

THE BOY AND THE BADGER

“Never say much do yer,” Terry groaned.

Alby didn’t reply.

“O.K - fine by me.”

He allowed the silence grow to prove it was fine by him, then poked the fire, releasing sparks from the end of his stick that swam off through the dark and disappeared into the night.

“Pass us some wood will yer,” Terry said. “I only said you could come cos Janice kept on at me”.

Terry put his hands close to the flames and washed them in the heat and, jittery shadows crossed his face then spilled up the earth bank. It was completely quiet apart from the crackle and hiss of the fire, the wind and his desperate efforts to try to think of one more thing to say. Terry drunk his beer, crumpled up his can and threw it on the fire then watched as it made strange colours as it burned.

“Ugly looking sod aren’t you?”

Alby glared back at him.

“Good – it’s alive,” Terry said.”

“I’m only here cos my mum said” Alby groaned then turned back to stare at the fire.

“Snap.”

Janice had asked him to take the boy, she’d said he was in need of male influence and, immediately, she’d thought of him. “It’ll be good” she said, “perfect.”

“I hardly see him,” he said.

“Dad would have done it,” she said.

“Well I’m not dad.”

“Only this once” she said, “Please do this - please,” holding up her hands in prayer.

Alby walked out of the room at this point.

Alby barely said a word on their way through the fens in his van, and then refused to help with the gear and the tent. He didn't even have boots or wellies but, instead, white Nikes that soon turned black in the mud.

“He doesn't seem to like the boys at school,” Janice said - “he needs male influence. Someone whose kind like you.”

“Except I'm not kind.”

“Nonsense,” she said.

“Fishing's not your thing?” Terry asked.

“Never done it,” the boy said.

“Never with your dad?”

“No”

“You don't see much of him do you?”

Alby didn't reply.

“Just give it a chance,” Terry said, “Anyway what *do* you like?”

“Dunno.”

“Football?”

“No.”

“Music?”

“No.”

“Everyone likes music”.

Alby looked at the ground.

“Computer games?”....

“Some.”

“O.K. what one's the best?”

“Fortnite.”

O.K. I’ve heard of that one.”

After Janice asked him to take the boy, he replied that he’d think about it but thinking about it was much the same as yes with her.

“Remember dad’s trips,” she’d said

“Yes.”

“Another sport then?” Terry asked to be met by a shake of the head.

It didn’t take long for Terry to realise that talk of sport had lost him the minuscule progress won with Fortnite.

“This evening will be crap if you don’t speak up,” Terry snapped.

“I didn’t want to come,” Alby replied.

“I didn’t want you to come,” Terry said, “trouble is you’re here now”

“Anyway, have it your way,” he said. “If you don’t want to talk, that’s fine by me.”

Terry needed this like a hole in the head. The foreman loved to pick on someone at the depot and, this week, it was his turn. O.K. he’d broken the gasket but what else can you do when it’s made of rust – unless you get it moving it’s a waste of space and to move the thing he had to use some force. Janice had told him the trip would be good for both of them, just like their fishing trips with dad.

“Everything all right at home,” Terry asked, “with yer mum?”

“Yes”

“Nothing’s changed then?”

Terry could see the boy’s face had turned from bored to tense.

“What’s yer mum up to now?”

“Don’t know,” the boy cried.

“Nothing new then?”

“Don’t know.”

“So yer mum’s not with some new bloke.”

“Don’t know.”

“She is - isn’t she - the sly bitch!”

“I HATE IT HERE,” Alby shouted, “AND I HATE YOU, AND I WANT TO GO HOME.”

“Everything makes sense now,” Terry said.

“I CAN’T STAND IT HERE,” the boy shouted, then he got up and walked off angrily into the dark.

“COME BACK,” Terry yelled. “You can’t see a thing out there.”

“I WANT TO GO HOME.”

“COME BACK,” he shouted as the boy rushed off through the dark. “YOU’LL GET LOST.”

Terry had forgotten that a drain lay on the way to the van but he was soon reminded by a loud splash and the boy’s cry. He quickly ran off to find his nephew half way up the side of the bank, struggling to climb out, wet and frightened.

Terry grabbed hold of the boy’s coat and pulled him up.

“I HATE YOU,” the boy cried.

“Better come back then,” Terry said, “I’m gonna get you warm,” and they returned to the fire.

“Better change into your spare clothes,” Terry said, “except you don’t have any spare clothes do you?”

“No” the boy said.

“Despite what I said to yer mum.”

“No, “ Alby replied, so shocked and cold, his breath came out in bursts.

“Better use my spare clothes then,” Terry said. He rummaged through his bag to unearth some old jeans. “There’ll be ten times too big for you but they’re dry at least”.

Alby looked down at the jeans in disgust then turned his back and changed into them.

"Isn't going too well is it?" Terry groaned then threw more wood on the fire. "Better come close and try to get warmsorry - all right - I shouldn't have asked about yer mum!"

He didn't even try to smile at the boy since there was no point.

