

In the Playground

The postcard was waiting for me, that night in early September. It had dropped through the letterbox along with a reminder from the library, a selection of banal junk mail and a wash of turgid credit card demands. No signature on the card: just a black-and-white photograph and a single line of print. I took off my jacket and hung it over the back of a chair; rolled up the sleeves of my shirt and poured myself a drink – a canny half-glass of best Scottish whisky; me, the abstemious one, who seldom accepted more than a single spritzer – and drank it down, sitting at the kitchen table, staring at the floor.

I kept on drinking until the thought of another mouthful made me shudder. Then I got up, clumsily, stupidly, and went through to the bedroom. I put my jacket on a hanger, stripped off the rest of my things and hauled on a sweatshirt and a pair of jeans. Then I took a very deep breath and started work. She came in just after I'd begun the process of separating up her things from mine. I'd meant to be finished before she got back, but I hadn't managed that. Maybe I'd meant to fuck it up.

She just looked at me. Then she looked at the holdall I'd found and left open on the floor, her case, not mine, and she'd said: "I don't understand this. I don't understand *you*. What's wrong? I thought we were so good together: I thought you were happy. I know I have been..."

She'd looked at me and I couldn't meet that gaze, full as it was of hurt and disbelief and disappointment. I'd progressed to the third drawer down: there were now three separate stacks on the quilt that covered the bed that we'd been sharing for the best part of half a year. I knew that if I kept going long enough, and stayed calm and didn't allow even the slightest note of encouragement into my voice or my behaviour, by the end of the process she'd have to believe that I was serious. I'd always told her that I couldn't get involved, and I'd believed myself that I never would be, up until the day she'd moved in with me. I had a roomy apartment, I had loads of space; it would have been a sensible move on economic grounds alone, but I hadn't needed to think about good financial sense: I loved her.

But things change. I'd known that there was something coming for the longest time, which made a lie of my behaviour, because I kept on going. Things change. I thought those words and then I said them out-loud.

Just before leaving, she'd said: "Is it space you want? Or time? Would it be better if we just didn't see one another for a while?"

Is it space I want, or time? I'd stopped sorting clothes and glanced out of the window. The darkness hadn't lifted: the sky remained white and unremarkable. No clouds, just that steady dullness. I'd said, "Maybe that's it."

I hadn't meant a word of encouragement to escape me, and then in three words I'd spoken legion. That was when she'd bent to pick up that holdall, the sagging leather bag in which all her things had come. She'd said, "Then I won't give up hope."

After she'd gone I went back to the whisky. It's God-awful stuff sometimes but necessary. That necessity sickened me a little. But there was stuff I had to do.

A little more than a month later I woke up too early, feeling dull and empty and tired. Dull, empty and soulless. I lay on the bed and stared at the blurred ceiling. Then I put on my glasses and gazed at the blur-free version. Neither attracted. My mouth felt dry and dead, my eyes burned as if I'd been chopping onions – what had brought that about? Had I been crying in my sleep? The pillow felt damp – and my whole body felt as if flu or some other entity had laid hold of me. I got up, made tea instead of coffee because my stomach rebelled at even a glance at the coffee tin. And I drank my tea and I sat at the kitchen table and waited.

I turned on the small portable TV and got *Two Stupid Dogs*. Maybe there were still reasons to live. The *Two Stupid Dogs* met *Little Red Riding Hood* and the three of them ended up swallowed. The credits rolled while they swam around in the wolf's stomach acid. Had I had kids, would I have let them see that? Jon talked about children but I had no such plans. But that train of thought led me on: I got to thinking about childhood. A memory came flying back to me, so pure and well-recalled that it shone. A group of us, nearly all of class five, out in the playground for the

morning break, the chilly air encouraging movement, playing *what's the time, Mr Wolf?* I could taste the metallic hint of arousal that came from playing. The strange structure of the game: the utmost in civility and quiet followed by that invisible metamorphosis that sent Mr Wolf spinning round and coming for us. All of us running about and hopping and jumping, all of us filled with that strange mixture of fear and excitement that no event in adulthood could even hint at.

