

SIX

We Go to the Eye

THE LONDON EYE MYSTERY

When I woke up, the sleeping bag on the lilo on the floor next to my bed was empty. I looked out of the window to do a weather check. The sun shone. The anticyclonic pattern of the recent days continued. Barometers would be set to dry and fair and isobars would be far apart, just as I'd predicted yesterday.

I found Salim with Kat in the bathroom. He had Dad's razor blade in his hand and was shaving off the faint hairs over his upper lip and laughing at the same time.

'But I thought it looked good, Salim,' Kat said. Salim turned and winked at me. 'Thing is, the more you shave it, the more it grows back. It's like lawnmowing.'

This made Kat hoot with laughter. When owls hoot, it doesn't sound like humans laughing so I don't know why people say 'hoot' but they do. Nor could I see any logic in hairs or grass growing longer

by being cut off. But I laughed too because I wanted to be Salim's friend. Then I ran a finger over my own upper lip. There were no hairs there and this was good. I wasn't sure about the idea of hairs growing on my face. For one thing shaving is dangerous. Dad often comes out of the bathroom with bits of blood-drenched toilet paper stuck to his skin. For another thing facial hair is a sign that we have evolved from apes. And when you remember that we evolved from apes, you have to admit how limited human intelligence is mostly.

Then we had breakfast. I had forty-three Shreddies, Kat had toast and Salim started on a bowl of cornflakes but didn't finish it. Then we left the house with Mum and Aunt Gloria walking behind us, talking up a storm. This is one of my favourite things people say. It doesn't mean they were arguing, which is what it might sound like. It means that they were talking non-stop and not paying attention to anything else around them. When storms happen, it is hard to pay attention to anything else.

Kat and Salim and I walked in front together. I was on the side nearest the kerb, hopping across the cracks in the paving stones and around the lamp posts, with my hands in my pockets, which is how I like to walk best when I'm with other people.

Then we passed the Barracks. Salim said how huge it was and I said it had twenty-four storeys and Kat said it would be flattened any day now by our dad.

'Never,' said Salim.

'Yeah,' said Kat.

'Why's it got to go?'

'Dad says it was full of drugs and needles and suicidal mums. And cockroaches.'

'Yuck.'

'Yeah. And the postman wouldn't deliver things there any more.'

Salim looked up at it. 'Some height.'

Then Kat pointed to another big tower. 'That's

where our mum works, Salim. Guy's Tower.'

'No way.'

'Yep.'

The tower was silver and tall and I could see Salim was impressed with London because he looked at the tall buildings with his eyes wide open and his mouth open. Then we had to go down onto the tube. Kat and Salim sat next to each other and I sat two seats down between two strangers. I folded my arms across my chest to stop my hand flapping and shaking itself out, which is a habit Mr Shepherd says I must lose. I stared at the tube map of London. It is a topological map. A topological map is a very simplified map, not to scale, so with no relation to the real distances. The stops stand for places where you can get on or off or sometimes change trains, and these are ordered into straight lines with junctions, whereas in reality they are all higgledy-piggledy. If I'd been next to Salim, I would have talked about different kinds of map, and explained how topological maps should never be confused with topographical maps, but when I looked over to where Salim was sitting, Kat was showing him the silver nail polish on her fingernails and asking him about his social life, which is the thing she always talks about. I tried to see if he

was bored. When people are bored, Mr Shepherd says the muscles in their face don't do anything and they stare without really looking and he says I should always check to see if this is how people are looking when I talk to them. Salim was laughing and nudging Kat so I deduced that he was not bored, although I would have been.

We got out at Embankment Station so that we could walk over one of the Golden Jubilee Bridges and see the view. The sky was blue. The river was grey. The Eye was white. The capsules moved so slowly they hardly seemed to move at all.

Halfway across the Thames, Salim took an old-fashioned camera, the kind where you have to use a film, from his pocket.

'That's an interesting camera, Salim,' Kat said. 'My mum gave it to me for going to New York. I

wanted a digital one, but she says this kind will make a better photographer of me in the long run.'

Then he snapped everything in sight, including

one of Kat and me together, with the London Eye behind us. After he clicked, his mobile phone rang

with its James Bond theme tune. He leaned over the bridge's rail and spoke into it like a spy on a double-o mission, as if he didn't want anyone to overhear.

'That phone of yours!' Aunt Gloria said when he'd finished the call and folded the mobile away. 'Who was it this time?'

'Just another friend,' Salim said. 'Calling from Manchester to say goodbye. Let's keep going. We're running late.'

'Late for what, Salim?' I asked.

'Late for the Wheel.'

'You can't be late for the London Eye,' I said. 'It turns all day long, two times an hour, every hour. Until after dark.'

Big Ben donged eleven o'clock as we reached the ticket queue, which was very long. The two mums groaned.

'It's infinite,' Mum said.

