

THE BOY AND THE BADGER

“Don’t say much, do yer,” Terry groaned.

Alby didn’t reply.

“O.K - fine by me,” he said, then smiled to prove the point. A flurry sparks scattered from the stick he poked in the fire then swam off through the dark and died.

“I only said you could come coz yer mum asked me.” Terry said.

Terry put his hands close to the flames to feel the heat as jittery shadows rearranged his face. Apart from the crackle and hiss of the fire. it was completely quiet where they were camped.

“Ugly looking sod aren’t you?”

Alby glared back at him.

“O.K – it’s alive,” Terry said.”

“I’m only here cos mum made me,” Alby groaned.

“You already told me this,” Terry replied.

.....

Janice had asked him to take the boy, she’d said he was missing a male influence and although he might not be the best influence no-one else was available. “Dad would have gone with him,” she’d said.

“Well I’m not dad,” he said..

“Only this once” she said, “Maybe you’ll get on just fine.”

Alby walked out of the room at this point then, later, sitting in the van, driving to the Forty Foot, he barely said a word. He didn’t even have wellies or boots; only white trainers that hadn’t stayed white for long.

“He doesn’t seem to like the boys at school,” Janice said - “he really needs someone like you to help him”.

“Fishing’s not your thing then?” Terry asked.

“Never done it before,” the boy said.

“Never with your dad?”

“No”

"You don't see much of him do you?"

"No."

"Better give this a chance then," Terry said then asked, "So what do you like?"

"Dunno."

"Football?"

"No."

"Music?"

"No."

"Everyone likes music".

.....

"Computer games?"....

"Maybe."

"So what's the best - what's the one you like the best?"

"Fortnite."

"Never heard of that one," Terry replied

After Janice had asked him, he'd said he'd think about it but knew that thinking about it was much the same in her eyes as yes.

"Remember dad's trips," she'd said

"Obviously."

"What about sport?" Terry asked to be met by a shake of the head. "This evening's going to be crap if you don't speak up."

"I didn't want to come," Alby replied.

"I didn't want you come," Terry said, "but you're still here now."

Terry needed this like a hole in the head. The foreman always picked on somebody at the depot and this week it was his turn. O.K. he'd broken the gasket but what else can you do when all that holds it in place is dirt and rust.

Janice thought the trip would be good for him too, "you'll get on just fine."

"Everything's all right at home then," Terry asked, "with yer mum?"

"Yes"

"Nothing's changed?"

Terry could see the boy's face turn tense and still.

“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 a new man.”

“DON’T KNOW.”

“All right, now I see.”

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

“Everything makes sense now,” Terry said and smiled.

“I CAN’T STAND IT HERE,” the boy shouted and walked off through the dark.

“COME BACK,” Terry shouted. “You can’t see.”

“I WANT TO GO HOME.”

“COME BACK,” Terry cried as the boy walked off through the dark. “YOU’LL GET LOST.”

Terry had forgotten that a ditch crossed the path near where he’d parked - until he heard the splash that is. He quickly stood up and ran to find the boy, appearing before him in the light from his torch; his knees deep in mud, frightened and short of breath.

Terry grabbed hold of the boy and pulled him out of the ditch.

“I HATE YOU,” the boy said.

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

“No” the boy said, shivering so much his breath come out in a short sharp bursts.

“Stupid cow – yer mum,” Terry said, then, after they got back to the fire, rummaged through his bag to find spare clothes. “There’ll be big but they’ll do alright”.

Alby grabbed the jeans from his hand.

“Isn’t going too well is it?” Terry groaned. “Sorry - all right - it’s none of my business what yer mum does!”

Silence then fell on the two of them once more.

“O.K. Even if you can’t talk you can eat food,” he said and found some beans, opened it and put the can in the fire and gave one to the boy to do the same. “Deeper in - that’s it - it won’t take long. And some bread to toast on a stick. Covered in cheese – perfect””, he said.

“Did yer mum pack you some food,” Terry asked.

Alby shook his head, wrapping in his arms round his chest as if trying to stop his shivers getting out of his body.