The school's playground had been a thing of pain and suffering. Surrounded by fields and hills the construction team had chosen to give us an asphalt play area: every week someone had to be rushed to casualty when the juxtaposing of soft human flesh and unyielding black tarmac offered up another victim to the cottage hospital across the way.

The school proper had dated back to 1911, but post-'45 demand had led to the addition of a corrugated-iron construction that passed as a classroom. In those days you got your full education there, but in later, and by the time I and my siblings came along, there had been modifications. From 1967 onwards, as the village population grew and the education system shifted and changed, the post-11s had been bussed off to the next town, where a grammar school stood waiting to rub off our raw edges. Oddly, because there's always the suggestion that little village schools produce little village idiots, they didn't need to do too much of that: education standard in the village was remarkably high. But we were the outsiders, and none of us ever lost, post-introduction to the wider world, the odd air of detachment that hung about us all. It kept us separate – ultimately – in any social mix.

The corrugated classroom was reserved for the last class, the oldest children. We might have only had to cover a ten yard walk from one building to the next, but we all knew that in reality we were bridging continents. No other progression I had experienced from that moment onwards, not the move to college, the relinquished virginity, the first funeral attended, the first or thirty-second job, came close. And yet there was nothing exceptional about it: a plain, dull interior with awkward-looking windows and a shabby, scrubbed-wood floor.

The classroom had served other arcane uses, being usurped for the use of adults when voting day came around – and we got the

day off – and as a village hall if meetings were necessary (the local WI had no other domain), or if the school's end-of-term play came to fruition, every available parent press-ganged in to make up an audience.

When I'd left the village, post-junior school, post secondary education in the next town, I knew that in all likelihood I'd never go back. I liked my independence, and besides, it was preferable, easier, to remain rootless after college. I lived out my first love affairs and the first jobs in an atmosphere of disinterest and no blame. Eighteen years of village had made me what I was, but I'd outgrown my need for the place, and besides, it held nothing that I wanted.

The cartoon had finished and was followed by an eternity of commercial breaks. I turned off the mindless chatter but let the picture run on, taking off my glasses and seeing nothing but a coloured blur.

Jon didn't like my glasses. At least, he didn't like them on me. He'd said – more than once – that the sight of me in them reminded him of a teacher who'd made his life hell. So I tended not to wear them around him, relying on contact lenses instead. It struck me that one of the joys of myopia is that, in bed, it softens the edges and allows a degree of softening kindness: not a single open pore to be seen... Sally had never said a word about my glasses, apart from to say that they suited me. Perhaps I could argue that my time with her was less honestly close-up, as opposed to the no-holds-barred, no-pore-spared experiences I shared with Jon. *Jon*. I was still adjusting to the idea of having any man in my life to whom I wasn't related.

He'd said he'd come over that day and I meant to be ready for him. I'd forgotten what it was like to get ready for men: after a little teenage wandering, I'd done a full 180 degree twist in sexuality during my first year at college. For some reason, getting ready for men seemed to be a demanding and almost punitive process in comparison with same-sex preparations. Jon knew a little about Sally – I got the impression that our dying relationship amused him – and the knowledge made him a little more forceful, a little less kind. He'd gone vaguely masterful the week before, when I'd said that I was going back home on a visit, without the slightest hint of an invitation to him to accompany me. He'd wanted to play the

hurt card, but that made him risk vulnerability: he'd worked on me gently but persistently all the previous weekend, but I still hadn't given way. Home – I'd told him this more than once – was where I was now. But he was curious about the pre-me me: I could see him wanting to meet my reasons for homosexuality, and I was pretty sure he had his theories all lined up, to be shot at like metal ducks in an amusement park stall.

I don't remember how I came to get to know Jon. He was attractive enough, and I knew that there were women at work who had actively pursued him. I suspect that because I never fluttered so much as an eyelash, let alone waved a flag in his direction, I did myself more favours than outright pursuit would have done.

He was almost stunningly confident. In fact, he took confidence to the point of arrogance, being one of those strange people who know what they want and then go out, like big-game hunters, in order to obtain it. His confidence/arrogance had suffered a slight flicker when he realised that Sal had lived with me as a lover, not a flatmate, before it sharpened up his interest in me. I'd never thought that things would work out in that way, and I refused, point-blank, to discuss with him any aspect of my life with Sally. He didn't much mind: I think that he saw my world as being post-Sally or pre-him, and either was just fine.

