

Opening extract from
Balaclava Boy

Written by
Richard Parkyn

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The Dancing Man

Just the other day in a galaxy really really near...

Jack Shillaber somersaulted backwards and drew his Lightsaber. *Pbshurstsed* hummed its pugnacious energy. The evil Lord Vader was poised to strike but Jack was ready. He could feel the Force flowing through him. He was a powerful Jedi and Vader could not win. When it came, the attack was no match for Jack's power and agility. The Lightsabers clashed and sizzled like furious hot metal. Jack span, leaped and turned in mid-air drawing his weapon down in a deadly strike.

Silence.

It was over.

Once again, Jack had brought peace and harmony to the galaxy and there were still a few minutes before tea.

'Jack,' shouted his mum from the house.

'Coming, *Aunt Beru*,' he mumbled, dropping his makeshift Lightsaber (a cut-off piece of ash tree). He jogged back to the house. The sky was full of cloud as the evening gloom set in.

'Where've you been, Jack?' his mother asked. 'Dinner's ready.'

'Oh, my watch must be wrong again, sorry.'

‘Jack.’

‘Yes, Mum?’

‘You don’t have a watch.’

‘Exactly. Not only do I not have one, but it doesn’t work anyway,’ he said, squeezing around the end of the table to sit down.

‘Are you sure you didn’t adopt him?’ said Jack’s older brother, Nigel.

‘Sorry, darling,’ said their mum. ‘He really is your own kith and kin.’

Nigel sneered, ‘Is that kin as in – *kin* I hit him now?’

‘And is that kith as in – can I give my big brother a sloppy *kith*?’ said Jack, pursing his lips in Nigel’s direction.

‘Carry on like that and we’ll put the lot of you up for adoption,’ said Mr Shillaber, raising his voice.

The boys’ older sister Sarah fumed. ‘But I didn’t say anything, Dad.’

‘Guilt by association, I’m afraid,’ said their mum, smiling.

Mr Shillaber divided up the rest of the previous day’s roast beef, while his wife dished out the vegetables: potatoes, carrots and greens.

‘Why don’t they ever help set the table?’ said Sarah, glaring at her brothers.

‘Don’t worry, their turns will come,’ said Mrs Shillaber. ‘More greens, Jack?’

‘No,’ he said, solemnly. ‘I don’t really like them.’

‘Well you’ll never grow big and strong if you don’t eat your greens,’ she said.

‘But they’re all slimy.’

‘Well, so are snails.’

‘What’s that got to do with it? I’ve never even eaten snails and I’m sure I wouldn’t like them anyway.’

‘Exactly,’ she said, slopping another spoonful onto his plate.

‘And I think Sarah’s jealous of how much you’re giving me – look, she’s *green* with envy, get it?’

Sarah shot her brother a withering glance. ‘You are so lame.’

Jack was twelve, the youngest of the three children. Sarah, the eldest, was sixteen, and Nigel (Nige to his friends) was fourteen.

Their parents were quite used to all the rubbish spoken in their presence, especially at meal times when they were all together.

They sat at the table in the crowded kitchen – range to one side, cupboards on the other, in front of the cobweb-edged window that overlooked a wildly unkempt garden.

‘What on earth’s that smell – Jack?’ Sarah pulled her jumper over her nose.

‘Sorry, there seems to be a gas leak in my central heating.’

‘Jack, no letting off at the table or you’ll be outside the front door,’ said his dad, sternly.

‘Sorry. It just came out. Better out than in and all that,’ he grumbled.

‘Can’t we just have him sown up?’ said Nigel.

‘I think there’s a new European law about not having children’s bottoms sown up to stop them breaking wind,’ said their mum.

‘I didn’t break anything,’ pleaded Jack. ‘I just bent it a little.’

‘Well please don’t bend it back,’ said Sarah curtly. ‘It may be more than my nose could handle.’

‘But your nose is really tough. You’re always poking and squeezing it in the mirror and it still stays the same shape.’

Everyone laughed except Sarah. ‘Well it’s not as tough as your Neanderthal ridge. It’s so embarrassing having a family member who’s more ape than human.’ She smiled an evil smile and stabbed a potato with her fork. Mrs Shillaber glanced at Jack from the corner of her eye.

‘Sarah,’ said her dad, with a warning tone.

George Shillaber was actually a patient, gentle man – his long face often broken with a broad smile. A practical sort, he could fix anything with a piece of wire or a length of baler cord and like many hands-on farmers he was incredibly strong. When the children were younger they had loved arm-wrestling him, but would always lose, even if they used both arms.

Jack was upset by his sister’s insult. He swallowed uncomfortably against the lump in his throat and paused from chewing a particularly gristly morsel of beef. ‘What’s it like being old, Dad?’

