

Baber's Apple

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Extract

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The morning crackles.

Twigs of the apple tree, stiffly welded from knuckle to knuckle, snap at Baber's frosty windowpanes.

Baber's eyelids spring apart, but he sees nothing. His bedroom is as dark as the winter working mornings. The neatly drawn curtains hide from his view the town's unexciting provinciality, its terraces of old houses stepping down to the silent river and then up the other side of the shallow valley.

'Baber! It's half past six!' His grandmother calls him from the bottom of the stairs. Her fruity voice bounces up the threadbare treads. He wants her, one morning, to call, 'Baber! Ten minutes to curtains!' but it never happens.

You might consider Baber's head to be empty or vacuous. I know he can sometimes seem empty-headed, but it's just that nothing sticks, at least not on the surface. The inside of this head is no bristling auditorium for a spectrum of doubts; this is a laser show clear and simple. Images and ideas pop across his mind.

Remiss of me, but I never introduced myself. I am Beulah Mittough, and Baber imagines I am his brother, or sometimes his sister. I cannot say that my uncertain gender bothers me. I try to see the world through androgynous eyes, though this perception is inevitably clouded because they are Baber's eyes, not mine.

It is my duty, ladies and gentlemen, to present to you, tadaaah, Baber Mittough. It rhymes with sabre ditto, which will tell you more about him than you suppose.

Baber creeps up behind Nan as she bustles about the kitchen. He stoops to kiss her on the back of her neck (it is as crusty as a turtle's), but satisfies himself instead with pulling on her apron strings.

'Silly bugger,' says Nan. Refastening her apron, she turns and smiles her orang-utan smile.

From behind his back Baber conjures a shiny, stiff envelope and gives it to her.

'Happy birthday, Nan!'

He walks along Orchard Road, the stiff leather heels of Baber's new boots clacking a rhythmic march along the rocking and broken slabs of the pavement. His shouldered canvas bag bounces in time against his hip. The numbers on the familiar front doors count down his progress to the railway station. He notices, amongst the usual echelon of parked vehicles, a different car. It is white and shiny. It looks new.

This morning, like most mornings, Baber waits with his fellow travellers in his place on the station platform. He wears a sort of beret, the blue of which nicely sets off the peacock hues of his waistcoat. The waistcoat's gilded thread twinkles in the frosty morning air. His thumbs are tucked into the bottoms of the armholes and his fingers strum theatrically in some silent tattoo. His face twitches in time to a beat and when he smiles, the salt and pepper pale brown goatee seems to spread all over his chin. He wears his camel overcoat like a cape. It is a sensible coat, carelessly worn.

The railway station is filled with the customary sounds of the urban morning, the insistent burbling of mobile phones playing an inharmonious medley of electronic tones and rhythmless tunes; phlegmy coughs redolent of last night's enjoyments and excesses; the icy wind as it rattles along the empty railway lines; the herring gulls croaking their way to and from the nearby landfill site; tannoyed messages disguised in a cloak of static hiss.

The morning crackles.

Baber almost capers.

'Baber,' I say, 'it is too early in the morning to caper.'

'I really don't think so, Beulah!' That was Baber, talking to me. Not out loud, of course. That would get people talking.

'If you say not, Baber,' I say to him.



On the train, Stephen shouts, 'Baber, my boy, nithe to thee you.' Stephen, snake-thin, has the hint of a lisp, accentuated by his high-pitched voice and youthful exuberance. He could lie down on a garage forecourt, coiled but unruly, ready to do some tyre inflating.

Baber says, 'Wanna come to a party?'

'What thowt of a pawty?' Stephen not only lisps, he also screws his rs into ws like wet towels. It amazes me that Baber always understands what he says.

'A birthday party! It's my grandmother's birthday.'

I say to Baber, 'That's a nice thought, Baber, inviting friends to Nan's birthday. But are you sure she's expecting a party?'

'When?' asks Stephen.

'It's her birthday today. Let's all go round and see her tonight.' suggests Baber.

