

Picnic in Eden

A novel by

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No, it is not only our fate but our business to lose innocence, and once we have lost that, it is futile to attempt a picnic in Eden.

-- Elizabeth Bowen

“...enough to eat, enough to lay up, enough to be stolen...”

What if she had not stopped when he spoke to her?

Molly Graves stalked through the grassy lanes between the apple trees of her family’s small orchard in upstate New York. It was the first day of August, and the early sun was strong enough to blind her and make her feel that she was staggering, even though she was walking steadily enough in her country boots.

What if she had not waited while he made his call and found he had no place to stay? What if she had not decided it was up to her to take him home, feed him soup, put his ancient jeans through the wash, lend him her shampoo and her father’s razor?

Her life had been unremarkable but comfortable in her family’s apartment on the upper East Side. She had never left home, but lived there through her college years while she finished her degree in art history, and now after the death of her parents she remained as the tenant of record. It was an uncomplicated life. If she had a guilty secret, it was the unlocked but unvisited room she called her workroom, where the tools of her craft, the combs and yarns and frames, gathered dust – all because of the day she laid eyes on a blue-eyed drifter and brought him home, married him and had a baby.

She might so easily have missed him. His friend Gordo said to her, bitterly, and more than once, “I was expecting Fielding to arrive the next day. I was waiting for him. If you hadn’t come along....”

“Marco! Marco, play on the path, where I can see you!”

Molly and her young son had arrived at the orchard in the early morning and Molly immediately began to look around, crisscrossing the paths between the upper and

lower terraces and going through the scattered farm buildings and the old house. Marco tried to divert her to join in his games, but she persisted, even climbing up and sticking her head through the trap door into the attic of the farmhouse. And as she searched for some sign that her runaway husband had visited the farm, was, even, perhaps camping out there, a hot feeling grew in the center of her chest, making her breath come noisily, occasionally in a sob. She let Marco run freely, far from her side. She did not want him to see her in this state.

Was it rage? She would have said it was not in her to feel that. But some mornings, back in the city, as she did her chores, no matter how controlled she thought she was, while she was calmly washing the dishes, for instance, anger would rise and break glasses, snap the handles off precious cups. And when she thought of the things Fielding had done, she felt what could be rage but sometimes felt like an illness. Or was it anxiety, anxiety masquerading as grief? And self-doubt, don't leave that out. "Was I so easy to leave?" she wondered out loud.

After she closed the trap door to the attic and put the folding ladder back in the kitchen pantry, she opened and shut the kitchen cabinets, looking for remnants of dry crackers or canned goods. In a drawer, below the one where the cutlery was kept, she came across photographs of the time when she, Fielding, and their baby had lived at the farm, working or playing at being farmers. She picked up a snapshot of herself on the back porch, flapping her apron at the photographer. Just a few short years ago she had been that girl, full of energy, glowing like an apple from the farm, a boundless and hopeful student of the world. And then she had fallen under Fielding's spell.

At first she thought she was alone in recognizing the power of Fee's physical grace. Certainly her friends and family seemed oblivious to his appeal. Were they blind? In a roomful of people, wouldn't you notice one who looked like the Archangel Gabriel? Not that she had any idea what the archangel might look like, aside from Russian icons...eventually she saw what she might have seen from the beginning: It seemed that she and Gordo and almost no one else worshiped at the same shrine.

Only Fielding seemed ignorant of his effect. He didn't seem to cultivate it, cherish it, or put it to use. It was like an inheritance that was unanticipated and accepted without notice. Molly never caught him checking his appearance in the mirror, except to shave or put on a tie.

In the years she knew him, Fee always seemed carelessly unaware of the looks that so moved her. Only once had she glimpsed a deep, alienating self-regard. That was after Marco was born and one of them had picked up a Polaroid camera to take pictures of the baby. She remembered Fee had spent time fooling around with the camera, learning how to play tricks with it. He set it on a tripod and took double and even triple exposures of himself, in each frame showing up fainter and fainter until he was the ghost in the picture. He was nude in every one. His long muscles, like those of a swimmer, caught shadows, his hips were flat, his belly rounded and soft, his penis hanging like the bell of a flower, tender, and his deep-set eyes gazed at something nearby; they gleamed, seemingly oblivious of the camera he had placed so carefully.

That was not the body he had when she last saw him. Fee and Gordo discovered bodybuilding, and joined the gym culture, turned their muscles into bunched fists, their abdomens into ribbed vaults. Fielding had made his stomach so flat that when he

occasionally ate a full meal – those rare times he sat at the table to eat the meal she had prepared – she teased him that she could see the lamb chop and mashed potatoes sitting in his lap.

