



VARIOUS

ALISON WINTER

♦
Toby's World

Over hill, over dale,
over the pond, in Perivale.

Perivale. June, 1985.

It was the summer term when Ace properly met Toby Freeman. The Boy That Never Spoke had joined Ace's fourth year of secondary school in the autumn and had been largely ignored. Toby, in turn, had ignored his schoolmates - even while being jostled or called 'ET', a fairly good-natured nickname inspired by the film sticker on his otherwise bare school satchel. Small for his age, Toby knew better than to take on any of Perivale's fiercest fourteen and fifteen-year-olds.

He didn't help himself, but Ace did feel for him. When picked on, he was like a startled colt, and his eyes would find Ace's in a terrible silent plea. Ace did such a good job convincing people he wasn't interesting enough to tease, she had believed it herself, and had entirely neglected to get to know the boy. She always meant to ask him where he was from and why he had moved to Perivale of all places, but she would find something more exciting to do, like lurking by the bike sheds with the gang and training the first-years to smuggle corner shop contraband to the fifth-years.

Ace's tutor had suggested Ace use some

of her 'natural confidence' to bring the boy out of his shell. Toby was always staring into space and never participating in class discussions, apparently. Ace couldn't see what was so bad about that. Toby sitting silently in the corner, in his own world and not bothering a soul, hardly seemed like a problem, whereas Ace was often accused of being flippant or disruptive when she made a simple contribution. Toby had also somehow got away with wearing a makeshift school uniform for the entire year, which Ace found offensive, as she was given no such reprieve and regularly sent home to change.

She had meant to chat to the little squirt, but now it was June, just six weeks away from the end of the academic year, after which Toby would be returning to his old school, wherever that was, so there was no point in getting to know him now.

On Wednesday 12 June 1985, they were in the thick of a heatwave. No one was wearing their school uniforms correctly, and no one was behaving correctly. School shirts were untucked, sleeves were rolled up, and green and black striped ties were draped around shoulders, if not stuffed in a pocket or a wooden desk. Ice pops were suddenly everywhere, despite the school rule about leaving the grounds to buy snacks. Drinking fountains had become hazardous water fight zones as soon as one child discovered that life was more bearable if you dumped cold water on your head. The weather brought a fever of playful excitement, and most of the teachers knew it was useless to try to work against such hyperactivity for the final hours of the school day. But a small minority of staff were more insistent, and less tolerant, of the more stubborn



students that sweltering afternoon.

From Ace's perspective, she was being sent to after-school detention simply for innocently voicing an opinion, albeit quite loudly, at her French teacher. Everyone else was heading to the canal to see who would jump in first, and now she was missing it.

She stormed into the classroom, poised to lob her tatty school bag at a desk, and to tell everyone why this was such a wild injustice, but was stopped in her tracks on seeing Toby. He was sitting silently at the back, as usual, arms folded. His face usually told her, or anyone else, absolutely nothing, but on this occasion, he was fuming. His hair was damp, and his face was very pink. Toby was alone, except for the teacher he was glaring at.

The teacher burdened with the responsibility of hosting the after-school detention was Mr Maddison, a kindly, crinkly-eyed chemistry teacher approaching retirement, who for some decades now had wrangled the entire student body purely with the power of cutting sarcasm. He never once raised his voice, except for the time a second-year pupil caught fire. A touch eccentric, and decent enough to turn a blind eye to various minor offences, he was affectionately called Mad Dog, but never, ever, to his face. Younger students were always keen to carry his books for him. Older students were keen to concoct experiments to impress him. Other students would steal his tobacco.

Mr Maddison looked up at Ace and cleared his throat. "Take a seat, Miss

McShane," he said in an affectionate mumble.

The wind fully blown out of her sails, Ace couldn't think of anything other to do but comply, so sat down with as much of a flounce as she could muster, albeit by the window with a full view of the sunny afternoon she was being denied. She immediately turned to Toby.

"What are you in for?" she whispered. Toby's nostrils flared, but he remained aggressively silent.

Mr Maddison spoke up. "He won't tell you. He won't tell anyone. He still won't speak."

"He shouldn't have to."

"He can't remain silent forever. Not when class projects suffer and history teachers are feeling fragile." Ace sighed heavily, looking out of the window at the trees lining the golden-green playing field. If it was History, it was Mr Bachelor who would have lost his patience with Toby.

"You do make an odd pair," said Mr Maddison. "Opposite ends of a spectrum."

"What?" asked Ace, trying not to sound too rude.

"We do talk to each other, you know. Your teachers, in the staff room. We know when it comes to class work, one of you can't talk about the subject *properly* and one of you won't talk about the subject at all. We think you can meet each other in the middle and do a project together."

Toby glanced nervously at Ace. She eyed him suspiciously.



“What project?” she asked, dreading the response.

“I would like you to prepare a presentation on the history of Perivale.”

“What flippin’ history?”

“Everywhere has a history.”

“Nothing happens here, sir. The best we’ve got is Greenford disco, and that’s depressing.”

“I can only imagine,” said Mr Maddison, looking like he’d really rather not imagine. “But there was a time before discos. I want you to look up what this land used to be.”

“It’s never been anything. Fields. A hill. Bunch of houses. It’s like a waiting room for something that will never happen.”

Mr Maddison chuckled, tossing his pen down on his pile of marking. “Don’t fret, Dorothy. You won’t always be in Kansas.”

She felt a surge of rage. She hated the name, and she hated the idea. But when she opened her mouth to say so, Toby finally spoke. It startled both her and Mr Maddison to hear his voice, which was clear, assured, and bluntly American.

