

Primavera

Frida felt far too fat for her school uniform. Everyone was looking at her when she just wanted to hide. I'm a dinosaur, she thought, shaking the streets as I walk. I'm a fucking hideous monster. The smell of spring got to her too, after the smoky scent of winter. The dryness and silence had been comforting, bare twigs, icy grass, the whiteness of frost so cleansing. But now this sickening spring stink was everywhere, coming out of the land. She wished winter could have lasted forever.

The thing that came out of the land didn't have a face or a shape, but spring was covered in flowers, like that goddess she'd learnt about at school. Fucking school. Yes, the goddess in the Botticelli painting was violated by some god and it was so awful that she transformed, she changed into someone else with the trauma of it. In the painting, the god is behind her, a dark blue menacing presence, and she has come out in flowers. Whatever he did to her made flowers burst through her skin.

Frida turned into the passageway that passed between the housing schemes. At least nobody could see her here. It was long and narrow and her Dad had told her she shouldn't go through it on her own at night. What did it matter now? Anything could happen to you anywhere. He was always trying to protect her, but what was the point? She thought of the time when he wouldn't let her send off for a T-shirt because it had a picture of a cup of cocoa and the caption 'Some like it hot'. She was twelve then and couldn't understand. When she'd asked him, his forehead had wrinkled, but he

didn't explain. Now she thought he had known about boys and the things they could do.

Frida looked at the moss growing on the wall in the passageway. There was no graffiti because of the rough harling. Not like in the bus shelter where diagrams of hairy male genitals seemed to take aim at her from every angle. She had stopped getting the bus to school and now she walked every day so that she didn't have to face people. But recently the moss had been bothering her. It seemed to be everywhere, strange and green and rootless, spreading up the walls.

It was Flora, the name of that goddess, the Goddess of Spring. After she read about Flora, she hoped she would never feel the shiver of spring again. She wanted to hide behind winter's thick clothes forever.

Macko jabbed the air with his shovel as he shouted into the wind. His voice was carried down the hill to the housing scheme below.

Ali stopped digging and glared at Macko. 'So you're a freedom fighter today, are you?' he said.

'Stiff Little Fingers, man. Great song. And aye, I've always been a freedom fighter.'

‘Well, ye better wipe that smile off your face then. Didn’t ye know the greatest enemy of freedom is a happy slave?’

Macko’s smirk turned surly. ‘Fuckin smart arse. You’ve been reading too many books again, haven’t ye? You better watch yersel’ or you’ll end up in one of them universities.’

‘You better watch yersel’ or you’ll end up in one of them dole queues,’ said Ali.

‘Too right,’ said a voice from behind Ali. ‘We work, while he sits on his arse.’

‘Och come on!’ said Macko, ‘I’m keeping yous entertained.’

There was a thud as Macko’s shovel hit a root.

Ali’s spade sunk into the ground, a sliding sound ending in a staccato. Apart from the meagre wages, he didn’t hate the work as much as Macko did. Sometimes he liked its rhythm. It was satisfying to see the growing pile of earth and to smell the fresh red-brown soil as he felt the wind on his face.

The earth smell reminded him of Octobers when he’d been a boy, of going tattie picking in the holidays to earn a fiver a day. Ali and his brother would turn up at the farm near the canal and get a lift in a shuddering trailer attached to the farmer’s tractor. The team of tattie pickers dressed in wellies, cagoules and headscarves would be bumped down mud tracks to the field.

When they got there, the tractor would rumble along digging. The tattie pickers would follow it, bending to lift the firm potatoes into their baskets. When the baskets were full they'd empty them into a sack. Sometimes it would snow, and the ground would be hard, and their fingers would get numb inside their gloves, but there was nothing better than sitting on the sacks at lunchtime in the crisp air, drinking warm soup from a flask.

The walls of the passageway were high and above them Frida saw the roofs of houses. Everything was made of clean, safe concrete, but the moss was spreading up the walls, coming out of the cracks. In the woods it was everywhere, growing, taking over. Frida shivered.

At the end of the passageway she stepped onto the pavement again. People were looking at her from the windows of houses. She couldn't see anyone, but she knew they were there because of the smell of cooked breakfasts. Hundreds of pairs of cold eyes were staring as mouths munched. The streets were silent apart from a few birds screeching. She heard someone shouting, a man's voice coming from the steps ahead. Did she hear her name? Did she hear the word dirty? Who was it? What did they know about her?

Frida looked up and saw the clouds hurtling past. A giant white mass moved towards one that looked like a lamb. The lamb exploded in slow motion as the giant reached towards it, it shattered into little pieces and was scattered across the sky.

‘Ah found out her name yesterday,’ announced Macko.

‘Who?’

‘The girl. How could you forget? Our daily entertainment.’

‘I thought YOU were our daily entertainment.’

‘Nah. The school girl.’

‘So how did ye find out?’

‘I had a word with one of the guys walking past.’

‘And?’

‘Her name’s Frida.’

‘Frida?’

‘Aye.’

‘Were her parents into Abba or something?’

‘You never know. I’d give her one though,’ said Macko, pumping his hips.

‘Och ya dirty bastard. She’s far too young for you.’

‘What? She could be 16 or 17.’

Ali stopped shovelling for a moment and looked at Macko whose eyes were hard, like the steel in the spade he was holding. For a small man, he took up a lot of space. He leaned back cockily and punched the air as he spoke. His mullet added an extra inch or two to his height.

