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Butcher's Perfume

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LATER, WHEN I knew her better, Manda told me how she'd beaten two girls at once outside the Cranemakers Arms in Carlisle. She said all you had to do was keep hold of one, keep hold of one and keep hitting her. No matter what the other was doing to you, you kept that first one pinned, and you kept hammering her, so the free-handed bitch could see you were able to take a flailing and still have her mate at the same time. It'd get into the lass's head then, Manda said, what it would be like when the mate got put down, and you went to batter her next without a silly dog on your back making you slow. Chances were you wouldn't have to fight them both. And if you did, that second one would be so fleart from you being still upright after her best, undefended go, she'd forget any moves she knew.

Manda was fiercer than all of us. It had nothing to do with her size – it never does with

girls, for the willowy tall ones are often gentle as you like. Manda was small – maybe five foot two. She wasn't squat either, not pelvic, or thick with glands and brawn. It was in her eyes. She had eyes that got set off easily, like a dog chained up all its life and kicked about, prone to attack for no other provocation than it catches you looking its way. All you can do is pray the chain holds at the stake. And it was in her brain. She didn't have a switch in there that stopped her from pulling back her fist, like the rest of us. That's why we were all afraid of her. That's why her name went before her – Amanda Slessor – and if you heard it said in a room you felt ill at ease, you felt things shift out of the way for its coming into the conversation. Everyone knew she was hard. It was the first thing ever they knew about her. It was her pedigree.

People said she was raised to it, with that family of hers. There was a lot of arrogance and expectation mixed up in the Slessors. They were known for prison sentences, and pig-iron money that built them a big house above the town's industrial estate. They had reputations for fertility at every age, for a seed that always took, and a womb that always produced – thirteen and virgin to those traveller grandmothers suckling at fifty. The town thought it understood their cause – they'd been forged from the old rage of the North, it was said. They were not drovers or

farmers, nor the quiet settlers of the Borders. They came from gipsy stock, scrappies, dog- and horse-breeders, fire-mongers.

These were the ones that lit the beacons when other folk hid in cellars and down wells. They smeared offal on their chests and waited at the citadel with their bearded hounds for the Scots. These were the ones who took trophy heads and played football with them in the streets. They had Pictish hearts that allied with an enemy for the sake of avoiding slaughter, but never forgot the original blood of their tribe. And a generation on, at the turning of the Solway tide, there would be a reckoning. The men would take up arms. The women would braid boars' hair into their own. They'd murder their infants birthed to the off-coming sires. Where does history end, we were once asked in school.

'With the Muslims,' some clever-arse shouted.

You may as well ask where true north begins.

The father, Geordie Slessor, went about town like the next in line for the throne, beating the Duke of Edinburgh every year at the local horse driving trials with a trap team of Heltondale Fells reared from his own Entires. Come June you'd see him practising along the roads, green-Barboured, leaning back from the reins. He was gristle right through to the bone. The brothers

were fighters too, the three of them, and they all had the same eyes as Manda, got from their gipsy mam: healthy blue, polished up to a high gleam, and set against bad skin. Manda was the sole daughter and she had her own tough clave quality that went beyond family; something not inherited, something made perfectly for hitting off another surface. You'll think me a daft mare for saying that. But sometimes there's strange beauty up here. It's found in deep cut places. It's found in the smoke off the pyres and the pools on the abattoir floor.

Past their notoriety I knew nothing of the Slessors. When I went to the secondary school all I had to go by was common judgment and the air rucking up at the sound of their name. I was late for catching my bus home when I first came across Manda's group. The last bell had cleared the yard, except for a ring of girls by the playground wall, hair short and stiff, skirts high on their thighs. Their heels were scuffling and scraping on the tarmac. They'd got Donna Tweddle alone, tracked her down after a week's tortuous promise of some retribution, for whatever reason she'd offended them: brains, looks, a boy. Manda was holding her by the throat and Donna drooped like rabbit-skin, like carrion. Her jaw was working up and down as she cussed. She knew her way round language I'd only heard outside the bookies or on building sites, things I'd only heard grown

men say before. She was loud in what she was doing, but she was bonny in it too.

'You're a lajful little tuss,' she told the girl in her grip. 'Aren't you?'

Her face wasn't pretty and smiling the way lads like girls' faces to be. Manda had her good features, those clear firedog eyes among them, and a heavy chest at fifteen, but that wasn't it. What she was doing suited her, and she was lit up, the way someone plain looks better when they sing, when suddenly it seems they have bright colours under a dull wing.

