boldest of the whelps, spite of being a female. The others were happy getting a mother-smothering from Jess, but Sal had started to break from that, partial now to following me round instead. Mostly the tickle on my trouser leg would tell me she was there, but sometimes I'd not mark her until I'd kicked her five yards forward and she'd yap on back to me, what you do that for, you big old bastard? She was the biggest of the litter too. The size of my head, fair exact, for when I played with her and put my cheek to the ground, she fit snug against my face, a damp spot of nose on my forehead. And I had a big head. Long thin head, long thin body. Lankenstein, they'd called me, in them days I still went to school, until three years ago when they sided me off. Cheerio, Lankenstein, we'll not be seeing you again, I hope. Too fucking right you won't.

The inside the van had been gutted and their belongings were lined up on the path to the front door. The pups had quit scuffling, their heads up having a watch, same as I was. Five of us in a row, picture house style, curious over these towns. A person might've looked on us and guessed we were all thinking similar, though they'd be wrong, likely, for I was eyeing the furniture and figuring how much it'd sell on for. A fair pocketful, certain.

The girl let her hair out. A blondie, looked like. The family were all indoors and she was leant up against the side the van talking to a lugger-bugger. A nice chat they were having. He had his arms folded all attentive but I couldn't get a proper sight on him as he had his back-end to me, so all I could see was the great stump of his back. Probably looked much the same both ways round, mind. She touched him on the arm. Then the wind gave a gust and our ten ears pricked up as laughter drifted up the hillside toward us, her laughter. A pearl of a noise, that danced about our heads a moment then spun off over the Moors behind. She must've laughed first, then touched him, and we'd got them wrongways – Sound is Light's clog-footed brother, always lagging behind. What had a lug such as him said that was so funny? I'd never forced a laugh like that from a person, not a girl, certain. Myself, I'm more likely rile folk up, cause them to shout or bluther, than honey-talk them. That was my talent. Maybe that was what he'd been telling her, maybe they could see me up here with the whelps and he

was having nine yards of fun out of me. There's a lad lives up there, do you see him? Sam Marsdyke. He's mighty popular round these parts – you won't find a sheep that has a bad word to say on him. Ha ha, that's a good one, you are funny, Mr Lugger-Bugger. Oh, I don't know about that. Not half so funny as Marsdyke's face, I'm telling you!

She was at it again. Laughing away, what a man you are, let me just steady myself against the van here.

She'd know me before too long. Not me, course, but my history, painted up in all the muckiest colours by some tosspot, gagging to set her against me. A piece of gossip travels fast through a valley. The hills keep it in. It goes from jaw to jaw all the way along till it's common news, true or not. Specially when the valley's full of tosspots, such as this one.

Delton was the worst. That crick of the kitchen curtain each time I passed by their farm at the bottom of the track, on my way to town. She was spying out, brewing her gossip. Never mind we were in as bad shape as them with money, and we should've stuck together, she'd never be warm on us. Specially me. So I knew she was out for me now, the blatherskite, brooding round the hillside with her cats whipping round her ankles. Just ripe for an introduction to these towns. And the second she spies her chance – that Sam Marsdyke, let me tell you what he does to young girls like you.

Sod that. I'd let them know I wasn't so foul-smelling as Delton had me for. I'd meet them in flesh first, before they met my shadow.



I was up early. The sun had just started to show himself when I stepped into the yard, a ball of orange half-hid behind the Moors. That was the best time, when the Moors were coming alive with creatures waking in the heather, and the dark was shifting to reveal a mighty heap of purple spreading fifty miles to the sea. This new family weren't fussed about that, mind. Their sort were loopy for farmhouses – oh we must move there, the North York Moors is God's own country – but they couldn't give a stuff for the Moors, all they wanted was a postcard view out the bedroom window. They knew nothing what I knew of it. Spaunton, Rosedale, Egton, thirty moors each bigger than your eye could frame, fastened together by valleys cutting into the earth between, lush with forest, flowers and meadow grass, where there weren't towns and villages drying it all up. I turned round from the Moor to look down the sloping green farmland that shaped the side of our valley. It must've been full of trees once, but now the whole valley was scarred with grey roads and homesteads, and the town.

I fetched a basket, cloth and some other trunklements, then I set off down the hillside. It didn't take much searching before a small circle of mushrooms came into view, four perfect ones down the bottom the first field. I plucked them out the ground, laying them in the basket before I made for my next sighting.

It was the calendar for picking, arse-end of summer, and there were plenty of sproutings. They were most fertile around the borders of the fields, as the grass grew clumpy by the walls where the sheep hadn't mown it up. There, and through dung piles. That was where I found the biggest mushrooms, groups of them sharing the shit, slurping up the goodness through their lime-white stalks. The stalk-ends were clung with muck after I picked them, so I rubbed them down with the cloth. I knew towns. I knew how they were mooded toward muck. I carried on down the fields and my sight of the valley floor sharpened to take in the groups of houses patching the land, bunched in villages along the river's side. The biggest patch was the town, stretching out to the base of the hills either side. It was early yet but vehicles were moving through it, so folk were up and about already, going about their business.

