**The Museum of Childhood**

2,187 words

We were murdering time in the corner of the park when we got reek of the news.

On the other side of the fence the Museum of Childhood rose up, tall and ivy-riddled, casting a shadow that protected us from the worst of the sun’s assault. But that didn’t matter now – nothing did – because apparently a plane had been shot out of the sky.

The summer was down to the dregs of itself, the grass parched, the rubbish bins overwhelmed and spewing. East London, lying prone.

*And* *eggs,* Stevo said. *We’ll need eggs.*

We looked at him, all six members of our man-boy cult, hotchpotched together by boredom and BMXes.

*For the Muzzies*, he said, running his hand over his skull. *Must be a terrorist attack – our job to make them pay.*

I frowned at the logic and the sun, trying to see how we could possibly have a job in any of this.

Only Stevo read my confusion wrong. *It’s alright, Aziz,* he reassured, full-swagger towards the bike pile. *You don’t count, remember? You’re one of us, bruv.*

We convoyed our way down the Cambridge Heath Road, all wheelies and backers and fat rubber tyres. We turned right onto Whitechapel Market, breaths held past the fetid fish stall wafts – *tell your old dear to close her legs! –* until finally we reached our destination.

The gold dome was massive; two short towers either side of the entrance and a taller one a good head above; half moons stuck on top like fingernails chewed off. I wondered what the place looked like inside. I imagined it a bit like our church, the something of the Assumption we attended every Sunday, my dad, my sister, myself and my mum. I always thought if we sat in that order in the pew our faces would make a perfect spectrum, pale white down to brown.

Stevo doled out the eggs he had nicked from the Co-op, the shells the colour of skins. When the order came we lobbed our grenades, three of them landing on the hijab of a passing girl. We pedalled home so quickly I lost my breath.

Outside my house the rubbish bags had been torn open, slithers of fat attended to by a gorge of flies. I gulped water from the tap.

*Jesus, you scared me!* My sister came home.

*Aziz, go clean those bins.* Followed by my mother. *The foxes have been at them again.*

*I told you,* I objected. *It’s the squirrels.*

*Those cuties? Don’t be silly. Now go!*

Three times I gagged at the stench. The bloody squirrels. But for some reason I couldn’t stop thinking about that girl; about how she had met my eye without a blink as the yolks baptised her head. And I wondered if we should all walk around with our necks craned up from now on, just in case anything else dropped out of the sky.

Apparently it had been an Air Malaysia flight – their second disaster in a row.

Apparently the girl hadn’t seen me.

*Five white boys*, she told the Bethnal Green Police. *One much taller than the rest. I think I’ve seen them hanging in the park.*

More than anything I was just surprised I hadn’t noticed her before.

The others weren’t allowed out again for a full week.

*My parents went proper mad.*

*Mine too.*

Stevo though, didn’t say a thing. Even when I offered an apology, wide-eyed with my guilt. People had always commented on my eyes, alright – teachers, women in the parish. They were blue like my dad’s but the lashes fat and black like my mum’s, which didn’t really go.

*Whatevs.* Stevo said, eventually. *Don’t worry about it, bruv.*

But I couldn’t help it, I did.

The old routine lazed back into us, that scut of shade the centre of our summer universe. Behind the fence, parents rammed buggies up the Museum ramp. Out on the footpath, more bins had been gouged open, the guts spilled out like war.

*Bloody squirrels*, I told the boys.

But they only laughed.

*Come look at this!*

We hurried to where Chaz was leaning over a particularly eclectic pile of detritus. The condom lay curled in a question mark on the ground, the tip of it fat and full.

*Is it yours, Chaz bruv?* Stevo teased, the only one amongst us who claimed to have used one himself.

The awkward laughs came in unison; a contagion of blush.

*And I wonder,* Stevo added then, his bald head catching the light. *What Muzzie muff looks like.*

This time, our laughter took a moment longer to come.

*Heard it smells different too*.

Still I shook my shoulders, but no sound accompanied it anymore.

*Like… like curry?* Chaz suggested, high-pitched with the risk.

Stevo hurled him a big man-laugh in reward. The other boys were jealous, playing catch-up with theirs.

Next a stick was produced. *Well this chap certainly had his fun,* Stevo whistled as he scooped. The sunlight turned cloudy passing through it. *I’ve heard them Muzzies are right filthy. Wouldn’t you say so, Aziz?*

It only took a single cock of his wrist. I heard it slick to my skin before I felt it, cling-film wet.

The boys erupted, hotboxing the air with their elation, while I ran the other way, retching, dry coughs that spasmed my body out of the park past the open mouth of the church.

When I made it home my face was drenched.

*Baby what’s wrong? What happened?*

But I couldn’t look at my mother, so I pushed up to my bedroom where I shoved my fat eyes deep beneath the pillow.

That night I sat in the tub until the water went cold, the puddle of it thick and cloudy and brown.

I didn’t go back to the park for the rest of the summer. I wandered the house, listening to the radio talk about that plane and that sky.

They said it had been a bunch of rebels. Pro-Russia. Nothing to do with the Muslims at all so how did that work? But when I tried to ask my dad he wasn’t interested, too busy with other news and other points to prove. Like Scottish independence – *about bloody time* – even though hadn’t he been the one to leave Glasgow behind? To settle down with his first generation wife and his half-and-half kids and his church of the Assumption?