The girl was strung up against the pebbledash. I don't know if she'd tried to rail against the attack or to reason, but now she was holding still. Then Manda delivered a slap to her face. It was already aflame from her panic-blush, but the clean leather crack of that hand marked it scarlet. There was no real damage done. Manda waited until Donna began to cry, and at that point the viciousness left her. She scratched a place under her chin, letting go of the girl's neck as she did so, as if she'd lost interest in finishing the lass off. As if she couldn't be bothered. The brightness left her. Until that point she'd been full of glister. The girls in the group laughed and sang a last threat or two to Donna. Then their attention turned.

I'd stopped walking. I hadn't hurried away as I should have done, given such a situation. Manda Slessor faced me too. I was in her year at school

but she didn't know me. I was a middle-row sitter, a nondescript. I thought she might shove me over or shoulder past. She did push others standing around her after she was done brawling, if they weren't on her side, if the temper was still in her. She saw me looking. I knew I shouldn't be, but I couldn't help it; I couldn't help thinking how bright she'd seemed. Her eyes curtsied quickly up and down, taking me in, a head to toe look in less than a second that said she didn't particularly like what she saw but it was no offence to her. I could feel the air all around, its softness, and in it the two of us were free to move. Her mascara was smudged in the corners from the day's wear. Her eyes were dark petrol blue, oily and volatile, ready to flare up and burn again. But they didn't ignite. She picked her canvas tote up off the ground and walked right past me.



I spent time up at the Slessors' house: *Nine Chimneys* it was called. I spent time with the family, after school and on weekends, whenever I could, because I didn't want to stay out in the village I was from with my dad being moody and nobody else my age. How it all came about I couldn't exactly say. The friendship was suddenly there one day, slightly askew in the beginning, like a sapling on the verge, then stronger and

straighter. Maybe I was just someone she didn't get into a lock with, and that meant we weren't enemies. Or maybe she saw something she liked that day in the yard. She saw my admiration.

One day she caught me watching her eat a packet of crisps, licking salt off her fingers, and she blew me a kiss across the canteen as if she thought I fancied her. She could be daft and funny that way. Then we ended up sitting together in class. It was engineered under the impatience of our history teacher, who got fed up with Manda's constant giggling and barracking alongside goggle-eyed Stacey Clark on the back row. There was a space by me, with Rebecca Wilson being off poorly, and Manda got shifted.

'Would you sit there and behave, please, Amanda,' Ms. Thompson instructed her, three times, each one louder and a little more desperate.

After tutting in the mardy fashion of a criminal playing victim, she screeched her chair out from under the desk and stalked over to my table. I got to see her eyes up close for the first time, and they were what my Grandad would have called 'ower glisky' – bright after the rain. She looked long at me. I knew it could go either way between us then. When you pen two animals in at short quarters they'll either take to each other and settle into company or they'll set to, gnashing and bucking.

Manda leaned over, clutching her pen tight

and far down its stem, like a little kiddy would hold it, and she drew an inky scribble on the open page of my exercise book. So I put a scrawl back on hers. I did it without pausing – tit for tat. I saw she had a little heart carved into her wrist from a compass point, a thing which only the hailest girls did. The scratch bloomed yellow-red, like a septic rose against her skin. Half way through the lesson her biro ran out and she selected another from my pencil-case without asking. She put it back when she was done.

Something was granted to us afterwards. We were past simply knowing the name of the other and what form we were in. We were allowed to say *Hiya* in passing, in front of our other friends, at the gates of the school, or in Castletown going down to the chippy or the arcade. Not that Manda needed permission for her friendships. She spoke to all manner of folk that were ordinarily off limits to the rest of us: the older, knotty-armed working lads who drove spoiled cars through town on their lunchbreaks and knew her brothers to drink with; the owner and dealers of Toppers nightclub, and the tall, tanned girls who served at the bar there and trod that fine line between being queens and sluts with their reputations for giving good sex, bent over counters after closing time. Inside the old Covered Market, Manda spoke cheekily to the sheepskin-jacketed gents from Carlisle racecourse, as if they were her uncles, and they might have been her uncles.

And there was her mam's lot, the foreign cousins who came to the driving trials from Ireland, Scotland or Mann, and brought with them piebald cobs, fiddles, rumours about filched electronics, litter and un-fettled debts. The town banged on and on about their arrival each year, half of it discrimination, half superstition from a century before. How they were rainmakers and crop-ruiners. How they had curses or the Evil-Eye. How they crossed the Border at night to the peal of the Bowness bells, said to ring out from their wath grave in the Solway when robbers were around, blah blah. Manda stepped into their loud circles and blagged cigarettes and gossiped and got invited to their hakes. She put up with nobody saying within earshot they were dirty potters and pikes.