Baber will be there anyway. We live there. With his grandmother. We have done for most of his life.

Stephen says, 'Can I bwing a fwiend?'

'Why not! Bring two or three! I'm going to.' Baber presents his card. 'There's the address,' he says, 'in case you've forgotten it.' He tucks the card between Stephen's thumb and newspaper.

Baber still has some of his self-made business cards in his hand.

A beautiful girl chassés down the aisle of the waddling train. She moves her hips as though they are the flippers on a pinball machine. She is pulling on her gloves as gently as a model in a skin-care advert.

She has a ticket sticking out from between her teeth and she seems to be pointing it at him, as though she wants Baber to inspect it. Perhaps Baber's hat gives him an official air.

Baber takes the ticket delicately from her teeth. Her eyes widen in surprise. Baber doesn't want to cut her lip with it – it would be like slashing a tyre.

The man with her snatches one of Baber's business cards from his pale hand. I expect he thinks it's his wife's ticket. He says, 'Come on Sita,' in a nasal tone. He tries to hurry Sita past.

She won't be hurried. Her big wide-open eyes, brogue-brown and white, can see Baber still has her ticket.

Baber says, 'Why don't you both come to my grandmother's party this evening?'

The man says, 'What on earth for?' With sparky eyes he looks straight at Baber.

'Because it's her birthday!'

The man seems to want some more reasons.

'And because you know where to come.' Baber points at the card in his hand. 'And she likes surprises!'

'Since when, Baber?' I ask.

'Since tonight, Beulah,' says Baber.

As they walk away Baber watches Sita's hips. They are like pistons. The man with her must be her engineer as well as her husband. Those pistons could drive a man insane. Certainly her man seems a little mad.

'She has "Pocahontas" body,' thinks Baber, "*Lovely as a poplar. Sweet as a red haw in November or a pawpaw in May*".'

He's still got her ticket.

The train lurches to an unscheduled stop amid sputters of electrical noises. The airbrakes sigh, the lights in the carriage dim so Baber can hardly see the hanging straps as they swing violently.

As time passes, the frustrated passengers rattle their unreadable newspapers with increasing annoyance. Baber is going to say something frivolous, but I warn him against it and for once he takes notice of me. Lately, I have realized that our fellow commuters seem to be losing what little sense of humour they ever had.

And still the morning crackles.

It is a piebald evening.

Baber has finished the washing-up. Nan is watching television. It is not easy to tell whether she is awake or asleep because her eyes are shielded behind the scratched lenses of her glasses. Baber knows, though, that if he were to turn off the television she would be wide awake at once and would be able to recall, if Baber were at all interested, the recent scenes with a watch-maker's precision.

Sometimes Baber imagines the television gives the world a gateway into our living room. He might be being watched just as Nan watches other people. As if to test his theory, when Nan is not there, Baber sometimes struts his mannered strut in front of the screen, even though it is not turned on. He is auditioning for any of life's invisible directors for the unlikelihood of dreams to come.

Walking home from the train station, Baber had met Macky. (The train was late again, the guard said, because of an incident. This, I would have thought, was self-evident.) Macky was weighing up the new shiny white car, like Nan watches the kettle when it is slow to boil. Baber invited him to Nan's surprise birthday party.

Mrs MacArthur once told Nan that Macky, her son, and his friends eat for England. Certainly one bowl of plain crisps and one plateful of stale cheese crackers is not going to satisfy their hunger. So, Baber unwraps Nan's favourite tasty Cheddar and plonks a whole week's supply onto the onion-flavoured, wooden chopping board.

After the adverts, for which Nan is always unquestionably awake, Baber quietly folds away the dining table's gate legs and moves it up against the wall near the kitchen door. He covers it with Nan's Sunday-best lace cloth and lays out the crisps and

crackers and cheese. He also brings in the fruit bowl and, at my prompting, a knife, because otherwise the grapefruit and kiwi fruit will be difficult to eat. Rather than leave the over-ripe banana, Baber picks it out to eat himself. The white flesh slides easily from its black sheath. Two old oranges roll aside to reveal two of last autumn's apples from the tree in the garden. Their thin skins seem to turn blue in the reflected light of the television.