"O.K. Even if you can't talk, you can eat," he said and found a can of sausages and beans, opened the can and laid it on the fire and gave one to Alby to do the same. "Deeper in the flames - that's it - it won't take long. And toasted bread on the end of a stick is good. A little bit of cheese and it's perfect - I suppose yer mum made you pack up food to bring with you?" but Alby shook his head and wrapped his arms round his chest but was still shivering.

"Don't look at me that way," Terry said, "I didn't make you fall in the drain - did I?"

Alby looked at the ground as if he could not bear to look back at him for one second.

"Anyway, get this round yer," Terry said, extracting his sleeping bag from an ancient kit bag to hand it to the boy. "Better not tell your mum," he said, "she'll imagine this was my fault."

"O.K.," Alby croaked, trying to stay stone faced but a tear soon rose in the corner of his eye. Slowly, it ran down his cheek and made lines in the dirt and further tears flowed and, soon, all the them joined up and grew and were inconsolable.

"What's wrong boy," Terry asked?

"I hate you," the boy said.

"Nonsense," Terry said, "you don't know me so how can you hate me."

"I still hate you?"

Terry could not think of one thing to say that might help the boy so said, "have another plate of beans."

“No?”

“Biscuits then?”

“O.K”

Alby took two fig rolls then turned to look at the ground once more as if he'd suddenly grown fond of dirt.

“Sometimes your mum came down here,” Terry said. “Right here. Yer grandad took the two of us when we were your age. I suppose you can't remember him can you?”

Alby shook his head.

“It's probably hard for you to see this now but those were good times with grandad, yer mum and me.”

“She told me,” Alby said.

“Did she!”

“Before we came.”

“What else did she say?”

“Nothing.”

“Anyway - that's why I said yes, ” Terry said, “yer mum said you were sure to enjoy it once you got here, except I guess she got that one wrong?”

Alby smiled.

“Does she ever talk about yer grandad?” he asked - at least the boy was talking now.

“Sometimes”.

“Sometimes?”

“It doesn't make sense what she said.”

“Sounds like yer mum.”

“It's mad.”

“Sounds likfe yer mum....”

"I suppose she is mad," Alby said and tried to smile, "she asked me to ask about the boy and the badger. She told me you'd know what this means."

"Did she now?"

"Yes"

"What else did she say? Terry asked.

"Nothing"

"Janice moaned all the time when she came back then - she said it was stupid "

"What?"

"The boy and the badger."

"Oh"

"The story of the boy and the badger - grandad would sit right there - he'd be exactly on the spot you are now - another night like this - eating like this - freezing like this and tell us the story of the boy and the badger."

"Grandad?"

"Yes."

"Grandad was one of the best," Terry said, and saying this made him feel emotional as if it were his turn now to shed a tear but the boy was there, so he covered his face with a piece of toast. "Stupid cow - yer mum ..," he said.

Alby didn't like it when he called her this, and Terry feared a worse bout of silence might break out now, consisting of hours of raised eyes, grunts and monosyllables. Janice wasn't a fool – clearly knew what the boy was like - however, getting things on with her new bloke made her hold her tongue. Stupid cow he groaned but not out loud this time.

Terry sat and looked at the fire - too tired now to think of one more word; it wouldn't make the boy speak if he did, so he looked once more at his beer and Alby looked at the ground and neither of these things brought up a new conversation. Even if they had wished to talk, their minds were blank and the silence made them more blank and it was sure to go on for hours as the constellations looked down on them, endless moths died in the fire and the

invisible water ran down to the drains to the sea, and they still failed to find another thing to say.

Terry thought of his dad and what he'd say to them if he saw them now, he wouldn't let this go on for long - he'd laugh at them - or he'd knock their heads together or else he'd talk - he could talk for hours - and thinking this made him suddenly know what to do, but wasn't sure how to start - the boy made it impossible but he thought back to his dad once more - the way he'd pause momentarily, waiting for the words to come to his lips - Janice would groan exasperated but his dad who would look up to find the next words in the air or convince them to come down. He'd always do this - because they were worth waiting for he said, because the night was long and time slow and there was absolutely nothing else they had to do. Janice groaned in case her last utterance hadn't worked but, apart from this, the night was the same - the fire - the darkness - the water and damp and the fen mud.

Sometimes, his dad would say, "Oh yes - that's how it starts."

Alby looked at the boy and the words came out; "One night the moon was terribly ill," he said, *Oh, yes, that's how it starts.*

That morning, the moon was so ill, it turned green and didn't have the will to carry on in the sky. It asked the stars to help but the stars thought they were dippers and twins and bears and snakes and things. The moon thought the constellations looked down their nose at him.

Because he was a new moon, there was a month to wait to have a rest so the only thing he could do was try to stay calm and hope to stay in the sky but his determination to do this made him worse. He rarely felt this bad - not since the Americans had turned up with their buggies and flags then it was the Russians then the Chinese.

"Sorry - I made that bit up" Terry said "Grandad never said this - the Americans".

Anyway, he couldn't find one star in the sky to call his friend. Although they acknowledged him when they went past and, perhaps they'd hang out occasionally, they didn't care for him or what was on his mind.

