

Glasshopper

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glasshopper / 'glɑ:ʃɒpə:r / *noun*: **1** a person or thing that shifts position or character without warning. **2** a fleeting, translucent object. **3** a person who balances precariously between sobriety and intoxication.

Prologue

There, framed against the steep backdrop of rock and sky, I see them, my two boys, bare-chested and brown as berries. The kestrel hovers between them, a wing tip on either shoulder. My foot is pressed hard against the floor of the car, and the speed is exhilarating. I forge towards them, a great pike, coursing through this ocean of blue sky. Jake sees me, cocking his head to one side, trying to work it out with his strange eyes.

“Does he see you too?” I ask the girl, turning to look into her deep face. “Does he see you?”

She shrugs, unconcerned, and as I tumble towards them, spitting grit and dust off the narrow mountain path, I smile at Jake, sending my heart out to him, longing for him to understand. The kestrel drops from view and the two boys part, making way for me to pass. Jake nods, a slight tip of his head, and when the car tyres leave the road, I’m really flying.

Memories flood through me, amorphous as March starlings, an ever moving cloud of voices, deafening in their clarity and number . . .

Part One

Jake, November 1984

I love November. I love the frosty grass that pokes up between the paving slabs, and the smoke that puffs out of your nostrils like dragon's breath. I love the ready-made ice rink that freezes underneath the broken guttering in the school playground. And I love the salt 'n' vinegar heat inside a noisy pub, when everyone outside is walking about under hats and gloves with dripping red noses.

This one Saturday afternoon, Dad and me are down the Royal Oak, getting ready to watch the match. Dad tells Eric the Landlord that I'm fourteen, so I can come into the bar so long as I only have Coke. Not that I'd want what they all drink.

Dad shouts over, "Fancy a bag of nuts, Jakey?" and I give him the thumbs up from the corner seat we've bagged. It's great today because it's just me and Dad. Andy's on some boring Scout trip, and he won't be back till teatime. And Matthew, well he just sort of disappeared a few weeks back. One morning I got out of bed, and went into Matt's

room to wake him up with this fart I'd got brewing. It kills him every time. Anyway, this one morning, I go into his room, and he's not there. His bed was empty. So were his drawers. He'd taken all his clothes and records, so I knew he wasn't planning on coming back anytime soon. Even his aftershave had gone. When I went in to tell Mum, she said, "He'll be back when he's hungry," and she rolled over and went back to sleep. But he didn't come back. Dad says he's old enough to leave home if he wants to, now he's seventeen. But I know that Dad wishes he knew where Matt was. The thing is, he couldn't stand being around Mum any more, and Dad's still in his bed-sit, so he couldn't have him there. It's not ideal, Dad says, but what can you do? The worst thing is, Matthew had only just got on to this Youth Training thing which was going to teach him bricklaying. He was gonna make a fortune, he said. I wish he'd phone or something. I could ask him if they've got YTS at his new place.

"There you go, Jake lad." Dad puts the drinks down on the round table, and settles into his seat. "We should get a good view from here, son. Here, 'ave you seen the new TV Eric's got up on the bar? It's the business – teletext, eighteen-inch screen, remote control – the works. Reckon I should save for one of them, don't you, lad? Trinitron."

It's a really nice telly.

"So, what's new, Jakey? How's it going at school? You still in the footie team?"

That's one of the things I like about Dad. All his questions are dead easy, and we never run out of things to say.

"Yeah, it's all cool. Because we're in the second year,

we're doing Classical Studies, and it's brilliant. We're learning about Odysseus. He has quests, and he has to kill monsters and cross oceans just to get back home. There's a cyclops and sea monsters and loads of others. It's brilliant – you'd love it, Dad. I think it's my best lesson now. Miss Terry's giving us Greek names as she gets to know us. Simon Tomms is Poseidon, Emma Sullivan is Artemis. She's still thinking about mine."

"Your mum got me to read the *Odyssey* when we were courting. And the *Iliad*." He takes a sip of his beer and smacks his lips loudly. "You'd like *Jason and the Argonauts*, son. Now, that's a good film. There's this one bit, when the Argonauts run into seven skeletons and they rise up from the earth, wielding swords and marching like soldiers of the dead. I tell you, that was one of the greatest achievements of twentieth-century filmmaking, Jake. And it was bloody creepy too. That's a film to stand the test of time." He takes another swig from his beer, wiping the froth from his top lip with the back of his hand as he looks around the pub.

