

Salvage

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HORN OF PLENTY lurks by the path, its cracking black trumpet emerging from the leaf litter. Patches of clear ground struggle as the tangled grass takes hold again; you follow its line until all that is left is the rich smell of decay. In the dense part of the wood you hear rumbling; something is burrowing beneath the sinking ground and it will emerge if only you keep quiet long enough. But long enough is forever and your breath is catching up with you.

The hut in the clearing is painted blue, and underneath the blue it has flaked to watery yellow. And white, crumbling white. A bucket sits two steps high, overflowing with White Shield bottles, damp labels peeling; and Johnny Walker, all empties; and a coil of thick blue washing line that can't be cut, three pairs of grey school shorts have turned white from hanging there so long. Someone had said he'd seen the brown beer bottles full of blood, but they were empty now. Just a dribble of beer, mixed with rainwater. You can see a man with a black beard inside, eyebrows wild and tangled, eyes flashing every time his head turns. His face is picked out by the light of something hidden, the tremblings maybe of a candle, and he talks, shouts, at an imaginary person, or rehearses an argument for the evening, taking both sides. The argument goes on forever in silence.

Last time you'd taken fright, seeing those bottles, hearing his shouting.

The path from the road into the woodland was darker, and every time your family drove past on the B road your

grandmother would look into the black wood and say, as if for the first time, 'That would be a good place to bury a body,' and you would all groan.

You heard the voices as your feet crunched leaves on the path, voices that whispered to you to turn back: 'Don't follow us.' But they were only voices in the ground beneath, and no-one listened to them. There were ructions in the soil, as if a life had been about to break through, but changed its mind.

On the ridge you could see the motorway where a lorry had pushed half into the grass embankment. The back was open and a gang of kids emerged with white boxes, triumphantly flinging candles and soap into the air, onto the tarmac. Or down the grass embankment as far as they could. A siren sounded, and in the approach of the flashing blue light the kids disappeared. As if they were never there. The police car paused beside the lorry before shooting off, light flashing but silent.

The back of that lorry was a dark, black box that contained anything you could imagine; if you slid down the slope and made sure you hid. Kept an eye open for police cars. Sometimes unmarked. They put their hands in but the good stuff was always just out of reach. When they were done, there were blackberries and small sweet apples on the tree by the path.

You watched them. In the distance.

And they said that he'd give you beer if you were there in the afternoon. He would stand at the gate holding two bottles, but only one opened, saying nothing, waiting. You just had to take him a gift, something he needed, living in a hut in the woods. Soap and candles. But if he needed them so much where did the beer come from? Where did he get all that stuff in the hut?

You never knew anyone who'd been there before for definite except the McGuire twins and they were tough and fought like tigers until Sam threw his brother through the first-floor window and cut a vein in his own arm doing it. You stood with him in collective horror, as the blood ran down his arm onto damp earth, forming a darker puddle on the water collected there. Light glinting off hard angled glass and soft water. Sam was shouting through the window, silver daggers pointing up to his chest. The McGuire rage they called it. Red hair. Red

rage. Angry at something and nothing. Shouting, what was he shouting? They'd been to the hut. You'd smelt the beer on those boys' breath; they weren't lying. So it couldn't be true, everything people said.

You'd heard about the boys chased by the police, another police car cutting them off between the abattoir and the fields of the open prison where the grass cut your legs. They ran fast through the fields but the police were relentless. Gasping but relentless.

You'd watched as they were marched, still clutching the candles and soap on the walk of shame with the whole school at lunch, to the Headmaster who was entertaining a distinguished guest, a councillor and business man, probably a Freemason with secret punishments for thieving. You couldn't help feeling a bit jealous, a bit like you wished you were with them, sharing their fear, their notoriety, holding the stolen goods. They'd said they'd take you with them but they didn't. Left you waiting. Now their lies were relentless, breathless with fear, but cut off mid-word, in front of the parade of green and white, boxes of candles and fairy liquid.

There is a whisper that you can hear from someone you used to know well, whose face is hidden in the trees, in the forms in the bark, in the shapes the leaves make. On the tree a line of Jew's Ear's brown rubber and you can tell there's stinkhorn, somewhere poking through the ground. You have forgotten their name but you want to see their face once more. To hear their voice. In the silence.

Along that path in the woodland you can hear the jackdaw crying, coarse and thuggish, and you want to go to that door, knock on that wooden paneling with the crumbling paint, to stop the muted shouting even though you have no gift, no roadside treasure to trade for a beer. You want to leave it all behind, to drink beer, not just sips, to drink it properly, gulp it down. To taste whisky. Feel it burn your throat. The taste of oblivion. The clearing.

The bare earth gives a little. The leaves crunch down, leaving the marks of your trail, dark in the woods, but still clearly visible in torch light when they come looking.