

LITRO

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by Vanessa Gebbie

ON THE EDGE

“What did you tell him?” I said.

“Said my friend was up for it. Said you’d be in later.”

I got the feeling Smitz wanted to go back near the river, so we went down the hill again, walking slowly, hands in pockets. We didn’t talk much. The speedboat wasn’t there. I got this idea it had sunk. It might have. If you leaned over the railings and stared at the water, the reflections burned the back of your head.

Later, I was walking back up the hill. I’d made him wait. Anyway, I figured less people would go up there late afternoon. Didn’t want anyone coming in the shop, not with what I had to do. Smitz said the Perve had turned the sign to ‘closed’ and they’d gone through the curtain into the back, that’s where it had happened. I said to Smitz I wanted to go on my own, but he followed me. He flipped sideways into doorways if I turned round, so I just kept on walking. My running shoes on the pavement sounding like a dog panting.

There were still a few bits of newspaper in the park, flapping on the grass, caught round the legs of the bench. It was getting cold. The sun was round the back of the houses.

The door shut. I didn’t say anything, just stood there. The Perve was on a chair, reaching up, putting something on a shelf. He looked down. Grinned. I grinned back.

“I’m Jez.”

“Hello, Jez.”

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I found Smitz in the park. He was sitting on the green bench, picking at the paint with his thumb, chewing at the inside of his cheek. I sat down, stretched my legs out, waited for him to say something first. He didn’t.

“OK?” I said.

Smitz took two crumpled tenners from his pocket, held them between us on the bench with his finger. He’d been biting his nails. I fished in my pocket, lifted his finger, slid a twenty and a ten underneath, put his finger back.

“Fifty.” I said.

Smitz looked at me then. “Was it OK? What did he want you to do?”

I stuck my hands in my pockets. “All sorts,” I said. Smitz looked away.

I started pulling money out of my pockets then. Fivers, tenners. Don’t know how much there was. I never counted, but a lot. Couldn’t go back with it, we’d get rumbled. All we needed then was the fifty. I got up, stood on the bench.

Started tearing a tenner into tiny pieces, letting them fall over Smitz like dandruff, then like confetti, then the breeze took some, blew them around. Smitz didn’t speak, looked up, shading his eyes. I handed him a fiver.

“C’mon,” I said. “It feels fucking good tearing up money.”

We stood there, tearing up notes, letting the bits fly around. The smaller they were the better they flew around. Then I told him.

“He wanted all sorts. I didn’t do anything. Got him excited, then said I’d go to the Fuzz. Dunno how much he gave me to get out.”

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The wind in our faces. The tight blue teshirt bloke driving us like we were the tops. Just Smitz and Jez. We bounced over the waves in that red black silver speedboat, slapping the water. We held on, turned round and watched the coastline getting smaller. Houses getting smaller, bleeding together.

I looked ahead of us, at the horizon. It was clear blue. A few sailing boats. I thought you just don’t know, do you? You don’t really know if there’s something beyond the horizon. Just because people tell you, doesn’t mean there’s anything there. It’s just a line. Maybe when you look over the edge the air is chocca with people falling, falling. You just feel somewhere inside you there must be something, though, so you don’t ask. The boat bounced over a wave, slapped down hard. White water hit us, salt, cold. Shock.

Then Smitz started laughing. And I started laughing. We couldn’t stop. Fifty fucking easy quid. And the horizon just got bluer. I thought of the park. I looked back to see if I could see it, but I couldn’t. I leaned back, closed my eyes, felt the wind in my hair, and thought of bits of paper flying round the park, all over the grass, covering the dogshit, like a wedding.



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I think I’ve just seen Smitz. Earl’s Court tube, on his own, reading a paper. Must be fifteen years I haven’t seen him. I watched him through the glass, through my reflection, waiting for him to tear that newspaper into little strips, walk to the edge, hold the strips up one by one in the underground wind, let them go. Maybe I should have yelled, banged on the window? Maybe I’ll think about looking him up. We go back, Smitz and me.

The summer we turned thirteen, some do-gooder left money to give ‘disadvantaged youths’ a taste of fresh air and wheelks. Our home, St George’s, in some murky part of town, tipped us out into the Cornish sunshine. Like puppies tipped out of a box, blinking.

Thirteen. On the edge of something; Smitz closer to whatever it was than me. Puberty must’ve seen Smitz coming and ran at him like a train; it had missed me, Jez Harper, for the moment. Jez Harper was in a siding. But Jez Harper had worked life out. Worked adults out too. They like an easy life. They could mess you up if you let them. Thing was not to let them know you knew that. Best thing was to get in first, mess them up instead, quietly.