‘Well, you ache more and get hairs where you didn’t think hairs could grow.’

‘Like where?’

‘Oh, your lower back, ears... the palms of your hands.’ He leaned towards Jack, lowering his voice. ‘And sometimes under your tongue.’

‘Urgh, Dad, that’s disgusting,’ said Sarah.

‘You see,’ said Jack turning to Sarah, ‘growing old is uncool, it’s something that should be left to... older people. You should try to enjoy your youth.’

‘You won’t have any youth left to enjoy if you carry on like that.’ She glared darkly at him.

Jack ignored her. ‘I wonder why Superman never seems to have a problem with hair. If he’s so unbreakable, how come he doesn’t have a super-beard that he can’t shave because nothing will cut it except a razor made from kryptonite. He should have a beard down to his arse.’

‘Jack, really.’

‘Yes, Mum – really.’

‘I wasn’t asking a question, Jack, I was – it was an exasperated *really*.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, really! George, tell him, please.’

‘Well you see, Jack, hair dies soon after it grows out the scalp,’ said his dad knowingly. Mrs Shillaber groaned in despair.

‘Ah,’ pondered Jack, ‘but Sarah said she has to have her hair cut to make it grow and that the hair at the root knows when the hair at the end has been cut and that’s what makes it grow more,’ he said, almost confusing himself.

His dad whispered. ‘Well, between you and me, that’s just something women say to justify having their hair cut more often.’

‘That explains it,’ said Jack, putting another oversized forkful of food into his mouth. He chewed and swallowed noisily. ‘I wonder what the state of his pubes were?’ he said, scratching between his legs.

‘*Super*, probably,’ said Nigel, through a mouthful of food.

Sarah realised what Jack was doing. ‘Will you stop that, you dirty little git,’ she snapped. ‘It has to be adoption, it’s the only way.’ She left the table and disappeared upstairs. On her way she

brushed passed a pair of jeans hanging from the makeshift drying lines that ran along the beams of the kitchen ceiling. A pair of his mum's knickers fell on Jack's head.

'Think I'll have those thank you, Jack,' said his mum, reaching over and plucking them from his head.

'Don't mind if you do, thanks very much.'

Soon the rest of the family was busy cleaning their plates.

'Mum,' said Jack quietly. 'Can I leave the fat? It makes me feel sick.'

His mum gazed at him with pitying eyes. 'Well, you're the one losing out, but if you can't...'

Jack's heart sank as guilt washed over him. He couldn't help it, he didn't do it on purpose; it was just the way it was.

Nigel stretched across and picked out the tastiest morsel of fat he could see and popped it into his mouth. 'Mmm, delicious.'

'Yee-uck,' said Jack, pulling a disgusted face.

'You need a bit of fat, you runt. Look – nothing to you,' he said, digging his brother in the ribs. There *was* something to Nigel. In fact, quite a lot of something. He wasn't really fat though, more well-rounded.

Jack attempted to wriggle free. 'Hey, get off you big bully. Mum!'

In his best Darth Vader voice, Nigel (still tickling his brother) breathed heavily then said, 'I have you now, young Ape-walker.'

'Argh,' yelled Jack. 'You're just jealous because you haven't got a prominent brow.'

'Prominent,' laughed Nigel. 'You could balance a birthing cow on that,' he said, studying Jack's forehead. 'No wonder you're so good at heading a football – it always reaches you before everyone else. You've an unfair advantage.' Nigel was on a roll. 'There we all were thinking Homo sapiens were the only bipedal primates left and yet here you are – a grunting Neanderthal walking among us.'

'OK, Nigel, enough's enough,' said his dad. 'No harm being unique, everyone is.'

'It's OK, Dad, I don't care,' said Jack quietly. He squeezed out from the table and turned to his brother. 'Oink-oink!' he shouted and ran off to the toilet.

‘Nigel, you went on a bit much then,’ said his dad. ‘You know how Jack is about his brow.’

‘But –’ began Nigel, then seeing the expressions on his parents’ faces. ‘OK, sorry. It was just a laugh, you know. I was just trying to – never mind.’

‘It’s not us you need to apologise to, is it?’ said his mum.

Nigel sighed. ‘OK.’

A few moments later Jack returned and Nigel apologised.

‘Well?’ said their mum to Jack.

‘Sorry about the *oink-oink*.’ Jack scrunched up his freckly nose and took the plates out to the sink. Embarrassed, he let his thick mop of hair droop down over his eyes.

His mum followed him to the kitchen carrying the pans. ‘About time you had a haircut, young man,’ she said.

‘No, I like it like this. It covers this lump,’ he said, poking his forehead.

‘Don’t be so silly,’ she said. ‘There’s nothing wrong with your head.’