“Her name is Ace, sir.”

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“Thanks for telling Mad Dog to call me, Ace,” said Ace, once they were finally released and trailing through the Horsenden woods to their neighbourhood. They were made to spend an hour reading dusty, defaced textbooks on the history of the London Borough of Ealing and outline a plan for their presentation on Perivale

before Mr Maddison had allowed them to leave.

Toby shrugged. “Sure,” he murmured. “It suits you.”

“It does?”

“Well, you say it a lot. And Ace means *number one*.”

“I’m not number one at anything,” she said, kicking a twig out of her path. “I forgot you were American, I think. I just knew you came from somewhere really different. Maybe outer space.”

“Florida,” said Toby with a light shrug and gentle smile. “There are comparisons.”

They crossed the canal and wended their way along a network of paved alleyways, which threaded through the small estate of 1930s and 1960s semis. The rows of houses were overlooked by a tired high-rise apartment building. They realised they were to go their separate ways.

Toby paused and Ace noticed. “Oi. Worried about going home?” she ventured. Toby shrugged. “My mom will want to know why I’m late.”

“That’s nice,” said Ace. “My mum won’t even notice.”

Toby frowned. “Isn’t she home?”

“Yeah. She’s there. Same home, different planet. Whatever.”

“I see,” said Toby, baffled.

“You can walk around the block with me if you like. Might as well. You’re late anyway.”

The boy grinned and scurried to her side. "Good thinking."

They went past the old witch's house, which was really just a normal house owned by a single woman of about 38, whose black cat liked to sit in the window. They made a game of scurrying past in case the woman saw them and cursed them. They left a tribute of some daisies on a lesser-known Perivale landmark – an ancient, abandoned rusting bicycle next to a phone box, that people placed fresh flowers on now and again. They grimaced as they passed by the noisy garage where Britain's next pop group sensation was rehearsing, very badly.

They got chatting and walked the circuit around the block more than a few times until they noticed they were being watched by the eagle-eyed Mrs. Bates from Number 33.

"Probably thinks we're scouting for a place to burgle," Ace told Toby. "Paranoid, that one. Always comes complaining to the mums and dads when we're not even doing anything." They paused on the corner, neither of them ready to part company just yet.

"We could just go to my house," suggested Toby, and Ace thought it sounded more interesting than just heading home. Something to do in a place where nothing ever happens.

They arrived at the end of a cul-de-sac, at a small house that was as unassuming as Toby himself. The hose had clearly been in use, coiled as it was like a snake on the driveway.

Toby's mother Kelly seemed both shocked and delighted that Toby had

brought home a friend from school, to work on a project no less, and immediately furnished them both with orange squash and custard cream biscuits on a tray, while talking about the heatwave and how she'd been fighting to keep cool all day. She asked Ace a succession of questions, which Ace fielded politely until Toby explained they had homework to do, and the teenagers sought refuge upstairs.

Toby's bedroom was pretty bare, except for one lonely-looking NASA poster, a few books, and an Evel Knievel action figure with its stunt cycle sitting on a shelf.

"It was the only thing I was allowed to bring with me," explained Toby, seeing that Ace was looking at it. "Besides clothes and school stuff. Got him for my eighth birthday."

"I'm gonna have a motorbike one day," said Ace, handling the toy with fascination. "I'm gonna do stunts." She wound up the base until it propelled the stunt cycle and its rider across the room. She then excitedly repeated the process to see if she could get it to do a mid-air somersault.

Toby switched on his small radio cassette recorder. The local station was playing a charity re-recording of *You'll Never Walk Alone*, the Number One song for that week. He wrinkled his nose and started to rewind a cassette tape. "Have you heard what's Number One in the US?" he asked Ace. "It's much better than this."

"It's different?" she asked, immediately realising that was a stupid question. Of course, it would be different. She had just never thought about it before.

No derision from Toby. He just smiled warmly and pressed play when the tape was ready. *Everybody Wants To Rule The World* started to play. “This is ace,” Toby declared with a cheeky grin, sitting down on his bed.

“This came out months ago!” laughed Ace. “It’s brill, though.”

Toby smiled, then indicated Ace’s battered canvas school bag, which was littered with random patches and pins.

“Where did you get the **Thunderbirds** button?”

“Button? Oh, my *badge*.” Ace grinned. “From a kid in the reading club, called Aisha. You get paired up with a first-year who’s behind with their reading. She was a sweet kid. Her big brother gave her his **Thunderbirds** lunchbox because he didn’t think it was cool anymore, and we used to talk about our favourite characters. I found a couple of **Thunderbirds** novels in the library, which made her actually want to read. Not sure why no one else thought of that.”

Toby nodded. “Adults are too busy to think of things like that.”

“Yeah,” agreed Ace, solemnly. “When the reading club finished, she gave me a **Thunderbirds** badge to remember her by. I put it on my bag so she would know it’s always cool, and her brother was a wimp.”

“I have some badges you can put on your



bag!” Toby happily announced. He pulled open a drawer in his bedside cabinet to reveal a repurposed ice cream container full of badges, pins, and patches; all of which seemed to be related to the United States armed forces. Toby scooped up a bunch of them in one hand and deposited them on the bed, so Ace could better see them.

“My dad gives me these,” Toby said. He held up a golden-winged eagle-shaped pin and a small circular navy pin. “This one is a Golden Eagle US military pin, and this one’s a CIA shield pin. I think my dad hopes they will inspire me to enlist, or something”



Ace examined the badges. “CIA? Cool! Spies.”

