

YANNI

By Amara George Parker

TW: Domestic Violence

“Our society as presently structured will continue to generate problems for some of its members – like working-class adolescents – and then condemn whatever solution these groups find.” – *Folk Devils and Moral Panics, Stanley Cohen*

Yanni can't go home. 'Course he fucking can't. His dad's given him the belt a dozen times this week and he's threatened to thrash him again if he sees Yanni's face. And though Yanni tells his sister it don't hurt so much no more, he's sure that vicious lick would be enough to piss him off and he wouldn't be able to help himself this time and he'd fight back. And that never ends well.

So Yanni's got nowhere to go. Before lockdown, that wasn't such a problem – he'd go to a mate's house, smoke a blunt and take the edge off, but now? Now the police are sniffin' about and Yanni's mates don't want him 'round and he can't even hang at the park 'cause some fucker will report him, and besides, he don't like the way people shoulder their kids when they see him, as if he might be a danger to a child. Yanni sucks his teeth. *Fuck man*, he thinks, *I wouldn't be no danger to a kid. No fuckin' way.*

Yanni's phone vibrates in time with tinny music and he flips it open to hear his mother's voice limp along the airwaves. He pictures her face as she speaks: wheedling eyes rimmed red, her mouth too wet and round, and one lip thick like a fit-to-burst grape. He isn't sure if he hates her more for letting herself get beat or for pretending it won't happen again. 'Come home, babes. I spoke to him. He says he won't be mad no more. Promise.' Yanni snaps it shut hoping this small violence will be enough to rend the thread between him and the bullshit and stop the dirty worm-belly feeling he's got in his gut, but it's too late. The worms are wriggling. Their edges are sharp.

Yanni's tired. He doesn't want to go home; he just wants to rest. Fuckin' prick dad can't even give him that. There's four of them in those walls just reboundin' and reboundin' – can't help but bump into one another and set off explosions. Ain't no toes he's steppin' on, it's fuckin' landmines, and he's tired. So tired. Those walls, intent on staying their vague shade of piss yellow and cigarette ash grey send violence spinning 'round faster and faster, and even when it ain't his turn he's pinned to his bedroom door, knowing he can't do nothing but can't ignore it either. His palms flat against the unfinished wood of his bedroom door, he stands sentry, listening to every crack of leather and bitten-lip yelp and yellow-grey-wall-stifled hurt. He knows it's the act of standing in the heavy-framed doorway that reassures him he's in motion, that he's doing something, taking action, even as he stands frozen. And he feels ashamed that he allows himself that lie.

Yanni sits in the park because *fuck it* if they arrest him at least he'll be out the house a little longer. Some woman ignores the legs he's spread and the unzipped hoodie he's laid next to him and sets her bag down on the bench. He scowls and hopes she'll frighten and leave but she just smiles and Yanni wants to punch her in her cunt mouth. He watches her from the corner of his eye as she pulls something out of her bag. It's soft and yellow, and its lazy sponge fibres spring apart when she tears it open. Yanni hates her more when the hunger he's been trying to ignore kicks in and gnaws alongside those churning worms. '*Fuck you looking at?*' He leans into the words, letting all the venom he's got in his stomach swell up into the syllables. Now the woman's holding some of the bread out to him like he's a fucking duck or something, and Yanni wants to tell her to fuck off, but he's hungry, and that wins. He doesn't say thank you and she doesn't fuss; she just keeps on tearing and chewing. Yanni finds he doesn't mind this silent stranger. Long as she keeps her mouth shut. As the gnawing in his stomach subsides, she offers Yanni another piece of butter-yellow. He grunts as he takes it.

While he eats, he thinks of his mother and how it wouldn't occur to her to feed him or his sister, and how it would occur to his dad, he'd just choose to spend the money on booze and betting slips instead.

He thinks of the hiatus days that pepper the cycle, where his dad pretends he doesn't hate them and his mum bothers to cover the grey and purple and black that creep over her face, arms and legs across the weeks, like a lava lamp's floating colours. There's more than booze on the table on those days. On those days, Yanni doesn't have to filch money from behind the gauze and fraying black of the underwear in his mother's drawer. On those days, even the jagged maw of the house – the hungry, infinite pit of demands for food and heat and water and shelter – seems satisfied.

Those days are less now everybody's inside. The pattern's deformed. The arc of the cycle has shifted and the bad days have lengthened – now they spill slick shadows over the good ones. Not that they'd been good for a long time, those good days. The good days just make him hate himself deeper when the inevitable leather finally comes around and he's let it take him by surprise. Like some fucking mug.

Her eyes pinned on the horizon, the woman extends her hand, the palm cupped around a not-quite-sphere of lurid green. Yanni deepens the furrow in his brow. He scours the woman's face for pity, but, finding only bland features set in neutral lines, he takes the weight of the apple in his hand. Her mouth stays shut.

