

Peaches and Monkeys' Tails

'I want *grapefruit*. Grapefruit *and* corn flakes.'

He quickly picked out her straw-coloured hair. There was enough silence, and not too much distance between their tables, for him to hear without effort. The either-or principle of breakfast courses was being politely hissed by the landlady, and again the girl was rebelling.

'But you wouldn't even *like* grapefruit, darling,' the woman sitting beside her said, with much more warmth (her mother, clearly) and as little success.

When the girl threw a napkin to the floor—she'd had to pick it out of a glass first—and scraped back her chair, he was hoping that her passionate exit would take her round his side of the table where she would have to squeeze past. He liked seeing her angry: her face had extra little bulges then, over the eyes and round the mouth, as though pockets of air had got under the skin. But no. The landlady's thin lantern-face stretched with horror. The girl was making a beeline for the door, upsetting bags, chairs, even his mother's surreptitiously slipped-off shoes.

His father snapped at him for laughing.

A sensitive soul, he ate what was left of his toast glumly, wordlessly, but when his dad's camera was passed to the nearest other dad and he and his brother were told to smile, dutifully he opened his mouth. He knew very well what he would contribute to the photograph: an unease inside the brown prickly crew-neck, a slight blush, a merciless fringe. His mother pressed a new 50p piece into his hand and he was off. But he was sorry to go when he caught what happened next: his father's voice inviting the wild girl's mother to sit with them.

Out in the hall, he joined in at first with the excited running up and down stairs, but he was older than these children and they let him know that, withdrawing like winkles into their shells when he clumped by. It wasn't last year any

more. He thought of the girl and imagined her screaming into a pillow in her room ... or perhaps she didn't do this?

His father must have locked their door. There was a communal toilet in the landing: he'd take revenge for being locked out by not washing his hands.

The sun dazzled him briefly as he stepped outside, so that the girl's face took some time to come into focus. She was on the doorstep, bunching up the loose skin around her knee, a radio on her lap. He must still have been dazzled, because he found himself greeting her for the first time, and not childishly, but with words he'd heard his parents exchange often enough.

'Do you want anything from the shop? I'm going there.'

She put a hand to her forehead as if she were about to salute him; under it, her face looked quizzical, then broke into a smile. It was the longest-lasting smile he'd ever seen.

'What's your game?' she said at last.

Without having exactly misheard her—he'd heard all right, but not understood—he answered by saying his name. Her smile turned into laughter and she extended a limp hand, saying: 'Mine's Jane. Pleased to meet you. I don't want anything from the shop, thanks.'

He almost skipped along the street, he was so happy. The wind blowing the seaside detritus in small circles also peppered his eyes with sand, and as he neared the corner shop he rubbed his eyes and stopped to spit, looking back across the front gardens to see if Jane could see him here; she could, but she wasn't watching. He wheeled the rack of postcards round till he got to the dirty ones. When the shop door blew open he took it as his cue to go inside. He bought sherbet and chocolate mice, making sure there were a few 2p's in his change: he would use them in the machine outside. He knew what he wanted. There was a one-in-five chance of getting the capsule that he'd give to Jane.

And his luck was in. The first that dropped down contained a ring.

The long street was only a space for him to rehearse in: how he was actually to do this, hand her the ring, when even in his own imagination he was too actorly. The moment would have to decide.

She had stripped down to T-shirt and bikini bottoms when he saw her next, despite the cold, with the clothes she had taken off underneath her on the step. They were spread out, he thought, to make a seat for two; but he thought wrong, and she pushed him off in amazement at his boldness, which privately she had to admire. He was confused.

'You can have this,' he said, producing the half-clear, half-purple plastic pod, with the yellow ring rattling inside. 'It's for a girl.'

'Keep it and give it to your girlfriend, then,' she said, 'if you've got one.' She caught a shadow of fear crossing his face: it was enough to make her laugh again, but she stopped abruptly, to turn the radio up. 'I love this one,' she said. He'd heard it before, liked it thoughtlessly: now at full volume it made him feel as though his bones were rattling like the ring inside him.

Walkin' on the beaches
Lookin' at the peaches

Still sitting, half-lying back, she wriggled a staccato dance whose movements he imitated, though with some reserve.

'Do you know what the song's about? Do you?' she asked.

It *had* struck him as odd, the idea of peaches growing on a beach, but then he'd never been abroad on holiday.