“Everyone has those kinds of friends, don’t they” Terry said, “You might bump into them at the pub and chat, but they don’t give a shit if you’re there or not. I expect it’s like this at school.”

Anyway – the moon tried to think who his real friends were – proper friends - genuine friends who might help him. He wondered about the owl and bat but never quite worked them out – flittering around all the time – they were scatterbrain types – mysterious types - unreliable – useless types but then he remembered the badger. Badgers were sound types who loved him since he always helped them scratch round and find worms and roots each night.

Terry couldn’t believe how his dad’s words had come back to him now - so easily after twenty years – it almost seemed like his dad’s voice was in his head.

Unfortunately, the badger was down here and the moon was up there - the badger couldn’t help the moon down here and while the stars loved to be archers or bears or twins or snakes. he’d not see one of them try to be a badger. I haven’t a choice then the moon thought, I have to get down to the earth.

Alby looked bored but when Terry asked, “want me to go on,” he nodded reluctantly.

“Doesn’t matter – I was gonna carry on anyway – I want to find out what happens next.”

“Don’t you know?” Alby asked.

Terry smiled and said - *The badger was in the wood when the moon saw him, burrowing and scratching in the dirt. The moon tried to call him but moons and badgers have different languages so the badger thought it was just the rustling of the leaves or the trickling water in the sluice. Despite what everyone says, the moon’s face is not much like a face and when he tried to interrupt him and catch his eye, nothing happened apart from an earthquake in Peterborough.*

Leaning over to look down, made the moon feel worse and he thought he was going to be sick.

"I often know that feeling" Terry went on, "after I've had a few pints – make a sudden move urghh."

Until then, the moon hadn't known just how sick he was and his head was spinning and he felt strange and for the first time in a million ears he lost consciousness.

Before the moon could stop, he fell out off the night sky and lost grip on the superstrings and physics and weird stuff like that so slipped out of time and tumbled and rolled and when the air tried to get out of the way it made a storm making him wake him up and see the Earth was racing fast toward him, expanding like an explosion in a map factory and though it hurt as he struggled to keep hold of the sky, scratching those long thin lines that aeroplanes leave, he couldn't stop so hit the ground with one great crash.

"The impact made a huge hole. There's still a lake down there - near Huntingdon - I fished there once".

Seven days passed before the moon woke up with a head so sore it more resembled a war zone than a head but, eventually, when he looked up, he encountered a pair of black eyes and a long white stripe.

Terry could sense that his dad's words would come back to him now as if the intervening time, since he was young, had gone, and Alby seemed to look interested for a while but then pulled back to make sure he looked bored again.

"Are you a flying saucer" the badger asked? Badgers are cool dudes – nothing upsets them.

Because he was now so tired and weak, no more than a thread of light emerged from the moon.

"I'm the moon," the moon said.

"Nonsense," the badger said.

Terry noticed a weak smile cross the boy's lips.

The badger could make the moon's words out now, because the moon's celestial powers had gone. Becoming sick, must have had made him lose his

faculties - he hadn't thought once how hard it would be to get home, it was so ridiculous and, now, he was trapped here like a fool .

"I really am the moon," he cried, "Smell me." The badger didn't need to move, possessing such a strong sense of smell – better than a dog they say - anyway, the moon smell was bad it was hard to miss. "

You smell of old pants," he said.

Terry noticed the boy laugh.

"You enjoying this" he asked.

"It's O.K.," the boy said.

"Want me to stop?"

"No."

"Good."

"The finest cheese – not pants," the moon said.

"Sometimes see them near here" Terry said "badgers. I've seen them there over by the rise, there."

Alby turned to look.

"Except - you can't see now - it's too dark."

The badger moved close for the first time and touched the moon with his nose.

"O.K, then," the moon said, "look up at the sky,"

The badger looked up.

"Anything wrong," the moon asked.

"There's no" Terry looked at the sky, "moon."

That evening there had been a moon - he'd noticed it low in the sky at dusk although, it was lost in the clouds now.

"Haven't seen the moon since you found me have you?"

"No."

"So where do you think it's gone then?"

"Don't know," the badger said.

"Because it's me."

The badger moved back to the edge of the wood, then looked at the whole of the moon.

"You're not too big are you," he said.

"Something to do with quantum physics," the moon said.

"Do you like Doctor Who?" Terry asked.

Alby nodded.

"The Tardis."

Alby nodded.

"Exactly."

"All right - maybe you are the moon," the badger said, looking up at the sky.

"Reckon you're not from these parts - that's for sure."

Suddenly, the moon felt worse, as if his plan to make sense of the world had exhausted him. He'd hardly said a word when he was in the sky - the stars ignored him most of the time so there was not much need and his famed long silences brought calm to the night and guided lost souls in the dark or someone had said this to him when he was young but it was so far back he couldn't think who has said this or if this voice had been there in the first place.

After a while he went to sleep and stayed like this for the next week.

Eventually, when the moon woke up, no-one was there and he was scared the badger had left him on his own but then he saw a pile of stems and roots beside him.