“Don’t look at me that way,” Terry said, “I didn’t make you get wet.” “Go on cover yourself with this,” Terry said, pulling his sleeping bag from his bag. “Better not tell your mum,” he said, “I promised to look after you and keep you safe”

“All right,” Alby croaked, trying to stay stone faced but a tear broke from the corner of his eye. Slowly, it moved down his cheek and drew a line in the mud, splattered on his face from the ditch then others followed and joined force and Alby started to cry uncontrollably.

“What’s wrong,” Terry asked?

“I hate you,” the boy said.

“Nonsense – you don’t hate me,” Terry replied, “you hardly know me at all.”

“So?”

“Have some more beans,” he said.

“No?”

“A biscuits - do you want a biscuit?”

“OK”

Alby took the biscuit and ate grim faced.

“Sometimes your mum came here,” Terry said at last. “Right here. Your grandad took us. I suppose you don’t remember him do you - you were too young”

Alby shook his head.

“It’s probably hard for you to see now but those were good times. Me, mum and Grandad.”

“She told me,” Alby said.

“Did she!”

"Before we came."

"What else did she say?"

"Nothing."

"Oh"

"Anyway," Terry said, "that's why I said I'd take you here."

"Oh."

"Grandad - does yer mum say what he was like?"

"Not really"

"Ahh."

"Except one thing."

"What?"

"It's stupid."

"Sometimes, yer mum is a bit stupid....sorry"

"She told me to ask about the boy and the badger."

"Oh...She told you to ask me this"

"Yes"

"What else did she say?"

"Nothing"

"Incredible," Terry gasped, "she always moaned at the time - said it was stupid "

"What was stupid?"

"The boy and the badger."

"What?"

"The story of the boy and the badger - Grandad sat where you are right now -
- eating food like by the fire just like this and told us - the boy and the badger."

"What?"

"Grandad was a good man!" Terry said, and, it was his turn to want to cry.

"Stupid cow - yer mum!"

Alby didn't say a word but looked him in the eye for the first time since they arrived at the camp. Silence back came down then but it was worse this time; awkward and sad, and the boy looked pale and scared. It was nothing like

being with his dad. Janice must have known it would be like this but had still asked him.

Terry couldn't even think how it went - his mind was blank. His father paused before starting — his sister would groan - until something strange rose up between them - a confusion and strangeness in his eyes – raising them up - trying to draw things out of the air. He always cleared his throat then. Janice almost groaned once more but the look from his dad stopped her first. Alby watching him made it worse. Everything was just like it was back then - the silence - the smell of this wet place - the fire – the sky – the moon.

“Oh yes – that's how it starts,” his dad would say.

Alby looked up at him and the strange thing was it seemed he had no choice.

“One night the moon was ill,” he said, “that's how it starts.”

“That morning, the moon was so ill it had turned pale green. It asked the stars for assistance but the stars were too busy trying to be dippers and twins and bears and snakes and things. He always thought they looked down him - the stars.

Because he was a new moon, it was almost a month was left before he could have a rest so all he could do was try to stay calm and stay in the sky but this wasn't easy he felt so weak. He hadn't felt good for a long time - even since the American astronauts had turned up with their and flags and buggies then it was the Russians and the Chinese.

“Sorry - I made that bit up” Terry said “Grandad never mentioned the Americans”.

Anyway – it was clear now - the stars weren't his friends. Although they acknowledged him when they passed - even hung around with him now and then – they really didn't care what he thought or said.

“Everyone has those types of friends” Terry said, “Sometimes you talk to them - even have a drink with them down the pub but they don’t care if you’re there or someone else – do you know what I mean – expect it’s the same at school.”

Anyway – the moon tried to think who his real friends were – true friends - genuine friends who might help him. He wondered about the owl and bat but never quite made sense of them – flittering around all the time – they were scatterbrain types – mysterious types - unreliable – useless types but then, finally, he remembered badger. Badgers were solid types who loved the moon because he helped them scratch in the dirt and find worms and roots at night.

Terry couldn’t believe how his dad’s words had come back to him now - after twenty years – almost as if 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 get well down there and while the stars loved being bears and twins and snakes none of them tried to be badgers. So I’ll have to get down there the moon thought.