In one of the Polaroid snapshots she still had somewhere he was seated on the old bench they had brought down from the apple farm to place in the entry to the New York apartment. He sat facing the viewer; his second doppelganger stood beside him with one hand on his neck, and the third by now fainter figure stood side-on, staring at the two of them. How had Fee moved fast enough to get the three exposures? And the last photo he took, before he lost interest in the process, was shocking.

The first image showed him leaning his weight on his bent knee which was propped on the bench, his head inclined downward; a second image stood behind the first, erect, and seemed to be entering him through his back – as if Fee were penetrating his own body. The third ghostly presence, the one Molly thought of as his persistent self, watched.

She dropped the photos back into the drawer and closed it. She looked around. Where had the time gone? She hurried to the door and onto the back porch, looking out over the orchard. “Marco!” she yelled. “Marco Polo! Give a call-out! Where are you?” In the distance she heard a reassuring, too-detailed response that went on and on.

This had been her grandfather’s land, intensely farmed at one time, but in her father’s childhood the family moved to the city, and the orchard became the family’s refuge from the city, a place where they spent summers and holidays, while it still provided a modest source of income from pick-it-yourself weekenders and from bulk sales of apples to the region’s cider mills and canning factories.

Her father explained his own final flight from the land with words like those spoken by serfs in the Middle Ages who fled their fields for the newly rising towns, saying, “City air will make us free.” Her father loved the city, but clung to the family acres until, when Molly married Fielding, he made them a gift of the land, rolling the deed and tying it with a satin ribbon and handing it to her after the ceremony. Long before that, after her mother’s death, he had made Molly a co-tenant on the lease of the family’s rent-controlled apartment. All this on his part had been to ensure Molly’s security.

But where was that security now?

Fee had not just left her, he had first wrecked her life: This farm might soon be lost, and her home back in the city was in jeopardy as well – she had not paid the rent in almost two months. The landlord would be delighted to have an excuse turn her out.

And he had left her son without a father.

As she stalked around the old place, she became aware that Marco was drawing closer and looking at her with curiosity. “What are you looking for, Mom?” he asked several times, and she finally stopped her activities to pay him some attention.

“I’m hungry, aren’t you? Pick out a spot for us and I’ll get a blanket and the sandwiches.”

She settled them on the grass and gazed around. “We lived here for a while when you were a baby. Do you remember?”

“No.”

“We put you in a basket, and we hauled you around just like a bushel of apples. We put you in the middle of the table at mealtimes, and we took you out under the trees

while we were working.” She remembered lying on a blanket with Marco while Fielding went up into the trees with arboreal grace.

With his odd, spotty education, he had regaled her from on high with orchard lore. Once he quoted, to her amusement, “In an orchard, there should be enough to eat, enough to lay up, enough to be stolen, and enough to rot upon the ground,” but told her he could not remember who had said it. Recently she had looked it up. It was attributed to Samuel Johnson. Too late now to let Fielding know the source of his quotation.

Those were the good years. She had Fielding, whom she wanted so much, and a darling baby boy, and she often said she was not ambitious, she wanted nothing more. Fee’s male beauty seemed to satisfy every aesthetic impulse she’d had in her years of museum-going and art history classes. He was the Greek runner, the Roman archer. She joked that she gave up her interest in art to study Fielding. She almost wept when Marco’s baby eyes turned into the level gray color typical of her family and not his father’s remarkable blue.

For a year, almost two, Fielding claimed he loved being a farmer. At first he was energetic and full of plans, but one bad season put an end to his enthusiasm. Reluctantly he moved them back to her father’s roomy apartment and found a job as a paralegal in a downtown office. A boring business, he said. Boring. He began to spend evenings with his friend Gordo. Life was not the same happy progression of days. Molly remembered what it was like when things began to go wrong. Little things. Fielding had a fantasy about coming home late and finding her asleep and tenderly kissing her awake. She had a fantasy about waiting up for him, forlorn and yearning. We must have frequently disappointed each other, she thought.

Molly poured out the last of the lemonade and set the last half-sandwich in front of Marco. “You remember the times we’ve come up, don’t you? You just don’t remember when we actually lived here.”

“Why don’t we live here now?”

“Sweetheart, we live in the city. We live in our apartment, where your toys and books are. We just visit the orchard.” And this may be our last visit, she thought. She couldn’t believe that Fielding had borrowed against the farm. Was that legal? She wished she could afford a lawyer. The land came from her family, but his name was on the deed as well as hers.

“Can I go now?” Marco asked, rolling himself away from the picnic cloth.

“Don’t go far. Stay close.”

“OK, Mom.”