“Kind of.” Toby sifted through the badges and picked up a shiny black pin with a white eagle on it. “This one I do like. It’s the Airborne Division, basically US Army air assault. They’re called The Screaming Eagles.”

“They sound nice,” joked Ace.

“Yep. Real nice guys. This bald eagle is named “Old Abe” in honour of President Lincoln. Here.”



“Thanks, these are ace,” she said, appreciatively. She set about attaching the pins to any spare area of her bag. Old Abe was promptly given a prime spot on the bag strap.



Toby continued to sort through his collection.

“Are those from NASA?” asked Ace excitedly, spotting what appeared to be space rockets.

“They are. These are my favourites.”

Toby picked up two embroidered patches, almost identical in design, but for colour.

One was white, red and navy, and the other was grey, red and navy.



“This is the official patch for the Approach and Landing Tests flown by the Space Shuttle Enterprise during 1977,” said Toby, handing over the one with the white perimeter. “And this grey one might have been a prototype. Probably very rare. Here you go. To remember me by.”

He handed them to Ace, who looked at him in surprise.

“I can’t take these.”

“Sure, you can. I have more back home. Get them all the time. I can mail some to you. Lots of NASA missions coming up. There’s the Atlantis mission in November. It will have the first Mexican astronaut, Rodolfo Neri Vela, on its crew. And in December, they’re actually putting a member of Congress in Space! Bill Nelson – on the space shuttle Columbia. And next year, a teacher...”

He trailed off. “Sorry. This is why people say it’s a good idea I don’t start talking.

Apparently, I monologue a lot. That, and I’m too American.”

“I don’t mind you talking,” said Ace. “It’s more interesting than what most boys have to say. Most of them in my year haven’t got beyond grunting.” She studied the patches. “But why don’t you put these on *your* bag?”

Toby sighed. “I don’t really like people knowing what I like, or don’t like. It usually gives them ammunition. I keep myself to myself.”

“Oh,” said Ace, now understanding the empty satchel and the blank walls. “I’m sorry.”

She pocketed the patches. “Is your dad a spy, then?”

“He’s a pilot.”

“What’s he doing here?”

“He’s on secondment at an airbase, RAF Northolt, just down the road.”

Ace’s eyes lit up. “Wicked! That’s the Ministry of Defence.”

“It’s used as a location in three James Bond movies.”

“Three?” exclaimed Ace, making a mental note to rewatch some Bond films. “Are you *sure* he’s not a spy?”

“He’s not allowed to talk about what he does in any detail, but that’s just standard for the military. He’s normally stationed at MacDill Air Force Base, near where we live in Tampa. Right now, I think he’s training the Royal Squadron, or something.”

“Probably working out what to do if we get nuked.”

“No, I’m pretty sure there’s nothing we can do if we get nuked.”

Toby went to his wardrobe and pulled out a large black jacket with an orange lining. “Check this out. It’s a flight jacket. He’s always trying to get me to wear it.” He held it to the side as if waving a red flag to a bull.

Ace stood. “A bomber jacket! Let’s see you in it, then.

“It looks ridiculous on me. My dad is waiting for me to grow into it, but I’m *taking my time*.”

“You’ll get there,” said Ace, kindly. “May I?” She indicated the jacket and Toby handed it over. Ace slipped it on smoothly and checked her reflection in the wardrobe door mirror.

“Aceeeeeee,” she intoned with glee, pushing up the sleeves, pulling down the sleeves, zipping it up, unzipping it again, then taking it off and flicking it over her shoulder with added *swagger*.

“It suits you better than it suits me,” said Toby, failing to keep the sadness out of his voice.

Ace stilled and handed the jacket back, feeling a little tactless. “You don’t have to be like him, you know.”

Toby hung the jacket back up in the wardrobe and sat down on the bed. “Tell him that. I’m the only child of an all-American action hero.”

Ace sat next to him. “Like Evel Knievel?”

“Yeah.”

“But you don’t want to be Evel Knievel?”

“I don’t want to be the guy on the bike. I want to be the guy who *designs* the bike. Someone has to figure it all out. The calculations. Computers used to be people, you know. Mathematicians computing everything. Geniuses. But also, hard work. That’s how we got to the moon.”

“You want to work for NASA, then?”

“Once I’m 16, I can try to get an internship. My birthday’s in September. And I’ll be back in Florida by then.”

Ace raised her eyebrows in surprise. She wasn’t even going to be 15 until August. Toby was almost a whole year older. He was clever, and now Ace realised his silence had been to avoid attracting the wrong attention, rather than because he had nothing to say. Turned out, he had everything to say.

“All right, brainbox,” she said. “Might as well sort out this presentation, then.”

* * * * *

The good weather continued as they inched ever closer to the summer holidays. Even a tedious school assembly, featuring a succession of group presentations, couldn’t spoil the good mood that morning. The year above had finished their O-level exams and already disappeared into the summer. Ace’s year group now ruled the roost, and they knew it.

When Ace and Toby stood, there were calls of ‘silent but deadly’, ‘ET go home’, and a few wolf whistles. Ace glared daggers at the culprits, then turned to Toby, who appeared strangely unperturbed. He gazed

up at her with a half-smile and shuffled his notes. With a pang, Ace considered she had brought him out of his shell and possibly could have done so a lot sooner.

She cleared her throat and announced the title of the presentation to a room full of smirking teenagers, and tired, sceptical teachers; including Mr Maddison, Madame Burke – Ace’s French teacher – and Toby’s impatient Mr Bachelor, who was scowling into his coffee mug, and appeared to be one intrusive thought away from throwing it all in.

