



BODIES WITHOUT SPINES

Ben Myers

The tallest, ugliest one— the one with the gelled hair and the earring—kicked the dog. He kicked it hard in the side. Hard enough to crack a rib and send the dog howling and recoiling into the shadows as the two girls and the other boys laughed, spitting lager fumes and hatred in dirty plumes into the ice-edged evening air.

‘Cheeky fucker, coming here sniffing my balls...’

More laughter, like Macbeth’s witches played by sea lions. Vicious cackling and honking exaggerated for effect. Voices staking territory beneath the pebbledash canopy of the shopping precinct’s second storey overhang. Fake laughter masking teenage insecurities and the promise of sex or danger.

And now the same boy was saying ‘Here, hold my can’ and taking off his belt and looping it around the dog’s neck, his sportswear rustling as he bent over. The dog whimpered and pulled back, but a strict jerk brought it in line.

The second boy gave the beer back to the first and he took a big hit. Tilted his head right back and took it all in. Big hit for a big man. Cro-Magnon in a shellie.

They lit cigarettes and passed them around, econo-smoking and trading half sentences of half formed words punctuated by grunts and animal noises and laughter that from a distance sounded like someone in pain. Drinking and smoking and chatting, feeling good as the few passers-by gave them a wide birth in the failing light. It gave them a sense of power— particularly the boys, both of whom were physically well advanced for their age.

The first tall and sinewy, a streak of grease and muscle; the second no-necked, stocky, a homunculus with a wispy moustache giving an illusion of hirsuteness. The two girls' bodies were already displaying the first signs of middle-aged slump. Rounding shoulders, saggy wide arses and the tired gravitational slide of the facial features; cynicism chiselled into what once were laughter lines. Their hair pulled back, stiff and secure in dirty hair bands and cheap scrunchies. One with a pronounced underbite.

They drifted away from the off licence, from the parade of shops and uneven paving slabs, confidence in their gait from the alcohol and nicotine, bodies occasionally brushing against one other until, under the pretence of horse play, the boy without the dog awkwardly wrestled one of the girls into a headlock, his limbs unnatural, her yelping *gerrof* and screeching loud enough to make curtains twitch but making no effort to push him away, and in fact enjoying the smell of smoke on his breath, his hardening body pressing against hers, him feeling a breast squash against his chest before pulling away and running ahead to the next street light and howling up at the moon like a werewolf.

The dog barked in response. They all laughed as they lead him down through the estate where the lights got further apart until they finally ceased to be. Beyond it was nothing other than the blue-blackness of the scrubland area everyone called the Scrambles; once people raced dirt bikes there, but now it was an overgrown hinterland used by dog walkers and kite-fliers by day. At night it was badly lit, the grass thick, the tracks blurred and winding, a setting that made you think of abandoned pornography stashes and *Crimewatch* reconstructions.

The boy released his hold on the makeshift lead, grabbed a stick and hurled it off into the darkness, secretly hoping the stray dog might never return. When it did he cursed its loyalty, or at least its willingness to trust in its abuser, not sure whether to feel sympathy for the fate of this underfed mutt or anger at its weakness and stupidity.

‘I think it likes you, innit,’ said the girl he assumed would be his if the night went according to plan. ‘You should enter Crufts.’

She laughed at this and poked him in the ribs, and though he didn’t know whether she was taking the piss or not he felt a tingle of delight at the attention, this faintest of adolescent touches. He downed more beer and passed her the can. It went back forth until he threw it away, the dog still obediently by his side.

The other two were lagging behind, he with his arm awkwardly around her neck, just dangling there like a spare part, hand suspended, her with head coyly tipped forward, their hips locked together, swaying in the breeze of the beer within, both internally dancing to the rhythm of blood pumping.

They cut across the main sloping meadow and along a lane whose hedgerows seemed specifically designed to cut out the sky and all natural light, then down to the train tracks.

They opened more beer from their carrier bags and stood around, kicking stray embankment stones and watching their own breath. It was a rarely used stretch of track, parcel runs, mainly. A quiet offshoot of the East coast mainline. Over to their left, a hundred or so yards down the track, was a short tunnel where they had all etched their names in marker pen at different times; to their right nothing but the tracks stretching onwards south, all the way to London probably.