"Medicine," he heard, then saw a small black and white nose poke out of nowhere. "They'll help you get well so you have to eat them."

"What?" the moon cried. "They look yuck and smell worse," only being used to consuming solar winds and eating the odd meteorite that fell on him once in a millions years.

"I promise they'll help," the badger said.

Although the moon didn't want to eat them, he didn't feel he could say no, considering the badger had worked so hard to help him. He wasn't used to kindness.

"Urghh," the moon said as he forced the roots down. "Everything here is so unpleasant." Even the badger could not bear the taste of these roots.

"Why did you get ill," the badger asked but all the moon did was shrug the shoulders he did not have and say, "perhaps it's old age?"

"Haven't you been old since the start of time," the badger asked?

Terry looked up and hoped the clouds would clear and the moon might look solemnly down on them; the stories his dad's told were best with the moon supporting him, but. looking up, he thought there was much more chance of drizzle.

"I suppose so," the moon said and sank down on his back - "sometimes described as the dark side of the moon," Terry said, "sometimes called his arse."

The exhausted moon sat down with barely the strength to move, but the roots, provided each day with such care, began to work - every day he felt a bit stronger and his moon shine changed from grey to yellow to silver and he increased in size and, after a few weeks, found he was a full moon.

Finally, the badger watched as the moon found the strength to raise up his immense weight off the ground, casting long threads of light on the trees and bushes.

"Always knew you were the moon," the badger said. "better get you back up in the sky my friend."

Even hearing the words - back to the sky - made the moon give off a burst of silvery light so strong it hurt the badger's weak eyes.

"Except you don't know how do you?" the moon said.

The badger didn't know what to say - he didn't have a clue how to get an object as large as the moon back in the sky

"O.K. then what d'you think comes next", Terry asked but the boy looked as

uncertain and pale as the moon. Terry was pleased how he 'd made his dad's story his own - spoken in his own voice - not his dad's - and the way he'd unravelled it out of the air. He hardly ever thought of his dad these days - consumed by what went wrong at work and all the ups and downs with his girlfriends. Terry hadn't been great for a long time - down in the dumps to be honest. Usually, he found a way to cope with things but this time it was too difficult. It wasn't like him to let life get him down and was not sure why it was different now.

Alby, buried in the sleeping bag now, looked back at him, the light from the fading fire on his face.

"Sorry, where was I?" he asked. "What comes next?. Oh - yes."

"Perhaps, we could ask your brother," the badger said.

"I haven't got a brother," the moon replied.

"Nonsense – I've seen him down in the drains at night."

"I didn't even know I had a brother," the moon said.

"Lying flat in the water – looking up at you in the sky."

"I didn't know."

"Suppose your brother must be small since he lives in a drain," the badger replied.

Sometimes, Terry had thought it might be time to have kids of his own. Rosie's kids had liked him, right from the start and this had been a real surprise to him. He'd almost called the whole thing off when she'd told him about them. "My children come as part of the deal." she'd said and smiled, Rosie like to taunt him with this smile - it was the thing he loved the most about her he'd said. "It changes your face so much," he said, "and I like the smiling one the best, something that made her smile of course.

"Reckon we should find the eel," the badger said. "The eel knows the drains better than the back of his hands - I meant the back of his fins."

Unfortunately, it wasn't easy to find the eel – slippery things they are – scittery brainless things – never know if they're coming or going kind of things -

forgetting how many legs they did not have in the first place – kind of things.

“Tomorrow maybe we’ll catch some eels when take up the lines”

Anyway, the badger and the moon searched for hours and hours for the eel – forever walking up and down drains or crossing swamps and fens but then, suddenly noticed they’d come back to where they’d set off in the first place.

“Remember where we parked the car?”, Terry asked.

Alby shook his head.

“The water trough?”

Alby shook his head.

Well that’s where the eel had gone - swimming around in an old trough swimming around his tail - trying not to get it in a knot.

“We’re looking for the moon’s brother,” the badger said to the eel.

“You what?” the eel said.

The couldn’t tell if the eel was thick or deaf; whatever they said, its small dimwitted eyes looked back at them as if all thought had slipped off and forgotten how to come back.

“It’s you,” the badger said - “eels go strange if there’s a new moon.”

“Oh,” the moon said.

“Of course,” the eel said.

“So, do you know where he lives?”

“Know what?”

“About where the moon’s brother can be found?”

“Oh yes. I don’t know,” the eel said.

“Eels get like this,” the badger said to the moon.

“When there’s a new moon,” the moon said.

“That’s it.”

“The badger was right,” Terry said, “funny things - eels. Never liked them

particularly – hardly a fish yer see.” Always used to be a lot of them here - hardly any these days”

Rosie’s kids would have loved to come on this trip - they were the type to entertain new things - unlike the boy who was more like a wet rag - sometimes he’d read to them when they went to bed and he’d made up a story like this once. Rosie was the one who was hard work - he missed her children more than her to tell the truth.

“Welches Dam,” the eel said.

