

William Bedford

Orchards

Every night the fox came down from the hills and hid among the trees. You could see its traces in the summer grass, hear the vixen crying in heat. With the first snows, delicate footprints appeared between the rows of trees, and there were scuffles in the mud at the edge of the stream. On the trees, dark patches of fungus discolored the infected bark, and where the canker had spread, whole branches were rotten with disease, causing fruit spurs and buds to wilt and shrivel near the scab. There had been no apples that year, and the trees looked pathetic and sick, the dying wood creaking when the fox cried in the night.

Lowther was certain it was the fox damaging his trees.

"What else can it be?" he glared aggressively when the men in the pub said he was imagining things. "You tell me what else it can be?" He kept their gaze, his eyes sullen with drink, his fists clenched round his glass. The older men were wary of him, knowing his temper, some of them remembering his father. The younger ones were not so sure.

"You spray for weevil and caterpillar?" one of them asked.

Lowther glowered into his empty glass.

"Bad year for sawfly," another grinned, enjoying the joke. They all knew what was wrong with the trees. "You want BHC for that," the man said innocently. "So I heard say."

"Molathian," his friend corrected.

"That's red spider, mate."

"And sawfly."

They were beginning to argue, enjoying themselves, when Lowther suddenly interrupted.

"I'm telling you, it's a fox," he said viciously, glaring round at the men. "It's a fox."

"Course it is, mate."

Lowther staggered up and fastened his coat. He stank of drink. He hadn't shaved for several days and his stubble was flecked with grey. As he leant against the table, the older men finished their drinks, waiting for him to go.

The man who had talked about sawfly stared at the fire.

"Summer pruning," he said insolently, not bothered about Lowther. "Could allus be that."

Lowther watched him indifferently. His eyes were red from lack of sleep. The skin underneath his eyes was bruised with tiredness. For a moment, he looked surprised, glancing at the younger man, then his eyes clouded over and went blank. He drained his glass and put it down carelessly in front of the man.

"Goodnight," he said with a sneering humor. As he pushed past the table, he slipped against the wall, and the men moved nervously, one or two of them beginning to laugh. He laughed with them, raising his hand. He felt dizzy. By the time he reached the door his head was spinning. "Goodnight," he shouted again, slamming the pub door.

The ground was iron with frost. A cold wind moaned up the narrow lane and the snow was packed with ice, solid in the rough road. Near the hedges, where the snow had drifted, it was frozen a foot thick.

"Bastards," he said, shivering against the cold. "Bastards."

Far away, he thought he could hear the fox crying.

* * *

The Lowthers had always owned the orchard at the far end of the village. Ignoring all advice, the father had planted the original trees in soil that was too heavy for them, on a rough bit of ground exposed to cold east winds. The stream at the bottom of the orchard made the earth marshy and damp. Everybody knew James Grieve was a daft tree for this far north. It was prone to apple scab and canker, and the fruit was liable to bruise. The best late variety would have been Orleans Reinette, or

maybe even Golden Noble, not this pale yellow fruit with its flush of soft red streaks. The old man insisted on planting what he wanted, saying he preferred something with a good juicy flavor even if it was rotten. He planted the wrong trees out of cussedness, and left the orchard for his son who went on trying to crop the apples.

Lowther sat in the kitchen and warmed his hands at the fire. He boiled a kettle and heaped coals onto the range. He massaged his aching wrist, rheumatic from an old bit of damage. When the kettle boiled, he made a drink of hot water laced with cider vinegar and honey, and shuddered at the bitter taste. He laughed, staring into the flames. On the scuttle and brass fender, the light of the flames danced and shimmered. Holding up his glass, he could see the melting honey, yellow in the warm light.

He remembered his father, scything the huge orchard.

Vigorous, and in a rage, the old man flailed at the weeds, cursing the wild garlic and bluebells, the purple bell-flowers that had seeded from the hedge, the dandelions that were everywhere. The ditches were rampant with cow parsley and nettles, the grass at the sides of the lane humming with flies and bees. In a temper, the old man bent the scythe into the ground, wrenching his back and yelling with pain and frustration. He shouted at his son to buy a weedkiller, but Lowther refused, laughing, good-humored. He spent all day spraying acres of crops with pesticides, and wouldn't see them used in the orchard. Glaring at each other, they fought over the trees, arguing about storing the rotten fruit, disagreeing about the wild flowers. Blind with fury, the old man died the year Lowther got married, and was buried in the church graveyard, his tombstone soon smothered with yellow lichen.

Far away, Lowther heard the fox.

The sharp cry was like a cough in the blistering cold, threatening, intermittent. Getting up from the fire, he stood uneasily by his chair. He was confused, listening for the cry. The flames were burning low. He threw more coal on the fire and then wondered why he didn't go to bed. On the mantelpiece stood the old army photograph of his father. He had never thrown it out, not noticing, indifferent. The fox cried again. He opened the kitchen door and the wind moaned into his face. The sky was full of stars. He blinked, flinching from the cold, and closed the door. There was no point going out. He sat down and stared into the fire, finishing the drink for his arthritis.

He knew why the orchard was dying.

