

Butt Clouds

“That cloud looks just like a butt,” Rob mused as he slumped back in the long grass, scratching his crotch through battered denim cut-offs.

“What, like a tight bird’s ass sorta butt? Or a flabby old granny’s butt?” His younger brother, Will, replied as he stretched beside him.

The azure blue sky above them was painted with a jumble of fluffy clouds which drifted, morphed, and changed shape in the air currents. A soft breeze stirred the baking field, moving the grass as though an affectionate hand slowly stroked it. Poppies and field daisies nodded as far as the eye could see. A perfect English summer’s day in rural Somerset.

Will pulled an old dried up pack of Mellors from his pocket and offered it to Rob.

“Smoke?”

“Cheers.”

Will flicked a match and they both drew with relish, savouring the smoke as though it were a double cheese burger with extra bacon. Will threw the spent match back over his head into the grass.

“Need to make the most o’ these while we can still get ‘em. Shops will be cleared out of everything soon, eh Rob? I heard one of the old ‘uns say the supermarkets haven’t got anything on the shelves now. People have even eaten the cat food.”

Rob took a moment to reply, enjoying the taste of the old cigarette.

“Yeah, and eaten the cats too. We’re OK though. That lot at the farm have a food stash that will last a year, I reckon. Now they’re growin’ stuff too we should be alright, so long as we stick it out here. Just means puttin’ up with some of ‘em so they’ll let us stay. It was our lucky day when we stumbled across that place.”

Rob, Will and their mother, Mary, had been wandering the countryside until two months ago, when they’d chanced across the little community that had settled in the abandoned farmhouse. The group had kindly taken them in and had shared what they had with the new arrivals.

Plundered cigarettes finished, they dozed in the grass under the sun, until the klaxon horn startled them.

“Shit!” Rob was first on his feet. “We’ll never make it back before they shut the gates.”

The two young men fled across the field, panic lending wings to their feet as they leapt furrows. They were just yards from the stockaded farmhouse when the huge wooden gates slammed shut. Now they could hear whoops and manic screams, drifting across on the breeze towards the barricaded settlement. Will hammered on the reinforced gates, yelling desperately, because he knew exactly what was coming for them. Just three months ago, a

woman and her ten year old son had not made it back in time and their bones, picked clean, had been discovered a week later by a search party, out in the quarry. The skewered heads, skulls blackened, had been abandoned on their stakes over the cold fire pits.

Rob and Will could make out the rattling sound of quad bike engines now, a mechanical sound rarely heard now since the disaster, and as strange to the ears as birdsong or animal cries these days. A dust cloud was gathering above the field they'd just left as the dry soil was churned by advancing tyre treads, and the cloud was creeping closer, along with the demented shouting. It was the sound of oncoming carnage, of a pack on the hunt.

"It's Mary's boys – quick, let 'em in." The lookout shouted down, having spotted them from the watch tower.

The terrified brothers tumbled inside the stockade as the gates inched open for a brief moment. Both of them were gasping from the sprint, relief clearly printed on both their faces. Left outside of the protection of the stockade was not a thing they wanted to contemplate.

"Thanks." Will managed, glancing round at the gathered, tense faces.

Mary rushed forward to hug them.

Everyone in the small community knew what was approaching, knew the drill. Children and old folk cowered in the main hall of the squatted farm, and everyone who could make a stand armed themselves with what they could, farm tools, kitchen knives, homemade cudgels.

Outside the sound of engines stopped and everyone gathered in the yard behind the high walls held their breath, faces stamped with fear and anticipation.

"Well how do ya do, folks?"

One of the hunters mocked them from beyond the gates. His voice sounded flat in the hot, still air.

"Anybody fancy joinin' us for a picnic? We're getting' really peckish."

The stockaders bristled and closed ranks, facing the gates, the primal urge to defend themselves prompting them to act as one animal. Mike, a tall man in his forties, wearing a battered baseball cap and carrying a machete, yelled back.

"You try and break in here and we'll fuckin' take you apart, you bloody animals!"

Outside, they could hear sniggering and a blood-thirsty whoop split the air.

"Comin' t' get yer then, ladies!"

Rob sniffed the air, suddenly aware of the smell of smoke.

"Shit, they're trying to burn the place down," he shouted.

The others were becoming aware of it too now, and someone yelled up to the lookout.

"What's going on, mate? What's the smoke?"

"There's a fire down in the field I think," he called back. "At least, I can see smoke there and it looks like the grass flaming."

“That’s right, folks,” the hunter who’d first spoken replied, obviously able to hear the panicky conversation on the other side of the gates. “Looks like some knobhead set your field alight. Pretty lucky for us. If it comes this way it’ll save us a job. Ready cooked, roasty people. Just need t’ get the ‘taters and corn on the cob out now. Anyone remember what they tasted like?”

More whoops and manic laughter taunted the stockaders from beyond the barricades.

Sarah, a thin blonde woman with a scarred arm, stepped forward and jabbed a finger accusingly at Rob and Will.

“You two always skive off work and go down to the field to smoke, thinking we don’t notice. Did you start this fire?”

“No, no,” Rob stammered. “I stamped my butt out as I always do, careful-like.”

“So that leaves you, Will,” Sarah continued. “What did you do with your cigarette end?”

“Same.” Will snapped defensively.

“Leave my boys alone,” Mary chimed in. “They’ve always been responsible lads. They wouldn’t just leave fag butts alight in the countryside, knowing the danger.”

“Except one of them obviously did,” Sarah sneered back, turning venomously on Mary.