No grand treaty was needed for her to know me. There came a day when I walked with her and a small crowd downtown for a gravy butty at dinnertime. I was standing near them in the cloakroom waiting for Rebecca to meet me, all of us putting on our coats and ratching in our purses for coins. Her face was dark inside the lum-pool of her hood, and she said,

'Come along on with us if you like, Kathleen.'

'What have you asked her for,' one of the others rasped.

'Because I'm fed up with your ugly mugs,' Manda replied.

She and I walked together with linked arms from the Agricultural Hotel to the bottom of Little Dockray. Who isn't looking at us, I thought, and my heart was going at two-time.

The next month I was one room away while she got laid by a friend of the family – a jockey, who was married with kids. She reported back that he had a prick the size of Scafell and his come had run down her leg. Six weeks after that I sat with her in the clinic while she took two pills for her abortion, and I held her shoulders while she was sick. She said the nurse had told her not to look when she went to the bathroom, but she had looked down into the bucket by her feet. It wasn't like period clots, just a ball of tubes. She said no bloody way was her Mam ever to hear of it because her Mam would've wanted the babby kept.



Nine Chimneys was not the house of a rag-and-bone family. The grime of cart-claimed money had been swept back a generation by the Slessors branching out into carpets, property, equestrian prowess. Their travellers' heritage was easily remembered in a town which never forgot former status, but they'd grafted a fortune which made them untouchable by recession, competition, the bitter regional snobbery. The building was low and sprawling. It was almost a mansion except that it

looked more like a Yankee ranch, with wooden interiors and a veranda. It had no business being built in Cumbria, one spit off the National Park boundary, and must have been forced past the council planners in the late seventies when the family was in its ascendancy, for it duffed all the local planning laws. There were paddocks front and back of the house for the horses, and slated stables off one wing of the property. Occasionally you could smell the beefy stench of Wildriggs abattoir wafting over from the industrial estate.

Inside there were too many bathrooms to count – I was always scared I'd go in a wrong door – and pungent utility rooms where the Doberman and the Mastiff were kept. There was a sauna and a game room. Everywhere were hung ornately framed pictures of champion breeds, red ribbons indicating the annual royal downfall in the territory, brass reminders of the family sport. There was a long drive up to the house from the Kemplar roundabout and all alongside it were those glistening, hardy ponies, made stout by the gradient of fells, made tame at The Wall by the Romans, and now made fast by the leading reins of the Slessors.

Everybody thought it was Manda's dad who was the horse expert. And with his mule-neck and muscles straining as he bullied them across the beck at Appleby fair, they had no reason not to think it. Geordie was a master of saddlery. He wasn't well respected by the rest of the nation's

breeders, the manor house owners and Range-Rover drivers, and that ritted him deeply, but they still came to him for advice and opinion on their steeds, they still bought his stock. He was always interviewed by the regional news-stations after the trophies were won; his yellow Rolls Royce parked prominently behind him. And though he had no right by birth or blood ever to own a car like that, he commanded the cameras in its direction, like it was the golden spoils of a chor shown off by a thief who knew cock to collar he would never get caught.

But it was Vivian Slessor that I saw bringing stubborn geldings into the stables with brobbs of fennel, in the old way of northern handlers. Her crop was seldom used when she rode. Though her racing and rutting knowledge was lesser professionally, as a horse-handler she was somehow greater than Geordie – for her intimacy and charm, her hands working the tender spots behind the creatures' ears to quieten them. Geordie looked to her as his official bonesetter when a horse was damaged, rather than ringing the vet and being billed. He stood back as she bound up a foreleg with sorrel. One windy, mizzling day in April, Vivian Slessor first got me up into the saddle – on a gorgeous chestnut mare too big and blustered for someone of my size and inexperience. She softly talked and tutted as she led us round the paddock in the gale, and I wasn't

sure if she was scolding the horse for cross stepping or scolding me for bad posture. At the gap-stead of the field she unclipped the horse's rein.

'Gan on,' she said, and slapped its rump. 'Heels down, Kathleen.'

