

The Story Park

By David Almond

Uncle Joe came back from sea, knocked at the door, stepped in, said hello, and said he'd decided to come back home again.

Mum clapped her hands and kissed his cheek. She gave him a cup of tea and a cheese sandwich and a doughnut. He dropped his rucksack to the floor and started to tuck in.

"So you're going to settle down at last?" said Mum. "You're sick and tired of all that travelling? Hurray!"

Joe laughed.

"Settle down? Sick and tired? Don't you know me better than that?" He lifted his doughnut and stared through it like he was looking through a telescope and as if he saw something wonderful far far away.

"It is my intention," he said, "to keep on travelling. But now I will journey through the imagination. I will explore the universe of stories. I will..."

He bit a chunk out of the doughnut.

"That is perhaps," he said, "a bit abstract for now. On a more practical basis, it is my intention to build a shack and to live in it."

Mum gazed back at him.

"What kind of shack?" she whispered.

"A wooden one, of course. And I shall build it in a park," he said.

"A park? Which park?"

He grinned.

"That little one at the edge of town," he said. "Round the corner and down the hill. What's it called again?"

"Henderson Park."

"That's the one."

"They'll never let you build it in there."

"Course they will. And I know the park keeper. Clara Moss. Nice lass. I went to school with her. Very good at art, I recall. Even had a little thing with her once but that's another tale. She'll help me to build it and hide it. This doughnut's absolutely delicious, by the way. Any chance of another cup of tea?"

Mum poured more tea. She scratched her head and pondered.

"But a little wooden shack in a little park in a little town. Won't it seem rather little after the endless oceans and the wide wide sky?"

He shook his head and sipped the tea.

"Little things can be the biggest things of all," he said. "Think about your head for instance."

"Eh?"

"That thing that's sitting on your shoulders. How big is that? Put your hands around it and show yourself how big it is. Go on. Do it." She put her hands around her head then held her hands before her face to show herself how big it was.

"That big," said Mum. "Not very big at all."

"Indeed. But what's inside it?"

Mum shrugged.

"Brains, I suppose. And eyes, and blood, and bones, and..."

"We know all that! But what else? All the stories you've ever heard and all the dreams you've ever had. All the people you've ever met and all the places you've ever seen. You can think about what's happening in Winnipeg and what might be happening on Mars and the moon. You

can think of what happened a million years ago and what could happen in a thousand years time. You can look at the tiniest bit of dirt and at stars that are a billion miles away. And it all goes on inside that little head, which therefore isn't a little at all but is the biggest and most astonishing thing in the universe."

He tapped me gently on the skull.

"And there it is sitting on your shoulders. Wow! Say wow!"

"Wow," I said. I thought about it. "Wow!" I said again.

He bit the doughnut.

"Best thing it does, of course," he said, "is tell stories, to make up stories, to discover stories. And stories are all around us, waiting to be found."

He suddenly jumped from his chair and picked up an old mug from a shelf.

"There's a story in this mug, for instance," he said.

"Is there?" said Mum.

"Yes! This mug once belonged to an old lady called Dorothea Malone," said Uncle Joe.

"No it didn't!" said Mum. "I bought it in Tesco."

"Aha!" said Joe. "But in the story it belonged to Dorothea Malone."

He held the mug in the air before us.

"Imagine Dorothea holding the mug," he said. "Imagine her lovely old hands around it. Now tell me: what's she wearing? Don't think. Just tell me quick."

"A green cardigan," I say. "And a silky scarf around her shoulders."

"And is she wearing glasses?"

"Yes, little round silvery ones."

"And is there anybody with her?"

"No. But there's a dog."

"And what's the dog called?"

"Geordiel!"

"And tell me about the room she's in."

"It's got flowery wallpaper and you can see the sea through the window and there's a kind of minty smell."

"Excellent! Now tell me this: when Dorothea was six years old she broke her arm. Poor Dorothea. How did she do that? Tell me quick."

"She was walking on a wall and she fell off."

"Tell me more. Tell me quick.."

"She was with her friend called Sue who ran for help."

"Correct. And any other answer would be correct. And we've begun to tell the tale of the life of Dorothea Malone and it all started with a simple mug in a simple kitchen. Wow! Think how many stories we'll find in a park!"

He swigged his tea and finished the doughnut.

"Now," he said. "The shack. I'll need some timber and a saw and a hammer and some nails."

He looked at me.

"And I'll need a helper," he said. "Will that be you?"

I looked at Mum. She shrugged. I looked at Joe.

"Yes," I said.

"Excellent. Now, to the timber yard. Come along."

"But doesn't it need a little more... planning?" said Mum.

"Perhaps you're right."

He took a notebook and pencil from his pocket and started to scribble fast. He drew a rickety shed with a pointy roof standing in a little park.

"That'll do," he said.

Then he laughed. He turned the picture upside-down.

"And look!" he said. "Turn it upside down and the shack becomes a boat and the earth becomes the sky and the air become the sea. My shack shall be my ship upon a boundless sea of stories! So, off we go to the timber yard!"

He paused and pondered.

"She always said I was crazy," he said. "She always said I had daft ideas. Seems to me you might be a bit like me. Are you?"