Sex was difficult. I didn't want to sleep with him: I could have stayed friends with him – it really is possible, I'd done it before – but that wasn't in keeping with his plans, and he really did have plans. We'd had sex together five times, and each time I had to fight back the sense of being in someone else's dream.

When he arrived – I had my lenses in but was in no other way prepared: I'd gone back to watching *Two Stupid Dogs* – his greeting kiss was almost exactly his essence: confidence and assurance blended with a frisson of the unnatural. He was never going to let me forget my lesbian traits. Nor was he going to let me go back home alone. "I've got no other plans for next weekend," he told me. "I'm looking forward to seeing where you grew up."

Sally didn't know much about where I grew up. I hadn't told her about playing *what's the time, Mr Wolf?*, just as I hadn't told her that I'd meant never to go back. She knew that I had family there, but she didn't know who or how many. Jon was clearly blasting

ahead: I had known him long enough to understand his hatred of secrecy and anything even remotely clandestine. I thought about the visit and there was about the idea a streak of sadness that sent tears to my eyes. Jon missed that expression: he'd arrived in mid-morning mood, bright-eyed and tumescent. A vivid illustration of tunnel vision: what a pity I hadn't made the bed.

The day we arrived in my previous home was bright and sunny. We'd taken my car, erratic though its running tended to be. Early morning showers had left the place sparkling, and for an instant I thought: I should have come back here before; I should have brought Sally here. And then the quiet seriousness of the place overwhelmed me and pinned me down.

We parked, dumped our stuff, and walked around. It was only a matter of time before I met someone from the old days, so when an almost-familiar voice called out my name, I was almost prepared. But when I turned around to see the speaker I lost what little internal calm I still possessed. Jude. I thought I'd forgotten her, but seeing her standing on the wet pavement, the smell of burning leaves scenting the air, I knew that every atom of her teenage self was knit to my blood. She came forward fast, almost running, and then we were facing one another and staring at each other as if determination alone could cause the last fifteen years to dissolve, allowing the two of us to become – however briefly, however minutely – joined.

Jon pushed himself into view. I think that Jude and my momentary silence had bothered him. He'd dug out of me that it was only since college that I'd swung both ways (I sounded like a fucking bell-clapper), but I could see him eyeing Jude with that narrow-eyed appraisal that was on the permanent alert for anything not heterosexual. He introduced himself to her and immediately took hold of her name, using it over and over in the next few minutes as if it was some kind of lever that he would not let free. I'd seen that trick before, and I didn't much like it. I saw Jude's eyes on him and then on me. Then she lowered her gaze to the fly buttons of his cords and smiled sardonically. She took a step back and grinned at us both before sending us on our way.

Jon said, "She seemed... alright." I knew the subtext of that statement and I wasn't about to indulge him. He waited a moment and then asked, almost casually, "You were friends as children?"

“I guess.” Jude had taught me how to kiss. Jude had taught me how to kiss one long autumnal afternoon in the attic of her parents’ house. The smell of freshly-wrapped apples that came from the boxes packed in the shady regions of the attic had lifted up and wrapped itself around us. Until then we’d only been friends, as if friendship itself was an insignificant thing. From that afternoon onwards we were strangers: we never had such privacy again, and neither of us understood exactly what might come next. Maybe, if we’d had time, and space... that pertinent combination again, but we hadn’t: I’d gone off to college and she’d started teacher-training, and for fifteen years there had been nothing but snippets of information gleaned from occasional phone calls and even more occasional letters home.

Jon made me wait on the next street corner. He’d brought his camera, one of those multi-faceted combinations that probably send faxes and open locks in addition to taking photographs. He made me pose for him in front of the wrought-iron gates that closed off the smithy from the rest of the world. I waited, a stupid, awkward, unrealistic smile on my face that slid away just as the shutter came down. I have that picture still: it is the only evidence I have that I was ever there. The smile had gone from my face by the time I saw myself on celluloid, and I look a bit uncomfortable, arranged as I was with my arms outstretched and my fingers hooked around the curved metal, but the composition of the shot was good: Jon had an eye for such things.