“Want me to go on,” Terry asked, but the boy just looked at the ground.

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

“Don’t you know?” Alby asked.

The badger was in the wood when the moon looked down, sniffing and scrabbling in the earth. The moon tried to call him but badgers and moons have different languages so the badger thought it was nothing but the rustle of leaves or water trickling through the sluice. Whatever people say, the moon doesn’t look much like a face and doesn’t look down on us so when he attempted to catch the badger’s eye nothing happened, apart from an earthquake in China.

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

“God I know how that feels” Terry said, “after I’ve had a few pints – a sudden move and urghh....sorry.”

Until then the moon hadn’t known just how sick he was and his head started spinning and he felt strange and for the first time in a million million years he fainted and lost grip of the superstrings and physics and the weird stuff that always kept him in the sky and he fell out of the might and hurtled down – tumbling - briefly waking up because the wind tried to get out of the way and became a wild storm, making him open his eyes and see the Earth racing toward him, expanding like an explosion in a map factory. Although his fingers desperately scratched the sky, he couldn’t stop before he hit the ground.

“The impact made a huge hole. There’s a lake there still- near Huntingdon - I sometimes fish”.

Seven days passed before the moon woke up with a head so sore it felt like a battle zone. He opened his eyes to be greeted by a pair of small black eyes and a white stripe.

Terry could tell now that the whole thing would come back to him as if the thirty years that has passed since he’d heard it from his dad had just gone. Alby almost looked engaged for a second then thinking this might be seen, immediately, looked bored once more.

“Are you a flying saucer” the badger asked?

Almost no light was coming from the moon because he was so weak and exhausted. “I’m the moon,” the moon said.

“Nonsense,” the badger replied.

Terry noticed the smile on the boy’s but looked back down not to make it

disappear.

“Really - I am the moon,” he cried. “Smell me.”

“You smell of old socks,” he said.

Terry noticed the boy laugh .

“You enjoying this” he asked.

“No.,” the boy said.

“Want me to stop then.”

“No.”

“Good.”

“The finest cheese – not socks,” the moon said. “Anyway, what are socks.”

“Sometimes seen them round here - badgers” Terry said “Coming down from the higher land up there.”

Alby turned to looked.

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

“Have a look up at the sky,” the moon said.

The badger looked up.

“Anything wrong,” the moon asked.

“There’s no....”

Terry looked up at the sky as well.

“Moon.”

He couldn’t see the moon - it was lost in the clouds.

“Haven’t seen the moon since you found me have you?”

“No.”

“So where’s it gone then?”

“Don’t know,” the badger said.

“Because it’s me.”

The badger trotted back to the edge of the wood, to look at the whole of the moon.

“You’re not very big,” he said.

“Something to do with quantum physics,” the moon said.

“Do you like Doctor Who?” Terry asked.

Alby nodded.

"The Tardis."

Alby nodded

"All right - maybe you are the moon," the badger said, looking up at the sky again. "Reckon you're not from round here - that's for sure."

Suddenly, the moon felt worse as if all the effort of talking in this new way had exhausted him. He hardly said a word when he was up in the sky - the stars ignored him most of the time.

After a while he went to sleep and stayed like this for ten more days.

Eventually, when the moon woke up, no-one was there and he thought the badger had gone but then saw a great piles of stems and roots .

"Forever, it took me," he heard the badger say then saw his nose poked out above the pile. "They'll help you get well. You have to eat them."

"What?" the moon cried. "They look disgusting," only being used to drinking solar winds and eating the odd meteorite every few hundred 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, seeing as the badger had worked so hard and been so kind. He wasn't used to such kindness.

"How do I eat them," he asked.

"With that hole in your head the one you talk out of."

"Urghh," the moon said as he forced the roots down. "Everything here is so unpleasant - nasty and cold and wet.

"What made you ill," the badger asked but all the moon could do was shrug the shoulders he didn't have and say, "maybe it's just old age?"

"Haven't you always been old," the badger asked?

Terry looked up at the sky, hoping the moon to break through the clouds but it wasn't that kind of night. Fishing trips were best when the moon was out.