“Where?”

“Your brother – I saw him there.”

“Can you show us,” the moon asked?

“Why not?” the eel said, and blinked his small black eyes in the moon’s light; weakening as they talked.

Before saying one more word, the eel set off, not bothering with paths but slivering through fields, swimming through drains or sliding through grass, whatever direction suited him and did not slow down and the moon and the badger fought hard to keep up with him – exhausted, cold and half drowned - wondering if this was some kind of wild goose - even worse - a wild eel chase - probably a hopeless chase but they moved on through drains and fen and hundred of more drains and, carried on through the night - lost in the moon’s diminishing light that helped them find new ways to go wrong, but then with no explanation, the eel turned round to go back which made no sense but he didn’t seem to mind since he knew he’d been wrong in the first place.

Terry hadn’t thought she was the type to leave this way - without a word of warning. Rosie wasn’t there when he called. The landlord said she’d gone - family issues he’d said – something wrong – crying lots he said - and she didn’t even give him the chance to give her back the deposit – she was gone before he got there - keys on the floor - only a note of the fridge but no forwarding address.

“Remember where we’re going,” the badger asked the eel?

“Looking for my brother,” the eel said.

“Looking for the moon’s brother,” the badger cried

“Sorry - I remember where he is,” the eel said. “

Where,” asked the moon?

“The Washes where he goes to hide”, the eel cried. “He’s always there each autumn.”

Again they followed the eel but soon got lost - the eel had more than a thousand brothers and every one of them moved back and forth just as randomly.

“Enough,” the moon groaned, “I can’t walk one more step,” and he sat down stubbornly on the ground

“Exactly like you” the eel said, “always flat on his back like you” but disappeared, saying he had to find his other brothers but wasn’t sure where – although he’d know when he found them.

“It’s difficult down here”, the moon said. “The heavens make some sense - . everything’s physics and maths up there but here we seem to end up with everlasting chaos.”

“Everyone knows ‘em,” Terry said, “people who are so weird, they’re sure to disappoint you in the end.” Rosie was the first girl who’d left him this way, previously he’d made sure he was the one to leave. Maybe that’s why it was difficult or if, perhaps, his dad had been there, he would have coped. They happened at the same time, give or take a few weeks.

Although the badger tried to cheer him up, the moon lay there for days, looking up at the sky in the same blank way it looked back down at him. “I promise we’ll find him,” badger said. “Tomorrow, you’ll see. Don’t give up now after we’ve come so far. “

“This isn’t far for me” the moon said”, as he looked up at the stars.

Another morning came and the sun rose up, the moon waned more and in only week he was as faint as the faintest fairy ring in the grass.

Terry emptied the rest of the beans on a plate and gave it to the boy. “You feeling good now?” he asked. “More dried out?”

Alby nodded a smile - maybe the boy was not so bad he thought – shy but essentially sound.

“So you don’t like him”, Terry asked, “your mum’s new friend.”

“No” the boy said.

“Maybe you should give him a chance?”

“No.”

“I suppose you think he’s not worth it?”

“No.”

“Because he’ll be gone soon.”

“Yes,” the boy said.

“I suppose you’re right”

Alby looked down at his plate of beans.

“Sorry.”

Terry’s dad always brought sausages and potatoes, wrapped in foil in the dissolving embers of the fire, but Terry had not thought to bring them this time.

“Cold ain’t it?”

“Hmm.”

“I’m happy you’re here.”

“Really?”

“It wouldn’t have been like this on my own,” he said, “I would have got plastered then have been sad and wouldn’t have thought of my dad or his stories, and, even if I had thought of dad, I would have got more sad and the even more pissed out of my head.”

“Suppose so.”

The badger slept all day in the reeds then watched the sun go down. He couldn’t see much of the moon now - the little of him that was left was so now feeble and grey he thought he might be lost by the time they moved on in the evening.

"I'll never get home," the moon groaned.

The badger didn't know what to say so scratched his head and tried to think of anything else that might help the moon, knowing that, unless he did, his friend wouldn't last for long. Scratching his head helped him think or his fleas got annoyed at least but, then, he looked up and saw a swan, so low down it was flying where his thoughts had just come from.

Pointing at the swan, he said, "I reckon I know where they go to each night." Every morning and night, he saw them; always so pure and white as they flew over his wood.

"So," the moon asked.

"Always head west to get there," the badger said, knowing this might not actually be true but also knew that he had to come up with some kind of strategy before it was too late. "So that's where we need to go," he said. "go toward to the west where the sun goes down."

Something in the moon squirmed each time he heard the word sun. He hated everything about sun who stole the day from him each one night but that was another story.

"I haven't the strength to go so far" the moon said.

"Nonsense," the badger said, "seeing as you've gone so far - what's a few further miles?"

It wasn't as far as it looked at first; everything being so flat it was hard to tell - every field, drain and reed looks the same in the fens. The badger saw the eel occasionally, but they did try to not talk this time - because the eel was so desperate find his brother.