"And Mrs Jenkins chose my bonfire night picture for the corridor display this week. She said that it's 'highly original'." I do her high-pitched voice to make Dad laugh. "It'll be stuck up in the corridor, so everyone will get to see it when they come for parents' evening."

"Parents' evening," Dad says, dabbing his finger in the dew around his glass. "Is your mum going?"

"She says yes. I mean she signed the slip saying she would. And I gave it back to Mr Thomas."

"When is it, son?"

"Sometime at the end of the month," I answer. I know what he's getting at.

“Well, if there are any problems, you give me a ring. Here’s 10p for the phone box, in case you need to phone from school. Stick it in your pocket. You can get me at the workshop. Alright, son?”

I smile at him, sucking up my Coke through two straws. It feels different drinking Coke out of two straws instead of one. If I had to choose, I think I’d go for one straw. It’s less gassy. I wonder what Odysseus would choose, one or two. Mind you, Coke wasn’t even invented back then.

“Dad, I don’t s’pose you know what Mum’s done with our library cards, do you? It’s just they won’t let me take out—”

“Stu!” My dad shouts across the crowded pub. Stu’s this new mate of Dad’s, and he’s come to watch the match too. Sometimes, when he comes to the pub, he brings his son with him, Malcolm. Malcolm’s the same age as me, and he’s mostly OK, but sometimes a bit of an idiot. Once I saw him trip up this little kid in the pub garden, on purpose, just for a laugh. Then this other time we saw some woman struggling with a pram in the paper shop, and he helped her lift it over the step. Dad reckons Malcolm’s a bit of an oddball. I think Malcolm’s OK.

“Alright, Bill mate!” Stu bundles over with their drinks, grinning at Dad, unwrapping his scarf and hat. “Glad to see you could make it. This should be a good ’un, eh? Room for two more? Budge up, Jakey boy.”

Dad’s pleased to see Stu. “Just in time for kick-off, mate. Good timing.”

Malcolm’s cheeks look all shiny and red with the cold. Like apples. We nod at each other, and then Eric whacks up the volume, and shouts, “Alright lads!” and everyone

turns to the TV as the players run on the pitch and take position. Stu lights up a cigarette and squashes further into the seat so I have to budge up to get out of his smoke.

“Should be a good match,” he says knowingly, leaning on to his knees like an excited kid.

Dad agrees and helps himself to one of Stu’s fags. “Just the one,” he says to me with a nudge.

As it turns out, the match is a really boring one, and by half time it’s still nil-nil. In between, Dad and Stu give us each 30p and let us go off to get some sweets from the newsagents. We leave them in the pub getting another round in.

On the way back from the shops, Malcolm’s been telling me about the BMX he reckons he’s getting for his birthday next week. They’re dead expensive, and I ask him how his dad can afford it. He squats down next to a drain in the road and drops his lolly stick through the gaps, before carrying on along the path.

“It’s cos him and my mum are divorced. Cos I live with Mum and Phil. So Dad always tries really hard to get me a better present than them. Then they say stuff like, who does he think he is, flash git, and then they get me something great too. It’s brilliant. Win-win.”

Sometimes I don’t get Malcolm, but he’s got a point. It does sound quite good.

“Is Phil loaded then?” I ask.

“Nah. But they get the money from somewhere. That’s what counts.”

Malcolm looks like a spoilt kid. He’s too big, and too chubby, and his black hair is a bit square. But he talks like he thinks he’s cool. He shoves his hands in his pockets and pulls out a liquorice shoelace, shovelling it all in at once.

“What about your lot?” he asks, an end of shoelace poking out the corner of his mouth. “Do you get good stuff off them? I mean, they’ve split up, haven’t they?”

We reach the phone box on the corner of Park Road.

“You ever played Mrs McSporran, Malc?” I ask him, heaving open the chipped red door, releasing the stench of old piss and cigarette burns. Malcolm’s frowning at me like I’m a right prat. “Come on,” I urge him, as he stands outside the glass, chewing. Half-heartedly he comes inside, which is a bit of a squeeze with his chubby belly.

“It’ll be a laugh,” I say. “Watch the master at work.”

I dial 100. “Reverse call please,” I tell the operator. I give her a made up number and name – “Yes, Albert” – and we wait for the connection. Malcolm keeps looking around, to see if anyone’s coming. He looks really nervous.

