Lovereading.co.uk

Fox Evil

Minette Walters

Published by Pan Books

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

Click here to buy this book and read more

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

One

June 2001

THE FOX SLIPPED quietly through the night in search of food, with only the occasional flash of his white-tipped brush flagging his presence. The scent of a badger set his nose quivering, and he skirted the piece of track where the territorial marker had been laid. A shy, nervous creature, he had more sense than to cross the path of a voracious fighter with powerful jaws and poisonous teeth.

He had no such fear of the smell of burning tobacco. It spoke to him of bread and milk for himself, and pieces of chicken for his vixen and her cubs – easier plunder than a night-time's wearisome hunting for voles and field mice. Ever suspicious, he stood for several minutes, watching and listening for alien movement. There was none. Whoever was smoking was as quiet and still as he. Finally, in trustful response to the Pavlovian stimulus, he crept towards the familiar smell, unaware that

a rolled cigarette was different from the pipe he was used to.

The illegal trap, a maiming device of metal teeth, sprang shut on his delicate foreleg with the biting power of a huge badger, tearing the flesh and snapping the bone. He screamed in pain and anger, lashing at the empty night in search of his imagined adversary. For all his supposed cunning, he hadn't been clever enough to recognize that the motionless figure beside a tree bore no resemblance to the patient old man who regularly fed him.

The woodland burst with sound in response to his terror. Birds fluttered on their perches, nocturnal rodents scurried into hiding. Another fox – perhaps his vixen – barked an alarm from across the field. As the figure turned towards him, drawing a hammer from his coat pocket, the shaved tracks in the mane of hair must have suggested a bigger, stronger foe than the fox could cope with, because he ceased his screaming and dropped in whimpering humility to his belly. But there was no mercy in the deliberate crushing of his little pointed muzzle before the trap was forced open and, still alive, his brush was sliced from his body with a cut-throat razor.

His tormentor spat his cigarette to the ground and mashed it under his heel before tucking the brush in his pocket and seizing the animal by its scruff. He slipped as quietly through the trees as the fox had done earlier, coming to a halt at the edge of

the wood and melting into the shadow of an oak. Fifty feet away, across the ha-ha ditch, the old man was on his feet on the terrace, staring towards the treeline, a shotgun levelled at shoulder height towards his unseen watcher. The backwash from the lights inside his open French windows showed his face grim with anger. He knew the cry of an animal in pain, knew that its abrupt cessation meant the creature's jaw had been smashed. He should have done. This wasn't the first time a broken body had been tossed at his feet.

He never saw the whirl of the black-sleeved, black-gloved arm as it lobbed the dying fox towards him, but he caught the streaks of white as the tumbling paws flashed in the lamplight. With murder in his heart he aimed below them and fired both barrels.

Dorset Echo, Saturday 25 August 2001

TRAVELLER INVASION

THE ROLLING DOWNLAND of Dorset's Ridgeway has become home to the largest illegal caravan park in the county's history. Police estimate that some 200 mobile homes and over 500 gypsies and travellers have gathered at scenic Barton Edge for an August Bank Holiday rave.

From the windows of Bella Preston's psychedelic bus, the soon-to-be-designated World Heritage site of Dorset's Jurassic coastline unfolds in all its glory. To the left, the majestic cliffs of Ringstead Bay, to the right the stunning crag of Portland Bill, ahead the dazzling blue of the English Channel.

'This is the best view anywhere in England,' says Bella, 35, cuddling her three daughters. 'The kids love it. We always try to spend our summers here.' Bella, a single mother from Essex, who describes herself as a 'social worker', was one of the first to arrive. 'The rave was proposed when we were at Stonehenge for the solstice in June. Word spread quickly, but we hadn't expected so many.'

Dorset police were alerted when an abnormal number of traveller-style vehicles entered the county yesterday morning. Road blocks were set up along the routes leading to Barton Edge in an attempt to stop the invasion. The result was a series of jams, some five miles long, that angered locals and bona fide tourists who were caught in the net. With the travellers' vehicles unable to turn round in the confined space of the narrow Dorset lanes, the decision was taken to allow the gathering to happen.

Farmer Will Harris, 58, whose fields have been taken over by the illegal encampment, is angered by police and local authority impotence to act. 'I've been told I'll be arrested if I provoke these people,' he fumed. 'They're destroying my fences and crops, but if I complain and someone gets hurt then it's my fault. Is that justice?'

