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opening extract from

Street Heroes

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In the rainforest steam of our kitchen, I leafed through the booklet that Adam Rosen had given me at school. He'd got inside my head all right, and so had the grainy black and white pictures of the Battle of Cable Street. I kept looking at one of Sir Oswald Mosley strutting about with his fascist followers. Mosley was tall and posh-looking, nothing like my father, but
I could imagine Dad in that same black uniform with the peaked cap and shiny boots,
goose-stepping around the country like he owned it. Other pictures showed Jewish shops all boarded up, ready for the violence that the Fascists would bring. I saw the cramped, tumble-down houses where the Jewish people lived alongside other East Enders, many of whom had come originally from Ireland. Cable Street and its poor, besieged immigrants seemed a million miles from my own mansion-like home.

I was startled by a sudden noise and looked up to find that Dad had emerged, blinking like a small sleepy bear, from the dark of his den. He

shuffled across the kitchen floor in his dressing-gown and slippers. Mum claimed he was suffering from what she called "man flu", though his sea-lion's cough sounded real enough to me, and worse than you'd get with a normal cold. He lifted the lids of the three saucepans that were hissing and bubbling on top of Mum's new self-cleaning oven and grunted unhappily. Then he began rooting around in the depths of the fridge. At last he emerged with a more cheerful look on his face and a large slab of chocolate in his fist.

"Don't tell your mother," he wheezed.

We sat in near-silence, broken only by the soothing burble from the stove and the spluttering sounds Dad made when he ate. Then he gestured for me to pass him Adam Rosen's booklet. At first he seemed pleased – he liked me to take an interest in politics and history, and was always trying to get me to watch his documentaries with him. But as he scanned the pages, two frown lines, like deep, dark

trenches, creased his brow.

“Where d’you get this garbage, Georgie?”

“It’s about Mosley.”

“I said, where did you get it? Was it Mr Stokes? This is all from the Jews’ point of view. It’s Jewish propaganda. What Mr Stokes won’t tell you is that the Jews were taking over our country and stealing what was rightfully ours. No one wanted them here. Jobs and houses that should have gone to English people were going to them instead. What you’ve got to understand about the Jews is that they’re arrogant, they think they’re special, and they’ll try and take over the whole world if people like us don’t stop them.”

I grabbed the booklet back from him. The pages were damp from the steam of the cooking. Surely it wasn’t all made up. It seemed believable to me and, in this version of history, the Blackshirts were the bad guys, the Jews their innocent victims.

“But Dad, no one else would have wanted to live in these houses. They’re slums. It says here the Jews came to this country to work hard and make a better life for themselves. What’s so bad about that? They were prepared to start from nothing.”

“No . . . one . . . wanted . . . them . . . here,” he spat out the words slowly. Each one seemed to be coated in venom. I couldn’t think when he’d ever used such a hostile tone with me.

“When it comes down to it, Georgie, it’s all about race – everything is. It’s about keeping our white race strong and pure. The Jews and the Muslims want to destroy us. And we’ve got to take action to stop them.”

I felt sweaty and light-headed, as if I too had the flu, but I was determined to make my point to him.

“You say no one wanted them here, but how come so many ordinary English people were prepared to stand up for them? It was thousands of ordinary English people who helped block off Cable Street

so the Fascists couldn’t march down it and frighten and intimidate the Jews who lived there. Look at these banners they’re carrying: ‘They shall not pass’. That’s your precious Blackshirts they’re talking about.”

“No . . . one . . . wanted . . . them . . . here.”

This time his voice was much louder and he leant towards me and pushed his index finger into my chest. It hurt, but although I was frightened, I heard myself laugh a weird, twisted sort of laugh.

“Don’t push me. That’s what fascists like you do, isn’t it Dad? If you can’t win an argument, you start threatening people.”

He stared at me with those famous blue eyes. When he finally spoke, he sounded calm and in control.

“Not fascists like me, Georgie. Fascists like us. You need to remember whose side you’re on.”

I thought that was it, but he hadn’t finished. I sensed a blur of movement out of the corner of

my left eye, then felt a searing pain across my cheek. For a second I thought he'd taken a serving spoon from one of the simmering pans and held it against my face. Anything seemed possible suddenly. But it was a slap from his right hand that had stung me. He flexed his fingers and examined his palm as though it was something unfamiliar to him.

"You made me do that," he said. "Now go to your room."