She was the one who fed the dogs at night and cured illness in the beings under her care. She was like that with her children too. She tended to them without complaint, with a kind of haughty devotion. The old man shouted at the hooligan lads to fucking grit down when they wrestled too near his showcase. He beat them for their cheek and backchat. But Vivian let them tussle and scrap for as long as it took them to thrash it out, until their raised blood got settled. She cleared up after them, wadded lint for the busted noses, collected the smashed plates strewn about the dining room floor. From time to time she stood in court, in her tweed tack-suits and silk scarves, defending an accused son with that pure stare of hers. She had a gannan pride that told the judge he could never undo what she had instilled in her brood, that all the laws of the town, the curfews and fines, the borstal and jail time, mattered not.

But when she did light out towards her own in anger she damaged them badly. Not a one of them ever fought back the way the boys challenged Geordie for supremacy, on and off, if the chance came to them. She could turn loose a blue

cruelty, and perhaps they all realised she was capable not least of murder. If she backed up her husband, an argument was immediately lost.

‘Get out and sarra them hosses,’ he might say to Aaron or Rob, lazy with whisky, from his armchair in the corner.

The lad in question would chunter on about watching the footie match, hating Geordie’s cocksure orders. A squabble would loom. Then Vivian Slessor would brush a hand lightly down the back of her son’s head and he’d rise up and put on his boots and go to the stables. It was a household of managed tension, and she was at its core. Vivian had a liking for modern things; kitchen appliances, music centres, cars; the sauna was built because she wanted scorching coals without having to go to a public gym. But she was a superstitious woman. Once I saw her take a set of metal tongs from the hearth and beat her eldest across his back for fumbling with her glass Luck. There was some old almanac to her world I didn’t understand – belief in plant lore, ritual and sign, maybe some part of it Romany. Come Allhallows she hung doobby stones in the byres to keep the animals safe. She’d put up the roof of her convertible in clear blue skies if there’d been a kessen moon the night before. And she was careful where she’d allow the horse trailers to be parked in a town for the common ridings – never on a gallows hill, which was forbidden, though

the horses were allowed to graze there.

I was fascinated to see the parents together. My mother had died when I was eight and my dad never had another woman in his life, so it was an unusual thing, adult intimacy. There was something out of balance in the cottage where I lived, something steeply-slanted. My dad had more heaviness to him than in just his arms and legs and the big belly where he rested his glass after dinner. But he was light compared to my mother's leftovers; her wardrobe of sour-smelling clothes, the elasticated jam-jars and dusty talcums. When I lay in bed at night and heard him grizzling I could feel the building pitch, trying to upend itself, and I'd brace my feet against the bottom of the bed.

The Slessors were even-weighted and indestructible. They'd paired by feral instinct, like wolves among us. If either of them stepped outside the marriage to a different bed – and there were those who gossiped about Geordie's liking for young stable hands, his chance bairns – then it did not threaten the union. They had produced between them three boys and a girl, all fit, all feisty. And there was a sense there might have been more, they had it in them still, he at almost seventy, she at almost fifty. The children bound them, but the two had bindings before, and bindings after. They belonged in the pairing. Even when you saw them singly in the house or

around town you knew there must be another half, a mate. Neither went into it for money, for when they began courting there was none. Vivian had owned one dress that would serve for the wedding. All Geordie possessed were a few tons of salvaged pipe and lead shingle.

For all his anger and brash, I never saw him raise a hand to his wife. He could have tried to brutalize her, the way he rode roughshod over everything else in life until it obeyed or broke. But he adored her, this rectifying woman. And he would, in any case, have met his match. He knew it. And moreover she knew it. If the man feared anything, it was his wife's genes, her cuntish atoms. I used to watch as she diced up chicken – the knife would slice and slice, clear of her fingertips, but she'd be watching him as he poured his scotch. Though he'd likely never been near a history book in his life, it was as if Geordie Slessor knew the old region's legacy of women riding alongside men up to the Border, their babies twined across their backs in sacking. She would have taken those fists into her soft flesh, and even worn his black temper on her face in public for a while. Then in the night she would have slit him wide-open, balls to bellybutton. She would've stemmed the blood with secret plant medicine, a draft to make the red come slower, and given him the guttings of his prize colt in exchange for his own liver. Or she'd have granted

him something from her domestic realm of keeping the big house; a dinner of ground glass, meat frozen and thawed repeatedly, bannock of foxglove.