Jack went back and got the last dishes from the table. ‘Can I go and watch telly?’

‘Yes, but not for too long.’

Mr Shillaber was already in the lounge watching the news, sitting as always, at the far end of the sofa, drinking a mug of tea. Nigel disappeared upstairs to do homework as Mrs Shillaber joined her husband on the sofa. Jack slumped down on the comfy chair to the left of the fire.

‘Jack,’ whispered his father, ‘stick another log or two on the fire, won’t you?’

Jack shuffled forward on his knees and chucked in a large lump of coal sending a cloud of sparks up the chimney. ‘More stars in the sky tonight,’ he said, recalling a story his mum used to tell him. He threw a log in and then picked up a second. ‘Ow. Damn it,’ he cursed, dropping it. ‘Ow, ow, ow.’

He raised a quivering hand so his parents could see the deep splinter protruding from his little finger.

‘Oh, that is a nasty one, shall I pull it out for you?’ said his mum.

‘No! No thanks, I’ll do it. Damn, why am I so soft?’

‘Not enough hard work,’ said his dad, grabbing Jack’s other hand and rubbing it between his rough palms.

‘Ah, Dad, stop it,’ said Jack, laughing. ‘I need to pull it out.’

Beneath his skin, a bubble of blood darkened the pink flesh surrounding the splinter. He took hold of it between his thumb and forefinger and pulled agonisingly.

‘Flipping heck. Look – blood.’ He threw the splinter in the fire and held up the bleeding wound.

‘Rinse it under the cold tap and I’ll put a plaster on it for you,’ said his mum.

‘Thanks,’ said Jack quietly. He got up and left the room, his mum following. Mr Shillaber eased forward onto his knees and carefully placed the dropped log on the fire before settling back onto the sofa. A couple of hours later he started to snore. This woke his wife, who had also been asleep (and also snoring). She gently rocked her husband’s arm until his eyes opened. Then she saw Jack.

‘Time for bed, young man.’ She yawned and sat up.

‘But this is my favouritest TV programme ever.’

‘And what’s this rubbish called?’

‘Er, it’s called... um, the er...’

‘You don’t know, do you?’

‘No.’

‘Have you ever seen this before?’

‘Er, maybe.’

‘Are you just watching this for the sake of it?’

‘Well not –’

‘Are you going to bed now?’

‘Um... yeah.’

‘Goodnight,’ she said, and kissed him on top of his head.

Reluctantly he got up and kissed his dad goodnight, then sloped upstairs.

Nigel was fast asleep when Jack entered their shared bedroom. It was a small, cold room despite the thick rugs and heavy curtains. Their beds were set end to end at right angles away from the window, so no draughts could blow around their heads as they

slept. Sharing was OK, but as Nigel got older Jack sensed he wanted more privacy than he was getting. Often Nigel would ask Jack to ‘Get out and leave me alone.’

Sometimes, it was not much fun. One night, Jack was ill with a bad stomach and in the middle of the night woke with a start. He sat bolt upright in bed throwing up at the same time. The combination of his movement and the powerful muscle spasms from his stomach made his projectile vomit gather enough momentum to reach Nigel’s bed. It was not a pretty sight. Indeed, it was not a pretty smell either. Nigel claimed he was emotionally scarred for life.

Jack crept into the bedroom, avoiding the creaky floorboards. He had forgotten about their earlier run-in. He liked his brother, he found something comforting about his happy face and dark, curly hair. He had natural confidence, something Jack could never imagine. He stared at Nigel’s bed, thinking how good it was having such a nice brother. A sharp, sucking snore broke the silence. ‘Come on pipsqueak, hurry up and get to sleep.’

‘OK, calm down, big bro,’ whispered Jack, undressing as quickly as possible. ‘What’s the rush?’

‘Rush’ll be my fist moving towards your head.’

‘Beautifully put. No kiss goodnight then?’

‘Only kiss you’ll get will be a Glasgow kiss.’

‘You wouldn’t do that, you’d feel too *kilty* in the morning.’

‘Ha ha. Very funny. Good night.’

‘Nighty-night.’

In the pitch-black night, far out on one of the most remote parts of Bodmin Moor, an old man danced crazily between a rough wooden bench and a bright, crackling fire. He was waving his arms like a maniac and leaping much further into the air than someone of his age should comfortably be able to manage. The wind swirled and snarled about him as slight wisps of hurricanes spiralled into the air before breaking and dropping their dusty loads back to earth.

The sky was heavy, the clouds low. No stars were visible. A dim glow was the only evidence of the full moon patiently reflecting

the sun's rays and transforming them into a brilliant pale-blue light.

On the bench stood a sleek titanium computer, displaying a rotating strand of interwoven, multicoloured particles that looked biological in their make-up. It was repeating the same mechanical animation of joining the particles before flashing significantly.