Bored and keen to impress, the first boy began baiting the dog. Taking on responsibility for leadership as host for the evening, he flicked the dog on the nose and moved back to avoid its yapping. He clipped it harder this time and it went for him, snarling. The girls laughed. He went to grab its tail but the dog was too quick and curled round to bite him on the hand. Bastard. This only made the girls laugh, and the other boy joined in, honking. All their movements were uneasily over-animated and decentralised, like bodies without spines. They were relaxed now, although the alcohol intensified the sounds and smells of the night. The promise was tangible.

Laughing, the boy kicked out at the dog, but his laughter was hollow and the blow was cruel and hard. The dog shivered, its lean body in shock. The boy moved towards it again as it regained its composure. Sensing imminent danger, it leapt forward, galvanized, and sunk its teeth into the same hand. The boy couldn't help crying out in pain. Bastard. The others roared with laughter.

'Fuck this.'

The boy grabbed the dog and staggered on the stones as he dragged it up the small embankment and onto the tracks. The two girls and the boy stood below him. The boy saw his chance and turned to the girl, kissing her on the mouth and letting his cold tongue writhe its way in. She tasted of chewing gum sugar and warm saliva. They kissed like

this, eating each other's faces for a full minute, before turning back to look at the boy on the tracks as if nothing had happened.

The stars were out and the thick smooth metal of the tracks was cold. He tied the other end of the belt to a sleeper as the dog just stood there looking at him, winded and forlorn. He joined the others, keen to speed things along with his girl.

'That'll teach it to mess with the main man.'

'Ahhh,' said the girl as he snaked his arm around her waist, still pudgy with the baby fat that would never leave her. 'It's looking at you.'

'Let it look.'

She took his hand and felt the wetness of his own blood in the darkness.

'Jesus, your hand's fucked. Did the dog do that?'

'Yeah, it's nothing.'

'Little shit,' she said incredulously.

She picked up a stone and threw it at the dog, missing badly. She threw another and hit it this time. 'Mint!' said the boy as the dog howled. He went to kiss her but missed and got her ear instead. She turned and met him face on and this time he got to kiss her properly and suddenly everything was worthwhile: his sore hand, the chill in the air, even that mangy little scrote of a dog.

They were walking back, aglow with hormones, when he remembered his belt— his only belt.

‘Shite, I’ve got to go back.’

‘Why?’

‘I’ve left my belt. It won’t take long.’

He called up to his friend ahead. His girl walked on to join the other couple in waiting for him in the darkness.

He ran back down the hedgerow lane, twigs snapping and his loose change jangling, the sound of his own lungs gulping for air. He ran across the edge of the open meadow, over a fence and across another short field to the stretch of the train tracks where they’d been, now strewn with cans and carrier bags. And the dog. The dog was still there. Shivering quietly.

He approached it cautiously at first. Then, seeing no threat, he grabbed it by the scruff of the neck and went to untie the belt. As he began to unloop the belt, the dog attacked again and clamped its teeth deep into his calf. The ground rumbled as the dog shook and snarled through a mouthful of flesh, refusing to let go. This was a bite for life.

The boy took a sharp intake of breath and suppressed the urge to yell for fear that the others would hear him. He went dizzy, light-hearted and the earth seemed to tremor with his pain as incisors ripped through flesh and touched bone. He thought he was about to faint.

Then, with a roar of noise, from nowhere, the train was upon them. White lights propelled towards them and blinding. No warning like in the films, just the sound of motion and kinetic energy cutting through the stagnant air. The driver saw nothing as the dog skipped to the side and down the embankment and the train hit the falling boy side-on, separating his torso from his head, sending him up and away into the

night, feeling nothing as his legs were sucked down and under the train, mangled and reduced to nothing but shattered bone and man-made material.

The train whistled away obliviously, leaving behind only silence and a belt.

It looked strangely alone out there beside the train tracks, as if it were waiting for a waist to fill it.

The dog padded over towards the belt, sniffing the ground.

He stopped and licked it and it tasted salty, as skin always does.

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