Eventually they saw the land rise up in a long straight line and then as they carried on, it stretched out as far as the eye could see and then it was like an earthworks, until, at last, they stood at the foot of the great bank of the Hundred Foot River.

"I sometimes go down there when it floods," Terry said, "it stretches out for many miles.

Climbing the bank was hard for the moon but he made it in the end, the bank sagging beneath his great weight and they looked out on a great flood in the Washes, stretching out to the north and south.

The badger didn't know the moon could smile but it crossed his wide face like a gaping gorge.

"Wow," the badger cried, "I've never been to a place like this."

They waited for dusk to come - according to eel, this was when the moon's brother might be seen.

"The moon's brother hates the sun too," Alby said.

"You've got it," Terry said.

Terry wondered how he'd feel if he saw Rosie in town with her kids. He wouldn't know what to do - perhaps he'd try to hide or just walk on - or pretend not to see her - people do this to you don't they - but he found, sometimes, he'd look out for her and kind of hope to find her there.

During the long wait, they watched the birds - skinny ones, short ones, noisy ones, long legged ones, curly beaked ones, shy ones but none of them were actually swans - even a distant white dot that might be a swan.

"Perhaps, you made them up?" the moon asked.

"Hardly," the badger replied, as, looking up, he saw them in the sky - hundreds of swans come down from the north, filling the air like a snow storm, swooping down with the loud whoosh of their wings

"I didn't make them up," he cried.

Somehow they got through the rest of the day and watched the sun set peacefully over the flood. "Desperately gaudy and sad" the moon said, "so unnecessary."

"Did I tell the moon hates to sun?" Terry asked

"Yes."

After waiting for hours through the night, there had been no sign of him.

Another two nights passed and there was still no sign of him and hope was

growing thin and the badger had to calm the moon down .

“No-one’s out to get you,” he said “everyone loves you here and love your brother too”

“I always felt on my own up there, “ the moon wailed. “It wasn’t right to be so completely on my own. Jupiter has six moons and Saturn has more - you didn’t know that, did you,” the moon asked.

“I didn’t know,” the badger replied.

“Couldn’t you tell from my face - how sad I was up there in the sky when I was, looking down on you.”

“Sorry,” the badger said.

“Perhaps it’s my brother’s turn to be in the sky and mine down here,” the moon groaned.

“Nobody’s seen him in the sky,” the badger said, “so that’s not true. “

“O.K. What happens next”, Terry asked? “Who do you think can save the moon?”

“Nobody,” Alby replied.

“I’m going to ensure the moon gets home,” Terry said, “and since this is my story, I decide how he does he gets there!”

“The badger?”

“Maybe,” Terry said, “the badger tries hard but he tries too hard

“The eel?”

“Don’t be daft.”

“Sorry.”

“Someone will save the moon,” Terry said, “seeing as we saw him there, earlier, driving down here.”

“I didn’t see him.”

“You didn’t look did yer. You didn’t look up, you were so mad you were made

to come”

“It wasn’t dark.”

“Sometimes the moon comes out when it’s day time - surely you’ve seen him out.”

“Him?”

“Yes.”

“Suppose so.”

“Just wait,” Terry said.

Terry’s dad would pause at this point then he’d look up at the moon – it always seemed to be up there for him - he always asked who saved him - always tried to find a new way. Terry’s dad would have loved to be there this evening - being with the boy – being with the two of them - but he died instead. His dying wasn’t one of his best stories – it didn’t come to an end – abandoned half way through – after all those lots of twists and turns - he was suddenly gone and the moon was left up there with no way to get home and Terry couldn’t think how it would end now and the moon might be trapped forever on the bank and die there. He didn’t even have the chance to ask – discovered by the bath – undressed – with a strange look on his face - something unsaid left on his lips. Terry was called at work but he was dead already. Terry hadn’t seen his dad for few weeks. Working shifts had made it difficult. Rosie had been with him then and she took up his most of his time.

Alby looked at him, waiting to see who’d save the moon.

“Sorry,” he said.

Another night passed and, by then, the moon’s hopes had all but gone. His moonlight was so weak, he was more a ghost than a moon.

Desperate to give the moon hope, the badger said, “O.K. I’ve got a plan. It requires me to go off for a while but I’ll be back soon . You just need to stay here”

The badger ran off and this made the moon feel worse – even more lost and hopelessly on his own. The badger didn’t have a plan - unless hoping

miraculously to find a plan can be called a plan.

The badger started to search this way and that but just got more and more hopelessly lost, praying that the swans who had gone by then would soon reappear, but after an exhausting, grunting, twisting, moaning search, he found himself looking back at the high bank where he'd left the moon and then, suddenly, noticed something was there – lying in the drain – very faint by the vanishing trace of the moon on the bank but he was sure it was there, so, immediately, the badger ran and it turned out to be the moon's brother but the moon's brother rushed off just as fast and, before he got there, he was gone, disappearing up the bank. The badger was mad that he'd come so desperately close - getting close would not do the moon no good - and he couldn't tell him how close he'd come - it would make the moon weep and the exertion might be the end of him. It didn't make sense - him leaving like this; perhaps he'd seen the moon and gone to greet him or ask him why he still hadn't been in touch.

