

BRIGHT STAR

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

‘Look, Mum.’ Robert had said that day. His mum was checking the receipts from the shoe shop and mumbled ‘In a minute Robert.’

‘But you’ll miss him,’ Robert said staring out of the window on the top deck of the bus. ‘A man’s floating up to the sky.’

‘Is he dear?’ His mum said, not looking, sighing to herself while opening and checking the shoe box. ‘Wrong receipt. Wrong shoes.’

‘Mum!’

‘They’ve given me the wrong shoes.’ His mum said showing them to Robert. ‘You’ll be going to school barefoot.’ She laughed. ‘Only kidding darling.’

Robert knew she had been kidding. She was always kidding, making him laugh, even more since his father had died. Sometimes he thought he saw tears behind the laughter, but he never saw her cry. Robert cried. A month and three days since the car crash. Now they travelled everywhere on the bus.

Robert was seven when he saw the man floating up from the pavement and glide past the bus window. His mother still not looking, no matter how hard he tugged at her coat. Maybe she had seen the man and had chosen to ignore him, mumbling about ‘getting off at the next stop and going back to the shop.’ Robert gave up trying to get his mother to look and watched the man rise and rise like a breakaway balloon, then swirl to the right and then the left, buffeted by the swirling wind. The man flailed as if trying to swim and stay afloat in the air, but the current was too strong.

‘Bad wind.’ Robert whispered to himself. ‘He needs help Mum.’

Then a hand came out from the clouds and caught the man. The hand still, as if waiting for the man to calm. Robert turned and pulled the sleeve of his mother’s coat too hard. She frowned but looked, and Robert looked, but the hand and the man had gone.

That night Robert had lain awake and watched the stars, and one seemed brighter than the others, and Robert wondered if that was the man, just like Robert, getting used to his new home. The brightness of the star was the man’s night light because the man, like Robert, didn’t like the dark and the shadows it brought. Robert had never got used to his new house. A year now of Robert sleeping with his night light on, of still getting lost on his way to the new school, even though his mum kept saying, ‘it’s just round the corner Robert. Why do you keep going straight on?’ They had moved because of his mum’s new job at the council. Now it was only the two of them.

The star slowly began to dim, and Robert turned on his side to sleep like he imagined the man doing.

Over the years from seven to fifteen, Robert lost count of the number of people, of all ages, who had floated past him and up to be greeted by the handshake in the sky.

Each night Robert lay awake and waited for the star to dim to say ‘goodnight.’

He had long ago given up trying to explain to his mother, or anyone what he saw.

‘You see what?’ His mother had asked one time, finally hearing him. He had seen the suddenly worried frown and he had quickly said. ‘Just me and my imagination Mum.’

She had been reassured by that. She was always telling his teachers, ‘what an imagination that boy has. Doesn’t get it from me. That would be his...’ She never finished the sentence.

After his sixteenth birthday Robert saw less and less of the floating people, and over time pushed to the back of his mind that he had seen anything at all. He walked the path of job and marriage, and two children, one boy and one girl. The years passed and he walked the path slower with each passing year, as did his mother who seemed to stop increasingly to rest from daily life. She had taken to travelling on the lower deck of buses if she travelled at all. The day arrived when she sat down on life’s path and said. ‘Your mother’s not feeling so good Robert. I’m sure it’s nothing. Old age doesn’t come on its own.’

He was sitting by her hospital bedside listening to her gently snore when she suddenly stopped, and she began to float past him and out the open window. He watched her rise and the hand emerge from the clouds.

‘Try to sleep,’ his wife had said that night as they lay in bed.

‘I’ll try,’ he said but was wide awake staring out the bedroom window. ‘No stars,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘It’s too cloudy,’ he said, ‘there should be stars.’

His wife turned towards the window. She pulled him closer so he could see what she could see. ‘Look.’

The clouds were moving in slow motion like someone removing a cover and the stars slowly revealed. ‘They’re always there,’ his wife said.

He searched the sky and found it. One star brighter than the other.

‘Goodnight,’ Robert said.

‘Goodnight,’ his wife said, cuddling into him. ‘Try to get some sleep, darling.’

Robert didn’t sleep, watching the star gradually dim until he found it difficult to find it amongst the others.

‘You’re still awake,’ his wife said sleepily.

‘She’s settled in her new home,’ said Robert.

His wife forcing herself awake and following his gaze. ‘Do you want to talk?’

‘You’re tired,’ he said.

His wife sat up in bed.

‘When I was seven...’, he began.

Tom Murray is a playwright, fiction writer, poet based in Dumfries. He was a Scottish Poetry Library Poetry Ambassador 2021-23. Publications: The Future is Behind You (poetry), Sins of the Father (play), The Clash (play), Out of My Head (fiction). There is a Place I Go (Poetry.) The Permanent Room (Fiction.)