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opening extract from

Jackdaw Summer

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One

It starts and ends with the knife. I find it in the garden. I'm with Max Woods. We're messing about, digging for treasure, like we did when we were little kids. As always there's nothing but stones and roots and dust and worms. Then there it is, just below the surface, a knife with a wooden handle in a leather sheath. I lever it out of the earth. The curved blade's all tarnished, the handle's filthy, the sheath's blackened and stiff and starting to rot away.

I laugh in triumph.

'Treasure at last!'

'Huh!' says Max. 'It's just an old pruning knife.'

'Course it's not! It's from the ancient Romans or the Reivers. It's a weapon of war!'

I hold it up towards the sun.

'I name thee . . . Death Dealer!' I say.

Max mutters under his breath and rolls his eyes.

I stab the knife into the earth to clean. I wipe it on the grass. I spit on it and rub it. I pick up a stone and try to sharpen it.

Then a bird flutters on to the grass six feet away.

'Hello, crow,' I say.

'It's a jackdaw, townie,' says Max. He imitates its call. 'Jak jak! Jak! Jak jak!'

The jackdaw bounces, croaks back at him.

Jak jak! Jak jak!

'It's after the worms,' says Max.

'No. It's seen something shiny! It's seen Roman gold! There, look!'

I dig like a maniac for a few daft moments. I stab the earth, plunge the knife deeper. Then my hand slips and blood's pouring out from my wrist. I scream then laugh at myself and press my finger to the little wound.

Max mutters again.

'Sometimes I think you're crackers,' he says.

'Me, too,' I say.

We lie in the grass and stare at the sky. It's early summer, hardly more than spring, but the sun's been pouring down for weeks. The ground's baked hard, the grass is already getting scorched. It'll be the hottest summer ever, and the story is they'll keep on getting hotter. The dust and soil's like a crust on my hands and

arms. It mingles on my wrist with the dark red of drying blood, just like a painting or a map.

A low-flying jet thunders over us, then another, then another.

'Begone you beasts!' I call.

I flourish the knife at them as they streak away southwards over Hadrian's Wall, over the chapel of St Michael and All Angels and out of sight.

Then my wound's bleeding again. I'll need a plaster. We get up and head for the house.

'It's all yours, Jack,' I say.

I expect the bird to hop into the hole, but it doesn't. It flies over us and lands again six feet in front of us, looks at us, then flies a bit further on, lands, and looks at us again.

'You can tame them, you know,' says Max.

'Aye?'

'Aye. We had one when I was a squirt. It was great – lived on the back path, begged for food at the door, perched on your wrist. Jak jak! Funnily enough, we called it Jack.'

'What happened to it?'

'Joe Bolton shot it.' He holds the air like he's holding a gun. 'Kapow! He said it was trying to nest in his chimney. But I think he just wanted to kill something. Kapow!'

He waves his arms and runs at it and it flaps up into the sky.

'Go on! Get lost! Shoo!'

Inside the house, I find the plasters. I rub some of the dirt off the wound with a bit of kitchen towel, blot the trickling blood, then stick the plaster on. I clean more dirt off the knife blade. I wash it with soap. I sharpen it on the knife sharpener on the kitchen wall. I spray furniture polish on the handle and wipe it. I spray the sheath as well, and I bend it and run it between my fingers and straight away it starts softening. I smile.

'Very nice,' I say.

I loop my belt through the sheath and the knife sits there at my hip.

'What d'you think?' I say.

'I think you'll get arrested,' he says. 'It's against the law.'

I laugh.

'A pruning knife? Against the law?'

I tug my T-shirt over it, hiding it.

'OK now?' I say.

I get some bread and cheese and lemonade and we sit on the bench at the back door. The jackdaw's on the gatepost now.

Jak jak! Jak jak!

It stabs its beak towards us. It flutters its wings, it bounces and bobs.

'What do you *want*?' I laugh.

Jak jak! Jak jak!

A printer whirrs upstairs. Dad, hard at work as usual. We look up, towards his open window.

'What's he writing now?' says Max.

'Dunno. He tells nobody nothing till it's finished.'

We chew and listen.

