

## Second Nature

This is the fourth night of James' fever and hopefully the worst of it.

His aunt takes the back of his neck in one hand to lift his head over the sink. Sweat has turned his hair to sweet-dark clumps of soaked hay. Through the washcloth, her fingertips put small dots of heat through his body like the beginnings of a barn fire. The mirror clouds over with the steam.

He is not strong enough yet to walk without shaking, so he is carried back to bed like a new bride. In the coarse sheets of the guest bedroom, he is made about the most delicate thing in the world, trembling like that. Strange boy, he has always been sick-looking, is just yellower now than usual. On the phone he tells his mum he is "O-K", and his aunt smiles milkily at him and says "yes, he's being terribly brave about it".

James' aunt would have made an excellent mother. Care is natural to her in a way that it is not to her husband, who calls James *buddy* and *sport*, pantomiming the baseball-gloved father of an American TV show. James' own mother, in no position to tend a feverish child, concedes now to her sister-in-law's good judgement; the boy is not well enough yet to go home as planned. It is likely he will miss returning to school.

Outside, sheep still bleat. They will keep this up until the morning as they did last night and the night before. The noise splits James' fever into many hundreds of sharp parts. They sound like dinosaurs, he moans, or crying girls. His aunt promises that it will not carry on much longer; already it is less noisy than when the lambs were first separated. Sheep are stupid, and they forget very quickly what it was they had to cry about.

James was there for the lambing this year. From the bedroom window he can see them most days – mothers and babies – spread all down the valley. He could paint them in with a sponge. In the mornings, the good weather makes picture-postcards of all the windowpanes; the farm and the entire village below it flushed with pleasant light.

The village is an expensive place to live these days; wealthy ex-professionals of James' uncle's sort have moved in from the cities to make families and paint their houses pretty colours for the tourist picture-books that advertise *Hidden Gems of the Country*. They walk big dogs in their quilted jackets and leave bunches of fresh-cut flowers out in boxes on their driveways: *Please take! Please, take!*

Usually, when James goes into the village with his aunt, she will take his hand in her roughened one (she often forgets her gloves) or, now he is taller, gently link his arm to cross the street. Over the past couple of holidays at the farm, he has taken to imagining when she does this that she is his fancy wife; that people passing by might think she is his girlfriend or fiancée and that he has done really very well for himself.

He has known that his aunt is quite beautiful for years now. Her loveliness has been carefully studied by the women from church choir, who put on makeup and their daughters' dresses whenever they come around to the house for dinner. In the greengrocers, his aunt wears him close to ward against the village wives, who recognise him in kind and nod, understanding the gravity of his fiction.

Though James is tall for his age, he has the small, pointed feet of a woman. His aunt has surprisingly large feet and so more than once he has thought quietly that the feet of their children would be just perfectly sized, though he keeps this thought pressed to darkest

corners. Sometimes, he takes a single of her clean socks from the drier to hold. In his hand they are like lamb's tails. He has seen his uncle tie the rubber bands around them before, so they fall clean off. In the weeks after, you can find them in the pasture just like that - without a body.

His aunt prefers horses to sheep. His uncle's money built her a tidy yard at the bottom of the farm, where she gives riding lessons. At the weekends, a charm of local schoolgirls descends on its forecourt, chattering and fussing their ribbons.

Her particular favourite horse can't jump anymore. Visitors to the house often stop under the framed photographs of her beside it – a shining dark thing pinned with rosettes. It's a big animal; a deep, ready vessel for the love she gives it, which has grown heavy enough in daily doses to weigh it there to its stable. James has tried to find something to love this way, but the lambs and farm cats that he tries only wriggle from his grasp.

James does not mind the horses but still finds plenty excuses not to go out on the hunts, even if they don't chase real foxes anymore. Last season they made him a runner, once. He thought they might dress him like the protesters that he and his mum saw get almost trampled at the Boxing Day Meet when they came for Christmas one year; in fuzzy pointy-eared costumes with cartoonish red bloodstains down their fronts. In the end they let him go in jeans, dragging an awful stinking rag behind him through the grass for the dogs.