“Perivale: Boring then and boring now.”

The teenagers tittered, and the teachers rolled their eyes.

“Miss McShane...” warned Mr Maddison, evenly.

Toby interjected. “We’d like to start with the etymology.”

There were audible gasps at the sound of his voice, which Toby ignored. “The name Perivale is a combination of the words ‘perie’, meaning pear tree, and ‘vale’, meaning wide valley. It was first recorded in 1508, spelt ‘P.y.r.y.v.a.l.e.’”

Ace glanced at Mr Maddison, who was peering over his glasses with a cautious optimism.

Toby shifted on his feet. He was clutching his notes for grim death. “So, Perivale means the pear tree in the wide valley, something bearing fruit in the middle of nothing.” Toby continued, unfazed by Ace’s grimace. “Pear trees are sacred all over the world. They’re seen as a Tree of Life.”

Murmuring and whispering continued, with an utterance of ‘Yankee-Doodle’, but was promptly shushed by Mr Bachelor.

“The ancient Chinese believed pears were a symbol of immortality because pear trees can live up to 250 years. They produce fruit for decades, so pears were also a symbol of wealth and success.”

A fourth-year snorted. “Tell that to Kirsty Hughes. Everyone says she’s pear-shaped.”

Ace winced. The whole presentation was going pear-shaped, though, to her surprise, most of the room seemed quite engaged.

“Yes, she is,” responded Toby clinically. “And that’s the other thing about pears. They’re linked to the female form and associated with femininity and fertility.”

A predictable amount of sniggering occurred.

“Anything else we should know?” prompted Mr Maddison.

“Well, in some places, pears symbolise death, rebirth, and remembrance.”

“About Perivale, Mr. Freeman.”

“Oh. I defer to my colleague,” said Toby, stepping backwards in a mild panic and bumping none-too-gently into the wall behind him.

Ace instinctively came forward, and she could see Shreela grinning, clearly hopeful for some more McShane-style entertainment.

She resisted.

Now, strangely inspired by Toby's composure, she reeled off the facts she had scribbled down in her notebook, alongside the lyrics to *Everybody Wants To Rule The World*.

"Perivale used to be farmland, and then it was a rural parish, complete with a village blacksmith. It was famous for growing hay which fed horses in London in the 19th century. This whole area used to turn into a lake if the River Brent flooded. Then, in the 1930s, some blokes cut Perivale in half by sticking the A40 in the middle of it. The most notable landmark in Perivale, apart from the highest point in the borough, Horsenden Hill, is, drumroll, a vacuum cleaner factory."

Mr Maddison removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Thank you for that picturesque summary, Ace."

Toby stepped forward. "The Hoover Building," he added quickly, "was called a Modern Palace of Industry. It has Art Deco architecture and was recently granted a Grade II listing."

Ace took a deep breath. "And it has nothing to do with Edgar Hoover, and definitely didn't used to be the FBI headquarters, so get that through your skull, Midge, you idiot."

* * * * *

They made it to the end of term. Everyone was dashing about, getting their shirts signed and schoolbooks autographed. Even Toby, somewhat dishevelled, was excitedly scrawling on anything people handed to him in a pink neon highlighter.

Mr Maddison approached Ace, who was

observing the chaos and enjoying an ice pop.

"Ace, your results this year confirm to me you have an aptitude for maths and science. Though not so much for French."

"When am I going to need another language?" scoffed Ace. "Not like I'm going travelling any time soon."

Mr Maddison gave her a sympathetic smile. "I'd like to see you attend the science club next year. It will boost your skills and get you ready for Chemistry A-level."

Ace looked over to her friends. Stevie and Shreela had begun the water fight to end all water fights and were sliding around shrieking.

Mr Maddison noticed. "Now, don't worry about them. Try to think about your future."

"In Perivale?" Ace replied, sullen.

"In peacetime, in 1985, on the fringes of one of the world's biggest, freest and most exciting cities, with your whole life ahead of you and a free university education if you should want one. More than my generation ever had."

"Don't see the point, sir," said Ace. "None of us are going anywhere. Half the year above ditched their O-levels as soon as they were old enough to work."

"A handful of students, Ace. And lucky for you that you're young in your year and can't abandon your education."

"But A-levels are just for getting into university. Waste of time if your future's at the Horsenden cafe."



He sighed gently. “Get them anyway. You never know how they might serve you later. You might learn something useful.”

“What, like freezing a rose in liquid nitrogen?”

“That’s not all I do, Miss McShane.’ Mr Maddison looked over to the boy now watching this exchange impassively, with pink highlighter all over his fingers.

“You should spend more time with young Toby,” said Mr Maddison. “He knows that above the clouds there is an expansive sky.”

“Yeah, because he comes from a place with space rockets and rollercoasters, not riots and dodgy canals,” protested Ace.

“The canal is actually quite clean. Have a good summer, Ace.”

Mr Maddison wandered off down the corridor, deftly avoiding a water bomb projectile, and disappeared into his office.

Ace looked to Toby, who was watching her, expectantly.

“Everyone’s heading to the hill,” he said.

* * * * *

They were such golden hours, as the afternoon stretched on. The teens sat in circles, sharing food and drink and secrets, without a care in the world. Ace and Toby lay on the grass of Horsenden Hill, soaking up the sun, talking about anything and everything. The rest of the gang gradually peeled off to one thing or another, with Midge and Stevie starting a light-hearted wrestling contest outside the youth club. Evening fell, and the London skyline began

to light up. Stars gradually appeared.