These who'd moved into Turnbull's were a different sort to the folk from town. They had brass, and folk with brass always wanted to keep themselves separate, not have their snouts in other people's doings the whole time like them lot down there. But they were still towns, mind. They knew sod-all about mushrooms, or much else besides. The country was a Sunday garden to them, wellingtons and four-by-fours and glishy magazines of horse arses jumping over a fence.

And here was me fetching their breakfast. A girl shows up and I'd turned into a half-brain.

My basket was filling nicely, but I kept on, starting a second layer. Mushroom breakfast for a week and each time they sat down to eat they'd remember who gave it them and Delton could say what she pleased, she'd have to scratch the polish off my arse.

I walked round the fields until the basket was brimful, but I wasn't sure they'd be up and I didn't want to wake them, so I sat up against a tree to wait a while. It was a champion collection, all different sizes of plump, dew-damp mushrooms. I took one out the basket and held it in the nubs of my fingers. A baby little feller, perfect round and white, no older than an hour or two. He'd poked his head out the ground same time I was getting from my bed. I turned him stump-up and felt along the pink fronds, fine and delicate like the gills of a fish. It was a gradely welcome. Delton wasn't going to match this.

I got up and trod for Turnbull's farmstead. The towns' farmstead, as was fitting to name it now, da as that was, when the only livestock they'd be keeping was cats and dogs and Fluffykins the rabbit. The kitchen light was on. I stood by the gate a moment then unsnecked the chain, but soon as it clinked off some great barking article came lolloping out the garage and near caused me to flip the basket over. Hello boy, shush up now. Woof, Marsdyke's here! A Labrador. He jumped up to the gate and jowled the top of it with drool.

Lionel, come here! The dad was at the back door in his pyjamas, stumbling into a pair of wellingtons.

Lionel!

Lionel kept slopping up the gate.

He came toward me. Proper smart pyjamas, probably went to work in them.

I do apologise for him, he's dreadful with strangers. He bent down to quieten the dog and I saw the top of his head shining under scraggs of hair. Especially with the move ... he shot his eyes up at me. He hasn't been bothering your animals, has he? I mean, your cattle, with his barking?

No. They're grand.

Oh, good. I'm Graham Reeves. We've just moved in. They were southern, clear enough, from the sound of him. He held a wobbling hand out to me.

I know, I said. Sam Marsdyke. Guy's son.

He spotted the basket.

They're for you, I said, you and your family.

Gosh, thank you, wild mushrooms. There's so many, blimey, thank you. He stood up straight to take the basket, the dog butting at his legs. There was a dark blotch of wet damped in the groin of his pyjamas. I must've got him off the bog.

Well then. I stepped back from the gate. We're up the hill, if you need something doing. I turned to leave, a quick gleg past him at the back door, but he'd not done talking yet.

Are you the local farmers, you and your dad?

Us and Deltons. And Norman other side.

I see. He looked up toward our farm. Lionel was eyeing the mushrooms.

I'll be going, I said.

Right, okay, thank you again. Hope to see you around.

I made off and started back up the track, but after a few steps I stopped, and watched through the trees. He was taking his wellingtons off, fending the dog from the mushrooms. Then the both of them went in. Don't worry, darling, it was just our new neighbours, the Marsdykes. Look what they gave us. She'd bust her eyelids, the mum, when he showed her the basket, she's never seen so many

mushrooms. Oh, my word, mushrooms on toast, don't you just fancy that? He kisses her on the cheek as he hands over the basket. Don't you see, he tells her, I told you it would be wonderful, it's God's own country here. They go into the kitchen together, and it's quiet a moment until, hello, who's this padding down the stairs? It's the girl. What's going on? she says. She rubs sleep-dust from her eyes and two small swellings push against the cotton of her pyjamas. Mushrooms, they cry together, from Sam Marsdyke!

I pressed up against the back the house, checking I'd not been seen, and snuck round, nice and quiet. Cluck, went a chicken that was scrabbling away outside the coop in the backyard. They'd taken a fancy to Turnbull's poultry, then – ducks, geese and all judging from the sounds inside the coop. The chicken came toward me, she thought I had a feed for her. Sorry, old lass, I gave it all to them in there and I'd get back in that coop if I were you, there's a fox about this past couple of weeks who'd love to get his chops round you. I knew when I was outdoors of the kitchen because it was the only room that side the house. I'd been in it, plenty enough. Turnbull and Father had been a right pair, always helping the other and getting leathered down the Grouse together. Father had been a miserable old bastard since Turnbull died, owing as he had no one to go down the Grouse with to get leathered.

