

FRUIT

Donald Lewin watched intently as the little girl across the aisle nibbled at her Granny Smith, burnished like the toe-cap of a Guardsman's boot. He focused on the gleaming apple, stealing the image like a magpie. To his regret he'd never learned to meditate, possessed no technique for clearing his mind, or scouring ugly thoughts lurking in corners like black mould; images of decay.

The little girl grinned, aware that she was being scrutinized. A gash of gum and tiny white ridges, the buds of teeth. A smile of hope and regeneration, or perhaps the foreshadowing of a crone's ironic, toothless leer.

The child tucked the apple into a Tupperware box, self-consciously flipping through a colouring book. Donald's eyes desperately bored a hole through the semi-opaque plastic to retrieve the image of that pristine object.

Too late, the apple in his mind's eye had already changed, metamorphosing into a more ancient variety. A Broxwood Foxwhelp, carbuncle-red, shot through with fine brush-strokes of yellow, smaller and more spherical; already shrinking and falling in on itself like one of those speeded-up films of decomposition. Helpless, he surrendered to the tyranny of memory.

His apple sat between twin blocks of gnarled brown wood, an old cider-press slowly tightening until the apple collapsed. A thin tannic juice dribbled out, little more than a teaspoon, leaving a residue of mottled, wrinkled skin and dry pulp. Is that what he would find at the end of this journey, a man as withered and diminished, squeezed dry by the combined forces of age and disease?

On the seat opposite, a young couple sucked urgently at one another's faces, tasting uvula. For Christ's sake, get a room - the kind of thing his father might have said.

Donald glanced quickly out of the window at the passing landscape, a Friesian defecated lavishly in a field. It troubled him. Everyone else seemed to enjoy the country. Mostly it made him nauseous - a singularity in a boy born and bred in the lush farming country of Somerset. There was beauty out here, unquestionably. He'd seen bucolic documentaries in which lambs were birthed, butterflies emerged from cocoons, and fruit trees blossomed. But let Donald even try to put on a pair of Wellies and something disagreeable was bound to occur, like the discovery of a small frog embossed wetly and grotesquely into his sock. On the rare occasions that Donald made the effort to enjoy one of Mother Nature's Spectaculars somehow or other he'd find himself between-shows; catching the cast back-stage without make-up, changing, bickering, fighting, fucking; the Diva hoisting her skirts.

The train trundled past a cumulous huddle. Donald shuddered, of course there would have to be sheep - sheep and the scent of apples.

How long? Twenty-years now, yet still the horror invaded his dreams.

He remembered damn well that he hadn't wanted to go in the first place, would have preferred to remain in the sanctuary of his room, burnishing stones: Tiger-eyes, those strange and hypnotic tawny lumps, pink calcites, louche and glistening like half-sucked candy, his sparkling quartz chips. But it was required by some immemorial custom that the son-and-heir should accompany his father on these monthly treks across

the acres. A kind of beating of the bounds - the “one day, son, all this will be yours” ritual.

‘I don’t want it,’

He hadn’t said as much at the time, of course.

Instead the thirteen-year-old Donald takes the rough Shillelagh from the hallway, black and twisted, like the shaky signature on a will, and pulls on his boots.

There’s little conversation. His father is, in any case, a man of few words. But in the orchard they pause, his father stoops to pick up a windfall, holding it up to the light, sniffing like a sommelier. ‘Donnie, I planted this orchard in fifty-two.’

Donnie spikes a mushy apple with his Countryman’s staff. He knows what’s coming.

‘This is the fruit of my seed, my son, just as you are. I would hate to think of all this come to nothing. What I mean to say is...’

Donnie raises the Shillelagh, holding it aloft like a cavalry sabre, and charges through the trees, Wellies flapping around his calves like two buckets. He sprints, fleeing the inevitable question, apples popping beneath his feet. Until he catches sight of immense ewe lying on her side in a dip. He swoops, waving the weapon, give her a good clout and send her scuttling off on her fat, shaggy way. A powerful-looking creature; he’ll point her out to his father when she rejoins the flock. There’ll be no equivocation then; no question of his manhood.

Up close, he's struck by her colour. In storybooks sheep are always pristine, white as St Nick's beard. But in the cold hard reality of the countryside her fluttering wool is as yellow as a fag-stained finger.

Donnie prods the ewe with the sharp end of his staff. She makes a guttural objection. Not a 'Baah' sound, more of a snotty grumble, like his father clearing morning catarrh.

She doesn't budge. He inserts the tough staff between her spine and the ground and leans on it with all his weight.

The fat old ewe rolls over, crushing scattered Foxwhelps to slurry, releasing a rank perfume. Her exposed side heaves, and for a second, he imagines it's just the wind.

Maggots.

Where there should have been wool is rotting flesh, undulating with alien life. Her entire flank is being eaten away; a ghastly ovine zombie.

Donnie hits out, again and again, striking mainly at the head. There's nowhere else to hit without risking an explosion of rotting flesh.

His father arrives wheezing, and gently prises the staff from his hands. 'It's all right, Donnie. I do understand...'

Donald Lewin shook his head like a wet dog, flinging soggy memories from his mind. He fixed on the urgent young couple; the girl now had a denim-clad thigh draped across her

partner's leg. The young man's tattooed arm cupped her breast. He opened an eye and caught Donald's shameless scrutiny. He pulled his tongue from his girlfriend's scarlet lips with a wet, sucking sound. 'Oy, you want a picture, or something?'

Donald lowered his gaze to the formica table between them. He tried to hold the pattern but tears formed, blurring the regular shapes to abstraction.

'Fuckin' fruit...' muttered the young man.