She was a handsome woman. Her brow was crosshatched, but lively. Years before she'd had gorgeous tumbling locks, brown and gleaming in their wedding photographs. Perhaps it had thinned or greyed, for she now wore the unwilling bob of a woman proud for most of her life of her hair's beauty, and she'd still sweep it back, invisibly, off her shoulders. Manda got her full chest from her Mam. Vivian was voluptuous, but bone-sculpted at her collar and her jaw. Men opened doors for her. And it was obvious when Geordie wanted her, for he made no game of it, he did not care who witnessed his desire. He'd come at her and grasp her waist. He might even have lifted up her skirts were she not to take it upon herself at these moments to move them both into a private space. Even then their sounds could be heard. After they were done they'd come back into the room easily, unashamed. Everyone knew when they were at it – *Nine Chimneys* took on a different atmosphere. The smell of the horse sweat grew gamier. The boys became edgy and would take to drinking or baiting the dogs. Manda turned up the stereo.

But it was their tender moments that intrigued me most, the brisk expressions of what I took to be love, that would have been mistaken

for ordinary occurrences or arguments by anyone not watching them as hard as I watched. Him pulling a spelk out of her hand, pinning her to the table with an elbow and twisting her arm behind her so she couldn't pull away while he doctored her. Him shouting at her from the car window for walking behind a reversing trailer.

'Blind bloody bint!' he spluttered. But it was panic in his voice, not anger.

And I saw her take out her husband's cock and hold it when he came home so drunk from the rugby club that he started to piss himself in the porch of *Nine Chimneys*.

Of the two of them I preferred her, and this surprised me because older women could make me uncomfortable and often I wouldn't know what to talk to them about. But I would have eaten out of her hand without much fuss. Geordie, in a good mood, would flirt with me, and that I could take as acceptance of a kind, mortifying though it was.

'Look at the lass, she's full up, is she not,' he'd say, when Manda and I dressed to go out on a Friday night.

Vivian often said nothing when I was in the room, but she'd sing songs with my name in.

'Maybe I'll go down and see Kathleen,
A swallow comes and tells me of her dreams.
Soon I'm gonna see my sweet Kathleen.'



Mostly when we went out it was around town, between the pubs, wherever Manda thought she might catch sight of a lad she was interested in. Sometimes, if one of her brothers didn't mind us coming with him on a delivery or to a gig, we went to the city of Carlisle. It was always a mad trip up, with stupid steering and breakneck overtaking, because the lads loved speed. They loved it on horseback, motorbikes, skis; any vehicle they could make accelerate to flatten their brains against their skulls.

There were two main roads from town – the old toll road, and the Roman, which was nearly disused and cut past the wither of Carrock Fell. And there was the M6. It was a deserted piece of motorway – the last run before Scotland, so it felt like everything was petering out.

I'd sit rammed up against the window, my cheek pressed coldly against it, holding the seatbelt tight across my chest. Manda fought for control of the radio dials while one of her brothers drove. Usually it was Aaron, who would shoot the cambers as if he was on a private racetrack. We crossed that hinterland as people still do now, and they always have done, and they likely always will, regardless of police traps and cameras – moving flat out, at reckless speeds, as if being pursued.

I hated all the passages up to the city; that eerie twenty-five minute slew. Something always seemed to be at our backs along there. This was the original badlands you were taught in school, if you didn't already know. You wouldn't want to linger. You wouldn't want to be caught alone, moving slow and obvious in the lowland. This was where the raiders met, coming south or north. This was burnt-farm, red-river, raping territory. A landscape of torn skirts and hacked throats, where roofs were oiled and fired, and haylofts were used to kipper children. And if you rolled down the window you could just about hear it – the alarms and cackling flames, women split open and screaming as their men-folk choked on sinew pushed down their gullets. The houses in the Borders, if they weren't fortified, were temporary, made of spit and cattle shit and wattle, easy to dismantle, because when the Reivers came you either held fast behind eight hewn feet of rock, or you packed up and ran.

The van leaned hard round chicanes, forcing my cheekbone to the glass, with Aaron singing away to the Roses. Manda seemed fearless on the ride. She seemed to trust the run of things. But I imagined terrible events – wrecks and busted spleens. Adrenalin cleaved my brain wide open, and the giversum old county clambered in. It was said by trainers that up here the gentlest horse could nostril the smoulder of years gone by, taste

clinker and burnt skin on the haunted vaults, and it might rear and toss its rider. And for all the Roman straightness, cars would often overturn. There were countless corners where wreaths were laid. Even my dad, normally sedate behind the wheel, leaned hard on the accelerator with his mucky welly through these stretches, not checking the rear-view mirror. He'd fail to indicate when moving lanes; swerve hard as the Land Rover was swiped by gusts from the Pennines. Long-distance drivers, returning home to London and Birmingham, Stafford and Manchester, would often find franked letters from the Cumbrian Police, with points for their license and a hefty fine, and they couldn't quite fathom why they were clocked going over ninety.