That night my dreams were filled with images of my dad and his followers dressed in the Blackshirt uniform. But though their faces were still recognisable to me, Brian, Mart, Tony and all the rest looked like huge lizards. They had scaly skin and long slithery tongues that kept sliding out of their reptile snouts. They walked unsteadily on their back legs through a ramshackle street market that I didn't recognise. The market traders and shopkeepers were terrified, of course, and either ran into the backs of their shops or hid behind their

stalls.

I watched transfixed as my lizard-like dad scooped up half a chicken from behind a counter and began to tear it apart with his fangs; a mixture of juice and drool hung in a long string from his jaws. Then he swished his crocodile tail and knocked over a crate of oranges which bounced and rolled like giant marbles into the gutter.

A little Asian girl in a red plastic raincoat began to scream, her brown eyes wide with terror. At first I thought she was just howling but then I realised she was actually forming words: *Go away, monster. Go away, monster*.

I bent down so that I was closer to her level, all the time making soothing noises. I was trying to tell her not to be afraid, that I would protect her from these evil creatures. But then I looked at my own hands and shuddered to see that they too were covered in reptilian scales; my fingers had become claws.

"No!" I began to shout, and the effort woke

me. I lay on my bed in a tangle of blankets, sweating and breathless.

I stared at the ceiling for what felt like hours, fearful of what further tricks my mind might play if I was to fall back to sleep. Close to dawn, I dropped into a heavy, dreamless stupor.

When I woke, I fumbled for the alarm clock, then let out a long moan. I'd never been this late for school before.

From the kitchen came the sound of an argument that was already in full swing.

"Look, if you're too ill to drive him, I'll go."

Mum was unloading the dishwasher, crashing around like she was giving the pots and pans a good work-out.

"He's got to have some breakfast first, though. He didn't eat a thing last night with you sending him to bed and all. He must be starving and upset as well, with you shouting at him."

And hitting him, I thought. It seemed Mum was unaware of exactly what had passed between Dad and me.

“Leave it out, Doreen, will you? I’m up now, aren’t I? I’ll drive him to school. After he’s had some breakfast.”

They both became aware of me standing barefoot in the doorway.

“Morning, darling,” Mum said. “You’re making me feel cold without your slippers. What can I get you to eat?”

Dad gave me a goofy, lopsided grin and came towards me boxer-like, pretend-jabbing with his left arm as he moved. When he reached me, he pulled me to his chest and I smelled shower-gel and aftershave and that scent I’d recognise anywhere that made him my dad.

“Who loves ya?” he said.

What could I say?

“You do.”

“Have you got over our little disagreement last night? I’ve been thinking about it and I’m

proud my boy’s starting to form his own opinions. They’re all wrong, of course…”

He winked, then coughed.

“You just need to spend more time with your old man so you can see why it is that I’m right. Why the British Fascists are right. And why we’ll win in the end.”

He escorted me, arm around my shoulder, to my usual seat at the breakfast bar and picked up a mug of Lemsip he’d been drinking.
He swallowed the dregs of it and winced.

“Have your breakfast, Georgie, then come out and find me. I’ll be in the car listening to the radio, trying to keep up with world events.”

He gave a mirthless smile to my mum.
She always had the kitchen radio tuned to a soppy music station in the mornings.

I didn’t really have time to eat anything but Mum insisted. I spooned some cornflakes that tasted like bits of sodden cardboard into my mouth and gulped down a mug of watery tea.

As I was getting dressed, I realised that

I would normally be halfway on the journey to school by now. I thought of sending Albion a text. She'd started travelling to school with her friend Lulu every day – anything to avoid my dad. Maybe she could pass on a message to my tutor. There was no point asking Mark or Scooter, they'd almost certainly be late themselves.

I let Mum kiss me on the cheek and straighten my tie, then I left the suffocating warmth of the house and started walking down the drive.

A flock of birds, crows or rooks or something were wheeling and complaining above a copse of trees in the farmer's field opposite. I saw the silhouette of Dad's head and shoulders through the Range Rover's tinted glass windows. He was sitting where he loved to be, high up in the driver's seat. His car towered over most other vehicles on the road and Mum often said he would have been much happier living in it. When he first bought it, she'd joked about what she'd

called “small man syndrome”: because Dad was shorter than average, she reckoned he liked being above the rest of the traffic to make up for it. That hadn’t gone down well and she’d never mentioned it again.

I realised as I neared the Range Rover that I’d left my pencil-case amid the clutter on the desk in my bedroom. I was about to turn back for it, but a glance at my watch told me there was no time. I reached out for the passenger side door handle, and that’s when I heard a voice. I spun round, squinting back at the house to see if it was Mum calling me. But she was indoors in the living room behind the double-glazed picture window.

You are in great danger. Please don’t get into the car.