I hunched down and shuffle-stepped till I was underside of the kitchen window. It was open a little way, but there wasn't a sound. I eased upward to slip an eye over the sill, but there was a wall of books blocking. They were stood paper-end to me, though two of the flat ones sat on top had their spines showing. *The Good Barbecue Chef* and *Indian Adventure: All Things Spice*. Some prize reading there. They'd have an adventure if they went to the Indian down the valley, certain, but I didn't likely think they'd be doing much of their eating down there, not with all these cookbooks. That was their sort for you – the sun hadn't done a lap round their house yet, but the cookbooks were fettled up. I was about to creep higher, till I saw a thin snicket between two books cocked against each other. I looked through. The mushrooms were on the table, and I could see most the middle part the kitchen. There were cardboard boxes piled up on the floor, and a big gap in the sideboard where the washer had been took out, but not a body in view.

I sided my head to the glass to get a listen. Nothing, so I pressed my ear harder, with my eyes straining sideways to get a squint on them if they came in. My eyeballs were tether-end of their range and all I had proper in my focus was the front of the cocked book, some grinning prat in a stripy apron holding up an onion. Just wait and see what I can do with this onion, he was smiling, but I couldn't give a toss what he could do with onions, I just didn't want to get spotted and everything to bugger up.

Likely they were in their beds. All I heard for five minutes was the echo of blood pumping in my ear, so I turned and looked again through the snicket. My lugs needed a clean, it seemed, for I'd not heard the dog come in. He was stood with his paws on the table, snouting at the mushrooms. Sniff, sniff, what's this? Drool all over them. Lionel! came a voice dim through the window. Naughty Lionel! The kid brother ran in. He flung himself on to the dog and lolled over its back while Lionel lurched up the shreds of a mushroom he'd knocked on the floor. Then the kid flopped off and ran for the table to dump his hand in the basket, and a load of mushrooms spilt out. He tossed one in the air for the dog to catch. Gulp, down the gullet before his paws hit the floor. Again! he squealed. But the next mushroom bust apart in the air, befuddling Lionel, who pushed a splinter of it behind a box, scratch scratch, where's it gone? I was near ready to bang on the window, distract them, but I stoppe

myself straight off when the girl walked in.

She clapped the dog away. Her hair was dark with wet, but I could still mark that I'd been right, up on the hill, she was a blondie. She turned to the kid. What are you doing, Oliver, you little shit? Uh-oh I'm telling Mum, you said shit. Shut up. Little shit. She came to the table and looked at the basket. Her face was near enough I could see the little brown freckles speckling her nose and the tops of her cheeks. I had to move aside, in case she saw me over the top the books. Where did these come from? Me, I almost spoke out, but I kept it in my pipes. The dad stepped in the frame, dressed now. Ah, now that I can't tell you, he said, tapping twice on his nose, like he was trying to wake it up. It's secret information. The kid clomped and squawked, Dad, Dad, where they from? But the dad just smiled and touched his nose again.

She sat down, opened a magazine. She'd lost interest who gave the mushrooms. A sliver of skin was showing under her shirt-tail, the flesh furrowed at the base of her spine, delving into her jeans.

The kid squawked again, where they from, Dad, where they from? He looked down at the kid. The Bogeyman gave them to me. The mum came into the room then. Graham, she said, don't tease them, and she stooped for a box by the table, pulling out a frying pan. Her hair didn't move a twitch as she bent, it was set in a sleeky-soft ginger mould, as if her head was jammed inside a chicken. The mushrooms are a present, she said, but I missed the next piece because she walked off toward the sideboard ... one of the local farmers.

One of the local farmers? Might as well have been Norman collected them, for all the girl knew. Chickenhead thought we'd had a get-together, planned the bleeding thing.

The girl slipped her forefinger over her tongue, and flicked the page of her magazine. See, Mum, her eyes still on the magazine, told you they'd be friendly, didn't I?

Yes, oh, I'm sure they are, I just think we should be careful not to antagonise them, that's all, make sure Lionel doesn't run amok with the sheep, that sort of thing. Lionel was slumped against the table leg, licking his knackers. They're not exactly known for their patience, are they? And they carry guns she said, turning on the tap. The dad piped up – do give the mushrooms a good wash, there's droppings on some of them. What's droppings? the kid said from underside the table, where I couldn't get a fix on him. The girl ducked her head toward him. Shit, she said, too soft for me to hear, but I traced the lines of her lips. It's plops, Oliver, said the dad, sheep plops. Yuck. I'm not having any. Chickenhead clobbered a clove of garlic with the stump of a knife.

Who was the farmer, Dad? She looked up from her magazine, stroking a tress of hair behind her ear to expose her throat, smooth and white. Sam Marsdyke, he said. You said it was the Bogeyman, squawked under the table. Well, Oliver, perhaps he is the Bogeyman, said the dad. Who is he, Dad? she asked. A page of her magazine flipped over, but she didn't notice. A young chap, bit older than you, the dad said. Mind you, it is hard to tell sometimes with these farmers, they are rather grizzly-looking. Bogeyman! Bogeyman! under the table. The dad laughed, yes, he's no oil painting. All arms and legs, and a nose like – her lips puckered, waiting – an old tree stump! She smiled. A knurl of butter slid in the pan. This won't be long, said Chickenhead, and the dad fumbled in the boxes until he pulled out a fist of cutlery. The girl flicked through her magazine, each while a little smile.