'Weird,' says Max.

I swig the lemonade, swipe my wrist across my lips.

'Aye. Sometimes it's like having a ghost in the house. Come on. Let's head out, eh?'

So we leave the garden.

Two

We get on to the footpath that skirts the house, then head along the long potholed lane towards the village. There's a single hiker in a red cap moving ahead of us. There's kids on the field beside the village school. Somebody's screaming, like they're getting lumps kicked out of them. Then there's a cheer and a howl of laughter, and a bunch of them break away and belt uphill towards Great Elm.

'Want to join in?' I say.

'Mebbe,' says Max.

Gordon Nattrass appears at the edge of the field. He watches us from the fence, then he jumps over it and comes towards us. He's carrying a rusty saw in his hand.

'Hello, brothers,' he says.

Brothers. It's what he always says.

'What you up to, brothers? Where you off to, brothers?'

'Nowt,' says Max.

'Nowhere,' I say.

'What *you* up to?' I say.

He grins.

'Fun and games,' he says. 'Come on over, eh?'

Another jet screams over us and streaks away towards the east.

'Bomb them back to the Stone Age!' yells Nattrass, then he spits. 'Come on,' he says.

I'm about to go with him, but Max holds back.

'Mebbe later,' he says.

I look at Max. I look at Nattrass. We were friends when we were small. We did the blood brothers thing one day, cutting our thumbs then pressing the wounds together and letting our blood flow into each other. I touch the knife at my hip as I remember it. But it was ages back. He started changing, started becoming the Nattrass we know today.

He winks at me.

'OK, brother,' he says. 'Later, then. I'll look out for you.'

He rests the saw blade at the side of his neck, then drags it back like he's going to saw his head off. He laughs, runs back to the field, and soon there's more screaming.

'I hate that bastard,' says Max.

'Me, too,' I say.

We walk up past the church. There's flowers heaped up by the churchyard gate, half-rotted and stinking, and with wasps crawling about inside the cellophane wrappings. Dave Dunn's chest-deep in a new grave and digging hard. He waves his shovel when he sees us.

'Come and have a lie-down, lads!' he shouts. 'I'll make sure you're covered up nice and warm!'

Then Max says, 'Would you believe it?'

It's the jackdaw again, in the branches of a yew tree above us.

Jak jak! Jak jak!

'Can't be the same one,' I say. 'Can it?'

'Looks like it,' says Max.

It flies ahead, stops, flies ahead, stops. The hiker ahead of us has stopped, too. He's looking back, shielding his eyes with his hand. Hard to make him out at this distance. It could be a woman.

'What do you *want*?' I say to the bird.

Max grins.

'It's definitely been tamed by somebody,' he says.

We follow it as it flies on. Up by The Bull, it perches on a wall, dead still, like it's *waiting*.

'Weird,' I say.

'Aye. Very weird.'

As we stand here, an army lorry rumbles past. There's

a bunch of soldiers in the back, hardly older than we are. They grin out at us.

'Join the army, lads!' yells one of them.

'It's a great life!' yells another. 'Get good mates! See the world! Learn to maim and kill!'

Then they're gone, off to play war games up at Otterburn, where the camps and the exercise-grounds and the firing-ranges are.

The bird leads us through the covered lane between two cottages by the pub. It takes long hops in there, lifting its wings, half-flying. Its croak echoes off the walls, its wings flap against them. Then we're out into Drogan's Field and heading away from the houses towards Benner's Brook. We stop on the little wooden bridge. The bird's in the copse on the other side, on the path that winds between the birch trees. We can just see the hiker's cap through the trees.

I spit down into the water, and watch the little gobs of phlegm curling away.

Jak jak! Jak jak!

'Shut up!' says Max.

There's another jet, but far-off this time. I close my eyes, turn my face to the sun, feel it burning into me. What will the summers be like when we're grown up, when we've got kids of our own? Will families like mine and Max's be battling each other for water, like

families round here used to battle for sheep and cows? I imagine struggling with him, fighting with knives to the death beside a well.

Jak! Jak jak!

'Mebbe we should just go back,' says Max.

'Aye. This is stupid.'