'Peaches are a lady's, you know ...' she said, casting her eyes down to the logo on her T-shirt. 'My, you know ...'

He looked at the flatness she indicated, but understood what she meant.

'Bumps?'

‘Breasts.’

She sighed with mock-exasperation, closing her eyes against the pale sunlight once more. He would have to work quickly now.

‘Your mum is sitting with my mum,’ he said, ‘and my dad and my brother.’

‘What?’

‘If they’re still there,’ he said, more cautiously. ‘Your mum sat in my chair when you stormed out the room.’

‘I didn’t *storm out*. Why would she want to ... ? I’m going to see.’

She went barefoot over the red stones to the bay window, too interested to bother about him walking in her shadow. If he stood on tiptoe he was almost her height, so long as she bent over slightly to see inside. And he was vindicated: the four of them still sat there, talking in the empty dining room, his father especially, John with his listening adult face on, and his mother with a pained look that made him want to be in there tugging her sleeve. Then Jane said the most extraordinary, horrific thing.

‘Your dad better not be interested in my mum.’

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They never let you do what you want, even when what you wanted wasn’t *bad*. He was allowed to go by himself to the end of the street, and the only thing that could kill him after that (he’d known how to cross a road *years* ago) was a tram. Trams went about two miles an hour.

So he’d have to wait for John to decide when to go out, and John only wanted to go to amusement arcades, to talk to girls (which after all *he* could do now) and lose money—though never all his money. John didn’t even want him around, he could tell. He’d end up by himself, flicking windows over unlit numbers at bingo.

It was troubling, what she’d said.

He watched his mum and dad talking. He’d heard

his dad called 'a smooth operator' by his mum many times, but always in the context of laughter, teasing. He understood the pun, once it had been explained to him: his dad was a surgeon; surgeons operated. He also understood what a 'bedside manner' was, and that his dad had it—it was town-renowned. But he didn't mean it: how many times had he heard his dad speak on the phone, and you'd think he was speaking to a long-lost sister in Australia, and then he'd come off the phone and you'd actually hear him *swear*—under his breath, maybe, but you'd hear the words. If Jane's mum was so stupid she fell for it ... well, it wasn't his dad's fault.

The talk was about Jane suddenly. They weren't arguing at all; they agreed about everything.

They were so selfish they could only ever think of the trouble children caused *them*, not the other way round. Jane was right to demand grapefruit. 'Poor woman,' his mum said. Poor Jane, more like. Now that they couldn't just spell out words when they didn't want him to understand, they used long, complicated ones. Like the one his dad had just said, which he could tell was a word that only surgeons and doctors ever used. 'Poor woman,' his mum said again.

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He was amazed to see her. He'd opened the door before John could get to it, and it was Jane, dressed differently, but still a whirl of colours. His disappointment when she looked past him towards his mother was short-lived: she was asking if he could come out, for a little while; just to the beach.

He.

Of course they would say no, especially since it was Jane. Hadn't he just listened to their condemnations of her? But something miraculous occurred, as it did from time to time when he least expected it: his parents said yes. John seemed happy too. They were all acting, in fact, as if they *liked* this girl.

His mother went out of her way to prove to him that she'd not changed her nature completely—that would be frightening—by stipulating that it must only be to the beach that they went, and only the stretch adjacent to these streets. And for an hour at most. And she must bring him back.

The awkwardness he'd felt earlier was now hers to feel, and on the way to the beach she played down the whole asking-him-out affair: she'd been bored, she said (and yawned); her mother was no fun these days. At the zebra crossing she offered him her hand, but he rejected it: either she held hands the whole way or not at all. How much suffering this rejection caused him!

Twice his shoelaces came undone; the second time she bent over and tied another—double—knot. He would have stopped this too, but he felt pleasantly paralysed for a few moments. Jane rested on one of the long iron bars that fenced off the beach.

'I was wrong about your dad before,' she said. 'Sorry. It's just that he's a doctor or something—isn't he?—and my mum's not been well. That's what they talked about. I don't know what's wrong, I think it's ... ' She looked at his taut, expectant face. 'Do you know what periods are?'

'Yes,' he said.

'Really, you do? I'm impressed. What are they?'

'You get them in secondary.'

'Well, yes ... '

'You get six in the morning and four in the afternoon after lunch.'

'What?'

'Like two periods of chemistry, then two biology ... '

'Oh my God,' she said, covering her face with both hands. She managed not to laugh this time.