They were sat so near I had to squinny through the crook of the dad's pit to get a look at her, other side the table. Behind them, the pan steamed curls into the air from the juice sweated out of the

mushrooms. Well, said the dad, you've got to hand it to the Bogeyman. I thought we might saunter up to their farm after breakfast, drop off the basket, then we can kick on with the lounge.

I was rubbing my brain trying to think was it today Mum was going into town for her hair, when the kid's plate smashed on the floor. Lionel was whipped up, woof, woof, what's this, why's the boy screaming like a throat-slit pig? Oliver, what on earth? He was on the flagstones wriggling and retching up his breakfast, Oliver! Shut up, Lionel! He retched again and they fussed around him, what's wrong with him, what's wrong, Oliver? The dog was nosing in the slop the kid gipped up. Chickenhead flashed a look at the dad, I told you he hated mushrooms, she said. The girl knelt down. It's all right, Oliver, it's all right. Her shirt rode up her back far enough to see the ridge of her backbone. Ugh, fuck, she sprang up slipping on a patch of slop. Maggots! she hollered, there's maggots in the mushrooms!

I felt my guts wither up. I'd forgot about that.

He's given us maggoty ones, Chickenhead shouted, and the girl ran for the sink to gush the tap on and swill her mouth out, water running down her neck. I'd have told him if it wasn't for that sodding dog. Check for maggots, some of them'll likely be mawky. Cut through the stem and look for riddle-holes – those are maggots, chuck them ones out. But I'd forgot, and now they were turn-taking waterfalls in the sink, all owing to me, the Bogeyman, local farmer.

Course, they thought the whole lot was rotted, that I'd picked them specially. The maggots were dead before they ate them anyhow, but they weren't thinking about that, they all had sodding foot and mouth now.

She sat down and the kid parked himself, quiet, in front her chair. She stroked his hair and I tried to see what her face was showing, but I couldn't tell. Her collar was wet with water. It glimmered on her neck.

I slunk off. My eye glanced past the cookbooks and a smear-stain on the glass I must've made with my hair. You've bugged it now, the onion man grinned at me in his stripy apron. Oh yes, you've bugged it now.



She'd find out soon enough. If I'd not been such a gawby forgetting about maggots she might not've believed them, but she'd believe them now, certain. And it'd be Delton that told her. Katie Carmichael. How I had to quit my schooling when I was sixteen on account of trying to rape her in Wetherill's formroom.

She never pressed charges. A court case would've messed up her exams, poor girl, though bugger knows why her exams were so important, she was only third year, and I didn't know why there should've been a court case anyhow because I didn't rape her, as it happened, and even if Wetherill hadn't come back for his fags I wouldn't have done, neither. We won't press charges so long as that monster is taken out of school, was the trade. And they said I was lucky, because I'd forced her against her will, but I didn't know what was lucky about missing my GCSEs and having to work the farm with Father. I'd have bobby-dazzled them and all – I got the best marks in class for the mock exams, not far off. There were some proper nimrods in my class, mind.

You're Sam Marsdyke, aren't you? she said to me. That set it off, her speaking to me, for I'd have sloped past otherwise, just a quick gleg at her, sat on the window sill in her skirt. I am, aye. I scanned up the corridor to see if there was a bunch of them round the corner, all giggles. I've been sent out of class, she says. That right? I say, fumbling in my pockets, what's she doing talking to me, is she pulling my string? Do I stand here like a doylem or do I get on? But I stay put because she chelps away, all she did was she drew a picture of a cat in her textbook, it wasn't even in pen, that's hardly a crime is it? I don't know why she's telling me this. Probably thinks I'm right impressed at her getting sent out. I don't mind, though, for next thing I'm sitting down with her on the sill close enough I can feel her leg touching against my own.

She talks on at me, this, that, the other, it's not the first time I've been sent out of class. Isn't it? I say, and then I tell her about how the first time I was sent out was for throwing four pencil cases out the music-room window and she thinks that's proper funny, she does, and I knew that we were going to kiss because we'd moved closer and my leg was getting warm where it was pushed up. We talk some more or she talks, anyhow, as I'm not sure what to say, but it doesn't matter for next thing I'm pressing up on her and her neck smells of soap and I'm kissing her and our teeth clank together because I'm not in the knowledge of how to kiss a girl proper. Wait on, I tell her, Wetherill's out his room, let's go there. No, she says. Don't worry, it's all right, and I'm holding her by the forearm, it's only the next corridor. We go in the room shut the door it's cold inside someone's left a window open but we're not bothered about that. I kiss her on the neck, soap gusting up my nostrils, a proper stalk I've got on now kissing her like that and her spread on the table. But then Wetherill comes in, he's le his fags in the desk. What's this? Marsdyke! and he's reaching for the blackboard eraser so I step back

and he puts it down.

