ACTIVIST
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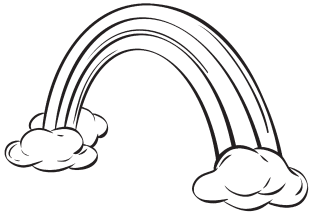
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There was only a quiet rain when they
were dying;
They must have heard the sparrows
flying,
And the small creeping creatures in the
earth where they were lying—
But I, all day, I heard an angel crying:
"Hurt not the trees."

'The Trees Are Down' by Charlotte Mew

PART ONE



NOW

SEPTEMBER

RAINBOW

with smiles,
our faces shine
bunches or braids,
black, pink, green –
caught in the sun;
brown and blonde,
we burn,
bright rivers of girls;
red and gold,
We run,

we are light

striking water.

We swallow wind,

swell with fire,

mouths full

of beams

and laughter,

which we throw

and catch

and throw again

to each another.

Dilly, Lori, Ria
and me.
Our names are
atoms exploding colour,
and we are not the same
but we are everything to one another.

FIRST DAY

Here we come.
Gilded air greets us and
bows like a waiter
proffering knowledge
from a tempting silver spoon,
we pass manicured lawns,
and smiling teachers out to meet us.

I stop,
try to breathe,
here we go:
okay, I can take it, I *will* face it

and another school year begins.

TOWERS

Surrounding us:
walls.
Brick wrapped in ivy the red of old blood,
the flashing crimson of last year, the year before,
when I started to understand
the way things are here.

Why wouldn't Mum let me leave, go somewhere else?
The college in town? I could have got a bus,
ridden my bike,
but she worries, says, no –
it's too
dangerous.

I pause at the gates.
The woods call,
the trees,
the cradle of branches
where I have spent the summer
staring at the sky, trying to work out answers
to the questions my GCSE papers didn't ask.

SAME OLD

A brand-new form.
People I like, but also
people I don't.

They're all so loud,
going on about fancy holidays abroad
and who hooked up with who.
They leak mercury laughter, release pesticide smiles.

Dilly laughs, pulls a face, and nods.
"Yup, same old same old, I suppose."

PERIOD ONE

Maths and the relief of equations.
Unemotional, the page
demands my cool deliberation.

I try to lose myself in the work,
not to wrestle
with the knowledge of

binary systems
and gaping holes.

I try to ignore the urgency of sunshine.
The clamour of fresh air.

I try to concentrate on
the possibilities here
(Mum's voice reminding me to
think of your future,
the doors wide open for you,
how lucky you are)
but there are whispers
as pens and pencils scratch at paper,
and phones flash under tables,
the distractions of
rifling pages.

Someone coughs,
and someone laughs.
Lori and I meet eyes.
I shake my head and get back to work.

TERRITORY

The bell rings for break and we rush
towards the common room,
shaking off yawns,
hugging friends we haven't seen for hours.

One lesson down. Four to go.
It smells musty,
although someone is leaning out of an open window
    vaping,
and I can't touch the green of the day
or see myself walking across the ancient quad
out of here.
Music plays, cans hiss.
        I taste last chances and
                something off.

We sit, a tangle of friends.
The look in Lori's eyes as she says,
"Shit, Cass, I missed you,
thank God you didn't leave and go to St Nick's –
for a while there we were worried,
weren't we, Ree?
Where've you been all summer anyway?"
She hugs me tight as if to prove it,

covering my cheeks and face with sloppy kisses.
Maria links my arm, agrees,
puts her head on my shoulder,
leaning in.
We claim a space
in the jungle of bodies, the chaos of noise.

CORDELIA

I look up.

Our corner
is diagonally opposite from
their corner
but we try not to take any notice of
the lads who whoop
when Cordelia walks past
coming to join us.
She flicks a finger, a perfect flash of disdain,
dodges snapping crocodile jaws,
moving fast and safe.

I sigh, we roll our eyes –

well, that's what worked this time last year
when we kept their nonsense
almost quiet.

TREMORS

But something's going on this morning,
something's rumbling,
you can feel it in the hot glances,
a pulse that's quickening and rising.

What the hell is it now?
I can't be doing with their war.
Okay, here we go. It starts.
God, I'm already tired.

READY

"What?" I call across the room,
(because that's what my friends expect –
that I'll speak up – and I guess I sound

the same, my voice as loud as it always was).
"What's up with you lot?"

It's Camilla who marches over,
swishy and sexy in her uniform
which is supposed to make us look
smart, not hot,
but she manages both
in a way I can't
and, quite frankly, don't want.
She looks me in the eye and says,
"Come on then, Cassandra. Admit it.
Was it one of you lot?"

"Was what us?"
I look at my mates,
we shrug and raise our eyebrows, and ask her
what the hell she's going on about.

AIM

Camilla shoves her phone under my nose
and a page reloads.