The cake we bought for Nan during Baber's lunch break is still his well-kept secret in its box outside the back door. Baber has found a candle for it in his room. It is not a birthday-cake candle, but it looks like a non-drip one, so he is unlikely to set the icing alight with it.

There were birthday cards for Nan in the morning's post. She has left them among their untidily opened envelopes on the hall-stand. Baber fetches the cards and stands them up on the mantel-shelf, as though it were Christmas, on either side of the one he gave her this morning.

Baber looks at her, quiet in her armchair, facing the TV, her wrinkles free from hairs and blemishes, her still-fleshy lips frozen in concentration or sleep, we are unsure which.

'A new pair of glasses for Nan would have been an excellent birthday present,' I say to Baber.

'Good idea, Beulah,' he says. 'We'll take her to the opticians on Saturday.'

'If we can get her out of her apron and slippers for long enough.'

Her right hand plays the bongos on the arm of her chair.

'Your hand's shaking, Nan,' says Baber.

Nan looks at it as if it has never been introduced to her. 'Must have been resting on a nerve,' she says and crosses her arms firmly under her bosom like a wrestler.

'What are you up to?' she asks, looking around the living room at the folded table and its incidental mini-feast, at the birthday cards, already bending in the heat from the gas fire, at the smile on Baber's face as he squeezes behind the telly to get some glasses out of the cabinet.

'It's your birthday,' he says. 'We might have some friends round to help us celebrate.'

'Don't be daft,' she says.

On the TV, white titles are rolling across a chocolate back-

ground of animated characters made to look like oily plasticene. The familiar theme tune is no more attractive than our doorbell which rings with its familiar pneumatic-drill-like tunelessness.

You cannot see who is at the door by looking through the simple stained glass panel. Baber thinks it is the only attractive feature in the whole house. When the spring sunshine shines through, it paints colourful patterns on the hall lino. In winter it frosts up if you breathe on it. The view it affords of the outside world, Baber reckons, is not unlike the one through Nan's glasses. The images need interpreting.

The bright light from the hall gives even Snakethin Stephen a shadow. A figure flits out from it.

'Hello, Baber,' says Stephen. 'You thaid I could bwing a fwiend.' He stands aside to let her come in first.

She is a small girl with an engaging smile. A pair of intelligent eyes mesmerize Baber.

'Hello, Baber,' she says, thrusting her hand out for it to be shaken. Stephen, exhibiting his usual lack of aplomb, says nothing. So Baber bows graciously towards our new acquaintance. The gesture obviously pleases her, because she hides her face behind her hands and giggles.

'Say something,' I say to Baber.

'Pleased to meet you, I'm sure,' Baber says.

'I'm Dolores,' she says. The name hangs in the wintry air with an indefinite purpose.

Before Baber can organize himself into doing anything, Dolores and Stephen have found their own way into the living room.

Baber hears Stephen hissing, 'Happy birthday, Miththuth Mittough,' and Dolores once again has to introduce herself. She does it with Baber-worthy bravura. She hands the surprised hostess a sensibly proportioned box tied up in gift paper and extravagant ribbons.

'Why thank you, dear,' says Nan, wiping her perfectly dry hands down the front of her apron before taking the parcel from her, almost with a curtsy.

Dolores has Michelangelo hands. Nan is more interested in Dolores' hands than in her present. Baber can see Nan admiring the thin fingers. They are more exquisite than new toothbrushes. The startling contrast between Dolores' pink palms and the

sculpted ebony of the backs of her hands are drawn with no clear lines.

'It's Mrs Minifie,' says Baber into Stephen's ear as he whisks away his coat. 'Not Mrs Mittough. People call her Minnie,' says Baber to Dolores.

While Nan unwraps her present, Stephen hands Baber a bottle. It is white wine. Party fare – intended for trading, not drinking. It is also warm. Stephen has probably had it between his thighs on the bus.