That was the first time he had seen the lake properly; from up on that hill past the sixth fence. There it was: perfect thing! *Easy as that*, it said to him, turning over in the light like a model of the Earth. It didn't occur to him then or any time since, passing at a distance from the passenger seat of his uncle's car on the way home from town, to take a picture. It was

better just to hold it where it settled on his stomach, with bits of his insides reflected between clouds on its surface.

The lake had an island in its middle. This was what made it special; different to other, ordinary lakes. Going about his daily chores elsewhere, he trod the dirt of that promised land all through his mind. He had taken it home to his mother's house, into school. In English class he staked coloured flags on its lonely shore - the first man ever to set foot there, or else the first in many ages. Maybe he would scratch his name into one of its few trees, so that anybody who came there would know it had been him - was his. At night the cool water glittered under his pillow like a coin from the tooth fairy.

His uncle said he would not take him there to swim. He found he could not name the desire to his aunt. Sometimes on clear days they went down to the river, where teenagers came to dangle bruised legs from the old bridge and try somersaults, floating up like apples in the foam. It was not right. The current frothed at James' ankles but would not return his winks.

In the end it had been further than he thought - even on his new bike. He chose the date of the wedding anniversary on purpose; better, because after a drink his uncle would sleep through until the next day undisturbed.

Beyond the porch it was all purple-black. The battery torch he taped to the handlebars made just enough light to show up the potholes in the track and the scattering eyes of a few loose ewes between leafy gaps in the hedge.

When he arrived to it, the lake was glad to see him - finally! Stars bubbled on the water around a second, flat moon. Further, the island trees waved out with a darkness deeper than even the wet middle of the night. Relieved that he came, and only faintly surprised to see him so late.

He couldn't have risked one of the striped towels from the bathroom, so his clothes were neatly folded into a bush. He walked with his hands outstretched to receive, feeling blind up to the edge. The water shushed and tugged at him; co-conspirator, boy with the fast-beating heart, until he could no longer see the white of his football sweatshirt under the heather.

It was cold in there, sure, but he was a good swimmer and never felt it after he was in past his navel; only kept kicking.

The ground in the middle of the lake was sticky between his toes. Leaning in towards him now, the land took the half-shape of the muckheap at the back of the farm where he used to play wheelbarrow. Grassy-smelling, a little sour. The first breach of morning made five different shades of green in the reeds.

*It is so nice to have you here!* Is what the trees said to fill the introduction. A great awkwardness came and widened into a spinning gyre. Each – boy and island – were aware of having been caught in their predicament somehow unexpectedly naked.

The largest tree, worst of all, was twisted away from where he waited in the mud. It could not hide the indecent tatters of gingham picnic blanket that tangled in its boughs. Empty cans of pre-mixed cocktails shaped ugly, terrible tears in the thin grass.

Suddenly, James found that he knew his coldness and began violently to shiver and could not stop.

The sheets weighed on James that first night of fever as they do now, heavy with the Lily Fresh laundry detergent his aunt buys special from the organic shop. Her clothes smell of it too, and other things, when she moves over him to straighten the blanket.

Up close he sees that she has been wearing lipstick and regrets that today she must have driven to the shops alone. In the lamplight, her loose hair marks fine brushstrokes in shadow up the wall.

She bids him to open wide - for a teaspoon of strawberry paracetamol syrup, a kiss to the forehead. Fixed with concern, he sees her cast like one of the lady statues in the garden of the community museum, bearing armfuls of stone grapes for wine.

Between her ears, his aunt is ringing with what the old man told her: that he'd seen him, the strange child from out of town, cycling like all hell down the dirt road by his house last week, first thing in the morning. He had only known him by the flashlight that shone backwards on his face like a campfire ghost. Almost gave him a heart attack, he said. There aren't many people that come by that way at night, unless they're up to something. Woke his dog, even.

James' aunt fixes the cap on the medicine bottle and says out loud that she should really go to bed. She will need to be awake when they come for the lambs at dawn, and already it is getting late. Still, her finger hovers over the light-switch.

The few seconds of quiet pass between them almost without notice. The sheep have stopped their bleating, just briefly, to chew over the last of the good grass before harvest. Soon they won't remember why they started at all.