Several occasions Aaron Slessor almost killed us driving to Carlisle, and on every one I hated him a bit more. He kept the music loud and ignored us, except for the odd glance at my legs now and then. He went after hares on the tarmac, terrorized other motorists by sitting on their bumper until they moved out of his way. He'd take the back road along the moors, by the Caldew river, brackish as old copper, because it was straight and hummocked and he could try to get all four wheels of the van off the ground. He dropped me home late after each trip, where my dad would be asleep on the sofa with the telly turned low. Aaron didn't complain about ferrying

me to and fro, he seemed just to like the drive, the fords and hairpins through the villages. Once or twice he'd ask for a kiss as I was getting out and I'd shove him back and say get lost.

'You're pretty enough to lick out,' he'd say. 'Stop being spooky.'

At nineteen he was the youngest of the Slessor lads, and he'd an almighty chip on his shoulder about that, a desire to be the belted champion in the family. Geordie never got weak enough in his later years not to batter him. If anything he brayed him all the harder – the old family bull recognising his prize fighting days were close to over. That his youngest son took less interest in the horses than the others, while driving the Heltondales tighter on each racecourse's slalom, riled him no end.

'Gudfernobbut twat,' he called his son. 'Runty mutt. You'll amount to fuck all in this life, except laying rugs round fucking bogs.'

Amateur brawlers from the town sought Aaron out, because it was said that to beat him in a fight was to take title over the town. He'd left school not a day after hitching sixteen, and started work at the carpet outlet. He was a looker, with the royal swagger of his old man. I'd seen him go to work on a lass. He had the ability to cut through what little pride she had, to strip her of common sense and condition her to waiting by the phone, waiting outside a pub in the rain,

waiting for the characteristic bastard's alba a few weeks later when he'd got bored – telling her she had a dry quim, old biddy skin, fat belly, or spots on her arse and that's why he no longer fancied her.

Nor was he discreet about his conquests. The details of them – the gasps, the games and sexual proclivities – were the chatter of the town for weeks after. How it had been in a horse-trailer and she'd knelt in fresh shit to suck him off. How he'd had her right after her sister in the same evening, a double-dipper. So that his circle of friends had the knowledge of any of his exes they needed before asking them out. And Aaron would occasionally revisit them, Friday nights, if something interested him enough in a bare leg or split-skirt, a new look, a haircut. And they'd let him.



It wasn't common that I stayed home. They liked company, the Slessors. They liked having noise and new faces about them. I never felt unwelcome. But the summer after I got to know Manda my father started to notice me being gone. And he said it was a shame, him losing my Mam and now me. The guilt made me hang around for most of the holidays, even though he was out rounding and clipping all day, the house was too chill for the season and it made me fidgety. In the

mornings I'd phone up Manda, or she'd phone me.

'Oh bugger Kathleen, can't you come in?' she's say. 'I'm lonely. I'm going to get some new lippy. Fine, alright, ta-rah.'

Then I'd go walking along a scrubby lonning in the village and up the Scar, knowing she'd soon be off into town, having a good time with someone else. From the summit I could see the beacon in the distance, trains dribbling down the mainline, and the ponds of the trout fishery glimmering. On the way home I'd pass by a dilapidated farm, littered with rusting metal-seated tractors, derricks and machinery, tarpaulin strewn about in the yard. The owner of the place was a right bastard, everyone said. He could be heard in the evening yelling obscenities at his dogs and throwing their bowls at them. There'd be howls and yips and yelps. He had any number of hounds and Collies, all rangy and greasy, and half-mad with the frustration you see in workers not put to the flocks.

The farm lay just past a dolt of brambles; I'd pass it after coming through the thorny lane, un-snagging my jeans with a twist of the hips every other step, my arms held overhead. It smelled of Swarfega and slurry, dirt and iron, and something sick, like industry and arable wrongly mixed. The man was known in our village for his bad treatment of animals, though he didn't keep

many past the dogs, a handful of bantams, and the occasional pony or scabby penned-in pig. No one reported him to the RSPCA, for doubtless then they'd have to look into their own barns.

But one morning, near the holiday's end, I was walking past the farm's corrugated shed and I noticed the door was open. Usually it was shut and chained, with a thick trestle leaning against it. There was a dead horse lying on the ground between the metal cattle chocks. The ground was slick yellow-brown, like concrete covered in piss and diarrhoea. I stepped closer, in under the gable, and a stink rose.