If Wetherill hadn't bust in when he did everything would have gone different, it wouldn't have looked so bad as it did, they wouldn't have said I planned raping her. You forced her against her will. Sod off against her will. Yes you did, they said, and you're lucky she's not pressing charges because there are bruises all up her arm, what more proof do we need?



Any as had half a brain could've told Chickenhead was angry. She didn't say anything at first, just stood quiet on the doorstep while the dad gibbered on, we've brought your basket back, delicious mushrooms, and the like. They'd waited a day to frame themselves up before coming, but that hadn't abated her anger none, it bred in the quiet, and when finally she did speak I could hear it grating at the underside of her words. And so could Father. He was sat in his chair, the telly burbling away, but I knew he had an ear on the doorway.

Actually, she said, they were riddled with maggots.

I played with the whelps under the table, where she couldn't see me.

Well, that couldn't be helped could it, Helen? said the dad. Fact of Nature.

Oh, Nature, of course. It's Nature's fault my little boy hasn't eaten a jot in twenty-four hours, is it?

Mum was stood at the door with them. Our Sam didn't tell you to check for mawk-holes?

No. He didn't.

Play with the whelps. That was what filled my head. Just keep on playing with the whelps. Father was looking at me. I gripped Sal into my belly and thumbed her big ears over her eyes until she squirmed to get out, and I let her go, sniffing and shaking her head.

Well, said Mum, you'll know for next time, then.

All I heard after was the dad chuntering his goodbyes and the door closing shut.

Father sat stewing in his chair, silent. Mum went out to put the basket in the storehouse. And this is Laura, said the telly, doesn't she look stunning in this twelve-pound top from New Look? She looked half-decent, fair enough. My legs ached from being sat under the table so long. I could see the top of Mum's head out the window, she was fussing about in the yard because she didn't want to come back indoors. What can I do now? Ah, I know, I'll take this washing down off the line, it's a bit damp but no matter. He stood up then and came toward me. I didn't flinch, it was daft flinching, I just waited for it. He took his time, sod knows what he was waiting for, he was probably listening to the telly or something, then – clout – the back of his hand against my cheek. The whelps were scarpering, I fell to the floor and scabbled up against the table leg.

What'd I told you, Nimrod? The tip of his boot was next my face. It was caked with shit. I could smell it. Eh, Nimrod, what'd I told you? I didn't answer him. I stayed there with my cheek flat on the carpet where I had an upskittled frame of the whelps cowering under Father's chair, chins hid between their paws. So it needn't cost you the earth to look a million dollars, but it wasn't Father said that, it was the telly. Father said, I'll smash your top, you goat with them again. Then he bugged off out the room.

I lay there a time looking at the whelps, a humdinger of a throbbing in my ear. There were small feathers and bits of hair matted into the carpet, too worn in for the vacuum to suck up.

She'd not come up with them – there was that, at least.

I was penning sheep in the top field when I heard the cattle-grid rattling. They were going out. Father was off in the tractor so I left the sheep half-penned and hoofed it round the hill to track where they went. Their vehicle was parked out front of Deltons'. I squinted to get a look inside the car but it was empty, far as I could tell, though it jipped to focus proper owing to the beltenger Father had gave me earlier. They were in the kitchen, listening to Delton. Devilry, that's what it was, nobbut devilry, but can tell you worse. That's not the worst of it with him. Is it, Arnold? and she'd turn round to old Arnie Delton like he might say a piece himself, but he was taking no notice, sat farting in his chair with his eyes goggled on *Countdown*. Devilry. You poor dears.

They'd been parked up ten minutes. The engine still chugging away. A nip in, hello, we're the towns, is all they'd reckoned on but Delton had them hooked with her cats and grim mumblings. Mushrooms! Ee, you should've seen what he did to my poor little car, that'd mark you the nature of the boy. Daft old trull – I'd done nothing to her car, it was her own fault driving so slow. She'd been crunching along the track going who knows where, probably off to buy cat food, so course when I came round the corner I fucked into her back-end. Only a small dint in the tractor, mind, and Father never noticed. She had a whole load of stories like that she could tell them. Like the time she said I'd shot her cat, left it dead in a field someplace – only it turned up again the week after, she'd not had it neutered and it'd been copping off with every bitch between there and Whitby.

Chickenhead came out, then the girl, only the two of them. When they got to the car, the girl looked back and gave a little wave. The side of the house blocked my view of Delton waving back on the step that gnarly smile on her, now just you remember what I told you, and don't think he wouldn't do it again in a flash.

I lay down with my hands behind my head and stared into the sky. I stayed like that till it was nearing dark, and the sky was bare save for Mr Moon and every while a bird flying home for bed. I shut my lids and fell asleep.