“Hulllooo!” I shout when the operator puts me through. “Hulllooo? Is that wee Ethel McSporran?”

Malcolm’s eyes are like saucers, and his mouth has dropped open like a cartoon.

“Ach, Ethel! D’ye need any haggis, Ethel?” I hoot, as the woman on the other end tries to explain that I’ve got the wrong number.

“Ooh Ethel, pipe down will ye, wee lassie! Ye dinne wan’ iny haggis? Hoo about some bagpipes?”

Malcolm has tears welling up in his eyes.

“Eh? Oor hoo about a kilt?” This one is so high-pitched that I crack up too, and just manage a final “tatty-bye” before hanging up.

Malc is thumping his fists on the glass, choking on his Hubba Bubba. “You’re nuts, mate—” he splutters, still chuckling, his shiny cheeks redder than ever.

I offer him the receiver, “Wanna go?” but he shakes his head, laughing, pushing out of the phone box backwards. As we carry on back towards the Royal Oak, we see an old dear sat at the bus stop on the other side of the road. She looks quite sweet, with a big shopping bag on the floor by her little brown shoes, and she seems to be smiling at everything. I notice the bag’s made of a kind of plastic tartan material. Malc sees it too, because he snorts and shoves me.

She’s a little way off, and I come to a stop facing her over the road, hands on my hips, legs wide. In my deepest Scottish bellow I shout over to her, “Hulllooo deary! D’ye wanna haggis?”

The little old lady tips her head to one side, like she’s trying to hear better.

Malc tugs at my sleeve, and screeches in a rubbish accent, “Oor perhaps a hairy sporran!” and we tear off down the street before she has a chance to get a good look at us.

An old man with a poofy little sausage dog angrily waves his newspaper at us as we run past. “Bloody hooligans!” he shouts, like a character from Benny Hill. I smirk at him, running backwards so he can see I’m not scared of him. His dog cocks his leg and pisses against the litter bin, and the steam rises like smoke as it trickles down the pavement and off the kerb.

When we get a safe distance away we stop, hands on our knees, catching our breath between sobbing laughter. A gob-stopper slips out of my mouth on to the toe of my plimsoll, before rolling along the pavement and coming to a stop by Malcolm’s foot. We look up at each other, and now we’re almost screaming, holding our bellies and

gasping like we've got asthma.

"Was she Scottish then?" Malcolm asks as we get a grip of ourselves, "—the woman on the phone?"

I shake my head.

"Then what's with all the Scotch stuff?"

"Dunno, it's just kind of funny," I answer. "Shit! I forgot the oatcakes! You should always ask if they want any oatcakes!"

As we get closer to the pub, we run out of things to say for a bit.

"Malc, do you do Classics at your school?"

Malcolm wrinkles up his nose, and snorts, "Yeah. Why?" like he can't believe I just asked it.

"Oh, nothing really. Wanna jaw-breaker?" I say, offering him the bag, and then we turn the corner, across the road from the pub, and Malcolm nudges me, grinning.

"Fuckin' 'ell mate – look at the state of that!"

And there's this woman, swaying around outside the door of the pub, arguing with Eric the Landlord. She looks like she's just crawled off a park bench, wearing a summer dress and slippers. She must be freezing. Eric is shaking his head, sorry love, no chance; trying to get rid of her. There's a match on, they don't need this kind of bother.

Malcolm's laughing; he doesn't know it's my mum. I try to act normal, pull a face, rummage in my sweet bag.

"Yeah, fuckin' 'ell," I reply. My head's throbbing. "Malc, mate – I need a waz. You go on in – tell Dad I'll be there in a minute." And I pretend to head off towards the pub's outside loo.

Malcolm nods, stuffing in more sweets, looking the

drunk woman up and down as he passes her in the doorway. Eric the Landlord spots me, shakes his head as if to say, don't worry about it, Jakey. For a moment, I'm stuck to the spot. I just stand and stare at the back of her head. She's like a gorgon, and I've turned to stone.

Quietly, I walk over and slip my hand into hers, and lead her away from the pub.

"I'll make you a nice cuppa, Mum. I think we've got some logs out the back. It's cold enough to make a fire, I reckon."

Mum shuffles along, shivering silently beside me, till we reach the house. We get inside and she wraps her arms around me and sobs against my shoulder.

"You know I love you, Jakey. Never, ever forget that, darling. I love you."