A shaft of sunlight lit the horse's body. The thing was a mess, shorn of its coat, with sores under its legs and keds crawling all over it. Its ribcage angled up through its flesh like the frame of a boat being dismantled. It had not stood for a long time for its hooves had twisted into thick discoloured spirals, like the nails of a Chinese emperor. For a moment I stood, stupidly looking at the creature. My brain began to flurry. It had not stood for a long time. It had lived on the floor; its hooves not wearing down from grazing and cantering like a properly upright creature. It had lived as it starved.

I took another step in and the horse snorted and moved. It lifted its head and rump together, tamping its torso down on the ground as if meaning to get up, and as it struggled its hooves

clicked together and scraped on the floor like flints. It snorted out a pink foam that was lathered in its nostrils, and dragged its back legs again. Click-click. Then it was still.

I cast my eyes around for a pot of water, a blanket, some feed, and saw nothing of any use or comfort. I knew the farmer might be in the bothy, or bent in a shadow nearby, for the shed door would not have been open otherwise, but I couldn't see him. The horse lay unmoving again, as good as gone.

'It's alright, girl,' I whispered, to myself, or to the animal, I wasn't sure which.

Then I walked away. And then I ran.

With every stride, gall rose in me against the man. A dead horse I could have taken. I'd seen much worse – lambs stumbling on the howse, their eyes and arseholes pecked out by the crows, hinds and heads stacked up inside the abattoir. A dead horse was not a problem. But I couldn't stomach a foully living one. My heart harried my blood as I ran. I pulled myself on through the blackthorn, tearing my arms off the burrs without untangling them. My mouth seemed filled with salt and seeds and pellets, though I tried again and again to spit them out along the path.

This farmer had driven one wife to alcohol, Valium, and public breakdowns, and finally a bathtub overdose, it was said. The second had died after falling into the silo. Neglect. Suicide, maybe.

But a patient killing in a reeking shed? No. A wife could up and walk away. She wasn't starved. Her feet weren't bound. This rotted, lying-down horse was worse than anything I'd known. It was something from a middle-forest fairytale, where the dark branches lift and in a clearing is Knife-Hand-Nick, his children's heads bubbling in a pot above the fire. It was like meeting Nelly Wood in your dreams, when she stitches your skin to the hem of her cloak and flies away, dragging your pelt behind her, so in the morning you wake up flayed.

I stopped in the briar and leant over and was sick.

By the time I got back to the village I was patch-worked with bramble gashes, and blood was dripping off my elbows. In my head I could still hear the skeltering hooves, scraping and clicking and scraping on the ground. I thought I'd go to the top field and tell my dad to fetch the vet. I thought I'd go into the house, take the shotgun from its rack above the mantle and kill the horse myself, or kill the man, or kill them both. But, like a reprieve, the blue Slessor van was parked outside the Fox and Pheasant, by the village green, and I saw Aaron climbing back inside from a delivery, or a pint, whatever reason he'd been there. He rolled the window down as I walked up.

'Now then, Kathleen. What have you done

to yourself, you daft tuss?’ he asked, looking me over.

‘Nothing. Just come with me will you,’ I said, and he laughed.

‘Aye, aye.’

‘It’s not a joke, Aaron. Come with me now. Please. I really want you to.’

He tucked his bottom lip under his teeth and had me stand there against the blue bore of his eyes. Then he opened the door and climbed down out of the van. Maybe he came for curiosity about the blood on my arms, already drying in black gobs from the summer heat. Or for the chance his sister’s friend would let him move her knickers to one side, like he’d been after for weeks. Or maybe it was my tone, the bite of it, for I’d never spoken so assuredly to him before. Any other day I’d have been ignored, or he’d have flustered me with a tease. But he followed me through the ginnel, calling me a dippy bint, complaining he’d torn his shirt on the briar, and saying it better be worth it.

When we got to the corrugated shed the door was closed up and trestle-jammed again.

‘Give us a hand shifting this.’

‘Dirty little spot you’ve got in mind,’ he said. ‘You’re a surprise, girly.’

I was shaking as we moved the timber, and breathing hard. He must have thought I’d become a lunatic, some lusty version of the girl he’d seen

knocking about his house so many times. When I pulled the metal latch off its snick he put his hand on my back and gripped my vest into a ball of cloth, un-tucking it from my jeans. He stepped in close behind me and held my hips.

I pulled opened the door. The sun had moved over a bit and it was dark inside, all spooled with shadow. The smell was throaty and rank, like something from a tannery, or a dog pound before the cages are hosed.