He paused again to frame-up a shot of the pub. The day had become windy and the pub sign creaked back and forth. The sound made my fillings ache. Jon looked at the sign and then back at me, eyebrows raised. He said, “The Blood Moon? What the hell kind of a name is that?”

“I know,” I said, not looking up. But Jon was still waiting. I said, “All the different moons of the year have names. October’s is the Blood Moon. Hundreds of years back the villagers would have slaughtered their cattle – the cattle they’d decided wouldn’t make it through the winter or that were best-suited to killing – which explains the blood aspect. The other thing is, I don’t know why, some cosmological explanation, I guess, that the moon looks red, this time of year.”

He was entranced. I hadn't realised how deep his curiosity ran. I said, "Uh, they don't do it any more, you know. Kill the cattle, I mean. It's been years and years since they did that."

"I had no idea how old this place was," he said. He was really happy. He said, "I could get some wonderful photographs out of this outing."

This outing. I went with him, back and forwards, as the morning moved on and he isolated a dozen or so different views and objects of interest. At last I said, "Could we get back to the bed-and-breakfast? My feet are aching in these boots and I could use a rest." Jon was too excited about the village to want to stop, but he let me drift off, and walk back to the B&B along the pavements that I'd not seen in years and which I knew down to the last crack and stain.

I'd told Jon that we couldn't see my family until later that afternoon, that we had a specific invitation that I didn't want to dim by arriving early. I reached the B&B and lay down on the bed. I was suddenly tired, not just walking-and-a-long-tiring-week tired, but desperately, sickeningly so. I lay on the bed and closed my eyes and dropped into sleep.

I dreamed. Of course I dreamed. Ineffectual dreams that satisfied not the slightest hunger. I dreamed the old school and the attic and the smell of apples and Jude's smiling face. I could imagine her going back to home – or whatever it was she had – and telling them that I had a boyfriend, wasn't that a surprise? and wasn't he a bit ballsy?

I dreamed and when I stopped dreaming, Jon was in the room with me. Jon was on the bed, and beginning to undo the buttons of my shirt. I helped him along, and I made him laugh when I went straight for the zipper on his cords, instead of wasting time with his shirt. Our sixth time together, and there was me thinking about Sally. I hadn't seen her since that night in early September and I had no idea of how she was, and who she was with, if indeed there was anyone. But I didn't want to think about her, so I kept my eyes open and saw Jon's smiling face instead.

We started out for the house that afternoon. The nap hadn't refreshed me: I felt tired and jumpy, a lousy combination. I could

have used a drink. I could have used a joint, but somehow the idea of trying to score in the village seemed probably redundant. But then I thought about Jude's amused smile and decided that I probably could have scored almost anything there, so long as it wasn't legal.

The house stood, detached and remote, about a mile from the village. We crossed the river, the bridge so narrow that we had to walk in single file. I stopped once to look down at the rushing, peat-browned water, the same colour as the young trout, the same colour as volcanic glass; the river I'd swum in, the river I knew. After a moment Jon said, "I bet as a kid you played Pooh Sticks here."

I thought back to the games we had played as children, and the games that I had played as an adult. I looked again at the water and felt the vibrations it sent up spinning through the metal architecture of the bridge. I said, "No, I never did that." We'd built a raft – three of us – and tried white-watering it down to the next bridge and the very edge of the village, nearly drowning every inch of the way, but Pooh Sticks had never been on our agenda.

I said, "Come on, we don't want to be late," and took his hand. He folded his fingers around me and ran his hand surreptitiously across my breasts. His face was shining, happy.

Later that evening, sitting before the fireside in the pub, waiting for our evening meal to be readied, he was still in his own white-water rafting, talking about my family, about how great they were and how he couldn't understand why I'd waited so long to take him to meet them. I looked at him and a wash of guilt so extreme it was sickening broke over me. I almost ran for the toilets. Fortunately there was no-one there, so I could stand in front of the sink and splash cold water over my face, time and time again. When I finally stopped, my shirt was wet and my fringe had gone spiked. I had shaken off the worst and was reaching for a paper towel when the door swung back and Jude came in. I was surprised to see her, and at the same time, totally unsurprised. She walked past me, went into the cubicle and pee'd. She'd left the door open. I had my hand on the door-handle and ready to leave when she spoke. She said, "I didn't expect that. I didn't expect him. You've *changed*."