We gather, close
and read.

www.noshamenojudgement.com

last summer after our GCSEs, i was at a party (you know those parties, where there's drinking and drugs and it's all so much) but I felt like shit. maybe my drink was spiked, i dunno, but i remember staggering upstairs, finding a bedroom on my own. i thought i'd be all right. sleep it off, this awful feeling – i couldn't stand, or see, my head aching and my blood so heavy like i was almost dying or something. so i lay down for a bit.
sleep,
i thought,
i'll sleep.

and i must have passed out, cos the next thing i know, i'm kind of awake, and someone's holding my arms, while someone pulls down my shorts and shoves

his fingers inside me.

and other things.

i wish i knew their names or the colour of their eyes, or their hair. but it was dark, and i was sick, like i said, with the drink and whatever, but they knew me. they knew who i was. said my name like i was just

dirt

i don't know how that could have happened to me.

i can't tell my friends, or my mum, or my dad, so here i am, telling you
anonymously
hoping people i don't know
might care

because right now i can't eat i can't sleep i can't breathe.

ANON Castle Hill College

FIRE

My friends watch me.
Wait.
I push Camilla's phone away,
and quietly, seriously, I look her
dead in the eyes.
"Camilla – come on,
you know what it's like –
are you seriously saying
you're surprised?"

"Tell me," she says, her face flushing,
"who posted this pack of lies?"

"How the hell should I know?
And what makes you think it's not true?
Or that this has something to do with
one of your mates?
Enlighten us.
I mean, this post doesn't name names."

We stare, she blinks first, almost flinches
when I won't look away and I hold it, right there,
the challenge to decide
if she really wants to do this

with me,
right here.

Why doesn't she get
that the fact that
someone has had to post online
on an anonymous site
that she's been **drugged**
and **raped**
because there was **no one** to tell
because **no one** heard when we said
that the boys
treat the girls here
like meat
should be what's making her scream?

She knows I'm goading her, insinuating
something she doesn't want to accept,
but just as
I'm about to tell her
she needs to rethink her allegiances,
that her idea of feminism is seriously confusing me,
our phones ping,
unsolicited
notifications trill and twitter,

I stare at a message
flashed
and flashing
on my screen,

a picture of someone's
dick
cock
penis

whatever you want to call it,

unimpressive appendage, appallingly lit.

I hold up my phone, show the room
I'm not scared, shaking my head,
taking the piss.
What else can we do but mock
the state of it?
What would happen if we reported this?

"Come on, then," Lori shouts,
"which sad little man
thinks this is cute?"

But the game here isn't to make us laugh,

it's to make us scared.
That's what gets me,
that's what makes me
too impatient
to wait for some authority
to act and reassure me
that it's okay, a one-off, they're good guys really
and we ought not get so

mad.

WE RISE

I don't recognise the account
but I know the style
of the next photo – even more pornographic,
utterly vile.

So I get up and go,
over to their side
of the room,
swallowing bile and
armed with disgust,
a weapon that only fires so far but is all
I've got.

"You know what, Jamie Jonson, you're completely gross,"
I snarl into his face,
"and I'm going to show this screenshot to the police
on the day you get arrested,
as I'm sure you will,
for being an actual pervert
whose brain,
– if he has one,
and that's up for debate –
is currently lodged somewhere between his legs."

His friends are watching, creasing up and
howling with the comedy
of harassing us,
at me
standing there
trying to convince them
that they
Just. Aren't. Funny.

Jamie's grin is wide and white,
body spasming at how
hilarious he thinks he is.

"Who says I sent that?" he laughs
"Like, you can prove it, right?"

I stab a finger in his direction.

"Did you even read that post?
Don't you give a shit about that girl?
She's one of us.
Someone here, in this school,
maybe in this room,
and all you can do is take the piss?
What's wrong with you, Jamie?
Why are you being like this?"

"CALM DOWN, LOVE,"

Henry says, from the windowsill where he's perched,
watching the show,
sipping a coffee, idly eating toast.
Jamie's best friend
and my friend, once, too.

I look at him.
Try to pose the question with my eyes:
Why are you so awful now?

But before it can really kick off,
there's a hand on my arm,
Mo, and beside him, Simeon and Luke –
nice boys there with the apologies
and *ignore hims* and
he's a wanker,
Mo even trying to pull me into a hug,
but I see the ones who are keeping quiet.

I guess it's hard
to be a traitor, to refuse to play the game,
and I watch them
liminally drifting,
allegiance switching

from us to them
and back again.

These are the boys
we went to nursery school with.
Our mums share memories
of lost teeth, sunny days and sweet dreams.

These are the boys
who fell in love with us then
and wrote sweet messages in halting pencil,

misspelling our names and their own,
littering their notes with wavering kisses.

Their fingerprints blurred with ours
on monkey bars,
they stepped in our footsteps in the sandpit
and we were messy and muddy
and pure together.

These are the boys
we raced,
tied at our ankles,
three-legged friends.

These are the boys we loved,
in the way you love yourself
when you're too young to understand
all the ways
the world will make you change.