'There,' I said, 'can you see it?'

'Oh, in a minute you know I will.'

He pulled me back harder against him, one arm belted across my stomach, one hand at the zip of my jeans. There was a pause. In my ear I heard a grating sound, like a piece of machinery slipping its driving gear. Aaron let go. He stepped round in front of me. Then he turned and drove me backwards out of the building, his palm splayed on my breastbone, pressing my nipple in painfully. I tripped on the concrete slab behind and went down.

'Fuck off.'

I looked up and he was standing above, his face in a twist, looking kiltered as if to hit me.

'Fuck off home, Kathleen. It's not your business, this. It's not your concern.'

'Get. The fuck. Away,' he said. 'Go on! Now!' His bicep jumped.

I stood and stumbled off, thinking myself so

horribly soft-minded, and only then did I feel my eyes begin to speckle and sting. I waited for him inside our cottage, with my cheek on the cold larder wall. I waited. But he didn't come. When I looked out of the upstairs window the carpet van had gone.

The next week I heard nothing at all from Manda. When I phoned the house Vivian said she was out and she said it in a tone that made me not inclined to ask anything else. Manda never phoned back. I stayed indoors. When I walked it was in the other direction to the farm.

The summer went on, and then it ended. By then I was sure they all must have taken against me for what had happened, for my babyish behaviour, and that was my worst fear. I thought about those times Manda had fought someone; the wet sound of knuckles against cartilage; the rows of double stitches required above her victim's eyebrows after she was done.

I took the first few days of the new term off sick, though I had no fever and my dad suspected it. Then I worried this would make it worse. I imagined Sharon Kitchen and Stacey Clark huddled round Manda before registration like rooks on their desks, cawing in her ear that I was always a too-clever bitch, or they'd heard I'd called her a slag, and she should pull me down a peg or two. I knew all some girls needed as an excuse to start hating you was your absence, your lack of defence.

On my first day back she came to find me in the cloakroom. She stood next to me, the old group hovering by the door. I kept my eyes down. I heard her say my name. Then I felt her fingers digging in under my ribs to make me squirm.

'No you don't,' she said as I twitched away. 'Where've you been, you silly cow? Off shagging some mucky farmer?'

When I looked at her she had a big smirk going. I knew she was pleased to see me.

'Right. Come on,' she said, putting her arm round my shoulders. 'Think we better have a quiet word – it's been pande-bloody-monium. Get lost the rest of you. Ah, shit it, there's the bell! Meet you at twelve.'

That lunchtime, in the bandstand in the park, Manda told me what had happened. Aaron had rung up their brothers from the Pheasant, and they'd come, because they always did come when it was put to them they had a duty. They'd searched the vicinity for the ratchety farmer – Malcolm Miller was his name. She said the lads knew the fellow marginally anyway from the cockfights in the pits near Greystoke, and he was a sly git, so it was no trouble to them. They'd strung him up in the shed by his feet and cut the bastard with a riding crop right through to the putty in his spine. He was in Newcastle Infirmary, she said, not expected to walk again.

I searched her face for some sign of

disturbance, and saw nothing favourable. Her eyes were that glisky blue, all bad charm and cheek.

'I thought you already knew,' she said. 'Thought you were just being canny and swinging wide. We've had the police up at the house about a million times. But it's just his word.'

Manda took my arm as she always did. We walked through the park gates down into town, past the sandstone terraces and castle tower. She talked about the parties I'd missed that summer, the fairs and driving trials, and asked if I'd had any lads properly yet.

'No,' I said.

'Well, what you bloody waiting for? Or do you want Aaron to do the deed. Urgh.'

As we walked I thought about the man, lying lame in a hospital bed.

'What about the horse?' I asked.

Manda shrugged. Her attention was on the construction site across the road. A builder in a red checked shirt whistled from the scaffolding. She blew him a kiss.

I knew if it'd been any other animal inside that barn, the Slessors would not have intervened. They wouldn't have done it for the kicked-about hounds. And they didn't do it for me. There was nothing sentimental to the family, nor could they be hired like mercenaries. It was simply the family's creed. It was luck, if such a thing could be so called. To slow-butcher a horse was an

offence great enough it could not pass. Their spurs were buckled on and used accordingly.

'Mam says you've to come for your tea next week,' Manda said to me as we headed back up to school. 'The hornies will have gone by then and she'll take you riding. She's got a new pony for you. And you'll never guess what she's called it. Sweet Kathleen.'