**Of Sprites and Spirits**

It was a crater in an old pit heap where mattresses, carpets, fridges, crusted paint tins and other assorted junk had been fly-tipped, joining car parts from Miley’s scrap yard.

Craig and Glen rode the upturned bonnet of a Ford Fiesta, toboggan-like, down a run dipping steeply from the lip of the crater to the bottom. The bonnet scraped over the edge and gathered speed. Halfway down it hit a ridge, bucked, and came down hard. At the bottom, they yelped and howled like mad dogs.

They dragged the bonnet back up. Coal dust and sweat smeared their faces. Glen spat on the black ground. They got the bonnet ready for another run.

‘Get in,’ said Craig.

Habib backed off. He was tired, had been up into the early hours, replaying the video clip over and over again, his blank, twelve-year-old face illuminated in the darkness. He’d heard the voice somewhere in the background, instantly recognisable over the sound of pneumatic drills, angle grinders and sledgehammers pounding and gouging.

‘Come on, chicken,’ Craig taunted.

The bonnet started to slide away from Glen’s grasp, setting stones tumbling down the slope. Struggling to hold on, he yelled, ‘Get the fuck in!’

‘No thanks.’ Habib buried his hands in his pockets. The voice in the video was his older brother, Nasser. He could hear his occasional laughter, determined grunts, and good-humoured complaints of weariness. He could hear others, too, mostly speaking English, but there’d been Urdu, snippets of French, a voice sounding Scandinavian.

Craig helped Glen steady the bonnet and summoned Habib. When he didn’t move, Craig’s eyes narrowed and he clucked like a chicken, ‘Brrack, braack.’

Glen joined in. They climbed on the bonnet and leaned forward to tip its weight over the edge.

‘Your problem,’ said Craig. ‘See you, chicken.’

The bonnet slid away, kicking up dust.

The scrap vehicles in Miley’s yard were stacked behind a fence topped with razor wire, but the bus was on Habib’s side of the fence, an ancient open top double-decker. What was left of the upper deck was buckled and mushy, and woodlice scuttled under its peeling surface. He poked his head through a ragged hole to below where nettles grew up through the rusted chassis and there was a smell of old engine oil.

He held on to the edge of the hole and eased himself through, letting his weight hang and hearing the wood splinter. He kicked out for purchase as the rotten wood broke off in his fingers.

He let go and dropped, landing with a sharp pain. His jeans had ripped below the knee. His finger came away wet-tipped with smeary red. He unbuttoned his jeans and lowered them, slowly, to check the damage.

The wound was about a half-inch long and weeping blood that he dabbed away with a fingertip. He pinched the skin around it and began counting to ten. When he got to eight, voices from outside joined in, ‘nine, ten…’

Habib grabbed his jeans and looked round. Craig and Glen were laughing and banging on the side of the bus. Flakes of rust jumped like fleas.

‘What you doing in there?’ said Craig. ‘Choking the chicken?’

Habib hunkered and held his breath. He didn’t know what Craig meant. He’d seen the men on the allotments wringing chicken necks, or chopping their heads off with an axe, the men laughing at the cartoon spectacle of the birds’ decapitated bodies charging around the yard.

‘We can see you, chicken,’ Glen said. ‘Saw you with your pants down. Little wanker.’

‘Come on out,’ ordered Craig.

Habib didn’t answer.

‘Well, if you won’t come out, we’ll have to come in,’ Craig said.

Craig and Glen closed around him. Habib tried to move away, but Craig dug him in the ribs. ‘Where you going, chicken?’

Glen whacked him across the arse with a stick. He bit his lip, determined not to cry.

‘Make your fucking mind up,’ Glen said. ‘One minute you’re shitting yourself to come out, next you can’t wait to leave.’

‘Strange,’ said Craig, smirking at Glen. ‘Can’t make his mind up, just like his brother.’ He turned to face Habib. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘you want to be friends, don’t you?’