When I woke up and angled my watch in the moonglow it was fast on half-midnight. The hillside was settled with peace, not a sight or sound anyplace but for a breeze chirring through the tree next me, and the lines of orange dots running stitches along the valley below. I stood up and my knees cracked. There was Deltons' – a shadowy square in the dark – Delton asleep inside, the jowl wobbling, that gnarly smile on her. The girl waving, well done Mrs Delton, that was a good one today, he's real vermin, isn't he?

Ain't that right, Mr Fox, I said, for there was a scurvy old feller skulking over by the tree. He spun his head round to see who it was had said it. Real vermin, you and me, skulking round in the dark, eh? Speak for yourself, he said, and off he went. Folk had their chickens shut up tight these past few weeks, owing to him – same as they had their doors bolted to keep me off their daughters.

Fuck you, I shouted. The words jimmied off the hill back to me, and faded into the valley. Fuck you but no one to hear it, not even Mr Fox, heh, heh, let's just see if I can't get in these chicken coops. I don't know who I was shouting at, mind. Delton, probably, because that was where I started walking

when I'd said it.

There was a wall all round Deltons' for keeping out the vermin. Not a drystone wall, that wouldn't do it, but a high, solid affair with slugs of yellowy cement in the cracks. No bother for me and Mr Fox though. I dumped down on the other side, into a bunch of nettles. They reached up to my pits, they were that overgrown. Not much of a weeder, are you, Delton? I lifted my arms like a scarecrow and trod through. It made me laugh, that did – me playing scarecrows middle of the night at the back of Deltons', but then a nettle snuck up my trouser leg and stung me to buggery. Delton smiled at that on I wasn't bothered, though. She could smile all she liked now, the whiskery old trull. I slipped out the nettle-bush and smuggled round the house.

Each few steps I gave a rub on my calf to quiet the sting. It was a day for soreness, first my head, now the leg, pain see-sawing up, down my body, but I hadn't time to think on that now, I could tend to that later when I was back with the pups and Delton's smile had slid off her face in a slump on the floor. I tilted the latch off the chicken coop and creaked it open.

A dim bulb was dangling on the wall, sending a fuzz of yellow into the dark beyond the door-gap. I went. My feet brushed fresh straw, a dull golden covering across the floor, and all these tufts sticking out from boxes and roof-beams, making the whole place snug. Not a hard life for these chickens. I wouldn't have minded a try of that – not an itch of worry, apart from where'd that worm go? And course the fox creeping in to snatch their heads off. I thought I'd just take a look so I stepped further in, stooping under the beams, peeking in the boxes where puffed-up chickens brooded nice and peaceful. We didn't keep chickens at our place. They make more shite than money, was Father's opinion. No shite on view in Delton's coop, mind. She probably had them trained to crap in trays.

Scratch, scratch, I could hear, so I followed on past a tower of sideways boxes, stacked up into a block of flats for chickens, and there was a mouse rubbing his hands behind a pile of long sticks. He fucked off when he saw me. As I walked back to the door, a chicken popped her head over the top of box. Hello there. She sided her head so the eye was full on me. Cluck, cluck, Marsdyke's here. More heads popped up. Shut it, chickens, I said, you'll wake her up. Then the cockerel started up. Cock-a-doodle-doo, eh? You barmpot, it's the middle of the bleeding night, some alarm clock you are. But there was no talking to him, perched up on the beam there like a pineapple. Cock-a-doodle-doo, he called again, how many girlfriends do you have, Marsdyke? I've got twenty.

I got out the door sharpish and pulled it shut. Then I stood in the darkness behind the coop and waited for the gabble inside to quiet down as they went back to roost. When I was sure they were all settled and Delton wasn't coming inspecting I opened the door again, just a sliver.

I near took off then, near went home for bed and left Mr Fox to his midnight feast, but I didn't, because there was a chicken by the side the coop that had got out without me seeing. She was fair relaxed, for a runaway, poking in the ground for worms. God had certain wired chickens up nice and simple – switch them on and they look for food, never mind if it's the middle of the night and the fox is on his way. I watched her a moment. If there was one out, the rest would follow soon enough. I was two steps off but she didn't notice me. Some daft bloody chickens you've got here, Delton, and the gnarly smile comes out, you've done it now, Marsdyke, she'll never be warm on you after I tell her about this.

Poke, poke, poke, has anyone seen that worm? I'm sure it was round here someplace, oh, is that yo

Marsdyke? The head pricked on one side, then the other. Have you seen the worm? The fuck I have, I said, get back in the coop. I got behind her and shunted her with my boot. She clucked and fluttered some, and scooted in the door.

I followed her in. The place was at peace now, all snug and yellowish, and she looked up at me. You again, Marsdyke? You've done it now, that's for sure. The rubbery red jowl under her chin was wobbling. I moved toward her and she clocked me with her marble eye. Vermin, you are, nobbut vermin. I was near enough I could see the red rim of her nosehole. First the mushrooms, now this, de me, poke, poke. Fuck you, I said, and I kicked her. She flailed through the air like a torn football. Heads popped up over the boxes but I ignored them and went in for her again. I belted her high this time and she thumped down in the corner where the mouse had been. Straw and feathers floated by my face. She was clucking something desperate now but she couldn't move apart from a shuffle as her wing was broke, hanging limp aside her. A hundred heads looked on, a hubbleshoo of noise starting to get up. I picked up one of the sticks from the pile. She scraffled through the straw away from me, but stepped right up to her till she turned at me and clucked, the jowl wobbling, get off, cluck, cluck, she'll never warm on you now, not after I tell her about this. Fuck you, I said, and took a swing.