They always made Ace feel lost, as if there was somewhere else she was supposed to be. She found herself unable to move away from Toby’s side, even with an increasing chill in the air. Giggles could be heard over *The Boys of Summer* playing on Midge’s huge ghetto blaster. That was where she would normally be, hanging around with the gang, not stargazing with the weird, quiet kid.

“If you want to go be with them, I understand,” said Toby with a weak smile, as if he’d heard all of her thoughts.

“You’re leaving soon,” Ace said with finality. “I’m stuck with these idiots forever.”

Toby sighed. “Leaving just as it was getting good.”

“It’s only getting good because school’s over and you know you’re getting out of here.”

Toby sat up to look Ace in the eye, absently picking the grass. “You really don’t like it here, huh?”

“It’s just... nothing. Small life.”

“That’s what I like about it,” he said, playing with the blades of grass between his fingers. “A little hill. A little wood. A little canal. A village inside a great city.”

“A small housing estate next to a motorway next to a great city, more like.”

“But all you have to do is get on the underground, and you’re in London. A fifteen-minute walk from here, and you’re

on the Piccadilly line, and your Hyde Park is a short train ride away.”

“My Hyde Park?” questioned Ace, puzzled.

“Yeah. I have my own Hyde Park. Kind of. ‘Historic Hyde Park, North’. It’s the oldest district in Tampa. And a train ride to Downtown Tampa is about the same time as the Piccadilly line takes to Hyde Park Corner.”

“Never really thought about it like that. Mad Dog keeps saying we’re on the doorstep of London, and anything can happen. But it doesn’t feel like that.”

“What does it feel like?” Toby watched Ace as she pondered his question. She looked up at the dark sky as if it would have an answer. Together they watched the pearly wisps of low cloud fly across the sky, like an ivory veil floating between the two teenagers and the bright stars above.

Ace found her words. “Like, we’re just nowhere. Nothing here is leading anywhere. Not for people like us. The gang, I mean.”

Toby didn’t know what to say, so he joined Ace in staring at one particular star.

“Where I’m from,” said Toby, “it’s a very busy city, night and day, with huge skyscrapers, and a beach. Everything is big and loud.”

“Sounds ace!”

“I think you would like it a lot. But, like my dad says, you always want what you don’t have. Perivale is so peaceful.”

“Dull, more like.”

“At least you can see the stars when it’s not too cloudy. We have to drive to get somewhere without light pollution, so I can use my telescope. Even this close to London, it’s better here.”

Ace was lost in thought, still looking at the one star, the brightest in their field of vision.

“My grandmother used to say I fell from a star.”

“Maybe it was that one,” said Toby, pointing at it. “Do you know its name?”

“What? Of course not,” scoffed Ace.

“It’s called Alioth. The star’s astronomical designation is *Epsilon Ursae Majoris*.”

“Bit of a mouthful,” quipped Ace. “How do you know that?”

“It’s the brightest star in the constellation of *The Great Bear*, or *Ursa Major*, in Latin.”

“I can’t see a bear.”

“No, it’s pretty faint right now, but what you can see is an asterism – that’s a pattern of stars smaller than a constellation – called the *Big Dipper*. That’s the seven brightest stars, and the tail part, of *The Great Bear*.”

Ace screwed up her face, wondering if she should be looking for some kind of Ferris wheel or fairground attraction in the sky.

“You call it *The Plough* here. The French refer to it as a saucepan, which makes sense.”

“Does it?”



“Take the star you fell from, Alioth, and look to the left. There’s a double star – one very bright, and one, its companion, a little faint. The Arabians call those two *horse and rider*. They’re said to travel together, bound by gravity.”

Ace shook her head fondly. “Do they have catchy names as well?”

“Just as catchy,” said Toby, with a grin. “The bright one is *Mizar*, and its faint companion is called *Alcor*.”

“Falkor?”

“*Alcor*. Comes from the Arabic for *faint one*.”

“The horse and rider,” murmured Ace, thoughtfully. “Out there in space.”

“And now you know where to find them, because their names are also their address, within *The Great Bear*. *Mizar* is *Zeta Ursae Majoris*, and *Alcor* is *80 Ursae Majoris*.”

“I think it’s always better to call things exactly what they are,” said Ace. “Call a spade a spade. No airs and graces. Don’t know why everything has to be so pretentious. How are kids supposed to get into things, when you give them names like *Alphabeti Spaghetti*, *Agadoo*, *Rama Lama Ding Dong*?”

“It’s just a number, then the constellation. Like first name and last name, or a street address.” Toby brushed dry mud off his hands, as Ace continued to frown. “Tends to be Greek, Arabic, Latin, and a bunch of mythology involved. There are plenty more stars to name. The International Astronomical Union want to set something up.”

Ace scoffed. “Maybe that’s what you’ll do, instead of being Evel Knievel Junior. Name stars one day. Planets. But something easier to remember. Janet. John.”

“Jolene?”

“Much better.”

Toby chuckled. “They won’t necessarily be in English, you know. There tends to be a more international approach to naming things.”

“As long as it’s not French.”

“Can’t promise that. Anyway, those two stars are the bend in the handle of the saucepan. If you follow that line back down to the right, you can see the bowl of the pan.”

Ace blinked into the dark as the promised shape of a saucepan came into focus. “The great saucepan in the sky,” she breathed. “Where I was cooked up.”

“That explains it,” agreed Toby.