'Do you know where the corkscrew is, Nan?'

'Here,' she says, holding up her unwrapped present: a Master Vintner set containing a foil cutter, a corkscrew and a bottle opener.

Soon, Baber, Stephen and Dolores are sipping warm white wine with the texture and bouquet of bedroom carpet. Nan explains that she doesn't drink. Dolores' scrumpled face suggests she wishes she didn't either.

The doorbell rings again. I think a new doorbell would also make a good birthday present, but I shall keep that to myself. Baber will have enough to worry about. It is Macky and his friends.

'Mum said she'll be round later on,' Macky says to Nan. He screws a tumbler into Nan's hands, despite her avowal that she seldom drinks alcohol.

Some of Macky's gang are cracking open cans of lager. Billy, the fat one, has already emptied the dish of crisps. He looks unpleasantly at Dolores and says to Stephen, 'Who's your friend?'

Baber says, 'Dolores, Billy. Billy, Dolores,' though it looks to me as though neither of them is interested. Billy lights a cigarette. Baber wonders what Nan will say because she can be abusive about smoking and smokers, though she lets old Mrs Stokes smoke, when she comes on one of her regular visits to discuss world events, *Daily Mail* reader to *Daily Mail* reader.

Billy pops open another can. Baber takes a can from Billy's pack and hands it to Stephen.

The cost that has to be paid for the attractive fractured light through the stained-glass panel in the south-facing front door is

the dark, damp back garden. Edifices crowd around it; the house's own three storeys, the neighbours' extensions and moss-frosted conservatories, a prison-high back wall. The unremitting gloom of the garden is preserved by the broadly spreading canopy of the old apple tree that, when it is in leaf, shushes Baber to sleep at night, and when it is bare, rattles him awake in the morning. Baber has, on occasion, thought to use the vacuum cleaner, its tube coupled in reverse, to blow-dry the grass beneath the tree so he can use Nan's ancient pushmower to cut the lawn without its wheels digging tracks.

There is a shed at the bottom of the garden, held upright, I think, only because it is leaning against two abutting garden walls. In it, besides the lawn mower, and the winter store of apples, Baber keeps his secret stash. The contents of the shed give it a sort of lost-grandmother smell, something of fruit sweets and decay.

Now that cigarettes and alcohol are sullyng Nan's living room, Baber thinks it might be an opportunity to risk her admonishment and take another liberty. When she asks, as she will, whether the ungainly torpedo-shaped cigarettes are what she thinks they are, because she is always well informed – the television tells her about these things – Baber will claim that marijuana is recommended for medicinal purposes and she should try one. It might help alleviate her shakes.

The grass is wet and frosty. Baber's boots are stained and his feet are cold and clumsy. He accidentally treads on the corner of the cake box by the back door.

Baber gives his pouch up to Dolores' graceful hands so he can rescue the cake. Dolores finds cigarette papers in the pouch and rolls herself a spliff. Baber finds room for the cake box on the kitchen table, beside the bottles he has assembled for the punch he planned to make, if only he could have found a bowl to mix it in.

Someone has found out how to switch on the old music centre. Baber can hear tapes being loaded, sampled, unloaded.

Nan is subjecting herself to Macky's scrutinizing, saying to his chin, 'Careful now. No more than to the bottom of the boat.' She points with an arthritically gnarled forefinger at the side of her tumbler. It sports the picture of a sailing ship painted in brown and white. It provides an appropriate Plimsoll line for

measures of whisky. Macky has taken a bottle, now only half full, from his jacket pocket. He takes a swig out of it before serving her another helping, appearing to pay particular attention to the ship on the side of the glass, but nevertheless pouring Nan double her requested measure.

He says, 'Oops.'

Nan repeats, 'Oops,' but is already sipping at it, holding the glass firmly with both hands. The music sampler has settled for some early David Bowie. *'Oh, you pretty thing, don't you know you're driving your mamas and papas insane?'* Nan is about to resume her seat when the doorbell drills again.