She had wanted it kept natural. On her first visit, they walked together beneath the shading trees. She worked in the town, travelling every day on the bus. In the new council houses, there was no room for proper gardens, and her parents weren't interested. She listened to him naming the flowers. At their feet, the grass was thick with snowdrops, drifts of wild hyacinth blue beneath the cloudless sky. They lay down in the warm grass and gazed through the clouds of blossom. In the middle of the orchards, primrose and yellow loosestrife caught the sun, pale in the shimmering dazzle. Down by the stream, forget-me-nots danced in the shallow water, marigolds and ragged-robin shone yellow and pink in the brilliant sun. When they came back to the orchard at night, the air was heavy with the scent of wild garlic, the sickly smelling meadowsweet which grew in great masses along the stream. She made him go into the water for forget-me-nots, and laughed softly when he took off his clothes to dry.

"You do what you want," she whispered when the old man went on about the weeds. "Don't listen to him."

The afternoon they were married, she made him lie down with her in the orchard and make love in the sweet smelling grass, the old man watching from his bedroom.

Then she started complaining. She hated the journey into town. The house was too far from her parents. She took a job at the pub, helping most lunchtimes and some evenings. When the regular barmaid left, she asked if she could have the job fulltime. She came home too tired to speak, working late at night, getting back when Lowther was already asleep. Slovenly, bad tempered, she lounged round the garden wearing tight jeans and an old blouse. One morning, when Lowther was getting ready to work in the orchard, she pressed him back against the kitchen table with a helpless groan, her hands hot and clumsy in her fumbling haste. A week later, she went off with another man, taking all Lowther's money from the post office and leaving the back door wide open in her hurry.

That was last year, when the air was dense with pollen, the country heavy and breathless with vegetation. Even the churches, built of the local greenstone, sank back into the lush growth. Old walls were covered with thick green moss. Gardens were overgrown with hollyhocks and

sunflowers, great banks of lilies and roses clambering out of control. In the orchard, the nights were wild with the scent of garlic, the rampant meadowsweet overwhelming in the unnatural heat.

Drunk with the scent, drowning himself in alcohol, Lowther savaged the trees, his hands blistered from hacking at the vulnerable bark, his head aching with the silence and immense heat. All morning he went at the summer pruning, and collapsed in the afternoon weeping in the dry grass. At night, in his bedroom, he lay and listened to the hedgehogs, foaming in their frenzy on the lawn.

He did no spraying at all that year, forgetting the winter-wash and the bud-burst spray he was supposed to do the following March. At petal fall, he couldn't be bothered with sawfly and spider mite, and the caterpillars were everywhere. He should have cut the diseased wood out with a knife, cleaning the wounds and painting them with a fungicidal paint. The branches that were infected should have been lopped off below the wound. By the time he noticed the damage he had done, it was too late. The trees were alive with woolly aphids, the apples were full of larvae. Dark patches appeared all over the bark. The fruit dropped rotten from the branches.

Stunned, he sat in his kitchen and listened every night to the fox.

It was coming down from the hills to find water in the fast-running stream.

On summer mornings, he would find its tracks baked in the hot mud. Its stink seemed to hang over the stream.

* * *

The fox was suddenly at the edge of the orchard.

Looking up, Lowther flinched from the abrupt noise. The ragged, harsh barking coughed on the low wind. Judging from the sound, it was crossing the field beyond the orchard, nosing towards the water of the stream. The water was frozen solid.

Nervously, Lowther stood up.

"I can hear you," he said angrily, tensing as if he was listening to the wind, his dulled nerves aching.

There was a scuffle in the hard snow in the garden.

"I can hear you," he shouted to the blinds, the curtained windows.

This was ridiculous.

Without thinking, he unlocked the door.

The wind tugged at his hair. He felt his face freeze, his eyes flinch from the cold. He shut the door behind him and stared at the empty garden. The cold bruised his hands. When he breathed, the air made his throat ache. Over the fields, the sky was desolate with stars, a brilliant, hard moonlight. He could hear the snow creaking, freezing in the gutters and drains. The water tub was inches thick with ice, great overhangs of snow frozen in the metal gutters.

The fox cried down by the water.

He could take his gun but that would mean going back into the house. He glanced towards the warm light, and then plunged into the frozen snow. He was still wearing his boots, though his coat was hanging in the kitchen cupboard. He ploughed through the snow, climbing the low fence into the orchard. In the moonlight, everything was bright and exaggerated. He could hear the trees, moving slowly in the cold. Every branch stood out, black against the pure snow. When he knocked into one of the trees, he was showered with falling snow, cascading from the low branches. He shook his head, the snow running down his back, freezing his bare shoulders. In the middle of the orchard, the ground was treacherous with ice, slippery where falls of snow had scattered. He fell awkwardly, grazing the skin on his arm, jarring his knee against a tree trunk. His hands and face had gone numb, and he could hear the blood pounding in his ears, like a voice whispering in the shadows.

It took him several minutes to reach the stream.

The fox was waiting by the water.

It watched him for several seconds, and then pawed indifferently at the ground, scraping at the solid ice before turning and trotting across the field. There were scuff marks all over the ice. Fresh snow at the edge of the field had been churned and dirtied. In the moonlight, the fox ambled through the snow, and then darted under a hedge and back towards the hills. As it went, he heard a sharp cry, and then an owl flew low over the orchard, a weasel screamed its terrifying squeal.

He broke the ice with the steel caps of his boots.

It took several hard kicks, and then his leg plunged into freezing water, soaking his trousers and making his head reel with shock. He dragged his foot out of the water and stood shivering on the banks. With

another kick, he shattered the frozen surface, and then turned and walked back through the orchard.