Ali kept quiet and turned again to his work. As he forced his shovel into the ground, it struck something soft - a decaying vegetable with a putrid smell. How did that get there? It made him think of his days on the farm, of finding a mushy rotten potato. As you picked it up, it would disintegrate, releasing its foul stink and spilling its liquid onto your gloves. Sometimes it would be difficult to shake off its stench.

Frida turned the corner towards the steps. There were 99 of them. She had counted them several times on her way to the primary school that was now closed down. Alongside each flight of stairs was a white banister, with creeping rust covering the paint like a disease.

In the Botticelli painting the flowers were coming out of Flora's mouth, she was vomiting flowers, vomiting spring. They twisted around her as if they were going to strangle her. No, they had already choked her, entangling themselves inside her. As he did. That god who thought he could do what he liked and what did his violence do but turn her into someone else. She became spring. The goddess of spring, all smiling. All smiles for the gods please. Look what we've given you, a new name, a new identity and lots of flowers. You must love spring. Fuck that.

Her heart started to beat as she climbed the first step. She could hear the men's voices and see the moss. Between the cracks in each step the moss was growing, dark green and slimy. It would appear anywhere the air was clean and pure, absorbing, sucking out the goodness, unfurling itself over the world.

After the first flight of steps she turned the corner. Beside the concrete sloping upwards, there was a low wall. Once she'd sat there as the sun was setting, listening to the tinny sound of distant radios blaring out football results. That time belonged to her childhood, like the time she had counted the steps, and now she was somebody else – a new Frida, a bigger version. The scales said she weighed the same, but someone must have tampered with them. She knew she was huge and she saw it in peoples' eyes. She knew she was swollen and fat and when anyone looked at her that's what they would see.

'She's coming!'

'Quick!'

Macko moved towards the banister at the edge of the steps and leaned over it. Ali and the other two smiled at each other and put down their spades. They ambled towards the steps and lined up beside Macko. The four of them stood there, as if they were at the edge of a procession waiting for a famous person to pass.

'God will you look at her.'

'Phwoarr!'

'D'you think she's got a boyfriend?'

Frida's face was on fire. Inside her school blouse, her heart was thumping. Her knees quivered so much she thought she might fall over. She could see them ahead, the four workmen, hungry wolves leaning out, leering at her.

There was nowhere to go. She had to go to school and unless she got the bus this was the only way. She would give anything to disappear. Why were they teasing her like this? Why were they making fun of her? The way they looked at her made her feel so dirty. What had they heard about her? What did they know?

She looked down at the concrete, ribbed and grey, then turned her head towards the trees and bushes beside the path. The barbed wire needles of the gorse bushes imprisoned her on one side. Her torturers' eyes stabbed at her from the other.

'Hi Frida!'

Her legs were like jelly. How did they know her name? Who had they been talking to? Did everyone know?

She heard whistles and guttural groans. The snarling beasts were waiting ready to pounce. She started to walk faster, rushing past them.

'Don't you like us Frida? Will ye not stop and talk to us?'

The tone of their voices reminded her of another voice. They were like him, part of him. Every day since that time she'd heard his words in her head: *You like it don't*

you? You're enjoying it aren't you? And the smell of the moss as she'd been pushed into it. The workmen were in her space like him, in her head, attacking her, hurting her.

She climbed the next flight of steps, keeping her head down and here the steps were slippery with moss. She reached for the banister, but pulled her hand away when she saw the dirty fingers of rust that curled around it. The moss had spread over the bark on the trees and was crawling upwards. It was on the ground too and she thought she saw it coming towards her, growing out as if some invisible knitter was making more and more of it. It slid over the steps and she could smell it: the sickening woody stench that was all too familiar. And now she thought the moss was going to start to grow on her, inch up her shoes, slither up her legs and cover her body. Maybe she would soon sprout foliage, like Chloris turning into Flora.

The workmen's voices got louder. She started to run up the rest of the steps. She felt dizzy, her schoolbag dug into her shoulder, her shoes slid. She had to get away.

'Frida!' yelled Macko. 'Don't run! I want to talk to you!'

The others laughed and leaned over the banister.

'Why's she running away? What did we do?'

'Well, she's only a young girl. Maybe she's shy.'

'How could she be shy?' said Macko, 'Look at her. If I looked like that I'd be full of confidence.'

‘I thought you were already full of confidence.’

‘And god help us all, if you looked like that.’

Macko smiled. ‘Well what is it with her? She goes around looking like that and doesn’t deliver. She’s so stuck up. Probably thinks she’s better than us.’

‘It’s not her fault that she looks like that. Just like it’s not your fault that you’re such an ugly bastard.’

‘Aw fuck off,’ laughed Macko, ‘Go and do some work.’

Ali thought about the girl: the tension in her back and the way she’d clenched her fists. She’d seemed to stagger drunkenly, as if she might fall over at any minute. He wanted to rush up and help her, but he didn’t know what he would say. As he looked at her his thoughts returned to tattie picking and to the times when he’d found a rotten potato. It would look good and strong on the outside, just like the others, sometimes even better. But when you got close to it, when you touched it, it would crumble and collapse inwards. It had been holding the darkness inside it for so long that it couldn’t stand any pressure. And if you pushed it, everything that had been hidden from the world would come pouring out.

Frida reached the top of the steps and her heart was beating so fast that she thought she was going to explode. The moss was moving and following her, squelching along,

trying to pull at her clothes and the workmen were coming - the wolves - panting towards her. Once the moss had held her down they were going to get her. They were going to tear her apart. And she stood at the top of the steps and looked at the trees and the sky with the racing clouds and she heard the voice from that time in her head and all she could do was stand and scream.