Sally Macey, 48, Traveller Liaison Officer for the local authority, said last night that the travellers had been served with a formal notice to quit. She agreed that the

serving of notices was a game. 'Travellers operate on the basis that seven days is the usual length of stay,' she said. 'They tend to move on just before the order comes into effect. In the meantime we ask them to refrain from intimidatory behaviour and to ensure that their rubbish is disposed of in nominated sites.'

This cut no ice with Mr Harris who pointed to the sacks of litter dumped at the entrance to his farm. 'This will be all over the place tomorrow when the foxes get at these bags. Who's going to pay for the clean-up? It cost a farmer £10,000 to clear his land in Devon after an encampment half this size.'

Bella Preston expressed sympathy. 'If I lived here I wouldn't like it either. Last time we held a rave of this size, 2000 teens came from the local towns to join in. I'm sure it will happen again. The music goes on all night and it's pretty loud.'

A police spokesman agreed. 'We are warning local people that the noise nuisance will last throughout the weekend. Unfortunately there is little we can do in these situations. Our priority is to avoid unnecessary confrontation.' He confirmed that an influx of youngsters from Bournemouth and Weymouth was likely. 'A free open-air rave is a big draw. Police will be on hand, but we expect the event to pass off peacefully.'

Mr Harris is less optimistic. 'If it doesn't, my farm will be in the middle of a war zone,' he said. 'There aren't enough policemen in Dorset to shift this lot. They'll have to bring in the army.'

Two

Barton Edge – August Bank Holiday, 2001

TEN-YEAR-OLD Wolfie pumped up his courage to confront his father. His mother had seen that others were leaving and she was frightened of attracting unwelcome attention. 'If we stay too long,' she told the child, wrapping her thin arms around his shoulder and keening against his cheek, 'the do-gooders will come in to check for bruises, and when they find them they'll take you away.' She had had her first child removed years before and had imbued her two remaining children with an undying terror of the police and social workers. Bruises were minor inconveniences in comparison.

Wolfie climbed onto the front bumper of the coach and peered through the windscreen. If Fox was asleep, there was no way he was going inside. The geezer was a devil if you woke him. One time he'd slashed Wolfie's hand with the cut-throat razor he kept under his pillow when Wolfie had touched

his shoulder by mistake. Most of the time he and Cub, his little brother, sat under the coach while their dad slept and their mum cried. Even when it was cold and raining, neither of them dared go inside unless Fox was out.

Wolfie thought Fox was a good name for his father. He hunted at night under cover of darkness, slipping invisibly from shadow to shadow. Sometimes Wolfie's mother sent him after Fox to see what he was doing, but Wolfie was too afraid of the razor to follow far. He'd seen Fox use it on animals, heard the death rattle of a deer as he slowly slit its throat and the gurgling squeal of a rabbit. He never killed quickly. Wolfie didn't know why – but instinct told him that Fox enjoyed fear.

Instinct told him a lot about his father, but he kept it bottled inside his head along with strange, flimsy memories of other men and times when Fox hadn't been there. None of them was substantial enough to persuade him they were true. Truth for Wolfie was the terrifying reality of Fox and the gnawing pangs of permanent hunger that were assuaged only in sleep. Whatever thoughts might be in his head, he had learnt to keep a still tongue. Break any of Fox's rules and you tasted the razor, and the strongest rule of all was 'never talk to anyone about the family'.

His father wasn't in the bed, so with wildly beating heart Wolfie mustered his nerve and climbed in

through the open front door. He had learnt over time that the best way to approach this man was to play an equal – '*never show how afraid you are*,' *his mother always said* – so he dropped into a John Wayne swagger and sauntered up what had once been the aisle between the seats. He could hear splashing water and guessed his father was behind the curtain that gave privacy to the washing area.

'Hey, Fox, what ya doing, mate?' he said, pausing outside.

The splashing stopped immediately. 'Why do you want to know?'

'It don't matter.'

The curtain rattled aside, revealing his father stripped to the waist with beads of water dripping down his hairy arms from immersion in the old tin bowl that served as bath and basin. '*Doesn't!*' he snapped. 'It *doesn't* matter. How many times do I have to tell you?'

The child flinched but stood his ground. Most of his confusion about life came from the illogical disparity between his father's behaviour and the way he spoke. To Wolfie's ear, Fox sounded like an actor who knew stuff that no one else knew, but the anger that drove him was nothing like Wolfie had ever seen on the movies. Except, maybe, Commodus in *Gladiator* or the bog-eyed priest in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* who ripped people's hearts out. In Wolfie's dreams, Fox was always one or other

of them, which was why his surname was Evil. 'It doesn't matter,' he repeated solemnly.

His father reached for his razor. 'Then why ask what I'm doing if you're not interested in the answer?'

