

# Green, Mud, Gold

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Two cousins stand at the foot of a prodigious field.

Neither knows how far it goes because it rises up a slope, falls down the opposite side and disappears. The point they stand at is its lowest step, its shallow end, its bottom rung. To two sides, there is field. To one, there is road. To the last, there is the gable of Grandfather's bungalow, painted sun-glow and pebble-dashed, a fibreglass fawn peeping up from the lawn, a bilberry shrub, a picket gate.

The sky's yet filmed with daylight, even though it's late,  
because it is midsummer.

Both cousins rent rooms in cities now, with flat-pack bedside tables, laptop computers, a rat-king tangle of USB cables, but roomed here first, in the field belt. Ochre and olive plaid backdrops the stage set of their memories, the wings show mud and grass to fit with every scene, the curtains are grey burlap to represent raincloud. Of all fields in the belt, they should know this one: its steps, shallows and rungs, ends and beginnings. This is the one in which all their open-air games took place,

every type of hide and chase,  
every seek.

But Grandfather always told them to stay, to play, on this side of the hill with the village below, where they could be seen through his field-facing window, and both cousins were the kind of little girls who did as they were told.

And now, they are girl-women: twenty-one, twenty-two; one dark, one fair. Their costumes are infinity bras and magic knickers, plumes of polyester hair. They stand drunk. Swaying in rhythm with the crop, tilting at the whim of the warm wind.

Fugitives

from the reception of a family wedding, from a giant tent in Grandfather's garden, three different catering vehicles. They exited during the makeshift disco, only noticing the slur in their voices, the slur in their gestures, when the waiters took their chairs away. They wanted to dance, but not there in front of grandparents, godparents, real parents, no chance, even though they are old enough, even though they've been much drunker, many times, on floors where their families couldn't see.

So they'd decided to dance, to slur, here instead.

Let's go up to up the field, Fair said,

she whispered.

Field has metamorphosed over the years, from mud to beet to spud to meadow, to rape to oats, and then, once men in lab-coats developed extraordinary pesticides which meant that men in mud-doused boots barely needed to rotate their tillage anymore, it went from spring barley to winter wheat, to spring barley to winter wheat, to spring barley to winter wheat.

And how bored Field is now, stitched beneath the hardly varying view, doomed to exist for all time to come and having existed for all gone, though it has not always been a field, of course. Before, it was forest.

Before forest, ice.

Before ice, mainland.

Before mainland, sea.

And now two cousins stand at its flank, in its lee, and don't care about history. They care about eyelash curlers and fruit-flavoured condoms, about the eco-friendly confetti which adhered itself to their bronze-shimmer tan and dissolved, about whether or not people they don't even know think they're pretty.

This day, of the wedding, there was a callow sun at dawn, a shower during the interminable ceremony, a lily-livered rainbow and wet laurel for the photographs. There was a white car, a white dress, a white marquee, a white sky which made it hard to distinguish the car and dress and marquee. To Field, the wedding looked like an aggregation of fancy hats, of frills and feathers and fascinators nodding against the white. Like a triad of bridesmaids in puce and plum and periwinkle, five hundred LEDs a twinkle, a jumble of timber table legs protruding from beneath the white cloths. And suspended above: white wine, white fish, white bread, a champagne sorbet which arrived in a flute capped with a strawberry and was white too.

It was back then and there that Dark and Fair found their names embossed on white rectangles side by side,

and so, allied.

Fair wears a harvest-moon dress, oxblood lipstick and platform pumps with ballerina ribbons in ankle bows. Dark's dress is longer, its fabric printed with exotic flowers: frangipanis, orchids, littlebells. The cousins chose the same dishes on the menu, neglected all the sprigs of rocket and lambs leaf, divided the flesh of their hake pleat by pleat, as if only learning that fish are welded together in this fashion, like onions; as if searching for white-gold pin bones between the folds.

Then the tables were stripped and carried away. The crumbs and crumpled napkins swept up, the chairs stacked up, and everybody got up and started dancing in different styles to the same songs. The old tapped their new shoes and waltzed across the improvised floor, the young jiggled and jumped and bumped against one another, like lunatics in padded cells, groping for a door.

And Dark and Fair, stomachs sloshing with a vile soup of alcohol and hake, of white cake which turned out to be chocolate, found,

the last free, full bottle of sauvignon blanc, and absconded, field-bound.

They stumbled across Grandfather's lawn, hopped over Grandfather's fawn, his shrub, and out on the road, they slowly ascended the incline,

to the farmer's gateway, the brink of belt,

the undulant skyline.