"I suppose so," the moon said, and sank down, too weak to move, but, gradually, the roots, given to him each day with such care, started to work - every day he felt a bit stronger and his moonshine changed from grey to yellow to silver and after a few weeks he reached the size of a full moon.

Finally, the badger watched as the moon at last found the strength to raise his immense weight off the ground, casting long moon-shadows on the trees and bushes.

“Always knew you were the moon,” the badger said. “better get you back up in the sky.”

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

“But I don’t know how,” the moon said.

The badger didn’t know what to say.

“O.K. then what d’you think comes next”, Terry asked but the boy just looked confused. Terry had so loved these stories, unwound by his dad’s calm, slow, wandering, voice. He hardly, ever thought of them these days though - buried forever by trials at the depot and paying the bills and endless struggles with his girlfriends. He hadn’t been good for a long time in fact - down the dumps - usually he’d found a way to bounce back but not this time.

Alby, buried in the sleeping bag, looked back at him.

“Sorry,” he said, “where was I?”

“What comes next?”

“Oh - yes.”

“Maybe we could ask your brother,” the badger said.

“I haven’t got a brother,” the moon replied.

“Nonsense – I’ve seen him sat down in the drains in the night.”

“I didn’t even know I had a brother,” the moon said.

“Lying flat in the water – looking up at you.”

“I didn’t know.”

Sometimes, Terry wondered if it might be time to have kids of his own. Rosie’s kids had liked him, right from the start - this had come as a real surprise to him. He’d almost run off when she’d told him she had kids. “My children come are part of the deal.” she’d said.

“Reckon we should find the eel,” the badger said. “The eel knows the drains better than the back of his hands.”

“Eels don’t have hands,” the boy said.

"Fins then."

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 don't have – kind of things.

"Tomorrow – maybe we'll find some eels - with a bit of luck."

Anyway, the badger and the moon searched for the eel for hours and hours – crossing drains, swamps and fens but then, in the end, found they were where they'd set off in the first place.

"Remember where we parked the car?", Terry asked.

Alby nodded.

"The cow trough there?"

Alby nodded again.

Well that's where they found him - the eel - swimming around in a cow trough.

"We're looking for the moon's brother," the badger said to the eel.

"You what?" the eel said.

It wasn't clear if the eel was thick or deaf. Whatever they said, its small black eyes looked back at them in just the same way.

"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 you know where he lives?"

"Know what?"

"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.

"Whenever there's a new moon," the moon said.

"That's it."

"The badger was right," Terry said, "funny things - eels – hardly a fish in fact. Always used to be a lot of them fown here but now its hard to find them."

Rosie's kids would have loved to come on a trip like this with him. He's read stories to them when they went to bed. Terry missed them, more than their

mother to tell the truth.

“Welches Dam,” the eel said.

“Where?”

“Your brother – I saw him down there.”

“Can you show us,” the moon asked.

“Why not?” the eel said, blinking his small black eyes in moon light.

Before saying one more word, the eel set off, not bothering about paths but directly crossing fields, swimming through drains or sliding through long grass, whatever direction suited him next - never slowing down to let them catch up. The badger and moon fought hard to stay with him – half drowned - half frozen – wondering if this was some wild goose - or still worse - an eel chase - a probably hopeless chase but they pushed on through drains and bogs and other drains and, carried on through the night they - steered by in the moon’s weakening light that helped them to find the next way to get lost - until, with no warning, the eel set off in a completely new direction which didn’t seem to worry him because he knew he’d been wrong in the first place.

Terry hadn’t thought she was the type to leave him that way with not a word. Rosie wasn’t there when he called. The landlord said she was gone - some family issues he’d said – crying she was - didn’t even give me the chance to return the deposit he said – she left keys on the floor - no forwarding address – nothing.

“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 know where he is,” the eel said, “that’s easy. “

“Where,” asked the moon?

“The Washes where they go to hide there”, the eel cried.

Again they followed the eel only to get lost because the eel had thousands of brothers and every one of them was moving around just as randomly.

“Enough,” the moon groaned, “I can’t walk one more step,” and laid

immediately down on his dark side.