There was a crunch as the stick clobbered her head. She lipped up then, but her body jerked about in the straw, so I gave her another hit and this time her head flapped on the side, and I gave her another and it snapped clean off – like knocking the top off a thistle.

I stood a time, and my brain went quiet. I knew there was a noise all about the place for they were out the boxes and the cockerel was back on his beam, but indoors of my head was still. I leant the stick with the others, the damp end bedded into the straw, and I fetched up the body. It was heavy and warm. I tucked it under my arm, trying not to gleg the neck, all stringy red wires like the insides of a cable. It made me want to gip. I'd done it now. Done it, champion. I rooted about in the straw for the head.

The eye glinted up through cusps of golden straw flecked with blood. I picked it up by the beak, then I inspected quickly round the coop to make sure Mr Fox hadn't snuck in. I latched the door up, and bid my riddance. I wasn't mooded for letting him in any more.

I couldn't climb the wall with the body under my arm, so I threw it over first and listened for the thud other side, the head stored in my pocket, for I didn't want to toss it up and lose it in the dark.

I went down by the beck. All burbling water and a wriggly picture of the moon. It would've been postcard down there, a scene like that on a fine, clear night, if there wasn't a head sodding up the insides of my pocket. I buried the body and head together in the soft mud by the water, and I legged it for home.



I kept to the Moors after that. Each afternoon, when I'd filled the troughs or whatever else Father had said, I'd fetch the whelps and go up. I felt peaceable there, once I reached the brow where the Moors lashed out, a million miles of heather and gorse and rock but not a person in sight. The whelps were small enough still I could take them up in the wheelbarrow, though I let Sal ride on my shoulder. She lay there, serious as a soldier, scanning over the land, until I set her down with the others and sprigges of heather towered over them like giant bloody oaks where they gadabouted round.

I could stay up there a stack of hours, lost with myself, nothing to bother me but the slap of wind on my chops – time slowly emptying all thought out my body till I was light as lambs' wool. Except for her. Niggling at my senses. I kept playing the time outside the window when she'd said – who was the farmer, Dad? – only each time I heard her say it I got her voice mixed with a lass off some television programme about a school, even though her voice was nothing similar, far as I could remember. It was daft stewing on a girl like that. I tried to shove her to the back of my skull.

One of them moor days we wandered further out than normal, as far as the bridleway. There was a car parked up aside it. It was tottering in the wind. Likely it'd been junked – town lads sometimes goated about with thieved vehicles up here, because of the vast, and because they were bored off their backsides with canning lager and smashing up phone boxes. I left the whelps digging at the turf and nosed up to the car with my blood racing as I halfway expected a dead body inside. But when I glegged in, it was nothing dead, it was a pale, bare arse bobbing away. A pair of kids humping. I spied in, watching as he bred her, the car rocking with each shunt. Fucking romantic, that, humping on a car seat in the middle of a moor. Hadn't they beds enough down there, they had to come up here in secret. Probably his sister.

I hadn't much of a view with him lying on top – all she had showing was a slop of hair and a shiny pair of knees – so I left them at it. I hadn't much of a care for watching his pimply backside.

You're keeping to the tops a lot, these days, Mum said to me one night.

I am. I'm walking the pups.

You shouldn't be getting too warm on them. They get plenty enough of that in the yard, and you know some'll be for t' bucket.

I didn't quit my wanderings, though. The whelps ran themselves empty each of them afternoons until I brought them back, powfagged, to Jess. Bleeding heck, she'd look up at me, you've fair knackered them out, and she licked them all over with her big scratchy tongue. Don't worry, old girl, I told her, I'm just training them up.

Mum hadn't nothing to worry herself about, neither. There was no trouble for me to start on the

Moors. As long as I was up there, I couldn't be prowling about town or bothering the new family, so didn't know what she was riled for. When I was a bairn I'd kept on the Moors all the time. She'd never been fussed then. I was always up there, them days, messing about with dogs, and sometimes my friend from the school, making fires, rabbit-hunting. Them were good days. Even if I was pot-of-one, it didn't matter – when you're a bairn you can please yourself just digging a big hole in the turf until the water shows through the bottom – hello there, is that a worm? One for the collection – and you don't have to worry about dead chickens, or girls niggling at your senses.

Father told me he needed a stretch of fencing from the hardware store, so I had to forget the Moors one afternoon and take the tractor into town. It was looking like I'd be there a fair while and all, as I queued up behind old calf-head Jackie, listening to him moan on at Dennis Bennett other side the counter.