More hours passed. More hours than made any sense. More stars shone, and even a planet gleamed in the south-west sky. Toby went into considerable detail about spectroscopic binary stars and companion stars, and Ace listened, making all the right noises in all the right places. But she was unable to stop looking at her sky saucepan, wondering why it felt more like home than Perivale ever had.

* * * * *

The start of the summer holidays heralded a miserable change in the weather, just in time for Ace and Toby to not enjoy it. The only film on at the cinema was **Return to**



Oz, which Ace flatly refused to watch. The rain did present an opportunity to start a *Dungeons and Dragons* club, however, with Shreela, Stevie, and even Midge, who became devoted to painting little orcs and goblins to make the game 'more realistic'.

When the weather cheered up again in early August, they headed to the youth club at dusk most evenings. Toby took it upon himself to teach Midge the most effective way to stack wood for a bonfire, and Midge responded to this with a war cry and the violent distribution of lighter fluid. Ace thought Toby was doing pretty well to handle the chaos of her other friends, though he did spend the evening ensuring there was nothing - and no one - between him and the fire extinguisher inside the youth club, at all times.

Ace was enjoying her lazy school-free mornings. She was slowly getting ready and thinking up plans for her birthday to tell the gang, when her mother casually relayed a message to her, like it was nothing. Some boy called last night, she said. *Leaving sooner than expected*, she said. Ace ran all the way to Toby's house without stopping, almost crashing into Kelly Freeman as she was coming out outside with a heavy suitcase.

"Easy!" Kelly chided, as Ace hurtled past her and ran straight up to Toby's room.

Toby was sitting on his bed writing a note when Ace appeared in the doorway. He jerked, startled, then laughed with relief. "I was writing you goodbye," he said, pushing the pen aside.

"You can't go yet!" cried Ace.

Toby stood, speaking gently. "It's my

dad. They rebooked his flights so he can get back to Tampa for some event. So that means me and Mom, too. They fought about it a lot. Embarrassing. Had to close the windows so the neighbours didn't hear."

Ace wasn't going to cry. She was determined. But Toby hugged her, which made this very difficult. When they separated, he turned to his ram-packed holdall, and next to it, his various few possessions. "I can't take it all with me. We have too much stuff. I'm donating my cassette recorder and the books. Our neighbour is taking care of that."

"What about Evel Knievel?"

"He's safely packed. But, uh, I might accidentally-on-purpose leave this jacket behind. It's yours if you want it." He patted the shiny black material.

Ace found herself speechless for the first time in her life, though mostly because she didn't trust her voice to come out right. She tenderly picked up the black bomber jacket and thought about her disintegrating canvas schoolbag. She could pick off the patches and transfer them onto her new coat. Light it up, like the night sky.

"Toby!" called his mother from downstairs. "We have to get everything in the car!"

Toby swallowed and reached for the note he was writing. He handed it to Ace. "My address in Tampa. Write me. You could always come stay."

Ace took the note and looked at Toby's street address that he'd handwritten so



neatly. It seemed so alien to read. Two thousand and what? Four numbers, for an address? How long were the streets in America? The words began to blur as tears formed in her eyes.

"I'm sorry I left it so long to talk to you," she blurted out, unplanned, almost crumpling the note in her hands with frustration.

"I'm sorry I left it so long to talk at all," quipped Toby. He forced the zip closed on his holdall. "Thanks for being Ace."

"Don't be so naff," hissed Ace, unable to look at him.

"I like being naff," said Toby. He was close to eliciting a smile from her, and happy about it. "Try not to get kicked out of school. You might not be able to see a future for yourself, but I can."

Iceworld

Ace had been on the planet Svartos for months now. She lay on her bed in her Iceworld quarters, unable to sleep, and tugged her bomber jacket tighter over her shoulder. As she did, she felt the Airborne Screaming Eagles pin with her fingers. What would Toby think of this? She was airborne now, on another world altogether, yet instead of serving fast food in West London, she was now serving fast food in an ice cream parlour in a tourist attraction in space. So much for her bright future.

Toby had sent her another NASA patch through the post in early 1986. It was for the Columbia Space Shuttle – the one with a member of Congress aboard. She hadn't even replied. In the thick of studying for

O-levels and arguing with her mother, she just felt resentful that there was a blue sky out there that she couldn't get to.

And now she was far away, perhaps next to one of those dim stars in the night sky. *A faint companion*, Toby said. She could use someone like Toby now. Someone thoughtful, someone knowledgeable, instead of the ignorant, entitled space travellers who talked down to her. Not to mention the likes of Sabalom Glitz, who had sat there all day studying a stupid treasure map like an anxious pirate, thanks to some legend about a terrifying dragon.

She curled up, feeling painfully small. How many more times could she wish upon a star, or mix up nitro, to propel her into a new reality? She felt all out of luck. There had to be a way off this planet, and she would hitch a ride as soon as she could. In truth, she knew the more immediate challenge was getting through one more day in her sorely needed job, without giving in to the impulse to tip a milkshake on someone's head.

The TARDIS

Ace hadn't been travelling with the Doctor for long before it occurred to her that their next adventure didn't need to be about aliens, or different planets, or even different decades. Looking over the badges she had attached to her jacket, she felt a pang of excitement at the prospect of visiting Tampa, Florida, in her own time.

The Doctor was in the console room scowling at the controls in deep thought, when Ace joined him.

"Professor, there's somewhere, or

someone, I want to visit. A friend. In Florida.”

The Doctor, who had been giving some thought to his next move, was baffled by the request.

“Florida?” queried the Doctor, rolling the ‘r’ with a note of suspicion.

“On this date, at this address,” confirmed Ace, handing the Doctor a very crumpled note with faded, blotted ink, and at least two coffee rings staining it.