“Exactly” the eel said, “exactly like that - flat on his back,” before he disappeared, saying he had to find his other brothers but wasn’t sure where – only knew when he found them.

“It’s difficult down here”, the moon groaned. “The heavens make more sense.”

“Everyone knows ‘em,” Terry said, “people you think you trust but “

Rosie was the only girl to have left him like this - he was the one to leave normally and maybe this was why he’d found it so hard or maybe it was because his dad had not been there to tell him he’d been right or wrong in leaving them.

Although the badger tried to cheer him up, the moon just lay flat on its back for several days, looking at the sky in the blank way it had once looked down from it. “We’ll find him,” badger said. “Tomorrow, you’ll see. Don’t give up now – after coming so far.”

“This isn’t far the moon said”, looking up at the stars, “that’s far.”

Every day as the sun rose, the moon faded at bit more and soon he was fainter than a fairy ring in the grass.

Terry emptied the rest of the beans on a plate and gave it to the boy. “Feeling better now?” he asked. “Dried out a bit?”

Alby nodded half a smile.”

“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.”

“He isn’t worth it?”

“No.”

“Probably you’re right.”

Alby looked down at his plate.

“Sorry.”

Terry’s dad always brought sausages and spuds and wrapped up in foil to put onto the fire but he hadn’t thought to bring them.

"Cold ain't it?"

"Hmm."

"I'm happy you're here."

"Really?"

"Yes. I wouldn't be telling the story to myself would I?"

The badger slept all day in some reeds then stirred to watch the sun go down. He couldn't see the moon at first - the little you could see of him was so pathetic and sad it seemed to be no hope.

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

The badger couldn't think what to say so scratched his head to try to think of something, knowing that, unless he did, the moon would soon be gone but suddenly saw a swan fly past.

"Reckon I know where to go," he said, "and that's where we need to go next. - I haven't the strength to get there" the moon said.

"You isn't a choice," the badger replied, "you need to get home".

It wasn't as far as it looked at first; everything so flat here it's hard to tell. A couple of times they spotted the eel but he didn't stop to talk to them - still trying to find his brother.

Eventually they noticed that the land was raised up in a long straight line and, after a few more miles could see it was a long earthworks and just an hour later stood at the foot of the bank of the Hundred Foot River.

"Sometimes go there when it floods," Terry said, "stretches as far as the eye can see."

Climbing the bank was hard for the moon – but somehow he forced his way - climbing the steps that made the bank sag down with his great weight – but eventually they reached the top and looked out across a vast expanse of The Washes in flood.

The badger didn't know the moon could smile but it came across his face like a crater.

They waited all day for the sun to set because this was when the moon's

brother might come out.

"The moon's brother comes out at night," Alby said.

"You've got it," Terry said.

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

"Did you make them up?" the moon asked.

"No," the badger said because he looked up and saw them in the sky - hundreds of them, flying in from the north, filling the sky like a snow storm, swooping down with the whoosh of their great wings

"I didn't make them up," the badger cried.

Somehow they got through the rest of the day and, at last, the sun set in it's ostentatious way.

They expected the moon's brother to show his face then but there was not even a faint sign of him, making the moon wonder if bad things had come to destroy his entire family.

After waiting for hours, all through the night, he still failed to turn up.

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

"I always felt so on my own up there, " the moon groaned. "It wasn't fair to be completely on my own. Jupiter has six moons and Saturn give - did you know about them." the moon asked

"I didn't know," the badger replied.

"Unless it's my brother's turn to be up there and it's 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.

“Remember, I’m in charge of this story I can say what I like!”

“The badger?”

“Maybe,” Terry said, “the badger tries but

“The eel?”

“Don’t be silly.”

“Sorry.”

“Someone’s going to save the moon,” Terry said, “seeing as we saw him driving here.”

“I didn’t see.”

“You didn’t look. You were too busy trying to look pissed off,” Terry said,

“Anyway, just wait.”