'No, it's not,' I said. 'Infinity—'

'Why don't we come back later and go to the Tate first?' Aunt Gloria said.

'You promised!' Salim shouted. He stamped his foot and his eyebrows went down over his eyes.

'Salim's right,' Mum said. 'We did promise, Glo. Let's stick to last night's plan. Here, Kat. Take this...'. She handed Kat some money in large notes. 'You get the tickets and Gloria and I will sit at the café over there and wait. When you've got them, we'll join you in the queue.'

Kat's eyes went large and round as she took the money. She put it carefully away in her leopard-skin backpack. Then she, Salim and I found the end of the ticket queue and joined it. A lady in front asked the lady in front of her if she knew how long the wait was and the lady two people up the queue said it was half an hour to get tickets and another half-hour to board.

'A whole hour,' Kat groaned. 'Maybe that is too long.'

'Kat,' I said, 'an hour is a Drop in the Eternal Ocean of Time.' This is what Father Russell at our church said once about the human lifespan.

Salim grinned. 'Too right.' He took out his camera

again and did another shot from where we were standing. I asked if I could take one.

'Don't let him, Salim,' Kat said. 'Ted's useless at stuff like that. You'll end up with a paving stone and half a trainer.'

But Salim didn't listen. He gave me the camera and I aimed through the viewfinder to the crux of the wheel. It jogged when I pressed the button. I took the camera away from my eye to see a man walking towards us. He wore an old leather jacket, unzipped, and a black T-shirt with writing on it but I didn't notice what it said. He was dark-haired with an afternoon shadow on his chin, which is what Dad says he gets at weekends when he has a day off shaving. As the stranger drew near, he threw a cigarette to the ground and stubbed it out under his heel, for which he could have been fined a thousand pounds for dropping litter, but nobody seemed to notice apart from me.

He came right up. 'Excuse me,' he asked. 'Are you looking for a ticket?'

Kat explained that we were queuing for five

tickets. The strange man said he'd give us the one he had if we liked. He said he was up near the front of the queue to board but he'd changed his mind. He just couldn't face it.

'You can't face it?' said Salim. He stared at the ticket in the man's hand and then up at the Eye. 'I'm claustrophobic. I'd pass out, being stuck in one of those perspex pods.'

Forgetting that it is wrong to speak to strangers, I said, 'The pods are made of steel and glass, not perspex.'

'That's worse! Glass? No thanks.'

The glass is reinforced. It's very strong and safe—'

'So you don't want your ticket?' Salim interrupted. 'It's yours for the taking.' The strange man held it out. 'It's the eleven-thirty boarding. That girl over there'—he turned and pointed to a girl in sunglasses and a pink fluffy jacket—'is holding my place. They'll be boarding soon.'

Salim turned to Kat. 'What d'you say?'

Dunno,' said Kat. 'Mum said to get tickets for everyone. It's a very nice offer but—'

My hand was shaking itself out because I had just remembered that you are not supposed to speak to strangers or accept gifts from them. But Salim had his hands up, saying, 'We'll none of us get up at the rate this queue is moving,' and Kat, I could see, was *weighing things in the balance*, which means she was deciding what to do. As the oldest, she was in charge.

'OK,' she said. 'Mum and Auntie Glo will be glad to save the money, I bet. Not to mention the time. And Ted and I've been up already. You take it, Salim. You're the guest.' The man handed over the ticket and led us over to where he'd been standing in the queue. My hand shook itself out because this meant I wouldn't be flying the Eye that day after all, and it was down to a stranger with an afternoon shadow whom we shouldn't even have talked to.

'Have fun,' the man said, smiling.

'Thanks a million,' said Salim. The edges of his lips nearly reached his ears. Kat and I kept Salim company in the queue until we got to the man who collected the tickets, who was shouting,

'Eleven-thirty boarders step this way!' Salim gave up his free ticket and winked at us and laughed. Then he went with a group of people to the zigzag ramp at the Eye's entrance.

'We'll meet you by the exit,' Kat called. 'Over there.'

Salim nodded. We saw him through the glass, advancing up the gangplank until he'd become just a shadow. He reached the spot where the pod doors opened and closed and his silhouette gave us a last wave. Then he hurried on with several others. I counted how many got on. Twenty-one, including him. The pod door closed behind them.

I looked at my watch. It said: 11.32, May 24. 'He'll be down at twelve-o-two,' I told Kat.

SEVEN

The Wheel Turns

'Let's see if we can follow Salim on his way round,' Kat said. The pod he was in was rising. By walking backwards we found we could track it as it slowly arced from six o'clock anti-clockwise to four o'clock.

While we watched, I started to tell Kat the facts I knew about the Eye: how it was not really a Ferris wheel at all and how on a clear day you can see for twenty-five miles from it, but she interrupted me and said, 'D'you like Salim, Ted?'