'It's just a way of saying hi. They do it in the movies. Hey, mate, what's happening, what ya doing?' He raised his hand to reflect in the mirror by Fox's shoulder, palm showing, fingers spread. 'Then you do a high five.'

'You watch too many damn films. You're beginning to sound like a Yank. Where do you see them?'

Wolfie picked the least alarming explanation. 'There was this boy me and Cub made friends with at the last place. He lived in a house . . . let us watch his mum's videos when she was at work.' It was true . . . up to a point. The boy had taken them into his house until his mother found out and sent them packing. Most of the time Wolfie filched money from the tin box under his parents' bed when Fox was out, and used it to buy cinema tickets when they were near towns. He didn't know where the money came from, or why there was so much of it, but Fox never seemed to notice when it went.

Fox gave a grunt of disapproval as he used the tip of the razor to scrape at the shaven tracks on his close-cropped crown. 'What was the bitch doing? Was she there, too?'

Wolfie was used to his mother being called 'bitch'.

He even called her 'bitch' himself sometimes. 'It was when she was sick.' He never understood why his father didn't cut himself with the razor. It wasn't natural to drag a sharp point down your scalp and never once draw blood. Fox didn't even use soap to make it easier. Sometimes he wondered why Fox didn't just shave off all his hair instead of turning the bald patches into irregular tracks and letting the bits at the back and sides hang down below his shoulders in dreadlocks that got more and more straggly as the hair dropped out. He guessed that going bald really worried Fox, though Wolfie couldn't account for it. Hard guys in the movies often shaved their heads. Bruce Willis did.

He met Fox's eyes in the mirror. 'What are you staring at?' the man growled. 'What do you want?'

'You gonna be bald as a coot if this keeps up,' the child said, pointing to the strands of black hair that were floating on the surface of the water. 'You should go to a doctor. It ain't normal to have your hair fall out every time you shake your head.'

'How would you know? Maybe it's in my genes. Maybe it'll happen to you.'

Wolfie stared at his own blond reflection. 'No chance,' he said, emboldened by the man's willingness to talk. 'I don't look nuffink like you. I reckon I'm like Ma, and she ain't going bald.' He shouldn't have said it. He knew it was a mistake even as the

words came out and he saw the narrowing of his father's eyes.

He tried to duck but Fox clamped a massive hand around his neck and snicked the soft flesh under his chin with the razor. 'Who's your dad?'

'You is,' the boy wailed, tears smarting in his eyes. 'You is, Fox.'

'Jesus Christ!' he flung the child aside. 'You can't remember a fucking thing, can you? It's *are* . . . you *are* . . . he *is* . . . I *am*. What's the word for that, Wolfie?' He went back to scraping at his hair.

'G-g-grammar?'

'Conjugation, you ignorant little shit. It's a verb.'

The boy stepped back, making damping motions with his hands. 'There ain't no call to get cross, Fox,' he said, desperate to prove he wasn't as stupid as his father thought him. 'Mum and me looked the hair thing up on the Net the last time we went to the library. I reckon it's called—' he'd memorized the word phonetically – 'all-oh-peck-ya. There's loads on it . . . and there's things you can do.'

The man's eyes narrowed again. 'Alopecia, you idiot. It's Greek for fox-mange. You're so *fucking* uneducated. Doesn't that bitch teach you anything? Why do you think I'm called Fox Evil?'

Wolfie had his own ideas. In his child's mind, Fox denoted cleverness and Evil denoted cruelty. It was a name that suited this man. His eyes filled with tears

again. 'I was only trying to help. There's loads of guys go bald. It's no big deal. Most times—' he took his best stab at the sound he'd heard – 'aypeesha goes away and the hair grows back. Maybe that'll happen with you. You don't wanna be nervous – they reckon it's worrying that can make hair fall out.'

'What about the other times?'

The boy gripped the back of a chair because his knees were trembling with fright. This was further than he wanted to go – with words he couldn't pronounce and ideas that would make Fox angry. 'There was some stuff about cancer—' he took a deep breath – ''n' dybeets 'n' arthrytes that can make it happen.' He rushed on before his father turned nasty again. 'Mum and me reckon you should see a doctor, because if you is ill it won't get no better by pretending it ain't there. It's no big deal to sign on at a surgery. The law says travellers got the same rights to care as everyone else.'

'Did the bitch say I was ill?'

Wolfie's alarm showed in his face. 'N-n-no. She don't n-n-never talk about you.'

Fox stabbed the razor into the wooden washboard. 'You're lying,' he snarled, turning round. 'Tell me what she said or I'll have your fucking guts.'