The Doctor began fiddling with the controls. “As you wish, Ace. Hope you’re prepared for the culture shock.”

Historic Hyde Park North, Tampa, Florida

Friday, September 4, 1987.

They knocked on the door of a Craftsman-style bungalow on West Bristol Avenue. The property had an obligatory white picket fence framing an immaculate rectangle of bright green lawn. Two symmetrical dark green hedges flanked the steps leading up to the wooden porch, and a US flag was hanging proudly from a white, tapered column.

A taller and more angular Toby answered the door.

“Happy Birthday, Starman,” proclaimed Ace, as the Doctor lifted a paper plate, presenting a chocolate cake covered in Smarties and a candle in the shape of the number 18 flaming away.

Toby’s mouth fell open as he took in the black bomber jacket adorned with a multitude of badges. Ace gave a quick

twirl, pushing her hands down into the jacket pockets, to stretch it out and best display the pins and patches.

“Like what I’ve done with it?”

“You have loads!” cried Toby.

“Yep. And each one a story.”

“Happy Birthday, Toby,” said the Doctor, inadvertently blowing out the candle with his breath. He immediately blew it back alight.

Toby’s eyes widened. “Magic candles?” he ventured, knowing full well that wasn’t what he’d just witnessed.

“I can explain,” said Ace, with a large grin. “Sort of. Can we come in?”

* * * * *

If Toby was unsettled by Ace’s explanation, and the presence of her alien friend, he was doing a great job of remaining calm. He first of all made tea, just as he’d learned to do during his year in England, and with some pride, presented the Doctor and Ace with a perfectly brewed pot, accompanied by milk and sugar on a tray. He sat them in the sitting room, where Kelly Freeman had put up birthday decorations for a gathering with friends and neighbours that evening. Kelly was at the store working through a long list of party provisions, and Toby’s father, as ever, was at the local airbase.

Toby sat and listened. Ace’s tales of venturing into the stars with a man with two hearts were met with interest, though the Doctor could see the young man was also sceptical. Toby’s face lit up when he talked about his imminent move to

Langley Research Centre for a twelve-month internship before he would be starting college.

“My dad made me finish high school,” he explained, tucking into more birthday cake.

“Not a bad idea,” said the Doctor.

Ace pulled a face. “Terrible idea if you ask me. Best off learning on the job. Isn’t that right, Professor?”

The Doctor said nothing but peered pointedly at Ace over his tea.

Toby shook his head, regarding Ace affectionately, then got up and left the room. When he returned, he dropped a small collection of badges into her hand.

“These are for you,” he said to Ace. “I was saving them up to send in one big package. But I don’t know, I got disheartened.” He sat down, immediately lost in thought.

Ace thumbed through them, remembering the first time Toby had presented her with his badges. She still had various patches and pins (some new, and some old favourites from her old school bag) to add to the bomber jacket, but she kept changing her mind about where they should go. Now she had even more to factor in. She was excited to see Toby had given her an embroidered NASA patch for the Atlantis mission, and a little golden NASA shuttle pin, which Ace immediately fastened to her jacket.

“Everything’s been grounded since Challenger,” said Toby quietly. “Turned out that delayed Columbia mission was the

last successful Space Shuttle flight before the fleet was grounded indefinitely.”

“Yes,” said the Doctor, looking Toby in the eye. “Terrible. But things will get started again, you know.”

“Sure will,” said Toby, smiling warmly at Ace. “And soon. I guess you’ve found that home of yours, after all? Somewhere up there? *Alioth?*”

“*Epsilon Ursae Majoris*,” the Doctor mumbled fondly, as if thinking of an old friend. He absently stirred his tea. “Lovely star. Bit peculiar.”

The teenagers ignored him. Ace picked a smartie off a piece of cake and ate it. “Thought you were gonna come up with some better names for the stars. Ones that people can actually say?”

Toby grinned. “Soon as I can. I’ll set up a working group on star names, or something.”

“Working Group on Star Names. W.G.S.N.” intoned the Doctor. “Sounds familiar.” He tapped his foot with his umbrella as he tried to remember where he’d heard that before.

Once the tea, cake and tales of time and space were concluded, it was time to leave Toby to the rest of his eighteenth birthday. He saw them out, glancing nervously at the street for nosey neighbours or approaching parents. He had no way to explain these two.

“Thanks for coming to see me, Ace.” His eyes wandered to the Doctor. “Be careful out there.”

Ace smiled proudly at her old school



friend. So much and so little time had passed, all at once. “We will! We’ll come and see you again, won’t we, Professor? We’ll think of you when we’re up in the stars again!” She turned on her DMs and headed down the path.

The Doctor tipped his hat, and Toby mimicked the gesture back, watching the older man twirl his umbrella like Chaplin with his walking cane. The duo linked arms and were soon gone from sight. *They made an odd sort of team*, thought Toby, but it made sense somehow.

“I’ll be right here,” he murmured, feeling more than ever he had a friend who really did fall from a star.

* * * * *

Back in the TARDIS, the Doctor looked up a thing or two and took great delight in telling Ace that the Working Group on Star Names was indeed set up, though not for some time, and not by NASA.

“In 2016, humans formalised, or will formalise, the *proper* names for exoplanets and their host stars. They wanted to differentiate between the astronomical designation, and a name more suited to everyday conversation.”

“No airs and graces,” mused Ace.

“The chosen names are hardly prosaic, even if the name of the working group is.”

“Was it him, Professor? I mean, will it be Toby? One day?”

