Saint Valentine

Nick Tomlinson

Chapter 1

drama

Tuesday morning, like every school-day morning, found Brendan and me under our tree. We were crouching in a clearing beneath the droopy branches, next to a miniature metropolis of toadstools. Someone had hung pink and yellow streamers over some of the branches. Veiled by the tree's straggly fringe, we spied on passers-by, mostly school-goers traipsing towards Denesgrove Secondary.

It was February 8th 1983, twenty years ago.

There was something about looking at girls while concealed that made us feel that we were seeing more than we were supposed to see, although we weren't. The girls were ambulating, not undressing.

'It's Sally Overton,' Brendan whispered. 'She's got breasts, and she knows how to use them.'

'Definitely,' I said. As far as I could tell, though, she wasn't using them at that moment.

'You can almost see them bounce,' he said. The wind was blowing Sally's shirt against her chest, then changing direction and pulling the shirt sideways, then changing again and making the shirt inflate.

Sally and her friends walked past. 'Imagine if they'd seen us here,' I said. 'Sarah Hancock keeps a brick in her bag so she can hit people with it.'

'They might have raped us,' Brendan speculated. There was a game in our school called Rape, played by some of the older girls. It wasn't really a game at all, if truth be told. It involved a group of very self-assured girls cornering a boy and forcibly debagging him. Being raped was allegedly an honour. Brendan and I were not the sort of people girls considered raping, even out of charity, which was fine by me, as it sounded like an ordeal. Brendan, though, felt spurned. 'If I got raped, I'd definitely make sure they didn't get my trousers down until I'd got a good feel of all of their fannies.'

'What if they were holding your arms?'

'I'd bite them on the baps.'

Copyright © 2004 Nick Tomlinson
Published by Black Swan / Transworld

'How much fun would that be?'

'Not much. I'd prod them with my toes.'

Brendan thought that thirteen was not too young to start having sexual entanglements or being debagged. Personally I felt under-age. Sex struck me as the province of adults, like voting, driving or house ownership, which was not to say that I was not interested in it, only that I didn't expect to have first-hand experience of it until I was about twenty. Sexual maturity seemed an awful burden if you weren't the kind of person that girls liked, and I felt I should view my own sexual maturity with scepticism until some girl came along who did like me, which was not something I could see happening soon. This left me with a surfeit of hormonal energy, which I diverted by becoming a romantic.

Brendan clapped his hands together gently. 'Third years. Maybe their skirts will blow up!' I looked at him. 'I mean in the wind,' he clarified. 'You know what we should do? Bring a camera here just in case.'

The row of trees to which our tree belonged flanked a cycle path that went under a couple of bridges and led up to the zebra crossing of a main road. On the other side of this road, another cycle path ran alongside a lake and then disappeared into a housing estate, beyond which was our school, Denesgrove Secondary. The trees along the cycle path were grotesque and entangled with bushes. The tree next to ours had fallen down. When we crouched in our hiding place, the fallen tree lay between us and the cycle path, with our tree's dangly branches tickling the fallen tree's flank. We hid behind this supine trunk, with our tree, which had two trunks and looked like a tuning fork, to our rear.

Now, during the winter, the lack of leaves meant that anybody who looked in our direction would see our faces bobbing above a recumbent tree trunk, hidden only partially by tangled branches and those apparently non-biodegradable yellow and pink streamers. But who looks at trees while walking to school?

We sat watching girls go by. Actually, we sat waiting for two particular girls to go by.

Today they were a little later than usual. For some reason they were jogging, but had to stop often because Gillian kept dropping her bag.

Gillian, whom Brendan loved, was a buxom beauty in the making. She had curly golden hair, not vague gold but bullion gold, the colour of opulence. Her eyes were blue and feline. She had a small nose dashed with freckles and when she frowned it wrinkled like a concertina. Her voice was deeper than you'd expect it to be. Brendan, who usually provided a cattle-market commentary on the girls who walked by, fell silent as she jogged flat-footed towards us. We both fell silent.

The girl running alongside Gillian was named Adele. For a short time I could feel the creaky vast rotation of the earth; the whole of the universe seemed the size of a

Copyright © 2004 Nick Tomlinson
Published by Black Swan / Transworld

pinprick, from which Adele flowed like life-blood. She flowed towards me, and my heart broke as it always did when I saw her, and Gillian dropped her bag again.

Adele and Gillian stopped jogging and started walking. As they passed us Gillian began swinging her hips from side to side in an exaggerated manner, and making her bag do huge loop-the-loops on the end of its long leather strap. She was talking loudly and laughing. Adele walked very straight, like a geisha, only without the subservience. She had nobody to be subservient to. She was as beautiful as it was possible for a girl to be; more beautiful, in fact, because she was also strange-looking. This gave her admirers the feeling that they were in love with something unique, admitting no rival, whereas Gillian's beauty was, all said, generic. I suspected that Adele was genuinely strange as a person, but I couldn't be absolutely sure, as I shared only one of her classes at school, and had never spoken to her.

Adele had pale grey eyes that always looked tired, dark vertical hair, and a mouth that turned downwards at the corners. She looked as though she never slept. When she smiled she looked knowing rather than happy. She was ethereally beautiful and not given to talking, showing emotion, or blinking.

After they had walked past, we stared at them for a while and then tried to summon enough courage to leave our tree. Our plan was to creep out from our grotto one day and follow Adele and Gillian to school, walking close enough so that they could overhear the pithy conversation that we would have scripted in advance. This plan may not sound adventurous; but the idea of being near to Adele and Gillian outside school, with nobody else in the immediate vicinity, seemed excitingly close to courtship. It never occurred to us that if we were to slip out from our hiding place and appear magically behind them, they would wonder where we'd sprung from.

Today we didn't have the nerve to materialize behind them, because we were planning on doing something tremendously daring later that day, and we needed to conserve our bravery. So we crouched behind the trunk for a further minute, then burst gracelessly from the shrubbery and took to the cycle path. Brendan snagged himself on something as we rustled through the branches, and let out a ladylike scream that caused Gillian, in the distance, to turn around. I grabbed Brendan's hand to stop him falling over. Gillian was too far away to recognize us. I hoped she was, anyway. I lifted my school bag in front of my face just in case.

Brendan didn't notice that Gillian had glanced at us, and I didn't tell him. It would have killed him to suspect that his true love had observed us, even from afar, stumbling from a row of trees, covered in streamers and twigs, momentarily holding hands.

I'd loved other girls before Adele, but only from afar. Even in infant school I found girls mesmerizing, and could not understand why other boys my age thought them repugnant. Secret admiration requires no great courage and is risk-free as long as it goes unnoticed, so I had become quite choosy and discerning - it is as easy for a boy to admire a pretty girl as it is to admire one who spits and has lice, so why settle for second best? This kind of discrimination does not serve a plain boy well, though,

Copyright © 2004 Nick Tomlinson
Published by Black Swan / Transworld

when he turns teenage and senses Nature prompting him to do something other than daydream. The world of actual romantic activity seldom welcomes skinny people with unreasonably high standards; it is, all said, a gladiatorial arena and not a pick 'n' mix.

Copyright © 2004 Nick Tomlinson
Published by Black Swan / Transworld