

The Honest Psycho

There was a bit of an age gap between my neighbour and me (technically still is if you count his skeleton). When he was meditating on retirement (from horse thievery (conjecture)), I was still labelling all adults outside my family as either ‘teacher’ or ‘grown-up’. Not him, though. What it was about the broken capillaries in his pendulous cheeks, the bursting tweed jacket with St George’s Cross lapel pin, the all-year-round wellie boots, and the bulrush-thwacker permanently pinned beneath one arm, I hadn’t then the capacity to deduce. But I knew something was rotten. And by ‘something was rotten’ I mean besides the fact that he used to thwack his dogs like they were bulrushes. I’d hear them yelping in the field behind our house during the day, and then again after dark when they’d howl up at the windows, and he’d go storming out in his billowy nightshirt to serve them up a second helping. In my opinion, that alone secured his place in hell, but it was after the following exchange over the garden fence that (as a precautionary measure) I started labelling every boozy, watery-eyed, phony patriot as... well, I’ll leave that to your imagination.

‘Do you like animals, Tom?’ he said.

‘I love animals,’ I said, uncupping my palms so the frog could jump back into the pond.

‘Foxes?’

‘I love foxes most of all,’ I said, ‘along with dogs and tigers and rats and mice and wolves and weasels and elephants and pigs and jaguars and donkeys and sloths and gorillas and penguins and...’

‘Wait here,’ he said, and disappeared. He returned a moment later with something hidden behind his back. ‘Close your eyes and hold out your hands.’

I did as instructed, eyes claspers, fingers reaching, ready for the fox cub I’d imagined in his absence (proper thick, wasn’t I?), names and cartoon comradeship dancing through my mind. And sure enough, there it was: coarse yet soft; dense and wiry yet smooth. I opened my eyes. Swallowed vomit. A fox’s tail. A limp, severed tail. A lonely, magnificent brush. Cream and grey and orange and brown concluding in congealed pitch and purple. The pillaged remains of a shooting victim.

My family were revolted when I showed them, and when we were sure the old screwball was out stealing eggs from nests to hurl at picket lines, we buried the tail beneath some nice stones and read a few words from Roald Dahl.

My neighbour enjoyed shooting animals; he only kept those dogs he abused so that he wouldn't have to walk over and pick up the birds he'd gunned down (I don't know who picked up the dogs after he shot them on their eighth birthday – useless after that, apparently). Shooting gave him such a kick that he was prepared to travel the planet to do it (the planet to him being England). He had to travel, as despite our suburbia being borderline picturesque, all the four-legged mammals wore collars. And so, ageing though he was, and with every other thought in his putrid melon filed under 'Retrospective', he would regularly summon the energy to seek out a den, harangue the owner from its slumbers, and at first sight of its sooty nose, give it both barrels. He was, in summary, a vicious nut-job; a trophy-collecting serial killer who'd learnt to keep his focus on animals so that he could keep his globular person out of prison. He was your classic, law-abiding psychopath, and when I was told that he'd choked on a partridge, I didn't even bother to look up from a particularly harrowing scene in *The Animals of Farthing Wood*. Just kidding, he took a header down the stairs after his trousers fell down. But, for his transparency, for not feigning the vaguest interest in pest control, he still belongs in a bracket above those so-called fox hunters.

It's the classism and hypocrisy that I find so intensely irritating. Obviously, it's their cruelty that makes me wish voodoo dolls were legit; that makes me want to stretch cheese-wire between trees at teeth height; but it's the fact that their demonic pursuits are protected by legal loopholes, which exist thanks to a thriving old boys' network, that really gets my goat. And I love goats most of all. Teenagers on an estate, wearing matching red hoodies and chasing urban wildlife on mopeds, would be bashed into oblivion by the judge's gavel; posh (imagination, again) get away with flaunting retinues of evil goblins armed with spades and terriers, ready to dig out the foxes they're supposedly not chasing should they have the gall to escape. On Boxing Day, they even get clapped down the street.

Those perverted, cast-iron scumbags aren't hunters; they're proven liars who claim they're tracking a scent, and then drop a bagged fox brought in from elsewhere – one that might well have been bred for that very purpose. They're the same (literally the same a lot of the time) as those talentless fakers whose social media displays blasted birds that were barked and beaten into their line of sight – birds that were definitely bred in captive misery for that very purpose. They too, those bird killers, are proven liars, with their theatrical lip-smacking and tummy-rubbing, only for piles of surplus dead, never genuinely bound for the pot, to be discovered tossed in ditches like fly-tipped trash. They can't admit that they just like killing things, and so they pretend gentility, pretend sportsmanship, and in the fox hunters' case, pretend trail hunting and then surprise when they 'accidentally' tear something to pieces.

It's not the duty of any animal to provide the fuel for demented elation; to perform a spectacle of terrified, screaming agony, and then have its living, breathing, emotionally expressive body ripped into sad and sodden fragments, discarded pointlessly in the grass. Relishing the torture and destruction of another sentient individual is an obvious sign of a dangerous psychological disorder. Regardless of whether inbreeding can account for that malfunction in foxhunters, their hobby is a hideous charade of nobility and tradition. It has nothing to do with culture or heritage or any other pilfered term of legitimacy; it's simply about a warped delight in savagery that's safe from retaliation. They're just wicked, cackling bullies. Unlike my neighbour. His laugh was more of a baritone.