“Never mind that now,” Mike snapped. “How do we tackle that lot outside if the fire does breach the barricades and they get in?”

Smoke was drifting across the yard now and the lookout called down, his voice shrill with apprehension.

“The field is really blazing now.”

“Yep. It’s getting’ bigger an’ closer,” the hunter taunted. “You folks in there still feelin’ safe as houses?”

Fearful faces glanced around at the stone walls they’d built up and had so far trusted to protect them from any threat beyond. The main gates were ten foot high and made from a foot thick timber, but they hadn’t reckoned on an invader being a spark from a blazing, tinder- dry field that could just burn those gates to the ground.

“Here’s the deal. You send someone out and we leave you alone for a few more months,” the leader of the hunting pack called through the gate. “We’re givin’ yer three minutes to choose someone. Let’s do this the easy way.”

“Go to hell!” Mike shouted back.

The tension among the stockaders was rising now like steam from a bubbling pot. They exchanged desperate, fearful looks. Sarah spoke up again, snapping in a loud voice as she glared daggers at Mary, Rob and Will as they huddled together.

“Maybe one of your boys, whoever started the fire, should offer themselves up to our friends as atonement for putting the rest of our lives at risk.”

People pressed closer, stirred by her words and their own fear.

“Yeah. Let ‘em eat them, so long as those criminals promise to leave the rest of us alone,” someone else chimed in, voice tight with emotion.

Murmurs of angry agreement began to bubble around them.

“Yeah, what do they contribute to the community anyway! Bloody free-loaders!”

“Lazy and selfish, all three of them. Time for them to move on, I reckon.”

“Agreed. Send ‘em outside.”

“No!” Mary blurted out. “You can’t!”

“Why should we endanger our lives just for you and your scrounging sons?” Sarah challenged her, determined not to let this go. “Which one is guilty? Which idiot did this?”

“I swear I stamped by butt out,” Rob protested nervously, glancing at his brother. “Will is the one who’s slack on the rules, though I always tell him.”

“What?” Will gasped, staring at his sibling in disbelief at the betrayal.

The ring of faces stared coldly, accusingly. Will glanced nervously around, mouth opening in silent protest like a landed fish. Sweat already stained his shirt from the run across the field and now the dark patches began to noticeably spread.

“Yeah, send him out!” an old tweedy man shouted. “He doesn’t pull his weight, just feeds his face and leeches off the rest of us. After we took ‘em in out of pity, too.”

Mike hesitated, taking stock of the feelings now running towards hysteria among his fellow stockaders. Then he started prodding Will towards the gates with the sharp machete, shouting to the hunters beyond.

“Here’s your prize, providing you promise to leave the rest of us be.”

“OK, deal.” The reply came back.

“Move well away and we’ll pass him out.”

“No! You can’t! It’s inhuman to send him out there.” Mary shrieked again, fighting to reach her son. “Please!”

Her shouts of protest were ignored as she was pushed roughly aside. Realising what he’d done, Rob made a futile effort to reach his brother too and pull him back, but his way was barred by armed, hostile stockaders. Mike’s machete and several nail-studded cudgels thrust at Will’s back, digging at his shoulders to propel him forward.

Perhaps once upon a time, someone among them would have protested, spoken up, pointed out how barbaric and wrong this was. But not now, not given these times where self-preservation and the need to be accepted into the brotherhood and safety that an organised group offered were paramount. No one wanted to be the outsider, fending alone in a hostile world.

The lookout called down that the hunters had retreated to the edge of the field and slowly the gates were opened, just enough for the terrified, ashen-faced Will to be pushed through. Victorious baying from the hunters filled the stifling air. Once upon a time such a primitive

response would have come by men on horseback, dressed in red coats, as dogs tore an unfortunate fox apart. As the gates slammed shut again, the now silent community inside the yard nervously regrouped. A mother sobbed with relief and thanked God. Mike fiddled with his baseball cap and stared at the ground, muttering that he'd done what needed to be done, his previous bluster drained away as though someone had left his emotion-tap open.

"Time to party," the head hunter laughed outside, taunting them.

Mary slumped to the ground, rocking back and forth, sobbing. Rob, fixed in stone, stared at the gates, shaking. He could hear his brother screaming to be let back in, but no one appeared to be listening now. The stockaders had started to fill buckets from the well, their focus now on the danger from the approaching fire.

"Get the gates soaked," Mike was shouting, taking charge of the situation. "They'll go first if the fire reaches us."

Will's cries were drowned out by the quad bikes firing up once more. Then the hunters moved off, heading for their summer quarry camp, taking Will with them. Their whoops and Will's terrified screams faded away on the still, dry air.

"When they're clear of the area, you and him can get marching too," Sarah hissed at the distraught Mary, still slumped on the ground, sobbing. "The State may have kept you on benefits once upon a time, but we're not obliged to do the same. Reckon you've outstayed your welcome."

"All clear," the lookout called down. "The fire seems to be burning out too."

The gates were cautiously opened and several stockaders headed down the field to check out the site of the fire, carrying buckets of water. The grass was smouldering rather than blazing now, and the buckets were enough to make it safe. Before the gates were closed again, Rob and Mary were roughly shoved through them. Sarah thrust a small bag of provisions into Mary's arms, muttering.

"There. Don't say we haven't got any humanity. Now you'd better find somewhere to hole up before dark. They aren't the only threat, people-wise, out there."

The towering gates closed again, leaving Mary and her last surviving son on the outside. Wordlessly, they started to trudge across the charred field towards the gloom of the woods.