**Who said the river was red?**

We were only playing.

This was our excuse for everything that ever raised a wail. It was no excuse at all. It meant we knew full well that we were being mean, or that we’d pushed a person to the fine-lined edge of their limits. There’d be tears, for sure. Or in this case, no tears at all, just bright red guilty faces that got hotter as we ran from the river and up through the woods and then scattered across the estate, never to play there again.

I was only playing. You were only playing. We were only playing.

We conjugated our excuses, though in truth we were too young and wild to care a toss for form.

I’m still trying to correct myself.

I was only playing. You was only playing. We was only running for our lives, running from the blood that spewed along the middle of the river.

I might say it was artistic now. There was a programme on the telly with a man who made a line of leaves and floated them along a stream. They told us it was art and I agreed. I wonder what the man would have to say of this.

The boy wasn’t one of us. That was the thing.

Where we were dark and scrappy, he was blonde and clean and neat. I thought that if I licked his cheek he’d taste the way that Maccy’s Sweet Shop smelled, all pink sherbert dust and sugar. Even from across the river I could swear I caught his scent. A pretty smell that didn’t know what rivers meant. He wore grey shorts and socks that came up to his knees and a cap that was made of felt and had a bright red button on the top. Gabe, or maybe Wes, or Bev or perhaps it was me, but one of us, somebody said it was his switch.

‘He’s not a real boy. They turn him on in the morning and turn him off again at night. Don’t they? Hey? I’m talking to you. Don’t they turn you off at night?’

He didn’t talk. He stood on the other side of the river while we flung ourselves about like cats.

‘What’s wrong with him?’ asked Bev, swinging fast and hard to us, then off again across the water, her legs stretched out towards the boy. She yelled, ‘What’s wrong with you?’

We had never seen his face before. And we were the lords of the river. We were the ones who flung the rope up over the tree, a rock tied to the end for weight and we’d shimmied up the trunk to wrap the rope around. We’d pinched the tyre from Bev’s father’s allotment and we’d sliced it in half with Frenchie Thomas’s saw in the back of his oily old garage. We’d tied the knots and tested them, piling on together, swinging out across the water: one, two, three at a time to make sure it was firm.

It was 1962. Can you believe that now? 1962 and still we cannot hold each other’s gaze.

He sat down in the long river grass and watched us for a while. We pretended we’d lost interest, became too busy swinging or rubbing sticks together to make fire.

‘Keep going,’ said Wes, as someone turned the stick between their palms until the skin was red and raw. That was me, I’m sure. ‘Keep going. It’s nearly there. It always catches in the end.’

We kept on sneaking glances though. None of us could look away.

‘He’s still there,’ we whispered over our non-smoking sticks.

‘He’s still there,’ we whispered, piling up our den with moss.

‘He’s still there,’ we whispered as we climbed our tree.

‘Leave it,’ I said, or maybe it was Gabe, or Wes, or Bev. ‘Not doing no harm to no one, is he?’

‘What do you bloody care?’

‘He’s still there.’

So it’s true that we were only playing. We were only playing when we shouted, ‘Oi. What’re you looking at?’

‘Leave it,’ I said.

Or Wes said.

Or Bev said.

‘Leave the boy alone.’

‘No,’ Gabe said, and I know it was him that said it, not me. ‘This is our river. You can’t just sit there and stare. You have to pay the toll or move along. Why don’t you go home?’

The boy didn’t reply. He sat with his legs crossed like he was in assembly and the hymn was starting up. He sat with his back straight like we did when Mrs Pugh was doing the rounds with her ruler.

‘Why are you here?’

‘Maybe he doesn’t speak English.’

‘Perhaps he’s deaf.’

‘Throw something at him then. That’ll stir him.’

Gabe picked up a stone from the bank and tossed it twice in his palm so it smacked in the middle and we all knew that it was a good one. He could have bowled for England if he’d wanted to. It was him that threw the stone.

He arced his arm above his head and hurled it with barely a grunt.

It wasn’t the stone that did it though. No. It can’t have been the stone that caused the blood because we saw the boy reach out a hand to catch it. We all saw it. He did it without flinching. Just reached up and caught the stone that Gabe had hurled with all his might. If it had cracked his head we would have all applauded, but there was something horrible about the way the boy’s hand flicked up and caught the stone mid-air.

‘Did you see that?’

The boy put the stone inside his blazer pocket.

‘Hey! That’s our stone. Throw it back, why dontcha?’

He didn’t though. He went on sitting and staring like nothing strange was happening to anyone.

The day got heavier. By that I mean the storm was closing in. You know how it gets. Your head feels tight. The air feels thick and everything is something like a dream. Even now when storms come up I get a migraine and I think about that day and everything becomes a blur of red and green and grey.

It was the kind of day that made you want to swim.

‘Let him be,’ said Wes, or Bev or me. ‘Come on. I’m boiling up. Let’s have a swim before our mams start calling us for tea.’

None of us had pants, so it was nudie dips or nothing for us all. We didn’t think a thing of it back then and all of us were naked in the water, spinning round like baby seals.

It was Gabe who started with the splashing, I am sure of that. He got his arm an inch or so below the surface and he curved it through to send a wave of water up and over all of us. We joined in and, as we were the ones already wet, we started sending waves towards the boy.

Even then, when he was soaked right through, he didn’t say a thing. He was soaking wet and had a stone inside his blazer pocket and he never said a word.

He stood up and Gabe laughed and pointed saying that the boy had wet his pants, but it didn’t look like that at all. If anything it looked as though he’d vomited all down his front. His face was pale and grey and his eyes were suddenly red like he’d been crying, though if he had, we hadn’t seen. He kept his shoes on as he slipped towards the river.

‘Bloody hell! He’s coming in.’

He kept his shorts on and his blazer and his hat and he let himself slide through the grass and right down to the river.

We were on him straight away.

He was clothed and we were naked. That was the thing.

We pulled at him. We had a sleeve. We took his hat. We pulled his shorts. We got his shoes. We span him up and ducked him underwater and we played him round and round and pulled his pants, navy little y-fronts that they were, until his peachy bum was bare.

There was splashing and shouting and screaming. But all of it was us.

He didn’t fight back.

I don’t know who first saw the stream of blood, but it was there and is always there between us now. This ribbon of red, like a string of leaves pouring down the middle of a river.

No one ever said a thing but we were out and grabbing at our clothes, all of us fighting with our shorts and our dresses and shirts, none of us looking at the water or each other. None of us speaking as we ran our different ways right through the woods and back to the estate.

We didn’t meet again that summer back in 1962. Can you believe it was so long ago?

There was a rumour that a boy had died up in the woods, though my mammy said it was a lie. We’d counted all the heads and none of us was missing.

There was Gabe and Wes and Bev and me.

There was a stone that one of us threw across the river at a boy who caught it in his hand. There was a storm and a rope and a swing, and all of us, including the boy who smelled of sweets, all of us were only ever playing.