I didn’t speak for a month in my first foster home. I say I don’t remember, but I do. It wasn’t that I didn’t have words; just they went in instead of came out, burned a place in my stomach. When the words did come out they were blistering hot. I knew that, but they felt good. I lasted six months there.

Smitz was at St George’s already, been there three weeks. He was taller than me. He was OK.

We had the same room, blue and red blankets. I wasn’t much good at explaining why I was there. Smitz didn’t seem worried, spilling his story after lights out my first night as soon as the squeak of rubber soles faded away up the corridor.

“My Dad’s Jamaican,” he said. His voice sounded like it was coming out of a tunnel.

I wanted to put the light back on. Smitz didn’t look half Jamaican. He was tall, loose curls, dark skin that could be a suntan. I didn’t say anything.

“Or, at least, he was.”

“Sorry.”

“I was three. I can just remember him, I think. Been in a few foster homes since.”

“Yeah. I was in those. Didn’t work out.”

Smitz was quiet. Then, “I called one of them ‘Mum’. Just one, Sally. He was David; I never called him Dad. She had to go into hospital. I don’t think she’s coming home.”

I heard the slump of bedsprings as he turned over. His voice was muffled. “Night.”

I was right about adults. Never get too close. They always dump you. I never asked about his real Mum.

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We shared a room on the holiday. Went places together. Smitz could piss from the harbour wall as far as the yellow buoy. We hung around drinking from a rusty tap, cans of coke, saving up our piss. We went crabbing, picked paint off upturned boats, poked sticks at dead dogfish, anything. All that water. Our stomachs were like footballs. If someone had swung at us, we’d’ve wet ourselves. We unzipped, counted ten, jiggling so the piss was gagging to come out. We aimed,

and on “Ten!” pissed as hard as we could. Aimed so the arc wasn’t too high, or you’d lose distance. My piss only went as far as the rust bucket the boat owners used to get to and from the jetty. But then Smitz had the advantage of a bigger dick.

Some people can’t take a joke. Complained. That’s why we went to Falmouth for the day on the bus with Jim, one of the carers. They gave us pocket money, a few quid. Said to stay in twos, be back at the bus stop by six. Jim was OK. I’d got him sorted. He was more interested in Clara, the girl he’d met at the pub last night. She just happened to be on the same bus.

We could have had a boat trip, shark fishing; that would have been good but we didn’t have enough money. There was a Dad taking two boys out, their Mum buttoning up their anoraks. I stood as close as I could to smell her, warm soap like after a bath. She kissed one boy on the head, and he pushed her off, said “Mu-um,” like that. My stomach hurt.

We nearly went on a speedboat. It was red and black with silver trim; we wanted to go on that so badly. We queued up, a long queue, missed the next trip, stayed in the queue for half an hour in the sun, waiting, getting bored, joshing. Then the driver, a bloke in a tight blue teeshirt, wouldn’t let us on, and a bloke with a stupid hat said to get lost. I called him a prick. We looked for interesting stuff, there wasn’t any, and we had hours to go. Met one of the other guys in the street, and he said there was this joke shop up the hill.

“Pervy bloke. Good shop though.”

It was hot. It got hotter as we walked up the hill away from the water, looking for the joke shop. Shops and cafs then rundown shops and no cafs, then an old garage. Up the top, on the edge of town. A small park with broken railings. A row of joined up houses, a tatty launderette, its door open, breathing out more hot air, a sweet shop, newsagents. Then the place. It looked a good place. The windows were crammed with all sorts...one side was all Dracula stuff, ghost stuff, plastic skulls, hands with nails through, spiders and bats on elastic, fake blood capsules, plastic teeth, broomsticks and black cloaks. It was all a bit collapsed in on itself, dusty, like no one had looked at it since last Hallowe’en. The other window had boxes of magic tricks, and

some better stuff, fart sprays, bangers, fake dog turds, trick ciggies, trick soap, stink bombs. A box that said ‘Peppermint Penises’.

You kind of left the sun behind, going in. It took a time before your eyes got used to it. Funny thing was it smelled so familiar, like St George’s. The Perve was there, sitting in an easy chair like he wasn’t expecting too many people...behind the counter, an open door behind him. Couldn’t see him properly at first. He was reading a magazine, holding it up close to his face. I could see why the others had thought he was a Perve. Too much, nearly in the dark. He smiled, and said ‘Hi,’ which was OK. He went back to his magazine. I reckoned dirty stuff, top shelf. Must’ve had his nose right up some woman, sniffing.

We spent ages just looking and joshing. It was good. Stuff was all under dusty glass counters, stuff we could afford, have some fun with. It was fun trying to decide what to get, who to ‘get’ with the stink bombs after lights out. Smitz and I were leaning on the glass, peering at the fart gas, adding up two of those, some bangers, fake ciggies, stinkbombs, packets of pellets that went ‘crack!’ on the pavement... and all the time this guy was breathing through his mouth. You could hear the breathing, too fast, like he’d been running. A click deep in his tubes. You could smell it. He let us josh about though.