Habib nodded, fighting back tears. Did they know about Nasser? How could they? Even his family didn’t know.

‘See Glen,’ Craig said. ‘He wants to be friends. That okay with you?’

‘Suppose,’ said Glen.

‘Alright then,’ Craig said with a lopsided grin. ‘But first you need to do something to prove yourself, your loyalty, like.’

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‘I’m not doing that,’ Habib protested.

‘So, you don’t want to be our friend then,’ said Craig.

‘He’s a fucking chicken,’ said Glen. ‘Like his brother.’

Glen scythed the nettles with his stick. His face crumpled, and he spat at Habib’s feet.

The insults boiling in his brain, Habib shouted: ‘Nasser’s stronger than you lot put together.’

‘Whatever,’ Glen said. He drilled a finger in a nostril and flicked the content away. ‘That’s not what we’ve heard.’

‘What’ve you heard?’ Habib demanded. Saliva flecked the corners of his mouth.

‘Fuck’s sake, Habib,’ Craig said. ‘Calm down, you’re frothing like you got rabies or something.’

Habib glared at Glen. ‘Why doesn’t he shut his big mouth then?’

There was a long pause before Craig spoke. ‘People are saying stuff about Nasser,’ he said. ‘Take a look if you want.’

Craig handed Habib his mobile. When he’d finished watching the YouTube clip, Habib was relieved. Yeah, it was stupid to think there were no other videos made, but this wasn’t *the* video, the one in which the hooded man was forced to kneel before the camera, the orange of his jumpsuit darkening at the groin. In this one, he could identify Nasser clearly despite the keffiyeh covering his face. Stone slabs carved with intricate friezes crashed to the ground to chants of *Allahu Akbar*. The video ended when rigged explosives detonated, sending a cloud of dust blooming above the destroyed site.

Pretty cool, but totally fucked up,’ Glen said.

‘It’s got nothing to do with Nasser,’ Habib said. ‘He’s visiting Pakistan, meeting his future bride.’

“If you say so,” Craig said. “Got to admit, though, it’s pretty much his double.”

‘But it’s not,’ Habib said. ‘Nasser would never do anything like that!’

‘Suppose those fuckers do look all the same,’ said Glen.

Habib felt relief rather than outrage at Glen’s stupidity.

Craig pursed his lips. ‘The only way to prove what you’re saying’s the truth is to strip and get in them nettles like I told you.’

They waited while Habib turned his back to them. Reluctantly, he removed his T-shirt and jeans. The injury to his leg was no more than a scratch. He pictured Nasser’s scornful face and was desperately ashamed. He stopped at his underpants.

‘All of it,’ ordered Craig.

Habib cupped his genitals in his hands. Cobwebs strung between the nettles were speckled with rust and tiny flies.

‘Go on,’ said Craig.

He flinched when Glen swished his stick behind him, eyes bleary with tears.

‘Diddums,’ Glen said. ‘Soft shite.’

‘Let him do it,’ Craig said.

‘Wait!’ Habib said, trembling and thinking out loud. ‘I’ve got a better idea.’

‘Do it!’ snarled Glen, tapping the stick his palm. ‘I’m bored with all this crap.’

Habib seized his chance. ‘Exactly,’ he said. ‘This *is* boring. That’s the problem. I get stung; we go home. That’s it. Finished. What does that prove? My challenge is way better.’

‘You’re just trying to chicken out again, you little shit!’ Glen sneered. He harked up phlegm and spat it out in disgust.

‘Hold on,’ Craig said. ‘What about this challenge?’

‘I’ll show you, but only if you promise not to tell.’

‘Bullshit,’ said Glen. ‘He’s taking the piss.’

‘Well it’s your look out. It doesn’t bother me, like. You’ll be the one missing out.’ Habib looked at Craig. ‘Both of you, in fact.’

‘Show us,’ said Craig. ‘What is it?’