As if in answer to her prayer, something distracted them. A man appeared with a monkey and set up in comically-fast time a stall with a tropical backdrop.

'You,' the man said, panting, 'want your picture taken with Charlie?'

'We've no money,' Jane said. It was a small lie. He'd seen his mum put a note into her hand. 'For an ice-cream,' she had said.

'That's all right, you can play with Charlie and I'll *pretend* to take your photo. It attracts custom quicker.'

She looked at her young friend's eager eyes. Hers were bright too.

'We'll do it if you give us a photo for free. You may as well check everything's working OK.'

The man's grin exposed a mouth full of bad teeth. 'I could cut myself on you,' he said. 'Come on then.'

The monkey seemed interested only in playing with Jane's hair, but it did sit happily in his lap. He was shy of it at first, not shy of its animal nature so much as the oddness of its appearance, got up as it was in T-shirt and dungarees. He watched Jane's smiles and cooing and laughter; her infectious self-forgetfulness overcame him, so that when the man approached with the photo drying in his hand, he was genuinely shocked by the relaxed image of himself captured in it.

'Now bugger off,' the man said, in a friendly voice, and lifted Charlie from around Jane's neck. A queue had already formed at the stall. One boy made a thrusting karate movement as they passed, shouting 'Ha! *Mung-kee!*' Jane giggled.

He was now wondering excitedly if there would be donkeys on the beach; Jane would easily have enough money for donkey rides. He took her hand to urge her onwards, but she was enthralled by the photograph, looking, waving it in the air, looking again. Only the sensation of sand running over the exposed parts of her feet brought her back to him.

It looked as though the money would have to be used for ice-cream.

She trusted him with the money, and watched as he ran awkwardly to the wheel-less ice-cream van. Then she took the inexpensive shades from her back pocket, wishing

that she'd worn them for the photograph, and sat on the sand. He was soon in conversation with another boy over there: they seemed to be comparing arms, then legs. It was surprising, really, how forward he could be, for someone so shy. She waved to him as he pointed her out.

He came back carrying the cones judiciously, with the other boy in tow. The boy was nearer her own age, she realised suddenly, and quite tall; his skin was a pleasant colour.

'What do you say, goosebumps or goosepimples?'

'What? Goosepimples,' she said

'See.'

'Hello, I'm Peter,' the other boy said. 'I've been trying to tell him there's no right or wrong word, it depends where you live what word you say.'

'Absolutely. I'm Jane.'

He saw that he'd made a mistake; that, the dispute settled, Peter wasn't going to go away. She was blushing, which he *knew* was a bad sign, while Peter talked exaggeratedly about rollercoasters. If Peter asked them to go along with him, it would spell disaster: he was too small to get on those rides.

She was showing Peter the photo; they laughed conspiratorially, and she blushed deeper. It was a good photo, surely they weren't laughing at him? No, it was something to do with Charlie's tail, apparently. Apparently, tucked between his legs, it looked like ... Jane said one of those surgeon's words.

His ignorance only amused them. 'I had to tell him about periods before,' Jane said. This betrayal—a barefaced lie—was the last straw. He wiped his ice-cream-smearred hands on her top.

'You!' she said, clutching his hands and pulling them to her mouth. He winced, screwing up his face for the expected bite, but all she did was lightly place her lips on his skin and leave them there. He was more confused than ever.

'I want to go home,' he said. 'I mean to the ...'

'I know what you mean ... I'll have to take him back.'

'Will you come back here?' Peter asked.

'I don't know, I don't know. Just let me take him back first.'

They crossed the road into the street. He stopped at the 2p machine and searched his pockets, while she waited impatiently. He looked at all the capsules through the thick plastic, stalling by pretending to consider which one he wanted, tracing a finger over them as though he were reading.

'I'm allowed to be in the street by myself,' he said. 'Remember this morning?' And he kept up the war until she surrendered.

'If you're *sure*,' she said unhappily. 'Give your mum all the change that's left. I've counted it.'

She retraced her steps and his stomach sank. He didn't move from the machine for quite some time, and when he did, he returned to the promenade also, but without looking for her. Instead he allowed himself to be carried with the crowd, vaguely in the direction of the Tower. He must have gone for miles and miles, he thought, and still he was unafraid. He would pick up the stride of the two girls—women, he supposed they were—walking in front.