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Opening extract from
The Bubble Boy

Written by
Stewart Foster

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For me!

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11 years, 2 months and 21 days

‘I’ve got a tattoo. Guess what it is?’

‘A giraffe?’

‘On my ankle?’

‘Okay, an elephant.’

Beth touches me on my arm.

‘Come on, Joe,’ she says. ‘You’re not even trying.’

‘Sorry. Show me it?’

She smiles then pulls up the right trouser of the overalls that all visitors have to wear, even family.

‘Last guess?’

‘Spider-Man?’

‘No.’ She laughs. ‘*You* can get that one when you’re older.’

We look at each other and say nothing.

She used to say she was sorry. I used to tell her it was okay, that it didn’t matter. Now we just look at each other then look away, pretending nothing’s happened.

She pulls down her sock and I look at the tattoo which is grey and red with a bit of blue in the middle.

‘Looks like a smudge.’

‘It’s a turtle dove! . . . And it itches.’ She scratches the turtle dove so hard that I think it might come off. I shake my head at my sister. Beth covers her tattoo, gets up and we stand side by side with the monitor beeping every thirty seconds beside us. We look out at the big grey building opposite with the sun shining on its windows and all the people inside sitting at their desks, staring at their computers. I see them come in and I see them leave, and during the nights and over the weekends I see the empty seats and the lights on dim until Monday morning when all the people come back again.

The air-con clicks, pushes cold air around the room and makes me shiver. Beth asks me if I’m okay and I nod.

‘It’s too hot outside, but it feels cold in here.’

‘Is it hot enough to make tarmac melt?’ I ask.

‘No, not that hot.’ She smiles then puts her arm round me and we stand looking out of the window, watching the planes as they fly above the tall buildings on the flight path in and out of Heathrow. It’s the only window I can look out of, now. There used to be one that let me see into the corridor, and watch the doctors and nurses walk by. But one day the maintenance man came to cover it up with a special white paint that stuck to glass. I asked them why they did it and they said it was for privacy. I told them I couldn’t hear what they were saying. They smiled, said that’s not what they meant. I don’t want any more privacy, though. I have too much of it already.

Beth squeezes me very gently – any tighter and she would bruise me. I’m glad that she’s not afraid to touch me. Whenever

the doctors have to touch me because they're doing an examination or helping me, they hold me like I'm glass. That's why I'm so lucky to have Beth. She says she's lucky to have me too; that she wouldn't know what to do without me. Sometimes, just after she's left, I wonder what that would be like. She'd be able to get a boyfriend and stay with him, or she could go out more with her friends. She wouldn't have to worry when she's in her lectures at university. But she says she's happy spending her time in here with me.

Outside, a man in a grey boiler suit walks across the roof of the office building with a brown bag in his hand. He walks between the black poles and silver tubes, checking the pigeon traps in the gullies, then he takes a knife out of his bag, bends down, opens a cage, grabs a pigeon and slits its throat.

Beth turns away.

'I don't know how you can watch,' she says.

'It's not that bad.'

We turn away and walk back to the bed, past the emergency oxygen tanks and the grey monitors with their flashing red lights and green numbers.

Heart rate: 79

Body temp.: 37.4C

Room temp.: 18C

Humidity: 7%

Air purity: 98.5%.

The drop in air purity is because she's in the room.

I lie down, Beth squeezes onto my bed and we watch TV while the monitors beep and the sensors in the corners of the room flash

every second, my heart rate and body temperature transmitted from sensors on my body by Bluetooth. Footsteps pass faintly by outside and I smell coffee I can't drink and food I can't eat. Me and Beth get tired of watching TV so I flick through my iPad for books and magazines I can't have printed copies of, and she listens to music until my food comes through the hatch at five. It's my superhero power-up food, vacuum-sealed in silver foil. It doesn't taste very nice but it gives me energy. Most importantly, it keeps me alive. I open the foil and eat dried beef and rice while the sky turns from blue to grey outside.

At 7 o'clock Beth gets up, kisses me on the forehead, then walks past my poster of Theo Walcott towards the door. Her white suit makes her invisible against the wall, kind of like Sue Storm from the Fantastic Four. She presses the call button and waits. I don't want her to go. The nights feel so long after she's been here. The door opens and she looks back.

'I'm not sure when I'm here again,' she says. 'I've got a dissertation to write.'

'It's okay.'

'Maybe the day after tomorrow.'

She smiles again then slides between the door and the frame, as though not opening the door too wide will stop the germs from getting in. I look at the white door and imagine her on the other side, taking her suit off in the transition zone. She'll be putting her street clothes back on and pulling the elastic bands out of her hair. Then she'll talk to the nurses and check my graphs. She says she likes looking at them, not just because they're about me, but because they'll help her at university where she's studying to be a

doctor. She's got to do a placement year soon. She says she doesn't where or exactly when she will go, only that she won't be going yet.