We decided, got our money out, and the Perve got out of his easy chair. When he stood up the air in the shop smelled a bit of aftershave. He put the magazine down on the chair, came over.

“Right you are, boys.” He leaned on the counter, looking at us, so his face was close. “Can I show you anything? Want to see something?” He was looking at Smitz, smiling. Dark hair greased straight back, pale blue eyes, face pitted like a battlefield. His skin was tight, shiny. His voice didn’t go with the rest of him. It was a television voice. He was not that old. Wore a black jersey, even though it was so hot outside. His fingers fluttered on the glass, never kept still, like they were thinking about doing something else.

If I’d been Smitz, I’d have moved back. He didn’t. He just held the guy’s look like it was in his hands. Then he moved slowly, slow motion, liquid. He pointed out what we wanted, and the guy grunted, bent down to get things from under.

I jumped up, leaned on the glass to see the mag, see a woman’s bits.

Served me right. They weren’t women.

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The others weren’t at the bus stop yet. We walked down towards the boats again. The tide was right in. The shark fishing boat was empty, moored out in the river. It looked dead. The black and red speedboat was tied up too, further out in the channel, moving slowly, low in the water. The silver trims shone. It was almost silhouetted. There was no sign of the blue tee shirt or the daft hat.

“I’d have liked a ride on that,” Smitz said. “Fast, wasn’t it? Ever been on a speedboat?”

“Yeah, fast. Nah, never been on one. Blew it, didn’t we? Bollocks to it.”

Smitz leaned on the railings, gazing at the boat. “I reckon we could still swing it,” he said.

“Oh yeah?” I had picked up a few small stones from the gutter. I was lobbing them one by one as far as I could, watching them ping into the water. It was very still.

“If we had fifty quid I bet that bloke would take us out. Just us, if we had fifty quid. We could get him to take us straight out to sea, straight out where it’s deep, and just keep going until we got to....” He stopped.

“Where?”

“Somewhere.”

I looked at Smitz. I was thinking then of the scratches on our beds back at St George’s, of scratching lines for months, bundles of five, crossed through for the sixth. Milestones.

“Where’re we going to get fifty quid?” I said. “Rob a bank?”

He didn’t answer, but it was a not answering that said something.

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It was easy to persuade Jim to take us back to Falmouth, next day. Clara came too.

“Meet you here at six,” he said when we got off the bus, and they went off towards the shops, arms round.

“You sure you’re on for this?” Smitz said, as we walked up the hill.

“Yep,” I said. There was chewing gum on the pavement, round grey splodges. I wondered what it would taste like if you peeled it off and

chewed it. It was sunny, breezy off the river. Smitz had showered, tarted himself up, put some oily stuff from one of the older guys on his hair. It smelt heavy. He’d got a white shirt on, the collar turned up. Denim jacket, the cuffs rolled back.

When we got to the park, Smitz ran his hands through his hair, brushing it back off his face. He looked older. He looked like someone had painted him. He pulled up his collar again, said, “You wait here.”

He was gone. I had to notice things then. I had to look at things up close in the park, see things, remember them, fill my head with them. Green shiny paint on a bench where someone had tried to write a name. You can’t write your name in thick gloss paint like that, it flakes. Dog shit on the path, a newspaper flapping. I picked up the newspaper, sat down on the bench. Bike tracks on the grass. The paper was crap, stuff no-one wants to read. They just buy it, throw it away. I tore the paper into tiny strips, listening to the paper tearing, tshhhhhk. I held the strips up in the breeze, let them go, seeing which would go farthest. It mattered that they should go a long way. I wanted them to catch the breeze. Some did. Some of them went up, curling on themselves then fell onto the grass. Some fell down straight away, until the path was white and grey with strips of paper. But I wasn’t worried, I wasn’t really watching what I was doing, I was looking at the black letters on the next strip, they didn’t mean anything if you tore words up. I must’ve been hunched over, just tearing, tearing, tearing, throwing the things into the air.

Then there were Smitz’s shoes on the path, in the paper strips.

“What you doing?” he said.

“I’m trying to get a piece of this paper to go up into the trees,” I said. “What’s it look like? It’s not easy. What happened?”

Smitz fished in his jeans pocket. “Twenty quid happened,” he said. “He showed me his mag, I jacked him off. Let him jack me off.”

He sat down on the bench, bent down, picked up a handful of newspaper strips, started holding them up. They fluttered back down. He stood on the bench, held them higher. They caught the breeze better. Then we both stood on the bench, crowing like cockerels, letting newspaper ribbons fly round the park, all over the grass.