Terry’s dad would pause next - sometimes look up for the moon if it was there – ialways asked who’d save the moon this time. He always made sure to end the story in a new way. Terry’s dad would have loved to tell Alby the story – a grandad sort of thing to do - but he died too soon. His dying wasn’t his best story – it didn’t even have an end – abandoned half way through – laughing and joking one moment – nothing the next – as if, suddenly, for the first time he couldn’t think how it would end and the moon would left on the earth to shrivel up and die. He didn’t even have time to tell them – they just found him lying by the bath – half undressed – with a strange look on his face - of something unsaid. Terry was called at work but it was too late by then.

Terry hadn’t seen much of him of late. Working shifts had made it hard to plan anything. Rosie has been with him then and the kids to filled up most of his time.

Alby was looking up at him, waiting to see who could come to save the moon.

“Sorry,” he said.

After another night passed - nothing had changed and the moon’s hopes had disappeared so weak he was like a ghost.

Desperate to give the moon hope because it would soon ne too late, the badger said, “O.K. I’ve got a plan. Just wait where you are, I’ll be back in a while.”

The badger ran off which made the moon feel worse still – even more lost and

hopelessly alone. The badger didn't have a plan, unless hoping to come up with a plan can be called a plan.

The badger started to search this way and that but just got more and more disorientated, hoping that the swans who were now gone would come back again. Finally, after a grunting, twisting, scratching, search, he looked back toward the high bank where he'd left the moon and then saw the moon's brother – lying in the water – even fainter than the moon - but he was there. Immediately, he rushed to the drain and the moon's brother but the moon's brother rushed off twice as fast and, before he could get there, ran up the embankment bank and was gone. The badger couldn't believe what had happened. It didn't make sense.

The badger found himself lost in the all the ponds and pools and drains on the Washes and after getting soaked a few more times, he realised he'd only get even more lost if he went through at night. Everywhere he turned, it was cold, unpleasant and damp. He ended up in a bed of reeds and dreamt of his warm hollow in the wild wood. Lonely and lost in the dark, he wondered if the moon was dead.

Finally, when the light came up, he noticed a few yards from lay was a swan – a sleeping swan - its head and neck curled on its back. He didn't want to disturb it so watched it sleep as the sun rose in the sky. He couldn't stop looking at the swan - it was quite a sight to see - the morning light on the perfect white of the swan.

Finally, the badger noticed a twitch in the swan's eyes then a thin hiss came from its beak. Eventually it raised its head but, despite being so close, ignored him completely.

The badger quickly explained about the moon and the eel and the moon's brother - how already they were at their wits end and how the swans might possibly help - he wasn't sure how - but the swan just look to the side and ignored him as if he was not quite there and had not said a word.

So will you help, the badger asked?

I really can't see how I can the swan hissed.

Sorry to bother you, the badger said, glumly, and made his way to the moon - or actually, a sprinkle of moon dust so thin it was hard to see in the dew. The

badger collapsed on the bank.

Alby looked sad, as if he might start to cry once more.

The badger then heard by 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 to him. Nothing to worry about, said the eel. I understand swans you see – always been with each other you see - from the start of time. You only have to know what to say to them.

He instructed the badger to meet him that night and be sure to bring the moon after which he slipped off through the grass. The badger didn’t think he’d see him again as he slivered off one way then the next and even if he did see him again, the eel wouldn’t remember one word of the conversation.

The evening still came and the moon slipped out of the dust of its neat death so desperately feeble he was not quite there. He didn’t want to move he felt so depressed.

Anyway, after much grunting and poking - the badger pushed the moon the along the slope then down into the Washes – falling into a group of swans but his appearance didn’t faze them and only a few of them raised their heads.

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

“Hello swans,” he said – you’re not as beautiful as you were.

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

“What do you mean,” the swan hissed?

“Because the moon’s not well,” the eel said.

“So what,” asked the swans?

“The badger told you,” the eel said.

“About what?”

“About the moon of course.”

“Did he?,” replied the swan with a clipped voice – disliking eels even more than badgers.

Looking as crafty as an eel can look, the eel winked as he looked back the

badger and moon. "Cheer up," he said, "give us a bit more light moon."

Although the moon tried to cheer up he gave off no more than a faint glow.

"Come on - try," the badger said, the eel knows how to get you home.