I thought about that, then I said, "I hadn't forgotten you."

"So you haven't changed completely. But there are differences." She pulled the flush and came out, washing her hands absently, letting the soap slide back into the basin. Then she drew level with me and put her still-damp hands on my shoulders. I could smell her perfume and I could see the remarkable green and brown of her eyes, like fractured marbles. She said, "I'd like to kiss you, purely for old time's sake, but..."

I looked directly back at her. I held her gaze, steady as it was. I said, "But what?"

"But I think you'd taste of him."

"Oh. Yes."

"You'd taste of him wherever I'd kiss you."

"I suppose so."

And then she let me go, pushed past me and left. For a moment I did nothing, just leaning back against the wall and feeling her scent dissipate and be overtaken by the over-sweet tang of the bottled hand-wash and the chlorine smell of the bleached floor.

Our supper over, Jon seemed restive. He said, "Earlier, when you went to the loo, I saw that girl... I saw Jude come out of the toilets just ahead of you. What did she want?"

It seemed like such a simple, pointless fear that I laughed. That didn't please him. I said, "She told me she thinks you're too attractive for me. She wondered if there were any more out there like you."

The words seemed to relieve him. He said, "For a moment there I thought I might be going to lose you."

"Not to Jude, certainly," I said. "Can we go back? I'm tired."

"Already? This early? But it's only –" He sounded disappointed, but he looked at the big clock that hung above the fireplace. "Hell,

it's almost midnight. How did that happen? Alright. Let me finish my beer and we'll go."

I let him finish his beer. The place was empty now, but for an old woman behind the bar who was wiping glasses, uncaring and unknowing about us, the two new lovers about to walk out into the night. Even when I pushed open the door and said goodnight to her, she simply carried on with her task, oblivious and uncaring.

When we reached the marketplace he turned back to look at the pub sign, illuminated as it was by the moon rising high above us. I said, "Let's go back to the bridge and look at the moon reflected in the water. I bet it'd make a great photograph, if you can adjust all the exposure times, or whatever it is you need to do."

He wasn't immediately impressed by the plan. He'd drunk four or five pints and the afternoon – prior to the visit – had been demanding in its own way. But then he saw the moon's face reflected in the water of a barrel and suddenly the idea appealed. Then he frowned and said, "My camera. Fuck it, I don't believe it. I must have left it at your family's house."

I couldn't believe that. Oh, fuck, was right. I said, "Then forget it. We can pick it up tomorrow. Let's go home instead."

"Home? Oh, you mean the B&B. Ah, hell. Will your folks still be up?"

"No. They're early sleepers. Oh, it can wait. Come with me. Let's go to bed."

Normally that would have done it, and suddenly I was prepared to do whatever was in my power to get him back to the B&B. I looked at him, his face ghostly in the light, his expression one of annoyance and frustration. I said again, "Come back with me, Jon, please."

But I'd put too much emphasis onto the words and he was clearly thinking seriously about waking my family. I said, "It's far too late and besides, they'll be angry at our waking them."

"Oh, *all right*." Now he was cross. I tried to put my arm through his but he had shoved his hands into his pockets, cutting off any

chance of contact. I'd seen him like that before: it was one of the things about him that made me think it might work. I tried to keep pace with him, but he'd begun striding, irritated with his own forgetfulness, and apparently happy to take that emotion out on me. Soon he was ahead of me, his shoes clicking on the paving stones. Then he was further ahead still, and almost out of reach.

His anger, always a nuisance, always an obstacle, made me think about Sally, whose good humour seemed almost miraculous in its way. And I thought about touching her, and being touched by her, and I ached.

By the time I'd cleared the village proper, and was a quarter mile from the B&B, I saw the lights approaching. I could hear muffled voices and the sound of boots on stone. Jon could see the lights, too, he came to a halt and I almost caught up with him. He said, "What the fuck is that? A fucking late-night welcoming party?" I had learned that, too: when he was worried, he swore. Me, I always swore.

