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New Fiction

Featuring James Kelman, Janice Galloway,
and a classic reprint of Anton Chekhov

Lucky Days Ruskin Smith

There was word-of-mouth work in the greenhouses — tomato jobs. Mally Cooper put my name forward. I had to tell them I had turned sixteen, think up a national insurance number.

It was bending, reaching, climbing up and down on platforms. You had to keep moving all day long. My shoulders hurt. Mally reckoned I'd get used to it. If I stuck at it I should get full-time hours — eighty to ninety basic, same as him. His mum took fifteen for his board and he could spend the rest on clothes or records, anything. He got a tiger tattooed on his back, Made in Hull, the tiger jumping up over the words, an amber and black leg, the claws of it, reaching out across his neck.

After a shift most of us walked together to the edge of the estate, single-file on the paths around the fields. Everyone was quiet, tired; on hot days I would often feel dizzy, and want to lie down somewhere in the shade. I said nothing. Some of the older blokes had buckets covered with wet paper towels to keep away the flies, buckets of over-ripe or misshapen or split tomatoes that their girlfriends or wives could make into a load of sauce for freezing. If I closed my eyes all I could see were red dots zigzagging against a wall of green. I kept walking.

The paths were full of hardened mud and stones. The greenhouse roofs flashed silver in the late afternoon light. There were ditches with water. A tree above one had a rope-swing on a branch. Many times I'd come out here to twag off school, with other boys or on my own, and we had swung around on it for hours. But as we passed it no one glanced or said a word. School was almost finished for me now — only one or two exams to go back in for if I wanted, and yet somehow the sight of the swing irritated me. It was a bit of nylon hanging down in knots, a stump of wood to balance on. I could snap it down and sling it in the weeds.

So this was it. You chose tomatoes and you took them off the vines and dropped them into crates as carefully and quickly as you

could. And there was cleaning, stacking, maybe pruning if you learnt it, checking pipes. And then what? After tea-break someone left a payslip on the table. The envelope was open. I could see the border of the pale blue slip inside. Everyone had gone back to the rows. I picked it up and saw the name, Gary Nickson. Nicko. He had been there years. He worked over the winter too. He was in charge of different things, a sort of boss. It was his initials that went on the trays before despatch, and he had his spraying ticket up-to-date. I got his envelope in my fist and went behind a stack to look. I kept on reading all the numbers. Was it a mistake? But the rate was there, printed in ink. It was about the same as Mally was getting.

I hesitated by my step ladder. Nicko was walking backwards away from me, uncoiling a hose. He was nearly thirty and already going bald. I had heard some of the others say about his wife. She wanted him out of the house. It was going to be a full divorce. People talked about it quietly at break, shutting up as soon as he came over to sit down. He would have to pay for child maintenance. People were guessing different figures for it. I had seen his wages though. He saw me watching him. He said, Is it Tuesday then or fucking statues day, come on.

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Stephanie Bell was talking about staying on for her A-Levels. You should think about it too, she said. I shifted around on the stool. Why not? she said. You definitely should. I was in her kitchen near the big window so lots of light would get across my face. She wanted me to turn my head and keep my eyes on something at the far end of the garden. The old bomb-shelter there was nearly buried under ivy. She had a sketchbook open, different pencils, different charcoal sticks. I kept wanting to turn back and look at her. She had dark eyes and very dark brown hair in curls down to her shoulders. Normally at school she kept her fringe over one eye to hide her birthmark there, the dark leathery oval that spread up out of her eyebrow. I saw her carrying a huge folder between lessons — it's a portfolio of work, she said, life drawings. Drawings of life? I said. No wonder it's

so big. She laughed. Soon after that she saw me across the quadrant and she lifted up her hand and smiled. Another time, when it was windy, heading for the bus, she took my hand as we walked past one of the blocks of flats. But she was seeing someone: Stubby. I was meant to be his mate. Why would she hold my hand? The wind was really strong around the bottom of the flats, and made it hard for her to walk forwards.

Her house was nice. Her mum and dad owned it themselves. The hall had stone tiles and family photographs in frames, and on the ceiling in the front room was a chandelier. Above the mantelpiece there was a black and white picture of her dad as a young man with his crew on board a fishing boat. He was in the merchant navy now. The house was down an avenue with trees, and had a long wide garden with a pond. Steph had pulled her hair into a bun. You could see all the freckles on her forehead and her birthmark there.

What's that? Steph's mum came in with shopping bags. What should he definitely do?

Stay on for his A-Levels, that's all Mum.

She looked at me. You're not planning on leaving this year are you?

I think so, yeah. I was looking out into the garden, not moving my head. At the edge of my vision Steph's mum stood looking at me. Maybe she wanted to say something. She cleared her throat and turned away towards the sink. After a while she said, Has no one talked to you about it then? Her voice was trembling a bit.

Mum, don't put him off, he needs to keep completely still.

Not really, no, I said. She dropped her arms down by her sides and looked up at the ceiling for a few seconds. Then she looked down again and carried on with the dishes.

I don't know what subjects I could do, I said. I wanted Steph's mum to say more, say something else, but there was only dishes clattering and water sloshing around in the bowl. Nobody spoke.

I'm doing Art and English, Steph said. So do English with me. We can look at books together.

The leaves of ivy on the top of the shelter were waving up and down in the sunlight. We could look at books. She had said that.

Together. Her mum wandered away upstairs.

I'm off to a party, I said. Steph was leaning forward over the paper, frowning. It's a bring a bottle, housewarming. I reckon I could bring a friend.