Habib smiled secretively. ‘A place of magic,” he said, “of sprites and spirits.’

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Glen read aloud from the dirt-greyed sign:

*LODGE HOUSE*

*A home from home for the elderly*

He gaped between the iron bars of the gate. ‘This fucking it? An old gadgee’s home?’

Another sign tied to the gates declared in red capitals, *KEEP OUT!*

‘As if,’ Glen said and swung an aimless boot.

‘How’re we supposed to get in?’ Craig peeled strips of moss from the mortar of a wall too high to scale and crumbled it in his fingers. He peered at the ornate spikes on top of the gates.

Habib’s heart quickened, torn between Nasser’s disapproval and his eagerness to impress Craig and Glen. But what did his brother care now? he asked himself. Hadn’t it stopped being their special place long ago?

‘This way,’ he said finally, and led them to the gap in the hedge.

He slipped through the other side onto the grounds.

‘Sound,’ said Craig, staring at the burned out shell of the house, black and jagged against the sky. ‘Think I heard about this place on the news a while back. Must’ve gone up a treat.’

‘Aye,’ Glen conceded. ‘Ka-fucking-boom!’

Habib pictured the house ablaze, an inferno that took the fire brigade days to put out completely. Still, an acrid smokiness wafted from the gutted remains, and, as he looked at the piles of blackened bricks festooning the charred ground like decayed teeth, earlier memories rose from the ashes, of he and Nasser doing dares. Nasser leading the ascent of a derelict flight of stairs, the vertebrae of a monster, until they stood at the edge of a void.

‘Wait here, Bibs.’ Nasser had stepped nimbly onto the joists. Plasterboard flopped like a broken wing. Habib watched from a platform of a few, remaining floorboards crossing the main beam. When he looked down the distant floors below swam up to meet him.

Nasser crossed the void and waved. Shadows dissected his body. Pigeons fluttered to beams overhead to attend squawking chicks. Bird shit caked the walls like dried yogurt. Habib waved back. ‘Be careful,’ he called as Nasser set out again, each step on a joist making Habib’s stomach lurch.

Then, he recalled the last time he came here with Nasser, after Nasser had turned serious and had no time for childish games. There was nothing more to see than an interior rank as the underside of a log, with hunks of fallen plaster exposing furred brick; imprints of panelling, architraves and radiators ripped from walls; mouldings and cornices chiselled from ceilings, and tiles jimmied from floors. Graffiti covered every wall still standing. Glass and rubble crunched underfoot.

Nasser had complained bitterly about the very idea of an old people’s home. ‘Just imagine Daada Ahmed or Daadi Nazia left here to rot.’

Habib’s nose had wrinkled.

‘Exactly, Bibs!’ Nasser gripped his shoulders, his eyes boring into Habib’s. ‘See what a foul place this is?’

When he’d embarked on one of his religious lectures, Habib had barely paid attention, still visualising his paternal grandparents roiling with maggots in a shadowy corner.

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‘Let’s go.’ Habib said, breaking from his memories. ‘Nothing much to see here now. The best bit’s round the back.’

Wilfully, he led them in the direction of the grotto Nasser had introduced him to all those years ago. *A place of magic, Bibs. Of sprites and spirits.*

The grounds divided into sections by walls covered with brambles and creepers. They walked under archways mottled with lichen, passing empty plinths and toppled statues broken into chunks.

They followed Habib along a brick path, with Craig edging closer to his side. When Craig got close enough, he talked to him in a hushed voice. ‘This’s great, Habib,’ he said. ‘Thanks for showing us.’

To hear his name spoken with generosity for the first time all day was strange and thrilling to Habib. ‘No bother,’ he said, lengthening his stride.

Mossy steps curved out of sight, and trees leant out from rocks. Huge ferns clung to the sides of the grotto. Everything was much the same as Habib remembered but more overgrown.