The badger found he was lost in the ponds and pools and drains of the Washes and, after he got soaked a few more times, realised he'd get more impossibly lost if he failed to get some rest. Everywhere seemed so cold and unpleasant but he had no choice but to stay the night so he found a small secluded bed of reeds that liked to dance and wail in the wind but still he managed to get some sleep and dreamed of his small warm sett in the wood, only to wake up once more and find he was in the same wet place. Now lonely and lost in the dark, he prayed that the moon would not die now he was abandoned with no place to go.

Finally, when the light came up, he realised that just yards from where he couldn't now sleep was a swan – a snoozing swan - its head and long neck curling on its back. He didn't want to wake it up, so he watched as the sun appeared in the sky. He couldn't take his eyes off the swan - the sight of the morning light on its white plumes filled his small black eyes.

Finally, he saw a twitch in the swan's eyes then a thin hiss came from its yellow beak, and then up it raised up its head and, though it was so close, completely ignored him .

The badger told the swan about the moon and the eel's plan and the moon's brother - about how they were at their wits end but hoped the swans might possibly find some way to help - he didn't quite know how - but such a magical creature like the swan might know the way. Unfortunately, the magical creature looked right through him as if he was not there and had not listened to one word.

So will you help the badger asked?

I really can't see how the swan hissed.

Sorry to bother you then, the badger said, and made his way back to the fast disappearing moon - a sprinkle of weak moon dust now lost in the dew - it didn't even shine as much as the dew. The badger fell down on the bank and didn't know what to say.

Alby looked so sad now, Terry thought he might, once more, shed a tear .

Terry had asked Rosie once if she'd like to have more kids once but she was horrified and laughed.

The badger then heard a strange sound in the grass.

"Hello it's me." said the eel. "I couldn't find my brother – do you know where he is?"

The badger told the eel what the swan had said. "Really it's good, the eel replied, "worrying won't help you, that's for sure - every eel knows a swan - every swan knows and eel - we've been like this since the start of time - the secret's not what you say - it's the way you speak to them.

He instructed the badger to meet him and be sure to bring the moon, but suddenly the eel slipped off through the grass, and was gone and it was unlikely he'd come back, especially the way he'd turned one way then went another and then was gone out of sight; and, even if he did come back, he wouldn't know one word of all the things they'd just said so there was no point anyway.

The evening came and the moon looked up from its death wish, so desperately feeble by then, he might as well have been in his grave.

"I don't want to move now," he said, "it's too late, he said.

Anyway, after many grunts and pokes - the badger forced the moon to roll sideways down the slope and reach the Washes – ending up in a group of unfriendly swans but his entrance did not seem to faze them but a few of them noticed and turned their heads

Suddenly the eel's head popped up out of the drain with a strange smile on its face.

"Hello swans," he said – "why have you changed so much - where has all your beauty gone."

Immediately all the swan turned round and stared at the eel.

"What do you mean," the swan hissed?

"I imagine it's because the moon has gone?" the eel said.

"What," asked the swans?

"The badger told you," the eel said.

"About what?"

"About the moon."

"Did he?" replied the swan with a clipped voice – disliking eels more than anything.

Looking as sly as an eel can look, the eel looked back and winked at the badger and moon "Cheer up," he said, "release some more of your moon light anyway."

Although the moon tried to cheer up he felt so sad. he only gave off the faintest glow.

"Come on, try at least," the badger said, the eel has a plan to get you back home.

Suddenly, the moment the moon heard the word home, he shed a burst of silvery light, making the plumes of the swans shine and glow in a way they'd never shone in all their lives. The vision was so sweet, it cheered the moon up even more so he sent out a wash of pure light on the fields and drains.

Excitedly, the swans looked at each other stunned by their new plumes, the shimmering silvers in their wings and on the glow of their puffed out their chests.

Whispering as much as an eel can whisper, with no hands to hide its face, the remarkable eel asked the badger to make the moon sad once more, and the badger told him about how his brother had run off and this soon made the silvery light of the night fade. A horrified silence rose then turned to lots of complaining hisses and cries as the swans watched the light drain from their feathers.

“Bring it back, bring it back,” they cried, flocking around the badger and eel, behaving more like a mad flock of geese than a group of swans.

Suddenly, they were all ears as the badger told them how it was of great importance to get the moon back to the sky, since, if they failed, he’d die of heartbreak and never ever come back to shine on them.

They nodded with keen eyes.

“Unless you see the moon,” the eel said “you’ll never look like you did this morning - never so sweet and pure.”

“No,” the swans hissed and spat.

“Unless you help the moon get back to the sky,” the eel said.

“Maybe the eel’s not as daft as he looks,” Terry said. “Sometimes your assumptions are wrong.”

Alby smiled.

During the night, they could hear the swans hiss and curse as they talked and negotiated and planned what to do next. The following morning, as dawn rose, thousands and thousands of the swans - their brothers, sisters and aunts and uncles, as well as all the white ducks and geese - descended onto the fields – transforming it to a great sea of white that moved in waves, illuminated by the increasingly bright light of the moon, boosted by his thoughts of home.