I stared out the window at the summer going off. On every wall, every tree, the squirrels ran, fidgeting the view until it made me so dizzy I had to look away.

By the time September came the heat had lost its bother. I met the boys in the corridor. We shrugged hellos, all of us matching in uniform again. Stevo’s hair was growing back. Some of the other lads had nearly caught him up in height.

A week in, Chaz made a joke about a smell in the changing rooms, but almost nobody heard. I nicked some of my sister’s deodorant. Boredom seeped over us like gum into grain.

We played football at lunch and called rudey names at the girls. Stevo told us about a new porno he had bought. On the second Friday I helped to set up a goal so when I got back to my desk I was happy, lifting the lid to take out my Geography book.

The stench was so strong I felt like I had eaten it, the brown lump the size of a fist.

*Holy shit!*

The class erupted, a mutiny of gags; of shoving backwards like I was contagious or worse, had a gun to shoot them all.

*Children!* Mrs. Heaney called, but even she had to swallow her sleeve and flee.

The janitor didn’t show for twenty minutes, glaring like I must have squatted over and done the thing myself.

The principal asked if I had any idea who might have committed such an attack. I thought of Chaz and Stevo; of that girl with the hijab and the unblinked eyes.

*Five white boys.*

*No Sir,* I said. *No I don’t.*

When I got home my sister was crushing a Digestive on the kitchen ledge and talking baby talk to a squirrel.

*Don’t feed them,* I said, standing in the doorway, my hands balled into knots.

*Alright, pooey Louis!*

*I said don’t feed them, they’re vermin.*

*Heard you had a bit of a shitty-*

*I SAID DON’T BLOODY FEED THEM!*

I slammed my bedroom door the way I’d heard teenagers do. I paced like a thing pent up. That night my father tried to coax me down for dinner, the smell of shukto rising up, but after ten minutes the worst of the fight fell out of him.

After that, I spent my lunchtimes in the library. Then at weekends, I discovered the Museum of Childhood had free computers, so I used the Internet in there too.

It was almost lightless inside; a coffee shop queue and some finger-smeared cabinets lined up all around. Victorian yoyos. Jacks-in-Boxes. Things the world had grown out of yonks ago.

I sat for hours, skulking through the websites. I read about the Scots standing up for themselves; about the Ukrainians gunning down a plane full of strangers that had nothing to do with them. And I read about other things too, the research building like when you pedal a hill and climb and climb even though your t-shirt’s soppy but it’s OK because it doesn’t smell bad until it dries, and then you can change.

On my way home, the bins were still under assault.

*Aziz*, *clean it up.*

*No.*

*Aziz, I asked-*

*I said no!*

*Aziz, what’s gotten into you?* My mother put her hands on me, as if to stop me falling over. *Aziz I’m worried,* she said. *You… you spend so much time in your room.* She stared down at my fingers. Three of them wore plasters now, skin-coloured for a different kind of skin. *I keep hearing… noises.*

It was the way she looked at me then that made me think of the condom; of Stevo’s dirty magazine. And for the first time in forever I laughed, big silly boy laughs. They only lasted a couple of moments but they tasted good.

Another week later the class filed in from the yard. I sat down at my desk and took out my exercise book. The History of the Soviet Union. The Rise and the Fall.

I closed the lid and opened to the next chapter.

The scream was louder than I had expected. As shrill as a baby, or a fox. It was hard to get a clear view Stevo was flailing so much, but I could tell the squirrel’s claws had got in deep, a slash of blood on the tip of its tail like poster paint across a brush.

I rubbed my thumbs over my plasters. I knew its teeth were vicious too. Two bites when I caught it and then another during training, prodding a stick every night into the shoebox I kept duct-taped beneath my bed.

It needed to be trapped for ten days before it went fully feral, the forums said. Some were for racing them; some for setting them off against one another, placing bets until one was decimated to bits. I spent hours scrolling through pictures of the bushy tails hanging like medals from the fat men’s necks.

At night I could hear it under me, scrabbling the cardboard, though mostly the noise was lost to the television downstairs as it murmured more wars, more causes, more blood.

Here in the classroom, Stevo was drenched – a gash across his eyelid where he had tried to rip the thing off, clinging for dear death. *You bloody Muzzie!* he cried over the other kids’ hysteria. *You bloody terrorist Muzzie!* Though I wasn’t sure if anyone except me even heard.

I walked home from school via the park. The Museum was closed for its day off. A family took pictures outside the church, a baby drowning in a Christening frock. I gave a half-wave but I don’t think they saw.

When I finally made it back, I could let my smile form. I looked around, wondering where the alcohol was kept; wondering how I had never noticed.

*Aziz?*

In the living room though, my father lay slumped on the couch.

*Dad?* I said. *What are you doing-*

*It’s the Scots…* he said. *They voted No. To Independence.*

I didn’t move. *Oh*, I said. *I’m sorry.*

*So am I, son. So am I.*

The silence took back over. I heard another noise.

*Or maybe it just wasn’t worth it.* It sounded slow and mechanical. *Always better not do something you’ll regret, eh?*

The microwave ping came like a bullet.

*Last night’s daal.* He rose. *There’s plenty if you want some? Growing boy and all that.*

But when the smell reached me down the hallway the nausea exploded, a violence up from my stomach up the stairs down the crack of the toilet bowl, my face reflected back and then lost in the spray, the shame-yellow yolk-yellow spew.