

The Cherry Tree

“There’s a window with cherries,” Roxanne was telling Thea. “You’ve got two, three days at most before the birds have them. They’ll clear a tree in minutes. So if it’s ok, we’d like to pick our cherries right now.”

5 The cherry tree was at the far end of Thea’s garden. It was part way into summer and the weather was warm. Roxanne was standing on Thea’s doorstep with her son, Toby, who had already announced to Thea that he was eight. This had made Thea look at Roxanne and then back at Toby. There must’ve been but fifteen years between them, if that, as it seemed that Roxanne was now pregnant with her second child. Toby was also carrying an empty shoebox, which Thea thought very presumptuous.

10 “You see, the tree is rooted in our garden,” said Roxanne. “But most of the fruit grows on the branches that are in your garden. We can only reach them if we pick them by standing on the wall in your yard.”

15 Thea did not like all this talk of yours and mine. Neither did she wish for Roxanne to come into her house, which she would have to do to get to the tree. So she said, “I’m sorry,” and closed the door.

The door, which Thea had recently repainted with a white emulsion, had two panels of frosted glass which she often cleaned with vinegar, so she was quite able to see Roxanne and her son still standing on her doorstep. She had also fitted an alarm and removed the doorbell.

20 “The cherries are mine!” Toby shouted. And in case Thea hadn’t heard, “They’re mine!” very loud.

He then kicked the door and Thea scowled. Not only would this leave a scuff, but boys like this were a nuisance. Boys like that should be told.

“Ours, Toby,” Thea heard Roxanne cajole rather than scold. “The cherries are ours. Be a good boy now. We must try and share.”

25 “Then tell that old biddy to share,” he said. “Those cherries are mine!”

Thea could see Roxanne bending down to talk to her son. She had seen her do this once before in the corner shop. There, she had bent down and asked him, once again, to put the sweets down. They were not his. She didn’t have enough pennies. And there were plenty of sweets at home. “But I want these sweets!” he had wailed.

30 Roxanne had put a hand on his shoulder. “No Toby. The sweets belong to the lady on the till. See? She wants her sweets back, don’t you?”

35 The lady on the till, and her name was Barbara, had smiled and played along: told the little boy that the shop didn’t sell sweets after four o’clock. She was sorry, but that was the law. Then she’d turned to Thea, looked into her basket, and said, “Is that everything?” which is what she said every week to Thea when putting her loaf, vinegar, rice and bleach through the till. Meanwhile, Toby had put the sweets into his pocket and left the shop.

What had happened next was strange. Roxanne, neither embarrassed nor alarmed, simply sidled out with two loaves of bread and a decent Chardonnay¹ and never came back to pay for any of it.

“She’s just stolen from the shop!” Thea had declared. “Aren’t you going to go after her?”

40 Barbara had shrugged. “We know where she lives,” she told Thea. “And it’s just sweets,” as if that was all the explanation needed.

45 But it wasn’t just sweets and Thea had felt confronted. That boy was naughty, she had said. He was wanting and he took without asking. That was stealing. He should’ve been scolded, shown right from wrong, and Thea decided that if she saw them again she would say this. Like mother like son, she would say. It’s in his blood. And that he owed fifty-five pence for the sweets.

¹ white wine

So that's what she said to the door that now stood between them. "You never paid for the sweets, wine and bread," she said. "You stole from the shop."

50 Outside, Roxanne said something to Toby that Thea couldn't quite hear. Whatever it was, it was certainly not what Toby wanted to hear, for he kicked the door again and harder than before. That would mean a second scuff. Possibly a boot mark. So Thea said it louder: "I said, you never paid for your goods in the shop the other day. You owe for the sweets, wine and bread."

Roxanne bent down and flipped up the letterbox. "We'll pick them quick, I promise," she told Thea. "You won't even know we're there. Just let my son pick his cherries and that'll be the end of it."

55 "I'm sorry," Thea replied. "But until you pay your way please go away. Life isn't about getting all your own way, and your son needs to be shown there's a better way."

"But they are our cherries. Legally speaking, we own the tree."

60 Thea moved away from the door at this. It was true that the roots of the tree were not in her garden but the main boughs of the tree were. And though the tree required those roots to bear this fruit, Roxanne would have to walk through her house to get to that fruit. To walk through Thea's house was to know, and Thea didn't want anyone to know, as someone who didn't know (since Thea was not in the business of letting people in) would walk through her house and assume things: she is poor, they might think. She is mad. Or perhaps she has lost everything. Maybe given it away.

[...]

65 The tree, at this time of year, was glorious. The cherries were ripe. The leaves lush. Look up high and you could see just how many cherries this tree gave. It was impossible to count them. There was more than enough. Though they were up high and ladders would be needed which she didn't have. But they were in her garden. That much was true. And then, the boughs seemed to suddenly bow to her, gifting her with its fruit. The cherries were within her reach. "So if anyone will pick these cherries it will be me," she said looking up at the sky, and she went into the kitchen to look
70 for a suitable container.

By now, Roxanne was hammering at the front door with her fists. "Open this door!" she yelled. "Those cherries are mine! Do you hear? Mine!" whilst her son kicked the door as hard as he could. And then Thea heard another voice: "Is everything ok? Has something happened? Do you need to use a phone?"

75 Roxanne took no time in explaining her problem. She had come to pick her cherries from her tree but this woman in this house wouldn't let them. "Those cherries are mine," she told whoever. "The tree is in my garden so legally they are mine."