It's only every fifty years that they do it. I received my invitation card a day early, a day before the Harvest Moon, and in a single day did it all, put out Sally, took in Jon. It didn't matter that Sally's heart had been broken, or badly chipped: there are some prices you have to pay.

When Jon spoke to me again I had drifted so far from the moment that I could hardly remember his name. "What is this? Some kind of joke? What do they want with us?"

I said, "Not us. Just you. They only want you." My voice was so steady that it surprised even me. "They want you to pledge your allegiance to the Blood Moon."

He stared at me and the penny dropped. "You set this up," he said. "You..." His voice died away but the fist that came up and caught me across the cheek felt like a blow from a baseball bat. Lights came and went. I stayed down.

They wore wolf masks. Why not? The wolf had come down from the woods in search of food. Wasn't that the way it had always

been? The masks showed the same face, over and over: the huge ears, the projecting muzzle and the vast white teeth. No natural wolf had ever looked like that.

Jon began to back away from them. They trod past me, round me, never even touching. Jon's face was the colour of snow in the half-light all around the square. He backed up further and further until he was standing before the War Memorial. I tried to get up, but I felt dizzy and sick. I put out my hands and felt the brisk cold of paving slabs.

I got to my feet. Someone helped me, an iron grip around my upper arm. Then they turned away. I hadn't known what to expect, but there it was. They began to move away, one step at a time, so that the circle that bounded Jon seemed to ripple. I took a single step forward, and so did Jon. He was almost beyond the power of speech, which was as well. What could I have said to him? A step forward, and then another step and again the rippling movement, and then the hushed question came: I hardly recognised my own voice: "What's the time, Mr Wolf?"

"Ten o'clock." The response came to me from a hundred throats. The wolves did not turn.

Another step and the same pause. My throat felt dry and raw as I asked the question for the second time. I knew the second time would be safe enough: wasn't the number three always the important digit? But I asked it all the same. "What's the time, Mr Wolf?"

I remember kissing Jude. I remember the scent of apples. I thought of Sally as the wolves all turned to look at me.

"Eleven o'clock."

Please don't let them hurt me. Jon was saying something, but the words were lost in the blur of fear. For the last time I asked the question.

"What's the time, Mr Wolf?"

That moment of hesitation. The moment that in games led to the sudden thrill of fear and excitement. For a moment no-one moved and I thought: maybe it is all a game. Maybe it is. Maybe they won't –

But they did.

I did not see Jon's final moments. I heard his scream, but in the distance and receding. I was backing away, faster and faster, until I stumbled, until I fell. Hands reached out: they were carrying me away. I had fulfilled my part of the bargain.

They carried me up to my bed in the B&B and left me there. Before they left, someone handed me a glass with some dark substance in it that I drank off. It tasted hot and bitter. I slept deeply and dreamlessly until the next day when I went downstairs to find the house empty. On the way to the car I passed no-one but a child who looked at me with curiosity, then laughed and ran away.

Villages need more than just money and artificial power to run on; ours was not the only one of its kind: cities can take care of themselves. Why else would I set up my everlasting rest in the centre of one? A week later I received in the post the film taken from Jon's camera. I had it developed in an anonymous chemist's shop where I paid cash and waited out the hour's development time in a café across the street. I only kept one picture: the shot he took of me before those iron gates will remain in my wallet for life, the others I burned.

They ask you for your lover and you can't refuse them. Without the sexual connection the offering is worthless. I sacrificed Jon because the only truth of my narrow existence has been Sally, and I would not, could not, sacrifice her. Jon had been on the edge of my life for a little while, arrogant and two-dimensional and healthy. I chose him. I had just enough time to do it, warned by that card a single day early, as if someone in the village had thought more of me than simply my usefulness.

When she kissed me, all those years before, I felt the same quickening of the heart as when we had played in the schoolyard.

And I'd tasted not just her but also that pungent, unforgettable, indescribable taste of giddy fear.

What's the time, Mr Wolf?

Dinnertime.