The barley is five foot, the cousins barely taller. Gold, ripe, ready, somehow both soft and sharp, both stirring and steady. The tyre tracks of the farmer's contraptions: tractor, sprayer, spreader, planter, run up and down, over and back, crosshatching Field. The cousins set out along the first they meet, passing junctions as they traipse. The track is perfectly clear, as if it has been prepared for them: pruned, swept and steam-rolled in their honour. No weeds, no errant shoots, just clean dirt, supple such that their heels sink a fraction with each step, such that they stagger ever-so-slightly more than they already staggered across the dance floor, on the firm and flat. From sky level, this patch is scribbled with disordered lanes, but from eye level, Field is a choppy green-gold sea through which they are wading,

the wedding fading,

only the glow of its illuminations remaining visible through the dim, above the rising crop tide. And to its pastured side, as they approach, the grazing stock stop grazing, merge and surge toward the cousins, come as close as they can to the tautly-strung wire, ticking with volts, clucking its electric tongue in reproach, come so close they threaten to cheese-knife themselves, to keep coming in their seared slices.

Neither cousin knows where Field ends; neither cousin knows if Field ends.

So they allow themselves to be led, bearing on toward the horizon until Fair guesses they are half way, breaks off from the path, throws her limbs and skin and dress down on the throng of stalks, and Dark follows.

And swallows,

still hunting, even though it's almost night, dipping the surface with beaks open wide, a clownish kind of flight, a hesitant pitch and glide. The cousins lie still and feel their bodies moving even though they are not moving their bodies: blood percolating, pupils dilating, nerve-endings sparking, until, Fair is up again, this time, her movements surer, swifter.

I'M MAKING A CROP CIRCLE! She cries, and starts to kick down shoots as if she can see a pattern in her mind, as if she's sketching a picture on the island's surface, a gift for passing aircraft: a curlicue, a doily, a spirograph. For a while, Fair pummels the barley and Dark listens to each stalk soft-scream as her cousin buckles it. Lies lifeless as she listens, like a murdered thing, waiting to be buried. And a rift opens between them, Dark so impassive, Fair so intent. And Field sees, and Field feels, and Field recognises this chink, this breach, this rent.

The mud clenches, the felled stalks whimper and the standing ones crackle. The sky obscures, as if a cloud covering the sun, only there is no sun and the sky is all cloud, all covered. And Fair stops, checks, sees that the pattern in her mind has failed in front of her face.

Sees only ravage, ruin, a messily cleared space.

And so down she belly-flops again, reaches for the bottle, slugs, draws her knees up to her chest to hug, and it's only now, and suddenly, that the cousins understand how much more powerful than them the crop is, how much vaster than them the ground is, how every root and shoot and leaf and grain is commanded by Field.

They lie,

bottle in-between, good wedding clothes freckled by some beige-coloured kind of chaff or seed, some leaked filaments of a weed, by a black bug coiled up like a tiny bead, another and another. They'd forgotten about insects; in their rented rooms there are no moths or beetles or flies, only an occasional house spider who tripped, slipped into the sink and trapped, starved, died.

They lie,

together, the cousins, remembering Roy Rover, Simon Says, Bulldog, Tip the Can, and Field eavesdrops and is never consummately silent, because even if the birds and bugs stop, the wind won't; because even if the birds and bugs and wind stop, the clay will continue to murmur, to purr.

They lie,

until, Fair robs the emptying slug, pushes herself up and, realising they have been unlaced, kicks off her ballerina platforms, beats away from Dark and into the dark, shouting:

**YOU'RE IT! START COUNTING!**

But Dark cannot count, she is too drunk, and so, she only watches from the ground the way the barley Fair had levelled does not stay slack but springs back, closes behind her like a trap. Dark can still hear running, shouting, but the sounds shrivel as the seconds lapse, until there's only the sound of Field: wind whipping shoots and purring clay, the burring of forgotten night flies.

And Dark lies,

as Fair left her, limp on the slain and trampled crop, listening to the sounds stop, watching the obscured sky deepen. And even though she knows that deepened sky means caving time, she does not get up. She lies prone, alone; still but doesn't feel still. She feels instead as if there is a field inside her, swishing with her platelets, pin-prickling her tissues. She shuts her eyes and pictures ears growing out through her ears, her spine turning to wood, pictures herself as a girl-woman scarecrow, arms opened wide,

and nailed to two posts in the centre of a great green, mud and gold expanse, crucified.

What did we used to tip here? Dark asks no one, aloud. Never actual cans, not once. Gutter pipes, swing-sets, flower pots, in other places, but she can't remember what it

was here, in Field, where nothing stands up or is fixed down, where there are no landmarks at all, nothing taller than the stalks, nothing not made of plant.