She cleared away the picnic things and walked through the house again, opening closets and looking into drawers. There was no sign that anyone had been in the house since the last time they were in it. She always made sure the place was stripped and clean, in shape for the next visit. It was the best routine to follow. *So I’m a creature of habit. So what?* People said “habit” as if it was a bad word, as if it was something to resist and oppose, while she thought that habit was a lovely chain leading her through a day: grinding the beans for coffee, watching Marco dig raisins out of his muffin, opening the mail, folding Marco’s tiny jeans and T-shirts and matching his small colorful socks. What was wrong with habit? A simple life suited her. It always had.

Fielding found it hard to believe that Molly’s family’s fortunes were so modest. Wouldn’t a family that lived on Park Avenue, owned land up the Hudson, and sent a

daughter to a good school have substantial financial resources? Molly tried to explain that in her father's day there were still many hundreds of thousands of middle-class families in Manhattan, that when her grandfather first signed a long lease on an apartment in the city such a move was still feasible. Her father had never been wealthy – in fact, in the years she was in college, he had taken on a second job, rising early to deliver papers to city newsstands, finding his home at the top of Park Avenue a useful place from which to work his Manhattan route. He was a practical, down-to-earth man, known for liking hard work, and indulged in plenty of that in summers at the orchard. Between her scholarship and her father's extra earnings, she got through college without hardship or incurring debt.

“My grandfather left the family the farm, my father left us the apartment,” she explained to Fee. “It's been a long, slow consolidation. If we can hold on to them, they will be there for Marco. We can do it,” she encouraged him. And during the years when they lived up at the orchard, Fielding had grand plans for the place.

“We have to diversify,” he declared. “Apples are too one-note. Everybody in the county is growing apples. We should replace the older trees with quince, currants and rhubarb, sell them to a broker with contacts with fancy Manhattan restaurants. Baby lettuces. To make money on a farm this size, we need to get out of apples and into niche items.” Molly agreed, but her father was still alive then, and it was not diplomatic to make extreme changes at the farm. Somehow, the changes were never made.

She left the house by the back door and locked it, turning to survey the land from the raised porch. She was startled by a noise in the dense brush that ran in a line along the edge of the forest. She detected some movement in the distance. There—she could make out two deer, ambling without caution, one following the other. She shaded her

eyes for a better look. Was the leading buck the one they called Fielding's friend? A stag had once challenged Fielding, chasing him across the meadow and into a handy apple tree while the family shouted and cheered. "He wants to be the monarch of the mountain. Too bad I'm in his way," Fee had said.

Before she could call out to Marco to look, the deer were gone. Molly descended the steps and went around to the side of the house to turn off the water. The climate in the area was still mild, but who knew whether she would be here again before winter began.

Next, she entered the barn where the apples were stored in season. The quiet air still smelled faintly of fruit. There were several bins affixed to the walls and an upper story, which, like a hayloft, could be reached only by a ladder nailed flat against the wall.

She was soon certain that no one was in the barn. And from the look of things, no one had been there recently.

One more time, she walked down to the shed where the agricultural machines and mowers and the tall three-sided ladders her father had built were stored. There was another bin for apples, and it was empty. No hiding places there. And what would I do if I found him? she considered. Do I *want* to find him? It would not be possible to start over, would it? What could we do except scream at each other?

She was ready to head back to the city, but now she could not find Marco. He was remarkably good at hiding, that boy. Could he have climbed into one of the gnarled apple trees that looked like old men holding out their arms? She peered into the leafy canopy, looking for a pair of gray eyes comfortingly like her own.

“Marco! Marco!” she called. Had he come back down the path? The only dangerous place here was the ravine behind the apple barn. It was so overgrown that the land could slip away beneath your feet before you realized that you had lost your footing. She looked behind the barn, but nothing stirred and there was no sound.

Usually she knew where he might be, and usually she was right. Today her attention had wandered. Now she was worried. She climbed to the porch and used it to check the orchard’s sight lines. She unlocked the door and ran inside, going to the closet to look for the scythe. Would a boy like that as a plaything? It sat there in a dark corner.

She opened doors, down one side of the kitchen and up the other, until her hand touched the ironing closet. She jerked the door open and there, scrunched into an impossible angle at the back, a rag or a towel pushed into his mouth to stifle his giggles, his eyes streaming with the effort, was her son. Her relief brought her to her knees, where she pulled the wadded rag out of his mouth and hugged him and scolded him at the same time.

Soon they were on their way back to the city, Marco napping in the backseat while she asked herself, *Did I miss something at the farm? Was there something I didn’t pay attention to?* There was something trying to get through, but rapping her temples didn’t shake it loose, and soon the traffic picked up and she was at the Tappan Zee bridge, too distracted to return to the question.