But it feels just as stupid to turn back.

We play pooh sticks, just like we used to: kick twigs off the bridge into the stream, count the seconds till they come through to the other side. I get my knife and scrape our initials into the bridge's wooden rail. There they are, along with fading initials of dozens of kids going back for year after year.

Jak jak! Jak jak!

We shrug and go into the copse and beyond it into the next field where a ram glares at us and the sheep bleat and scatter stupidly away. Then across Castle Lane and to a gate on to the old reivers' track that leads down towards the river. The field drops steeply to the river. It's all uneven and tussocky and there's lengths of barbed wire from an old fence all tangled up with fallen stones from an ancient wall. The castle turrets are just visible higher upriver. Max grabs my arm and holds me back.

'Watch your step,' he hisses.

There's an adder basking in the sun. Just a few feet

ahead of us, curled up in the grass, rusty red with the line of black diamonds all along its back.

'Hello, snake,' I whisper.

I crouch down and stare. It's so beautiful.

Max stamps, and the adder uncurls. It lifts its head, seems to look straight at us, then slides down between two stones into the earth.

'What a beauty!' I whisper.

Jak jak! Jak jak!

Down here there's a bulge of bare black stone with ancient art carved into it: cup and ring marks, swirls and loops made by unknown people at an unknown time.

Jak jak! Jak jak!

We follow the call. There's an ancient farmhouse, Rook Hall, a small square fortified place with thick walls, windows like arrow slits. Places like this were built in the days of slaughter. An ancient farmer and his family and his beasts took shelter in here when raiders came down from the north. Its doors disappeared an age ago. Its roof's fallen in. Further down, there's the river then the opposite bank, then moorland and emptiness. The footpath turns down there, follows the river as it curves northwards. The hiker's standing on the bank, staring down into the water. The air by the water trembles in the heat. The jackdaw's perched on the ruined wall of Rook Hall. It's dead silent now. It's

all so ancient here: just water and stones and trees and the birds. Fish in the river, snakes in the earth, creatures all around us, watching, hiding, trembling, scared.

We used to talk, Max and I, about what we'd do if the worst things happened, if the awful things out there in the world arrived in Northumberland. We talked about the adventures we'd have, just like little kids do. We'd head northwards with a tent. We'd take weapons and fishing rods and traps. We'd hunt and fish and hide. Maybe we'd find other kids we could team up with. We'd start a new society out here in Northumberland. We'd make a better world, close to nature: no violence, no wars, no waste. A couple of times we even practised it. We spent whole days walking north on the old trails. We found places that'd be great to hide in, secret sheltered places close to streams, away from public view but with a good view of any strangers or pursuers. We even stashed stuff away in some places: tins of food, compasses, knives, just in case the worst comes to the worst.

Max laughs about all that now. He says how daft we were, how childish, but it's not really that long ago. And I still dream about it. I dream that war has come at last. I'm running and hiding, I'm heading north again, all alone. I'm at one of our hiding places. I'm lifting a great rock to get at the stashed boxes beneath.

Jak! Jak!

The call's louder now, more insistent. The bird flutters down into the ruined hall.

Jak! Jak! Jak! Jak!

We peer into the shadows. The bird furiously flaps its wings. We both know we're scared and we're scared to admit it.

Max licks his lips.

'Hell's teeth,' he says. 'It's just a bird!'

I reach for the knife, draw it out. It fits snugly in my hand. We clamber in over the fallen stones and the jackdaw croaks one last time and flies straight into the sky and it's gone.

We can't help laughing. My heart's thudding.

'We're so stupid!' says Max.

'I know!' I say. 'It was just a stupid bird!'

'It thought we were *chasing* it!' said Max.

Then we shut up. There's a tiny sound somewhere in Rook Hall.

We can't turn away. We can't run. We pick our way over the rubble and sheep droppings towards the sound of crying. And there it is, on a pile of broken stones. It's a baby, wrapped in a brown blanket, in a basket. There's a scribbled note pinned to the blanket. *PLESE LOOK AFTER HER RITE. THIS IS A CHILDE OF GOD.* And there's a jam jar filled with notes and coins at her side.