I walk over to the window and look down as she crosses the road between the cars and buses stuck in traffic. When she reaches the other side, she turns and looks up at me. I smile and wave, and she waves back at me then leans against the wall and looks at her phone. Every so often she looks up, sees I'm still looking and shakes her head, laughing. I rest my head against the glass, feel it cold on my skin.

My head starts to spin. I swallow and taste metal on my tongue as blood trickles out of my nose and over my lip. At first it spots on the window sill, then it begins to splatter. I hold my nose with my finger to stop the flow. Beth waves as a bus arrives and blocks her out. I want to stay and watch her go but my legs are wobbling, going numb. I put both hands on the sill. Blood pools in the palm of my hand and drips down onto my t-shirt, my trousers, the radiator and then the floor. The grey building is a fog, the traffic is a blur. I need to make it to my bed . . . I need to make it to my bed. The monitor is closer. I fall against it and press the red button.

I'm on my bed, on my side. Greg is holding my nose with a gloved hand.

'It's okay,' he says. 'You're doing okay.'

I try to smile. He smiles back, then gently lets go of my nose and presses the button to bring my bed upright.

'Here.' He gives me a swab and lifts my hand up to my nose. 'Hold it, there.'

My head begins to clear. I look around the room.

‘Sorry about the mess.’

He smiles. ‘It’s okay, mate, just tilt your head forward.’

He checks my pulse and my temperature while another nurse I don’t know checks the monitors. She clicks a button – there’s a hum of a motor, the rush of air and I’m cold again. Greg comes back to me.

‘Let me look,’ he says. He lifts my hand away from my nose, mops my blood off my face and gives me a clean swab so I can do it myself.

‘You’ve been doing too much,’ he says.

‘Too much talking?’ My voice sounds funny because I’m pinching my nose.

Greg smiles and I want to smile too but I’m scared that if I do the blood will come again.

‘Yeah.’

I look down at the red stains on my t-shirt, on my trousers, on the bed, at the spotted trail that goes back to the window. There’s a red smudge on the glass. Greg mops my forehead.

‘I told you, I’m not worried about the mess, Joe. But *this* should be round your neck and not on the bed.’

‘Sorry.’ I take the panic button. The nurse asks Greg if he can manage. Greg nods and the nurse smiles at me as she leaves. I lie back a bit while Greg goes into my bathroom and comes back out with a pair of pyjamas. I take my hand away from my nose.

‘Yeah, it’s good, mate,’ he says. ‘Change into these when you’re ready.’ He puts my pyjamas down then goes back to the bathroom. I hear the sound of running water and smell disinfectant. Greg

comes back out with a bucket. I swing my legs over the bed and take off my t-shirt as he wipes my blood from the window.

‘Maybe you should take it easy tonight, maybe just rest, no laptop or anything.’

I put my pyjama top on and look down as I do up the buttons. There’s a red mark on my white body where the blood has seeped through. I don’t want to shower tonight, though – I’m too wobbly. Greg shakes his head, he knows I hate showers.

‘I saw nothing,’ he says.

I smile, and do up the last two buttons and change my bottoms while Greg mops the floor.

After he’s done he comes back and checks on me again, then watches the machine for a few moments before lowering the blinds and dimming the lights.

‘You want some music, mate?’ he asks.

I nod and he walks over to my laptop and he clicks on Spotify, but it plays so low I can hardly hear. I ask him to turn it up but he says it’s loud enough, then he walks towards the door.

‘I’ll check back in an hour, maybe sit with you for a bit,’ he says.

‘You could stay now if you like.’

He looks at me like he wants to but it’s like someone has got hold of his arm and is pulling him outside.

‘In an hour, mate,’ he says, ‘if you’re still awake.’

I reach down by my side for the TV remote. Greg shakes his head and leaves me alone. Then I hear a buzz from my phone on the side table.

Joe, keep 😊. I’ll be back tomorrow.

I smile. She said she'd be back the day after.

I turn on the TV, flick through the channels for five minutes then turn it off. I lie back and stare at the ceiling. The hiss of the air mixes with the music and with the footsteps and the whispers as people walk the corridors while the lights on my monitors flash like aeroplanes in the night. I wonder what Beth is doing and who she's with. I wish she was with me but most of all I wish I could be with her in her flat. We could eat crisps, drink Coke and watch superhero films on TV. But I can't go there, I can't even walk outside onto the street, because if I step outside of my room I could catch any disease in the world and die.