80 The neighbour, or perhaps just a passer-by, had now approached the door and was cupping her hands about her eyes and peering into the frosted glass. Thea overheard: "I don't really know her. She's not one for mixing and there seems to be a curtain. Is she definitely in?"

"She's in," shouted Roxanne. "She told my son that he couldn't pick his cherries then slammed the door in his face!"

The neighbour appeared to be leaving, for she said, "I can't help you I'm afraid. I don't know the woman and I really don't understand the situation. I'm so sorry."

85 But Toby, used to getting his own way, was screaming. He would scream then kick the door, scream then kick the door. Thea counted him doing this no less than ten times before Roxanne told him to calm down. "Call the police!" he told his mother, and Thea suddenly felt so very afraid.

90 She leant against the hall wall. This was why she had never wanted children, why she had always wanted children, what she had done when she couldn't have children. She remembered the rage like yesterday, the kicks and the screams. How her husband, her dear, patient husband, had covered his face with his hands: It's no-one's fault Thea. Not mine, not yours, it just is. Thea had detached herself from everything then, else she would have dropped out from life itself.

She looked up at the door again and saw that the wires from the alarm she'd fitted had come loose and were swaying in the draught like boughs on a tree.

95 The doorbell took her by surprise. Thea had thought she had disabled it when fitting the alarm. She

looked up at the box on the wall and wondered whether she had, in fact, rewired the doorbell rather than wired in the alarm. Yet when the doorbell was pushed again it sounded brand new. She pulled the curtain slightly to see through the panels of frosted glass. A luminous yellow and law-enforcing black figure loomed. It pushed the doorbell again. Again, it sounded full of life. There was knocking. A polite request. "May we come in?" Another knock. "Might you open the door?"

100 Thea pulled the curtain right back and saw the three figures through the frosted glass. Had they actually called the police? Or had they simply been patrolling by? Thea moved closer to the glass and asked: "Why are you here?"

105 "I'd rather you open the door Madam to speak with you," and it was a thick accent that suggested somewhere north and perhaps to the west rather than the east. "I am sure that everything can be worked out."

The figure of authority, Thea could see, was of stocky build. They might need only to lurch a shoulder to ram the door open and Thea wondered who, legally-speaking, would then have to pay for the new door. So she said, "I'd appreciate it if everyone would go away."

110 "Well that can happen as soon as you open the door," came the reply.

Thea thought about turning the key. Then she thought better of it. She must stand her ground. So she said, "You do know that these people are criminals? They stole from the corner shop. I was there. I saw them do it."

115 "Well, if you could just open the door now we can all sit down and have a conversation. I understand that this is about some cherries in a tree?" And it suddenly sounded so very silly.

"It's gone beyond the cherries," Thea replied. "Those people are thieves."

"No-one is stealing from you, I can assure you that. But please open the door."

120 The three figures were now huddled together against the glass and Thea felt trapped. She was about to say, "You are trapping me in my own home," but another voice was speaking, a familiar voice, though one Thea had not heard in very a long time: "What's happened? Is Thea alright? Is she in there? I have a key." And Thea closed her eyes and sighed.

Fay.

125 "What's going on, Thea?" Fay enquired, pushing her key into the outside lock. "Why won't you open the door, dear? Are you ill?"

This made Thea feel very guilty. She was not ill, that was just something else people would assume, and she tried to remember when she had given Fay a key. Then why she had given Fay a key. She tried to remember Fay's face – horsey yet pinched. How she would wear that certain look as Thea talked – serious and knowing. The agreeing nods. The disagreeing *hmmms*. And though Fay had been a friend, in the sense that she was someone who had known Thea well and at a particular time when Thea had needed such a friend, it had never been a friendship. [...]

130 It was quite a crowd that had gathered outside of Thea's front door by now. Thea would have no idea who any of them were or why they felt the need to stop and listen to Roxanne's version of events. Thea could hear her and realised that she must be standing on the small wall outside of her house, all but three bricks in height, as if preaching. At one point, she was sure she heard a heckling "God be with you!" But Thea was distracted by Fay, persistent with her key, pushing, no, ramming her key into the lock to try and push Thea's key out from the other side. The police officer cupped her hands through the frosted glass and called Thea's name over and over. Someone was holding a finger down on the doorbell and the din ripped through Thea's insides. "The cherries are mine!" screamed Toby. "THEY ARE MINE!"

140 So Thea turned her key and opened the door.

145 She was thrown by the flashes of cameras on mobile phones, just how many people had congregated outside of her house as if this was, indeed, a spectacle to be seen, and she immediately tried to push the door shut. Not quite in time, for the picture that appeared in the local paper had her looking frightened and thin in the sackcloth² she now rarely took off. She would, for a long time after, wish that she'd just let them pick those cherries instead of standing

² (here) a dress made of coarse fabric

her ground. They had, after all, come to pick cherries, not to see how she lived, why she lived as she did, how she punished herself for not bearing fruit. How she'd made a deal with nature, *unkind nature*, to understand why it'd chosen to renounce her as it did. But that boy was a nuisance. He needed to be told. And he and his mother were thieves. "We can't always have what we want," is all that Thea would say. [...]

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As it was, the cherries never did get picked. Roxanne was right. The birds do have them. They steal from one another's beaks, fight over them, drop them, squish them, ground them into the slabs³ and spit out the stones, and the mess that was left behind on Thea's patio was nothing but thoughtless greed. It took many trips to the corner shop for cleaning products to clean up. In fact, Thea was forced to use so much bleach it killed the tree.

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(2019)

³ tiles