'It's getting to be a proper party,' she says, and Baber catches her almost chuckling.

Baber pushes his way through into the hall, a Zippo lighter and the over-large candle for the cake in one hand, an ever-ready welcome in the other.

It is Pocahontas.

She looks up into Baber's face with her eyes of vanilla-and-chocolate ice cream.

Now it's a skewbald evening.

Baber jellifies.

After seconds of seraphic silence, she says, 'Oh, it's you,' and her face bursts into a sunshine smile.

Jelly can't talk. Especially when it's melting.

'I didn't recognize you at first. Without your hat.' She touches him lightly on his forehead to show him what she means.

'The blue hat?'

She remembers the colour of the hat. Over her shoulder, Baber cannot help noticing the street filling with winter-burgeoned exhaust fumes. A car is parked in front of the house. Baber can see her husband peering across at them from the driver's seat.

Baber says, 'You've come to my grandmother's birthday party. How nice of you.'

In the hallway behind Baber, Sita can see the scoured skull and vicious mouth of one of Macky's gang. They call him Toss.

'No. I don't think so,' she says shrinking away from the front door.

Toss goes up the stairs, looking over his shoulder and rolling his mouth like it is full of spit.

The car's passenger window slides down. 'Ask him for your ticket,' there are no vowels in the way Sita's husband says 'ticket', 'and let's get out of here.'

Someone comes up behind Baber and taps him on the shoulder. It is Dolores. She says, 'Minnie says for you to shut the front door. You're letting in a draught.' Then she sees Sita and smiles her infectious smile. 'Hello,' she says. 'Are you coming to the party? Come on in,' and she is guiding Sita in through the front door, past the jelly. Sita, looking surprised at the warmth of Dolores's greeting, has no way of stopping herself.

Baber bends forward from the hips, this is easy for him to do in his invertebrate state, and calls to the man in the car, 'We're just going to go and look for it. Come in and wait for her if you like.' Sita's husband turns off the engine, I guess against his better judgement. Then he switches the ignition back on to close the passenger window. He gets out and opens the boot of the car and fetches out a bed sheet. Baber wonders whether he has suddenly decided to stay the night and thinks about what he should do to air the bed in the spare room - we have had no one stay for years as far as I can remember. But Sita's husband drapes the sheet over the windscreen, opens the front doors of the car, tucks the sheet in and shuts all the doors, first on the driver's side, then the boot, then the passenger's door. Then he bleeps the doors locked and is at the front step, when Macky turns up beside Baber to reissue his grandmother's message.

'Shut the fucking door.' Macky slams it shut. Sita's husband is still outside. Behind him, his black car wears its white blindfold and pretends not to notice.

On his way back down the stairs, Toss unscrews the bell so that its clapper now vibrates fruitlessly and Sita's husband can no longer disturb the party with his incessant ringing. Baber sees that the bell top will make a magnificent candleholder and quietly takes it out of Toss's hand, leaving him the rest of the evening to think about what he was going to do with it.

Dolores and Sita are in the kitchen, trying to make the cake presentable and the upturned bell fits sensibly into the dented corner. Soon it can be held aloft, with Baber's old candle spluttering like an Olympic torch. Its arrival sets the smoky living room rocking to the strains of 'Happy Birthday to You'. The song drowns out David Bowie, Sita's husband banging on

the window and Mrs Stokes ringing the greatly subdued doorbell. They have to wait outside with Mrs MacArthur, Macky's mother, until the song finishes. Stephen leads the singing, even through 'Happy birthday Miththuth Minifie'.

Dolores asks Baber if Sita is his girlfriend. Baber says, 'Don't be silly. Pocahontas has only come because I've got her train ticket.' He fingers his way through his waistcoat pockets. 'Somewhere.'

Dolores says to Sita, 'What a lovely name, Pocahontas.'

'Oh no,' she says, 'my name's Sita.'