The badger and eel asked their good friends the spiders to make them a cradle of silk - thousand threads that they spun round the moon - one by one -

every one of the threads tied to the beak of a swan.

“Oh,” Alby said.

Suddenly – joining up – the army of swans made their long, loud take off - noisily running hard on the back of the wide flood - until they took off and rose into the sky - formation after formation - until a many great Vs of them appeared in the sky and beneath them the thousands of threads tied to the suddenly hopeful moon.

Before for the badger had time to say goodbye or allow the eel to look for his brother again, the entire mass of swans rose up and raised up the fine silk cradle off the ground. The silver light from the moon shone high and wide because he was so thrilled now to leave the ground - as up and up the swans ascended as the moon smiled down at the badger and eel, looked down on flooded fields and drains and then the farms to each side and then the villages and marshes to the north and then forests and hills to the south and Cambridge and London and the silvery seas and continents and oceans and eventually they could see the edge of the earth. The cradle of silk - as soft as heaven - made him feel at home now and free once more. It wasn't long before the swans tired because they were so high and air was so thin but they desperately carried on, horrified by the thought that they might not be beautiful again if they failed in their task. Suddenly the moon felt light and powerful - gravity was falling away from its flesh for the first time in weeks and, simultaneously, the swans knew he was free and let go of the silk threads that unfurled and fell back down to earth.

The badger and eel looked up, dazed by the threads of light that fell down around them. The moon was strong once more and rose up, and it found its position in the sky - the place it had been since the start of time. The stars and planets looked down at him but still they failed to say one kind word - the bastards.

It doesn't matter, the moon sighed, because the badger and the eel will always be my best friends from now on. Even those selfish, vain swans would forever have his gratitude. Even though they were just small dots of white now scattered on the fields he could tell by the way they moved that they were

beautiful and the world was pleased to see him back in the sky.

After that day, the moon shed his light on the swans when the dawn rose - always made their plumes shine, always helped the badger find roots and berries each night and always showed the eels where they had to go - whenever they did not know where to go in the first place and a few of them, miraculously, made it all the way back to where they came and swam in the Sargasso Sea.

The badger and the eel looked up at the sky and knew things were once again how they should be and as they had been since the start of time.

“So that’s the story of the badger, the eel and the moon,” Terry said.

Alby looked at him with a strange smile in his eyes and was not sure how to reply.

“Enjoy that,” Terry asked and the boy half grinned and half looked shy and the missing part made no sense.

“Better go to sleep,” Terry said - “I don’t have one small word in my head.”

After Alby crawled into his tent, Terry sat on his own and drank beer and his attention turned to the night, and he thought of his dad’s calm voice and the different endings he’d come up with and how his life was shit and how to overcome these thoughts and he wished his dad could be there now to make suggestions about what he could do next ,but he was on his own and had to forget all this and get some sleep.

The following morning, when Terry crawled out of the tent, the boy was up, attempting light the fire with damp wood.

‘Mornin’ he said.

He’d expected the boy would talk to him now but things were just the same as before; he struggled to get more than a grunt out of him.

“Isn’t as good as it used to be here,” Terry said, as they sat by the drain fishing, “always caught more when I was young - climate change or pollution or God knows what.”

Again nothing came from the boy’s mouth - so Terry sat for the rest of the

morning rod in hand.

They didn't catch an eel or see a swan and there was no sign of the moon. He didn't take the boy to the wood - only a few hundred yards as the crow doesn't fly but the swan does - he reckoned the boy was tired or sad or it was impossible to know but he did know one thing - he'd not get more word out of him now.

They didn't talk on the drive back through the fens in the van.

Alby put his arm out of the window and made it go up and down in the wind. Terry almost told him to stop but he bit his tongue.

After half an hour's drive, Ely cathedral was close enough to mean they were almost back at his sister's house.

Terry pulled the car up outside number 67.

"Well" Terry said, "better get yer kit out of the van."

He didn't want to go in the house - his sister would ask how it had gone - he wouldn't know what to say - Alby would grunt and he'd try to leave but she wouldn't let him.

"Better move," he said.

As Terry got out of the van to get the boy's things. Alby looked up at him as if waiting for him to speak but before he could do so, his sister came out and assaulted them with questions and offers of tea and saying they looked exhausted and moaned about the mud on their shoes and asked what had happened and wondered what the fish they'd caught and tried to be nice because she'd been in bed with her new man all the time that they'd been miserable. Terry could tell all this from the flushed look on her face. He felt sorry for the boy to have a mum like this but then thought she was not so bad after all.

Terry said he had to leave - he needed sleep - he always had night shifts on Monday and, before, she could say one more word, he turned round to walk toward his the van, but, then, Alby ran up to him and said, "Can I go again?"

"What?"

“Fishing?”

“Yes....”, Terry said, “of course.”

Terry got in the car and drove off and Alby watched him leave and waved good bye.