'He's our cousin,' I said. 'Which means we share fifty per cent of our gene pool.'

'Yeah, but d'you like him?'

'Hrumm. I—'

'Don't you feel anything? Ever?'

'I like him, Kat. He's my friend.'

She nodded. 'He's cute.'

'Cute,' I said. Kat calls lots of things cute, including cats, football players, movie stars and skirts and

babies. Which means that cure doesn't mean much because if everything's cute, what isn't? Me, I suppose. I don't suppose Kat would ever call me cute. 'Salim's a mosher,' I said. 'A mosher?'

'It's northern for "casual, cool dude",' I said. 'And he gets lonely. He told me.'

'Really?' Kat sounded impressed. 'Perhaps it's having to move to New York. I'd be lonely if I had to leave all my friends.'

We kept watching the London Eye go round. It was like a huge clock only going anti-clockwise. Salim's pod moved from three o'clock to two o'clock just as an aeroplane flew low overhead. 'Kat?' I said.

'What?'

'What does it mean when something is up your street?'

'Huh?'

'Salim said *The Tempest* would be right up my street. He acted in it at school last term,' Kat laughed. 'We've been reading it at school too.'

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Mr Moynihan keeps making me read Miranda's part and she's such a bloody dishrag.'

I considered this. 'So it's not up your street?'

'No way.' The pod was nearing one o'clock. 'What d'you think of Auntie Glo?' Kat asked.

I remembered what Dad said about her leaving a trail of devastation in her wake. Then I remembered how she'd said I was like Andy Warhol, a cultural icon. 'I don't know.'

'Me neither. I heard Dad say to Mum that Auntie Glo drives him bananas. And I found two empty bottles of wine on top of the fridge.'

In my mind's eye, Aunt Gloria turned into a motorist with driving goggles and a huge consignment of bananas in the back seat. 'You mean, she drives him bananas the same way I drive you nuts?' I said.

'Bananas. Nuts. Round the bend. Off your trolley. Whatever.'

She laughed and I joined in because it showed I knew what she meant even if I wasn't sure what was funny about Aunt Gloria making Dad feel insane.

Then Salim's pod got to its highest point, twelve o'clock, and we both said, 'NOW!' at the same time and laughed again, and this time I meant the laugh. We'd been tracking the same pod, the exact one Salim was in. My watch said 11.47. He was right on schedule and at the top the sun made the glass shine.

The pod sank slowly to nine o'clock. I remembered from the time we'd gone up before how, near the end of the ride, a souvenir photograph is taken automatically. The London Eye managers have fixed a camera into position, so that a good shot of everyone is possible against a backdrop of Big Ben. It happens somewhere between eight and seven o'clock. I saw the dark figures inside Salim's pod gather to one side, facing out northeast to where the camera was. I even made out a flash.

Then we walked back to where we'd arranged to meet Salim and waited for his pod to land. At 12.02 opened. A group of six grown-up Japanese tourists came out first. Then came a fat man and woman with their two small boys who were also fat, which

probably meant they all ate too much convenience food and needed to improve their diet. The girl in the fluffy jacket followed, arm in arm with her boyfriend. A big burly man in a raincoat, with white hair and a briefcase, came out next. He looked like he should have been getting off a commuter train, not the Eye. And then came a tall, thin blonde lady holding hands with a grey-haired man who was much shorter than her. Finally two African women in flowing, colourful robes came out, laughing like they'd just been at the fun fair. Four children of various ages were with them and they looked very happy.

But of Salim there was no sign.

I knew straight away that something was wrong.

'Hrumm,' I said.

Kat screwed up her face. 'I could have sworn he was in that one, with the Japanese...' The passengers wandered off in different directions. 'He must be on the next one.'

We waited but he wasn't. Nor the one after, or the one after that.

A bad feeling slithered up my oesophagus. 'Stay here,' Kat said, gripping my hand. 'Don't move.'

She dropped my hand and ran off. I didn't like being left on my own in those crowds. I kept blinking and looking around, thinking Salim would re-materialize. Then I started to think I'd lost Kat too. Then I realized I didn't know how to find Kat and Aunt Gloria, which meant I was lost as well. Mum hand flapped and I forgot about trying to stop it. Then Kat came back. 'No sign of Salim?' 'No, Kat.'

'I bought this,' she said. 'A souvenir photo. I looked at all of them, the ones before and the ones after, but I couldn't find any with Salim in. This is the one with the Japanese and the African ladies.' She showed me the photograph and I looked at the faces of strangers, smiling and waving at the camera. Various bits of people were chopped off, as the pod had been quite full. You could see half a face here, an arm waving there. But nothing that looked remotely like Salim.

'Salim isn't there,' I said. Then I said, 'Salim has disappeared.' Kat groaned. 'Mum and Auntie Glo are going to be livid.'