Suddenly, the moment the badger said the word home, the moon shed a burst of silvery light, making the feathers of all the swans shine like they had never shone before. The vision was so lovely, it cheered up the moon a bit more radiating more light on the fields and drains.

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

Whispering as much as an eel can whisper, without hands to hide its mouth, the eel told the badger to make the moon sad, so the badger told the moon about how his brother had run off. Slowly the light from the moon failed, disappearing from the feathers of the swans as horrified silence then sharp hisses came from the swans as the light drain from them.

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

Suddenly there were all ears as the badger explained how the moon had to return to the sky because if he failed to do so, he'd soon die and would be able to come back and shine his light on the swans.

They nodded with sad eyes.

"Unless we have the moon," the eel said "you'll never be like you were so beautiful just now."

"No," the swans hissed and spat and cried.

"Unless you help the moon get back to the sky of course" the eel said.

"Maybe the eel's not as daft as he looks," Terry said. "Sometimes you just can't tell."

During the night, they could hear the swans hiss and curse as they talked and imagined and planned what to do. The following morning, as dawn broke, thousands and thousands of the swans - their brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles, as well as white ducks and geese - descended onto the fields - turning it to a great sea of white that shone in the light of the moon now

thinking 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 – all as one – the army of swans made their long, loud take off - noisily running hard on the water of the flood - until they took off and rose up into the sky - flock after flock - formation after formation - until thousands appeared in the sky and beneath them the thousands threads still tied to the moon.

Before the badger had time to say goodbye or allow the eel to start looking for his brother again, the entire mass of swans rose up and pulled the silk cradle away from the ground. The silver light from the moon shone out high and wide because he was so thrilled to leave the ground - as up and up the swans ascended as the moon smiled down at the badger and eel, looked down and the flooded fields and drains and then the farms to the sides 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 curve of the earth. The cradle of silk - as soft as the heavens - made the moon feel at home now and free once more. It wasn't long before the swans tired because they were so high and air so thin but desperately carried on, horrified by the thought that they might not be beautiful again if they failed. Suddenly the moon felt light and free and powerful - gravity was falling away from its skin 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 to earth.

The badger and eel looked up dazzled by the threads of light that fell down around them. The moon was strong now and rose up, and it soon found it's position in the sky - where it had been since the start of time. The stars and planets looked down at him coldly and failed to say a word.

It doesn't matter, the moon sighed, because the badger and the eel will always be my 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 delighted that he was back in the sky.

After that day, the moon would always shed his light on the swans in the morning - always make their plumes shine, always help the badger find berries and roots in the evening and always direct the eel to where it didn't even know where it was meant to go in the first place and would help it reach far off seas.

The badger and the eel looked up at the sky and knew things were once again as they should be.

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

Alby looked at him with a strange face as if he wasn’t sure what to say.

“Enjoy that did toy,” Terry asked but the boy half grinned and looked shy .

“Time to go to sleep,” Terry said, “I don’t have one word left in my head,” something his dad used to say.

After Alby crawled into his tent, Terry sat on his own for a while and drank and listened to the sounds of the night.

The following morning, when Terry crawled out of the tent, the boy was up, trying to light the fire.

‘Mornin’ he said, but no more than a grunt came back.

He’d hope the boy might talk now but things were just the same as there were before; he barely got a word out of him.

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

Again nothing came from the boy - he couldn’t think how to make the boy talk so just sat, rod in hand as if he was on his own for the rest of the morning.

He didn’t catch an eel or see a swan and there was still 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 could see how tired the boy was.

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.

After half an hours 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 your bag out of the back."

He didn't want to go in the house - his sister would ask how it had all gone. Alby wouldn't say a word and what more could he say.

Terry got out of the van to take out the boy's things. Alby looked up at him as if waiting for something to be said but before he could ask, his sister came out and smothered them with questions and offers of tea and saying they looked exhausted and moaned about them getting mud on the carpet and asking about what they'd caught and being nice because she'd been with her new boyfriend all weekend.

Terry said he had work to do and turned to leave when the boy ran up to him and said,

"Can I go again?"

"Fishing?"

"Yes...."

"Of course you can, he said."

Terry walked back to the car and drove off and Alby watched him leave from the doorway.

Peter Daldorph