The Doctor peered at the records again. “It doesn’t say. But then it wouldn’t, would it? Toby doesn’t seem the sort to pursue

recognition. Curious choice of words, though. W.G.S.N.”

Ace tried to take in the information flitting across the monitor, while the Doctor understood it effortlessly. He chuckled to himself as if enjoying the story.

Ace pressed the Doctor. “But he will do great things? Calculate missions? Design rockets? Send people to space? Engineer stunt cycles?”

The Doctor placed his hands on Ace’s shoulders. “Ace, Toby will do great things, alongside a great many people, who are all working towards greatness. But his greatest gift, and joy, is doing his brilliant work, and being part of a whole.”

“Toby?” said Ace, in disbelief. “But he didn’t even talk to anyone, for months.”

“Well,” said the Doctor, plotting in a new course for the TARDIS. “Something changed that. He obviously learned there is value in coming out of his shell.”

Ace shivered. She felt uneasy about how much, or how little, she might influence things, and didn’t want to think about that at all.

“Where next, Professor?” she chirped.

“How about a little tour of Tampa Bay, seeing as we’re here? But then I need to pop into 1963.”

“1963? What for?”

“Oh, just to lend someone a hand,” replied the Doctor casually. “Shouldn’t take long.”



**European Southern Observatory,
Cerro Armazones, Chile**

September 2035.

For Dr Toby Freeman, the best moments of his career had been silent. Those were the moments of revelation for him, when the instruments he designed worked just as they should, and he would breathe a sigh of relief and a silent prayer.

After his internship, and after earning more than one Mechanical Engineering degree, Toby had found himself working on the designs for the world's largest optical telescope. In the late nineties, a job opportunity had taken him to the European Southern Observatory Headquarters in Germany. He was charmed by the cobbles and colourful houses of Munich, and what he called European sensibilities. He always meant to return to Florida, but then there was love, and a house, and a cat, and a life he couldn't imagine living without. But always, there was the work he loved.

Transparently called the Overwhelmingly Large Telescope (OWL), it was sadly also overwhelmingly complex and expensive, so the Observatory focused on the more 'modest', scaled-back concept: The Extremely Large Telescope (ELT). It was still to be the world's biggest eye on the sky, and to contain the most intricate and powerful mirrors ever made.

By the time the Extremely Large Telescope had its technical first light, and relayed its first images, it had exclusively filled over thirty years of Toby's working life. In no time at all, the universe came into focus like never before. "More planets

than you can shake a stick at," Toby would say, feeling more content now than he thought possible. All his hard work had finally borne fruit. For a few years, Toby's sense of home included frequent trips to the mountain Cerro Armazones in Chile, to visit 'his' telescope, though just as there were so many hundreds of segments slotting imperceptibly together to form vast, colossal mirrors, Toby was just one systems engineer in a vast project team. The ELT belonged to all of them.

Finally, the day came to take his last working trip to Chile before he would begin his retirement at home in Munich. Shortly after his 65th birthday, he flew once more to the mountain, which resided inside a desert. His mind was busy with all the calculations and conversations that had led him to this point, as he regarded the incredible, unspoiled night sky with just the naked eye. Names for all of it drifted through his mind like music, in all the world's languages. His legacy was a very big telescope, to see it all with. Misty-eyed, he went back inside to find himself surrounded by his working group, who surprised him with an announcement and presentation. A colleague read out a message in front of everyone.

"The European Southern Observatory and International Astronomical Union wish to honour your lifetime of service to astronomy, by inviting you to name a star or planet discovered this year by the Extremely Large Telescope."

There was warm applause, rigorous hand shaking, affectionate good wishes uttered in English, German and Spanish, and champagne popping, but all Toby could think about was how to name a star

with no airs and graces. He knew just the one. He had reviewed the lists of stars and exoplanets discovered that year and been drawn to one in an incredibly dark region of space where there were barely any signs of matter having come together at all. It could have easily been missed. Just one very distant star – and little planet – hanging out in the middle of great big dark nothing.

A wide valley, one might say, thought Toby. And a Tree of Life just springs up, against all odds.

Once back in Munich, a cat on his lap and dinner on the boil, he sat down to fill in the IAU Proper Name submission form, optimistic they would be kind enough to grant his request for naming both the star and the planet.

Object Type: Star

Astronomical Designation: *ELT – Theta Obscurum Majoris*.

Modern proper name: ‘Pyryvale’.

Citation: Meaning the pear tree in the wide valley. Something bearing fruit in the middle of nothing. Rebirth, remembrance,

Proposer: European Organisation for Astronomical Research in the Southern Hemisphere (ESO)

World Region: Germany

Object Type: Planet

Astronomical Designation: *ELT – Theta Obscurum Majoris b*.

Modern proper name: ‘Ace’.

Citation: Meaning ‘one’, or exceptional talent, unmatched proficiency. In Old English, ‘unity’. Also from the Spanish name, Acevedo, meaning ‘one who comes from a small estate’.

Proposer: European Organisation for Astronomical Research in the Southern Hemisphere (ESO)

World Region: Germany

Toby smiled. That was his world.

Ali’s background in science communication includes working at the Royal Astronomical Society (RAS), who were kind enough to advise on the astronomy in this story, including Toby’s stargazing, the very real Extremely Large Telescope currently being built in Chile (while the also very real Overwhelmingly Large Telescope remains too expensive), and what’s involved with naming stars and exoworlds via the International Astronomical Union. They cannot account for the blue box that appears out of nowhere, though.

With thanks to Dr Robert Massey, Deputy Executive Director of RAS