

The Burning of the Bad Apple Tree

by Paul O’Kane

We never found out what was so bad about that apple tree but by the small hours the fire had consumed its trunk, root and branches, reducing the whole unloved object to smoke.

As the tree’s last vestiges crumbled into ash and cinders, our host -a slightly mystical, middle-aged, South East Asian lady of recent acquaintance -began sharpening a small axe. She seemed to be preparing to make further radical adjustments to her unkempt garden as soon as the sun returned, and for a while she appeared incapable of thinking of anything else.

To distract ourselves from her slightly threatening behaviour we gazed up through the branches of a cherry tree which remained tall, proud and under no threat of extermination -despite the fact that some its leaves had been frazzled by the flames. Between its branches we made out one, then two stars, then glimpses of geometric constellations. Stars are something you rarely connect with in the city. City people, though presumably as influenced by their movements as others, are likely to register their existence only by means of a tabloid newspaper’s astrology column read on the tube perhaps, far removed from the actual sky.

When we pointed-out the stars our host stopped sharpening her axe, looked up and announced that Mars would loom unusually large this month, that the ‘red planet’ would

soon appear as big as the moon. We were sceptical and I suggested that Shakespeare might have deployed such an event as a symbol of impending war. But she continued by planning how and where we would all witness this exceptional phenomenon.

During the course of the evening, the bad apple tree had been accused of ugliness, disease, contagion, and several other forms of ill. As the smoldering root burned and spat within a pit resulting from the tree's forced extraction, both our host and her partner repeatedly demonised the object of their scorn. They spoke with frustration when the tree resisted the flames, and then with satisfaction when it succumbed. They alluded only indirectly to the tree's origins, but when, with a vague sense of distaste, they invoked an unidentified person who'd planted it seven years earlier, it became apparent that the evening was a kind of exorcism of old evils to which myself and my partner had been invited as fresh faces to help turn their backs on an irksome past.

My partner sat on the other side of the fire, reassuringly sweet features bobbing in and out of the light while she talked and laughed, her pale clothes flashing with gold and pink reflections of the pulsing glow. A little pipe went around and then her apple-like cheeks shined harder and her laugh became madder. For city dwellers, the rare eventuality of smoke and fire becomes ritualistic. I can't say if that night we lost any innocence or really sacrificed anything but it was filled with symbols that seemed to cluster-around our hosts as if their idiosyncratic beliefs transformed their surroundings.

Around and about the garden, a fat black cat kept stumbling in the dark. Up and down

the cherry tree he went, sometimes going higher by means of some adjoining scaffold before flumping down ineptly to a lower level. At one point, already 'high' by other means, our host's partner dragged himself up into the cherry tree and started roosting and stretching, hanging and writhing like a cross between a monkey and a snake. And for his finale he risked a nasty fall to reach out and force down a branch on which hung the season's very last pair of cherries. Feeling like a gullible Adam, my hand forced by these acrobatics from above, I reached and obligingly plucked them. They felt warm and, under a smoky patina, were just rosy enough to offer some small sense of promise.

At about this time our host expressed satisfaction that the remains of the bad apple tree had been burned and so the ritual event drew to a close. The next morning I woke feeling disoriented but renewed and negotiated a series of false starts until, slipping lazily back into the acrid smelling clothes I'd worn the night before, I finally embraced the new day.

As I brewed coffee to restore my metabolism an old Chinese proverb circled in my head like a mantra, polishing my morning mind: 'Water that is too clean has no fish... Water that is too clean has...'. The house of last night's host had been as unkempt as the garden and kept haunting my imagination in a way that no stylishly organised interior ever would. That unruly model provided the control-freak in me with a reminder that to relax is never disastrous; it simply allows life and things to stumble towards their own definition of order.

My partner awoke and displaced this reverie. As we sat and chatted I found those two smoky cherries still tucked in my breast pocket. We popped them playfully into our mouths with a mutual smile, and as the flesh fell from their stones an initial shock of tart-ness gave way to a glimmer of sweetness. After that the cherries seemed to make us hungry for a *long* while, as if they'd installed within us new, unfathomable desires.