

Two Dark Tales:

Jack Squat and The Niche

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The Niche

Billy Lender is crouched between the pushed-out cupboard and the wall, as deep into the niche as he can get. His shorts are tickling the back of his knee, but he can't move to scratch himself because he might be heard. Behind his head, the radiator gurgles, loud in his ear, scalding hot. If it touches his hand, or the back of his neck, where his hair has just been cut, he'll get burnt, and give the game away. All he can hear above the gurgle is Mad Millie shouting in the room at the far end of the corridor, in history class, where Billy ought to be this minute. He'd better move now, or he'll be in even worse trouble. But how can he trust the silence to mean he's safe? He doesn't dare think what Mad Millie will do to him for being late. He slapped Jenkins round the head so hard once, for whispering in class, they both lost their balance and Jenkins had blood come out of his ear. He's going to have to risk it.

Billy edges a half-dead foot out from beneath his leg. The cupboard shifts. He stops, holding his breath, waits for the pins and needles to ease up. If only he'd made it to the library

in time, he'd have been safe. He'd have walked out with the others and been at his desk, with Mad Millie writing dates on the board and everyone copying them down in their rough books, ready for homework.

When he nerves himself to straighten his leg, he hears a low voice. 'Gobface.' He freezes. The voice is a baby voice, the way they say he sounds. He can't tell who it is. Horton, Sharples, one of the Lees twins. The worst is Sharples. 'Gobface.' A giggle, something banging against the wall. 'We know where you are.' The voice dragged out as long as the words will go, still in the voice they say is his, Baby Billy, Baby Gobface Billy, like a worm in the ear. 'Come on, Gobface.'

The weight of his whole body on the bent ankle is too much to bear as the feeling rushes back. His eyes fill with tears. When he hears it a third time – not one voice now, but voices, a chorus of voices; Gobface, says the chorus, and giggles, and a second thump, closer now – he stifles a sob. His other leg is dead. His throat is dry. Pressed back into the wall, into the niche in the wall, he feels the scorch of the radiator on the back of his head. After a second, two seconds, five, he can smell something singe. He jerks his head away. The cupboard beside him rattles.

'He's here.' The voice only feet away now. 'I can smell him. What a stink. I bet he's shit himself.' They laugh. He shrinks down into his bones and skin, as small as he can get; he's scared they can hear his heart. Does he stink? Has he shit himself? Cautious, he sniffs the air. Sweat in his eyes makes them smart.

This is when he feels it, like a breath on his cheek, or a breeze

from below, an earthy smell. He flinches, raises his hand to touch where the breath has been, as though to capture it, hold it against him. But he forgets about the breath immediately when the footsteps stop and he sees fingers curl round the side of the cupboard to shift it from the wall. He braces his back against the radiator. He'll fight if he has to, he decides. He will.

‘What do you wretched boys think you’re doing?’

The fingers disappear. He feels the breath again, come back like something cool, a damp cloth to calm fever, almost a whisper.

‘Is that Sharples I can see, crouching in gnome-like fashion behind his accomplices?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Come here, you hopeless child.’

He hears footsteps, a slap, a muffled cry. The nearest feet shuffle. Their turn next, he thinks, gleeful. Their turn to suffer.

‘Now get into whichever class you’re supposed to be in, all four of you, and God help whomever of my esteemed colleagues is expected to teach you anything.’

More footsteps, moving away from him this time, then safety swilling in to fill the space, like water, the parquet shining with it. Messerschmitt to the rescue, thinks Billy.

‘And if I see any one of your loutish faces skulking around the corridors again, under any circumstances, any circumstances whatsoever, it will be my pleasure to introduce you once again to my old friend George. I think you’ve already been acquainted with George, Sharples. Am I right? Your rotund young backside and George are old friends. And

that applies to Lees One and Two. Yes, that's correct, you two. Only Horton remains to be introduced. Am I right? Because that can soon be arranged.'

'Yes, sir.' One voice. Sharples? It sounds like Sharples.

'I'm sorry?'

'Yes, sir.' Chorus of voices.

'That's better. No one likes boys that mumble. Now be off with you, you miserable rabble, before I lose my temper.'

Billy doesn't think about the breath until he's in bed, almost asleep. He hears it again, but inside his ear this time, as though something has lodged there and is slowly moving, settling itself in. He tries to hold his own breath to hear it better, but just as suddenly as it started, the noise is gone. He lies still for what feels like hours, unable to sleep, until the house is silent around him, then reaches beneath the pillow and pulls out his torch and the magazine he stole from the shop when he went in for sweets. There's a man on the cover, his shirt ripped off, tied down by ropes to rocks, with crabs crawling over the rocks towards him. The name of the magazine is *Rugged Men*. He misread it the first time: he thought it said *Rugger Men* – he had to look in the dictionary to find out what 'rugged' meant. The caption, in bright-red letters with spiked yellow edges like lightning, says the man is being subjected to a torture invented by the Japanese army for prisoners of war. His face is twisted with pain as he strains against the ropes. A crab is crawling across his thigh towards the scrap of cloth that covers the private parts between his legs. Another crab is biting into the ball of his thumb with scissor-edged