Over the fire stood a tripod made of branches from a nearby beech tree, below which hung a heavy, black, cast-iron pot. The contents were bubbling away, occasionally popping with brilliant iridescent flashes that momentarily turned the surrounding area into some kind of bizarre bush disco.

'Yes, yes, ye-e-s, you little beauty.' The old man was dressed in modern hiking gear, from his red thermal hat down to his brand new walking boots, and was jumping up and down while screaming out his utter joy. From the surrounding darkness a figure approached. By contrast he was wearing what seemed to be the costume of someone who was auditioning for the part of an extra in a film about life in the Dark Ages. His scruffy, dark brown robes were well-worn but thick enough to keep him warm. He took hold of the oversized hood and threw it back as he drew into the firelight, revealing a friendly, but ancient, face.

'Hello there,' he said in a calm, low voice. The dancing man had not seen the fancy-dress man wander up and almost jumped out of his modern hiking gear. In fact, he almost jumped out of his skin, his flesh, his bones and his modern hiking gear.

'For the love of Uther,' panted the dancing man, holding his hands to his heart. 'You scared the Cheesewrings out of me, Golitha, sneaking up like that.' He was now busy checking his pulse.

'Terribly sorry, Fynn, but if you'd not been making such a racket you'd probably have heard me coming,' said Golitha, once again in his calm, low voice.

'You could've *called*.'

'*Called*? I didn't think you believed in all that rubbish. Aren't you the one who keeps telling all us damned old fools that we need to be a more progressive – try and keep up with the rest of the world and all that?'

‘Yes, well –’

‘And yet you suggest that I should have *called*.’

‘Oh come on, Golitha. Most of them old ways you and the others cling to have no place in the modern world.’ He paused. ‘But on this occasion, *calling* would have been highly acceptable, thank you very much.’

‘Would you like me to go away and *call*, and then come back?’

‘Now you’re just being ridiculous.’

Golitha shuffled around the fire, staring into the pot and sniffing. ‘Those are very nice boots you’re wearing,’ he said.

‘Why thank you. They’re modern and they’re great – warm, comfortable, waterproof too,’ said Fynn.

‘They must have been expensive.’

‘Yes, well they were quite, they – now hang on just a minute. I see where you’re going with this.’

‘You know, those funds weren’t released for you to make yourself look *cool*,’ said Golitha.

‘Are you suggesting that I used the research fund to buy myself boots? What kind of person do you think I am?’ said Fynn, his voice rising with disgust.

‘I know exactly what kind of person *you* are – remember what happened with Red Ruth?’ he said.

Fynn gasped and bit his bottom lip. ‘Everyone makes mistakes sometimes,’ he said, ashamed.

‘Oh come now, Fynn. I’m just joking with you. Ha! Modern humour. You see? Maybe I’m not such an old fuddy-duddy after all. Now then,’ he said, turning back to the fire, ‘what do we have here? Golitha’s friendly face became world-weary, as though he had remembered something quite dreadful was about to happen. He rubbed his short, grey hair and played with the end of his roughly trimmed beard while gazing into the inviting depths of the pot. He sniffed, closing his eyes. ‘It almost smells good enough to drink.’

‘Well I should think so too. I just hope it’s not too...’ but Fynn’s sentence was lost as his mind wondered over unknown consequences. His face revealed a burden of responsibility. Golitha genuinely felt for him but forced the feelings away – they all had their own part to play and this was Fynn’s. He had chosen it

willingly and knew what he must do.

‘Is it ready?’ asked Golitha solemnly.

Fynn nodded. ‘Oh yes,’ he said. ‘It’s definitely, absolutely and undoubtedly ready.’

‘Did the pom-cuter help at all?’

‘It’s called a *com-pu-ter* and let’s just say getting that was a giant leap forward,’ he said, a wry smile breaking over his face.

Golitha eased himself down onto the bench, his joints were stiffer than they used to be and his limbs ached. He’d had troubled sleep lately – maybe the years were finally catching up with him. Unconsciously, he rubbed his right knee and heaved a great sigh. ‘It’s taken an awful long time – must be several hundred years so far. Has there been any word from Pixash recently?’

‘The last *call* we had was a bit garbled. She’s finally leaving her post. I don’t think we can delay,’ said Fynn, grimly. ‘The time is close, Golitha, maybe closer than we previously thought.’

Golitha’s tired eyes watered from the fire-smoke. Anxiously he asked. ‘Is there time enough?’

Fynn nodded uncertainly, slumping down next to Golitha. He pulled off his woolly hat and scratched his head. As he spoke, his voice almost broke under the gravity of his words. ‘Only time will tell... only time will tell. This may be our last chance. The evil will not wait for us to be ready. It will come.’