I'll tell you one thing, and I'd tell t' same to any as'd care to listen.

Go on, Jack, go on.

Well, I will. I'm telling you, I've supped my last in that establishment, for all I might be thirsty.

You do right, Jack, me an' all.

I rested my roll of fencing on the floor. A grand gesture, that was, Dennis Bennett refusing to sup in the Betty, seeing as he never went there anyhow, he drank in the Maypole.

Thirty-three year I've been drinking in that establishment, eh, said Jack. He paused, picturing up all the interesting things had happened during that time. And I wrote t' same on that there petition.

I thought it were just a list of names, the petition?

It was, aye, but I took meself two lines.

Bloody hell.

These were dark days for the old boys in town, certain. The shadows of the cities were sneaking in on both sides of the valley, and there was nothing any of them could do about it but for mawnging, specially now the shadows had met in the centre of town – the Fat Betty. It'd sold for a fair pocket, Father said, and old Jackie could moan and keep me waiting all he liked, he wasn't going to stop them branding the Betty for a chain pub. The brewery already had a string of them down the valley – in Addleston, Lockby and Thorpe Head – the lot of them the same but with a *distinguishing feature*, like a family of inbreds.

Your father ne'er signed petition, eh, Marsdyke? Jack had bought his items and fixed his flappy old face on me.

He doesn't drink in town, I said.

Well, 'e should've signed, all t' same.

He picked up his items – a bag of screws and a saucepan – and buggered out the door, griping quietly into his beard. Daft old sod. He was half asleep most times he was in the Betty. What difference was it to him if they changed the decorations? Likely he was worried the brewery might bring in some other old calf-head with the new carpets and the wine glasses, who'd take over his buff in the corner, mumble into his pint in Jack's place.

Doing some fencing, are you? Dennis Bennett eyed me down his nose. No, I'm making a bleeding cage, for to keep my victims in, what the hell did he think it was for?

I slung the fencing in the back the tractor and, as I didn't much fancy getting home yet, I took a

walk through town. There were plenty of folk about. I didn't recognise many of them, though, as I went down the street, which was fine by me, until it hit me the family might be there and I stopped, looking around, only steadying up when I was sure they weren't near. There were other new families, mind. They all trotted round similar, gawping at the pubs and the hills as if they'd never seen the like. Because they hadn't, probably. Their places were different than this, places with jobs and wealth and land so flat you couldn't hide a gatepost sideways.

Wait on, lad! Wait on!

It was Norman, blustering up behind me, a waxy new Barbour on.

I'm fain glad to see you, I am. I want to ask on yer father. How's he keeping?

He's middlin'.

Grand. Grand. He put a hand on my shoulder. Turnbull and yer father were tight as nuts, weren't they?

They drank together, I said, inching back from the hand. He reeked of Saturday spray, tangling with his more natural reek of cattle-muck.

Get on! They were tighter than ale-partners, them pair. A pair of old rogues together, they were. His cheek bulged a slow wink over his eye. He wasn't a bad type, old Norman. Send my greetings to him, will you, lad? And yer mother too.

I nodded, and watched him cross the street to get in a new motor. A proper fancy one. Why the bugger Norman was sat in it, I didn't know. He was spending some fair brass, somehow, new coat, new car, Father wouldn't be happy.

I was hungry, so I went up the butcher's, my mouth juicing for a steak bake, but I'd forgot it'd been closed down a month since, and when I got there it wasn't the butcher's any more, it was The Green Pepper Deli. I took a look in the window. Last time I'd been here, there were rabbits strung up and bloody hunks of beef dripping on to the counter, but now it was all shiny jars on shelves and a tray of olives pricked with little sticks. Go on – try one. No, thanks, I'd rather get my jaw round a hot steak bake, do you have any of them in your jars? Do you bollocks.

I walked on. That capped it, the butcher's going. There were new shops going up all over, feckless articles no person could use. There was one now just for gift cards, and another that sold bunches of flowers – tall, daft, dangling affairs brought in from York and foreign places, no matter summer was seeping into back-end and the Moors were busting with meadowsweet and red campion.

I could see there was a crowd in the Fat Betty up ahead, because there were drinkers on the pavement and cars parked up both sides the road. Two-faced tykes. Normal times, the Betty was empty for weeks at a stretch, save for Jack chuntering in his corner, but now it was threatened the whole town had crawled out to show their support. They were wasting their time. The Betty was on its way, any with half a brain could tell that. There was a different breed to cater for now – this gawping lot from the cities with their fancy jars. The rambling class. Young folk hadn't brass enough to buy houses here any more, so they were sloping off, and all that left was the old-timers. Them that weren't for selling up sandbagged themselves in their homesteads for the remains of their time, and died with their chop in a sulk. This house hasn't left our family for near four generations, you know. As if the city folk gave a stuff for any of that. They were rubbing their hands waiting for the old-timers to clog it. Probably had themselves a phone hotline set up – how's old Elsie Metcalf's Parkinson's at the

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