She wants to get up, but thinks she can't,

she tries, trips, retches. Now the birds have been replaced by bats, the gnats by midges. Dark digs her heels into the pliant earth, looks around. But she can see no field-furniture to tear toward, to touch, to tap. No lights in the distance, no lights in the air, no Fair. She can see nothing but fretful vegetation and caliginous universe. How can it be that Field is suddenly so tremendous? Dark tries to think, can't think.

How can the bungalow be so far away? How can the lights of the wedding have gone out all in sync?

She shouts her cousin's name, her voice begins to break, to shatter,

the barley shakes, bats scatter, and Field steals Dark's cry, sculpts it into a squeak, a scoff, a sigh.

And in every limitless direction, there are a billion trillion tiny ears, but no cruel-meaning creatures make their home here on this harmless landmass of perpetual gloom, this island designed by glaciers for the benefit of trees, where the ground is ever hilly, the earth ever unyielding. No snakes in the towering grass, no sharks in the green-gold sea, no wolves in the stalk forest; these ears belong to the barley, and soon, they'll be chopped and stripped, plastic-wrapped and packed.

Dark wrests her feet free, tugs them up as if her shoes are patent leather leeches spat from the soil and suctioned to her soles. Barefoot, she runs, the tyre path smooth and cold, her long, light, bright chiffon snagging, shredding, and the fronds which had caressed, now lacerating, leaving exotic-flower streamers in her wake.

Midsummer. Night. Dark in the dark field,

And, just maybe, a wolf, a shark, a snake.

Running, slipping, tripping, ripping, Dark raises her hands above the surface of the track, to flap for help, and Field sends its rooted shoots reaching up too, growing as she watches, waving back.

How can it be, she asks herself, aloud, that these shoots sewn, rooted, sealed into the mud a billion, trillion times can be chasing me; how Field can go on eternally?

And to the aircraft which do not pass, Field might look like a monstrous piece of toast, a scrubbing brush coated with pollen, a close-shaved animal pelt. From the air, there are no bounds; there is no belt,

every where and thing is Field.

And Dark bellows her cousin's name, again, the same, and hears, this time, a panicked squawk, and wants to believe it came from Fair, but knows it can't be so, and lo, the crop discharges a pheasant, a squabbling emerald-brown ball, startling Dark so that she falls, and spreads her fingers to break the impact, covers her head as if the bird might descend again, to attack. For a moment, commotion, but now, a great lull. Dark's cheek pressed against the path as if she might listen her way to her cousin through its smooth mud arteries, smooth mud nerves and smooth mud veins.

Abruptly, Dark realises, that Fair is just lying down somewhere, along one of these crop lanes,

like she is, only passed out, blackly slumbering. And Field turns its ears down toward fallen Dark, reminding her that they are gold, that gold means ripe, that ripe means a combine harvester,

an artillery of spinning blades sweeping,

a screech for every sundered shoot,

a girl-woman sleeping.

Up Dark leaps, again, sprints, howls.

I should have been a forest, Field thinks. She should be beating her way through bracken, branches thwacking, grappling blind, drunk, from trunk to trunk, pursued by glint-toothed predators, stags and stoats,

weasels and owls;

That would have been more amusing, Field thinks.

On Dark dashes, receiving a thousand barley lashes. But finally, she stops, pushes her body onto the balls of her toes in order to see over the top of the crop. And what Dark sees, way way off, is a black dot skimming the surface. Not a bird, too late. Not a bat, too round and heavy and low. But what can only be a head. A head not wholly skimming but bouncing slightly, not lightly, hesitantly, but solidly, certainly, as if the body beneath the head, the feet beneath the body, are bounding. She is so weary now, her skull pounding, all her slackened muscles tight. Her eyes are filled with

particles of grating gold; she blinks, claws at her sockets, begins to cry as if crying were a practical measure, a way to clear her sight.

But still, she cannot see

Field's steps, shallows and rungs, ends and beginnings, the fence with cows behind it, Grandfather's gable and the wedding below it, the white marquee, her family.

What she can, all she can see, is the crop and the bouncing dot, and so she yells her cousin's name; the word bursts from her like a shot, lodges in the low cloud, sinks into the sky like lead.

And the running head,

changes direction, and only now can Dark discern that it is coming toward her, and only now does she remember that her cousin's polyester plumes are flaxen, that her skin, or rather the liquid powder smoothed across, is toffee, honey, butterscotch; that this day, for the wedding reception, no part of her cousin's complexion is dark like the dot; every part is fair,

that Dark is the cousin who has dark hair.