I pondered.

“Tell me quick!”

“Yes!” I said.

“Excellent! Daft ideas are often the best of all.”

He hurried towards the door then paused again.

“Where exactly is the timber yard?” he said.

It happened just as he said it would. We went to the yard, we got the wood, we got the saw and the hammer and nails, and we pushed it all in a handcart round the corner and down the hill and into Hendersons Park.

Clara Moss was waiting there.

“Hello there, Joe,” she said. “Thought you were in Vladivostock or Valparaiso or somewhere like that.”

“I was,” said Joe. “But I’ve decided to come back home and build a shack in the park and live in it and turn the park into a park full of stories.”

“That’s a good idea,” said Clara. “Build it behind those bushes, Joe. Then the bosses won’t catch sight of it. I’ll give you a hand if you like.”

“OK,” said Joe.

We set to work. We cut and sawed and hammered and nailed. By the end of the day the shack was done and we were looking at it in amazement. There it was, rather rickety, rather wobbly, very small, but big enough for Joe to live in, and we all agreed it was really something rather lovely, and that it really did look like an upside-down boat. Mum arrived with lots of cheese and salad sandwiches. We sat around eating them.

“So,” said Joe. “It’s time to start. Time to get those stories going.”

He quickly turned to me.

“You go first,” he said. “Find a thing and start to tell a tale about it.”

I gasped.

“Don’t gasp,” he said. “Don’t think. Just do it now and do it quick.”

“Go on!” said Mum.

I ran to some bushes. I found an ancient glove beneath them. I took it back. I held it up.

“This glove,” I said, “belonged to a boy called Billy McCoy. He was...

10 years old. He’d had a terrible argument about... Maths

homework with his dad and he ran to the park and he was so furious that he took his gloves off and threw them away. It was

winter and the snow was falling and he was freezing cold and he went back home. He made up

with his dad, who had been so worried about him. They came back together the next day to find the

gloves but they only discovered one. And...”

“Excellent!” said Joe. “Keep thinking about Billy and discovering more of his tale. Who’s next?”

“Me,” said Clara Moss. She picked up something from the soil. A coin.

“This coin,” she said, “has been lying in this park for five hundred years. It belonged to a beggar called... Bernard. He’d had a very successful day of begging and he was so happy that he started dancing and one of his coins fell out of his pocket and he didn’t notice. And he was a beggar because... he’d been thrown off his land by the evil Lord of the Manor, Sir Frederick and...”

“Brilliant!” said Joe. “And next?”

He looked at Mum.

“I don’t know how to,” she said.



"Of course you do. Let yourself do it and you'll be able to do it."

"Go on, Mum," I whispered.

She took a deep breath. She picked up a white feather. She stared at it then closed her eyes.

"This feather," she said, "belonged to an angel who was flying over the park one summer night. He saw a lady crying in the park and he swooped right down and touched the lady and the lady felt so much better. And as the angel flew away again, this feather fell and drifted down onto the earth."



"See?" said Joe. "Isn't it easy? Isn't it lovely?"

He reached down and picked up a tiny twig.

"A little mouse ran over this little twig last night," he said. "He'd been hiding all day from the horrible black cat that comes into the park sometimes. But the cat had gone away at last. And the mouse ran over the twig and by the light of the moon he found a hazel nut that he carried back home to feed his family with."



He smiled.

"What a fantastic start we've made," he said. "So many brand new stories under way already!"

We put the objects onto the grass: the glove, the coin, the feather, the twig. Suddenly, they'd become much more than a simple glove, a simple coin, a simple feather, a simple twig. They were filled with stories, filled with life.

Clara pondered. She knelt down and started moving them around.

"I've had another idea," she said as she worked.

"What's that?" said Uncle Joe.

"Well," she said. "How about this? We get all the objects that make the stories and we put them together on the grass. And we move them around and we make a picture with them. Or a kind of sculpture..."

"Hmmm..." said Uncle Joe. "A kind of story sculpture! Told you she was good at art, didn't I?"

"And," continued Clara Moss, "if we do it well enough, we can make it into a kind of creature! Look, the glove makes a hand. The coin makes the pupil of an eye. The feather makes a bit of wing, of course. The twig?"

"A strand of hair!" said Mum.

"Yes!" said Clara Moss.

"And if we really make it well enough," said Uncle Joe. "And the stories in it have life enough, maybe the creature itself will come to life!"

"Yes!" said Clara. "So we'd have a parkful of stories with a living story creature wandering within it. Wow!"

"Wow!" said everyone.

"We'd need lots of objects," said Uncle Joe. "We'd need lots of stories. Happy stories, sad stories, funny stories, daft stories, gory stories, strange stories, tiny stories, long stories. All kinds of stories" I laughed.

"We've got a parkful of them, Uncle Joe," I said.

"And we'll need lots of helpers," he said.

"I'll bring my mates," I said.

"Yes!" he said. "So we'll have lots of kids collecting bits and pieces from the park, and telling tales about them, and adding them to the story creature!"

"And making something," whispered Mum, "that is truly magical and truly alive."

"Brilliant!" said Uncle Joe. "I'm so glad I came home from sea. Now, let's keep going. Who's next?"

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