As they chomp quietly on apple flesh, Yanni thinks he feels the distance between them – a distance that until now has far exceeded the bench's stretch of crumbling wood and flaking varnish – begin to recede, and he wonders...

She reminds him of a teacher he'd had in Year 10 who'd slip him oranges at breaktime. Ms Epstell. She'd been the first teacher to have asked him why he did it. Why he acted up. She'd seen Yanni pummel the shit out of Jimmy Ranson, trying to get the fiver he owed him. Yanni had nicked the cigarettes from his mum, thinking to earn himself a few quid that he could use for food for his sister. The reward should've outweighed the risk. Only Jimmy hadn't paid, the fucker, and the thought of the beating Yanni'd get once his mum realised – and ratted him out to his dad – was enough to make the anger overwhelm him. He'd lost sight of everything else but Jimmy Fucking Ranson's face and he'd hit and hit and hit until he'd felt a hand on his shoulder. She'd taken Yanni to the closest classroom.

There'd been glass vials and test tubes and thumbnail-thin beakers all around and he'd thought for a moment about what it would feel like to smash the shit out of everything. The satisfaction of the noise, the fragmented carnage. His life, bare and shattered in front of him. And she'd asked him why. Why had he been pummeling the shit out of Jimmy Ranson? The rage had drained from his muscles and, for whatever stupid fucking reason, he'd told her. 'He owed me. And I can't tell you why I needed it, Miss. But I did. He owed me and when he didn't give me it, I lost it.'

She'd nodded and stayed quiet a heartbeat longer than people usually did when Yanni was about to get an earful, and then she told him that from now on he'd be spending Wednesday breaktimes in her form room. 'In the Maths department, Yanni. I expect you there each week. No excuses.'

'Fine, Miss,' was all he'd said.

'Fucking detention, innit,' he'd said when the people he hung around with complained that he kept going AWOL. But he loved it. Just him and her in a room. She'd given him books to read and handwritten maths problems that he finally had the chance to think through. No buzzing thoughts. No threat bustling on the other side of the door. Just oranges and equations. His mind was clear and he liked it, found he had a knack for solving the problems she left on his desk, that he enjoyed the equations she said even the kids in the top class struggled with. Slowly, the walk along the maths corridor to her room became something he looked forward to, something special. When he came in with bruises on his face, he told her he'd got in a fight with the other kids at school. When sores from his back bled through his shirt, he said he'd got caught in a bramble bush. She said nothing, but soon after, moulded carefully around an orange, there'd been a piece of paper. It'd read, Support for women and children, and Yanni had memorised the name of the shelter, practising syllables and explanations with his tongue, then thrown the paper in the bin.

Oranges and equations. They couldn't last. In the last days of Year 10, she'd told him she was leaving. 'Budget cuts.' She'd spread her hands, then balled them into fists. 'I didn't make the team.' She'd set Yanni up with another member of faculty, but within days of the new school year starting, Yanni knew it wasn't going to work out.

The prick kept setting him work that was too easy, and Yanni found his enthusiasm waning. The sessions became tense. This teacher looked at Yanni like he was scum, and it wasn't long before he'd dropped their lessons, citing some bullshit like too much marking, and Yanni slipped back into the mass of bodies and banter and smokes behind the P.E. shed.

And now school's shut and there's nowhere to go.

Yanni thinks about leaving. He thinks about getting a car and shoving his mum and sister into it and driving them all somewhere safe. He's not got a licence, but he's driven his mate's car around the block and up the hill to smoke a joint. Last summer they'd lobbed empty bottles into the thick, absorbent black of the woods, listening to dull thuds and knife-bright cracks of glass shattering in the night. Yeah, he could drive. He could get them somewhere safe. Somewhere he could study, somewhere his sister could learn more than how to be quiet. They could have a chance. *But she'd just go back*, he thinks. *Mum would just go back to that fucking prick and he'd kill her and that'd be the end of it.*

Now the woman sits with her back leant against the bench, her eyes closed. Yanni's never felt more alone and he wants to reach out and tap her on the leg and ask what he should do... if she knows? As though she can hear his thoughts, her lids open. Their eyes catch for a second and Yanni feels a hundred desperate pleas, a lifetime of questions, a thousand threats gurgle upward. And then the shutters clatter down. Miles from home, he feels the yellow-grey walls clammy and cloying close around his throat. He stems the torrent and jerks his head away to glower at something in the distance.

Big globs of rain take their time darkening the exposed wood of the bench, discolouring Yanni's grey sweater with every peppering strike. The woman hesitates, the gravid pause as weighted as the moment before the sky opened, then wraps the leftover bread in its crinkled brown paper and tucks it under Yanni's rain-speckled hoodie.

The stark bright of her umbrella bobs rhythmically as she walks away, a neat figure indifferent to the darkening sky.

Yanni stays and lets the rain saturate his clothes, turning over four-letter words like help and belt amongst the bread and apple and the memory of oranges in his mouth.