'*Your father's sick in the head . . . your father's evil . . .*' 'Nothing,' Wolfie managed. 'She don't never say nothing.'

Fox searched his son's terrified eyes. 'You'd better

be telling the truth, Wolfie, or it's your mother's innards that'll be on the floor. Try again. What did she say about me?'

The child's nerve broke and he made a dash for the rear exit, diving beneath the bus and burying his face in his hands. He couldn't do anything right. His father would kill his mother, and the do-gooders would find his bruises. He would have prayed to God if he knew how, but God was a nebulous entity that he didn't understand. One time his mother had said, if God was a woman she'd help us. Another time: God's a policeman. If you obey the rules he's nice, if you don't he sends you to hell.

The only absolute truth that Wolfie understood was that there was no escape from the misery of his life.

*

Fox fascinated Bella Preston in a way that few other men had. He was older than he looked, she guessed, putting him somewhere in his forties, with a peculiarly inexpressive face that suggested a tight rein on his emotions. He spoke little, preferring to cloak himself in silence, but when he did his speech betrayed his class and education.

It wasn't unheard of for a 'toff' to take to the road – it had happened down the centuries when a black sheep was kicked out of the family fold – but she would have expected Fox to have an expensive

habit. Crackheads were the black sheep of the twenty-first century, never mind what class they were born into. This guy wouldn't even take a spliff, and that was weird.

A woman with less confidence might have asked herself why he kept singling her out for attention. Big and fat with cropped peroxided hair, Bella wasn't an obvious choice for this lean, charismatic man with pale eyes and shaven tracks across his skull. He never answered questions. Who he was, where he came from and why he hadn't been seen on the circuit before were no one's business but his own. Bella, who had witnessed it all before, took his right to a hidden past for granted – *didn't they all have secrets?* – and allowed him to haunt her bus with the same freedom that everyone else did.

Bella hadn't travelled the country with three young daughters and an H-addict husband, now dead, without learning to keep her eyes open. She knew there were a woman and two children in Fox's bus, but he never acknowledged them. They looked like spares, chucked out along the way by someone else and taken on board in a moment of charity, but Bella saw how the two kids cowered behind their mother's skirts whenever Fox drew near. It told her something about the man. However attractive he might be to strangers – *and he was attractive* – Bella would bet her last cent that he showed a different character behind closed doors.

It didn't surprise her. What man wouldn't be bored by a spaced-out zombie and her by-blows? But it made her wary. The children were timid little clones of their mother, blond and blue-eyed, who sat in the dirt under Fox's bus and watched while she wandered aimlessly from vehicle to vehicle, hand held out for anything that would put her to sleep. Bella wondered how often she gave happy pills to the kids to keep them quiet. Too often, she suspected. Their lethargy wasn't normal.

Of course she felt sorry for them. She dubbed herself a 'social worker' because she and her daughters attracted waifs wherever they camped. Their battery-operated television had something to do with it, also Bella's generous nature that made her a comfortable person to be around. But when she sent her girls to make friends with the two boys, they slithered under Fox's bus and ran away.

She made an attempt to engage the woman in conversation by offering to share a smoke with her, but it was a fruitless exercise. All questions were greeted with silence or incomprehension, except for wistful agreement when Bella said the hardest part about being on the road was educating the kids. 'Wolfie likes libraries,' the skinny creature said, as if Bella should know what she was talking about.

'Which one's Wolfie?' asked Bella.

'The one that takes after his father . . . the clever

one,' she said, before wandering away to look for more handouts.

The subject of education came up again on the Monday night when prone bodies littered the ground in front of Bella's purple and pink bus. 'I'd chuck it all in tomorrow,' she said dreamily, staring at the star-studded sky and the moon across the water. 'All I need is for someone to give me a house with a garden that ain't on a fucking estate in the middle of a fucking city full of fucking delinquents. Somewhere round here would do . . . a decent place where my kids can go to school 'n' not get their heads fucked by wannabe jail meat . . . that's all I'm asking.'

'They're pretty girlies, Bella,' said a dreamy voice. 'They'll get more 'n' their heads fucked the minute you turn your back.'

'Yeah, and don't I know it. I'll chop the dick off the first man who tries.'

There was a low laugh from the corner of the bus where Fox was standing in shadow. 'It'll be too late by then,' he murmured. 'You need to take action now. Prevention is always better than cure.'

'Like what?'

He detached himself from the shadows and loomed over Bella, straddling her with his feet, his tall figure blotting out the moon. 'Claim some free land through adverse possession and build your own house.'

She squinted up at him. 'What the hell are you talking about?'

His teeth flashed in a brief grin. 'Winning the jackpot,' he said.