Sounds ace. She looked up from the paper and smiled. Her dad had a cupboard full of drink — bottles of whisky, sherry, rum. He was away at sea. The cupboard had a sort of ornamental key that hung next to the kitchen door.

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I bumped into Mally by the flats. I had a half-bottle of sherry out of Steph's. In the lift we had swigs each. Mally had something else. He took a little clear bag out of his pocket. Acid tabs, he said. Little squares of paper were all printed with the same purple squiggle. His older brother had brought sixty-four of them back home from Middlesbrough on the train. Mally showed me what to do. You break it off like this and stick it on your tongue, he said. What about chewing? I asked. Doesn't matter, get it down your neck, he said.

Music was banging from inside Nicko's. We were ages on the landing swigging sherry, ringing and knocking the door until somebody opened up. You had to squeeze your way inside. People were sweating. There were quite a lot of mods. There was no carpet on the floor yet, only bare cement, a couple of small rugs, and hardly any furniture. Steph wasn't anywhere. A PA and turntables were set up in the front. Nicko was behind the decks. I nodded at him but he didn't seem to recognise me. It was dark and he was busy choosing records. People were dancing, some lasses I recognised. You could look out over the city and all the yellow lights; it had a calm feeling, but sad as well, and on one side the view was over all the empty fields, empty and dark, only the flicker of the bypass in the distance. I leant against the wall and shut my eyes.

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Every time I shut my eyes it felt like I was moving sideways. The

wallpaper had lumps in it; the lumps were sliding down, melting wax. I shut my eyes again and spread my hands and fingers on the floor. Why had everybody gone? They had been dancing. I moved the palms of my hands over the cement. My arms felt invisible. Tiny worms were twisting circles underneath my skin. Millions of worms were dancing threads of light. The cells of my body. Each had a separate life, a separate mind; each was pulling away from the others to evolve again, to become me, another version but identical, and decompose into the earth and then be swallowed up by all the other worms, a spinning cycle, endless, turning myself inside-out for ever. I sat on the floor with my head leaning against my knees. There were quick pulses in my belly. Mally sat down and poked me in the ribs. Alright our kid. Decent gear or what. My tongue was too heavy. Are you alright? I shook my head. Can't handle it. He put his arm around me. Keep your head up straight. Get into it.

I lifted up my head. Steph was wearing lipstick and a long black dress. She crouched down and touched my arm. Sorry, I said. She frowned and pushed her hair back from her face. Somehow she had fixed a layer of fine blonde hairs into the surface of her birthmark. Why? I dropped my head and made a snotty laugh and wiped my nostrils with my hand. A line of snot over my thumb was twinkling. I stared into it — overrun with snails. Are you okay? I couldn't meet her eye. A speck of lipstick stuck below her lower lip, a red dot on her chin, was burning into her, a coal, hot coal.

She sat down next to me and held my hand. She put her other hand against my back. All the cells inside of us were dancing. I'm finishing with Stubby, she said. I don't know why you didn't grab a hold of me and shake some sense into me sooner. Anyway I've finished with him now. She leant in and kissed me underneath my eye and then stood up and went. Later if I closed my eyes her lipstick tingled on my cheekbone.

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It was light. No music was playing. There were bits of broken glass over the floor. Two of the mods were making aeroplanes out

of the pages of a magazine, folding, talking quickly, sometimes over the top of one another. A bloke called Fat Ted was sleeping on the couch, sitting upright with his head drooping to one side, snoring slowly, an erection poking up inside his tracksuit trousers. Mally had gone with a lass into the bedroom, then taken her home. I couldn't find my shoes. Out on the balcony it was fresh air, and all across the fields the light was gathering. The mods came out and let their aeroplanes go in the air. The wings made circles drifting down. The mods leant out over the railing to look. After the first of the planes landed they shook hands and pound coins passed between them. They went inside and started tearing and folding again.

Nicko had been sitting on the edge of the bath crying and talking to two women for ages, but now they must have gone, and he was in the kitchen looking for something, banging drawers open and shut and swearing. Did I have a light? He asked me twice. Was I sure? There was a joint ready to smoke but every lighter in the place was dead. He was lifting all the mattresses and rugs to search. Fuck sake. The garage was three miles away and no one had a car. I went to look at the cooker. I turned on the gas and pressed the ignition. It clicked a few times then the blue flame opened up. Everyone stood looking at it.

Nice one lad.

Genius, that.

You want to go to university.

I don't know. I'm staying on for A-Levels. Nicko looked at me.

Seriously?

Yeah. I am. A big white drag of smoke floated between his teeth and his moustache. He pointed at me with his thumb. Fucking good for you fella.

I nodded at him. Yeah.

I went back to the balcony. I wanted to go home and see my dad. I could tell him what I had decided. It might cheer him up. I could put my arm around him. Steph had sat down next to me and held my hand. She had finished with Stubby. More paper planes drifted over my shoulder, first one and then a second. Nicko came from the kitchen with a bucket. He started firing tomatoes from it

at the planes and making whooping noises. The mods joined in. Attack, attack. They laughed and chanted. Fat Ted was stirring on the couch. He rubbed his face and coughed. Nicko dragged a sack of potatoes across the floor. He threw one off the balcony into the air and shouted. They all started chucking more. Someone held a potato towards me and I looked at it. I was so tired I could hardly shake my head. I had one of my shoes on. On the other foot I had a flip-flop I got from the airing cupboard. Like that I walked towards the lift and down.