Dolores picks an apple out of the fruit bowl. She weighs it. It looks beautiful filling the palm of her hand. Baber thinks, our tree makes especially heavy apples. It has lost its bluish hue; its thin skin has adopted a pink tinge. She sniffs it. I hope it is not too like the smell of the shed. She bites it and a tidy wedge snaps away.

'Tell her where it's from,' I say to Baber, proud that these are the apples from our very own tree.

Baber can imagine the taste. It will be airy and hollow, like elderflower.

'They're from our very own tree,' Baber says, at last. He has been watching for the juice to start to appear at the corners of her mouth.

Baber would like to lick the juice away, but I manage to forestall this possibly provocative impulse for sharing.

Mrs MacArthur has managed to attract Macky's notice by calling through the letterbox in her squeaky Highland accent. It is like the chemistry between lamb and ewe mother. It is as though they do ultra-sound. Obediently, Macky opens the door to her, just a crack, and she squeezes her way into the house.

She tells Minnie there is a man outside, 'One of those Paki bastards,' she calls him, 'shouting his mouth off about how some prat's kidnapped his sister and if he gets his hands on him he's going to kill him.'

Minnie nods her head at Sita.

'That's her, I expect,' says Minnie. Then she graciously declines the joint Stephen offers her. 'No, thank you, dear. I've got a drink.'

Macky says to Baber, 'Her brother says he's going to kill you.'

We can't have that now, can we? Think we ought to sort him out?'

I say to Baber, 'Whatever for? If she were your sister, you'd want to kill anybody who took her away from you, wouldn't you?'

Not for the first time today, Baber listens to me and says to Macky, 'Of course not.'

On their way into the hall, Baber says to Sita, 'Brother? I thought he was your husband.'

Sita says, 'What gave you that idea?' and smiles with those enormous Bambi eyes and red-apple lips. She doesn't seem particularly upset about the hostility Macky directed at her brother. 'And you can call me Pocahontas if you want to. I don't mind.'

And Baber blushes. Baber never blushes – but Baber blushes.

Only a Pocahontas could look so graceful, squatting in the hallway with one of her long legs thrust straight out to the side for perfect balance. She is talking through the letterbox to a mouthful of teeth glittering with spittle. In more than one language she is telling her brother to go away. In English, at least, she promises to call him later for a lift home.

Baber waits patiently for her to finish, imagining her one day sharing an audition with him in front of a receptive television. Then he opens the door, really wanting to invite her brother in. Instead of thinking himself welcome, the brother steps away and starts to concentrate on unwrapping his car windscreen.

Mrs Stokes comes in instead, scrunching her eyes to squeeze the smoke from her cigarette out of them. Her teeth are chattering more than she normally does herself. What a story she has to tell Minnie, of her hours spent fearfully on her doorstep in the company of 'Some mad, vulgar, Indian man. There were times,' she says, 'I thought I was in a scene from *Coronation Street*.'



Baber gives himself up to an evening of Pocahontas's undivided attention and the opportunity it presents for him to run through at least some of his raconteuring. I get tense early on, when Baber manages to make a funny story out of the day when he

was a very small boy and his parents abandoned him to his mother's newly widowed mother. They then set off on some ill-defined expedition in their psychedelic camper van, never to return.

'The next morning,' Baber says, 'Nan got me up and took me to school. All the teacher said to me was, "You're nice and early this morning, Baber."'

It won't surprise you to know that this is not the first time Baber has told this story. It has, I think, become somewhat apocryphal. Or, more generously, distilled. What Baber is saying, in shorthand, is that nobody but Nan seemed to take much notice of his change in family circumstances. What he never goes on to explain, either in detail or in summary, is that from that day on, I was there with him. I, Beulah, was his mother and father, his brother and sister, his conscience and his confidante. Now Baber is older I tend to concentrate on the conscience role, though sometimes he still needs the company.

Dolores, still munching her way through the apple, comes and sits beside Sita on the floor at Baber's feet and listens along to his anecdotes too. Meanwhile, the other party-comers try their best to ignore the four of us and get on with drinking themselves into oblivion.