A tunnel took them under a meagre waterfall. Their restrained voices merged with a faint whiff of urine, and among them at first was *serious* Nasser, cursing the idolatry of the place, but soon he was silenced by happier memories of being here with *fun* Nasser in the early days, in their favourite place of all, and his brother’s daredevilry that he never had the courage to match.

In the dimness, they were able to discern mosaics of faeries, and slender boys with green faces playing pipes. Near the roof, carved stone faces of old men, with sprigs of plants growing from their noses and mouths, glowered down at them.

‘This’s fucking brill,’ said Glen. His voice echoed and they laughed.

Craig slapped Habib on the back and smiled. He smiled back.

They emerged from the tunnel into blinding sunlight, and Habib pointed down. Where they stood the path ended abruptly above a vertiginous drop to a big pond below, its surface covered with green weed and leaves.

‘This’s the place to jump from,’ Habib said, touching the trunk of a tree. A big branch overhung the grotto.

‘Jump,’ said Glen. ‘You’re fucking kidding, aren’t you?’

‘It’s not that high,’ Habib said, grinning. ‘And the water’s deep enough. I’ve done it loads of times.’

‘Like shit you have,’ said Glen.

‘With Nasser,’ Habib explained, calmly. ‘He brought me here when I was little and taught me how to jump.’

‘How deep?’ Craig asked.

‘Deep enough,’ Habib told him.

Craig pondered for a moment, looking down all the time.

‘You’ll have to go first,’ he said. ‘To show us, like.’

Habib looked at Craig, then Glen, and as they stared back, a wood pigeon broke cover above them with a loud clatter.

‘Shit!’ said Glen, and they all burst into jittery laughter.

‘I know,’ Habib said. ‘Let’s all do it together.’

Craig and Glen exchanged a quick glance.

‘Alright,’ said Craig and puffed out his cheeks.

Habib edged along the branch on his backside. Fragments of bark crumbled and showered down, hissing into the leaves. He stopped when he was directly above the pond. The air was greenish and soupy, midges danced in a patch of sunlight at his feet. Craig followed, then Glen. Their faces were serious. Glen licked his lips and spat. The discharge disappeared into the foliage below.

When they were all in position, they sat completely still. Nobody spoke. ‘Ready,’ Habib said after a long while. ‘On the count of three.’

Craig nodded. Glen did nothing, just stared down at the pond, which appeared further away each time Habib looked.

Habib began, ‘One, two…’

On three, nobody had moved.

‘Jesus, man!’ said Glen. ‘This’s fucking scary. Let’s go back.’

He started to shuffle back along the branch, but Craig grabbed his arm. ‘Fuck this,’ Craig said, staring wildly at him. ‘We’re gonna do it, man. Just give us a minute.’

Habib could hear Craig’s breathing, heavy and shaky. There was a moustache of sweat on Craig’s upper lip. Craig looked at each of them. His fingers still gripping Glen’s shirt like the talons of a hawk. ‘I’ll give the countdown this time,’ he said. ‘I’ll start from ten, okay.’ Habib nodded, and so did Glen, but Habib could see the fear in his eyes.

Craig began the countdown.

When he got to one, Glen tried to pull away from Craig’s clinging hand, but Craig didn’t let go. He slid from the branch and plunged down, dragging Glen with him.

They fell like a twirling baton and hit the water with a loud smack. The water opened up, and Habib saw its dark, treacly innards beneath the green surface. He sat on the branch, waiting.

But they didn’t come up.

He continued to wait, hoping somehow for the *fun* Nasser to emerge from the water; his nonchalant hand brushing wet hair from his eyes, his wide, triumphant smile beaming up at him.

He waited as he did after Nasser disappeared, and, in his anger and loneliness, plumes of thick brown smoke from the blazing house drifted overhead, plunging the grotto into premature dusk.

He waited.

Waited silently, patiently, until the water gradually settled and the parted curtains of weeds and leaves drew back together.