The voice was clear and insistent, and took me totally by surprise. It swirled like a cool current around my brain, and I shook my head, as though I was trying to remove bath water from my ears.

This is Fatima. I know that you can hear me.

You and your father must get away from the car. Please, it's very important.

My first thought was one of relief that the voice was not hurting me. Twice now it had been bearable and had not caused any pain. Then I considered the meaning of the words
I was hearing. Was I really in danger? It seemed ridiculous. Surely this Fatima was
just the work of an overactive imagination.
My dreams of the night before had shown me how feverish my mind could be.

I took hold of the handle and squeezed it. The door opened softly and I heard a politician's voice on the radio, smarmy and wheedling.
The interviewer was aggressive and kept trying to interrupt him.

"Hurry up, Georgie boy. It'll be time to fetch you home soon."

I opened my mouth to speak and then a huge wrecking ball of noise smacked me between the eyes.

I TOLD YOU NOT TO GET IN THE CAR! YOU MUST GET AWAY FROM IT, BOTH OF YOU!

I staggered backwards and found myself sitting down on the gravel with my rucksack in my lap.

Dad leaned across the cream-coloured passenger seat to get a better view of me.
He looked tiny suddenly, like a jockey sitting on top of one of those enormous shire horses.

“What is it now, Georgie?”

Fatima had got my attention. I felt winded and sick. If I didn’t do what I was told, there was every chance that she would attack me again. My words came out all shrill and whiny, like a six year old begging for sweets.

“Dad, this is going to sound mental, but we need to get away from the car.”

He banged down with the heel of his hand on the steering wheel, making the whole car shudder. His face had started to turn tomato-red.

“You’re right, it sounds utterly bonkers. Get your backside in here!”

“Please Dad, you’ve got to get out of there. I’m hearing that voice again, that Fatima, and she says we’re in danger.”

The wrecking ball returned for another swing at me:

THERE IS A BOMB ATTACHED UNDERNEATH THE CAR. YOU MUST RUN NOW!

I staggered to my feet and sprinted round the bonnet of the Range Rover. When I reached the driver’s door I yanked it open and began clawing at my dad’s clothing. He lost his balance and slid halfway out, but his seat belt wouldn’t let him fall the whole way. I grabbed his right ear, which felt hot and rubbery in my hand, and started pulling on it until I felt it might rip away from the side of his head.

“Get out of there, Dad. Just do it, please!”

Suddenly he was freed from the seat belt and sprawled on the gravel beside me, but I still had his ear and some of his hair in my grip. He was cursing and flapping at me with one arm, trying to push me away.

“Now run!” I shouted, and we did, him half-crouching as I dragged him, off-balance, in the direction of the house.

I glanced up and saw my mum at the living-room window, staring out at us with a look of utter confusion on her face. She was chewing on a strand of her blond hair as though she might bite right through it.

It was then that all the sounds in the world came together in one great roar that rolled over me like a huge tidal wave. For a moment I wondered if it could be Fatima’s voice shouting again, but then I saw hunks of metal from the car flying past us, some embedding themselves in the wall of the house, where they smoked like fallen asteroids.

A great orange fire-ball reflected in the window where Mum was still standing. For some reason, that would make no sense at all to the anti-terrorism police, the picture window didn’t shatter and I was able to watch as my dad and I flew in seeming slow-motion onto the stretch of

lawn to the side of the drive.

I'd let go of his ear by this point, but we still landed together in a jumble of limbs. The explosion didn't leave either of us deaf, even temporarily, but at first I thought the world had gone silent.

Then the birds in the trees over the way resumed their mad squawking. I heard my dad's voice all husky with cold, or maybe with fear.

"How did you know that was going to happen?"

He was staring, unblinking, at the twisted wreckage of his car and the angry black cloud that billowed above it. I had the strangest urge to start giggling – the doctors explained later that's because I was in shock.

"Seriously, Dad, you've got to listen to me more," I said, with tears of laughter in my eyes.

He was groaning now because he'd cracked a few ribs. Apart from some scratches, I was completely unharmed. Suddenly Mum was there and it seemed she'd been struck dumb.

She hugged us both but couldn’t say a thing. Instead I heard Fatima’s voice speaking faintly inside me, like a butterfly batting its wings against the folds of my brain.

I am so glad you’re safe. All I ever wanted for this world is peace.

But Fatima did not have the last word.

My dad, grimacing with pain, managed to raise himself up on one elbow.

“I promise you, this is the work of the Muslims,” he whispered hoarsely to no one in particular. “They talk about holy wars and jihads, but they will not have seen the like of what I’ve got planned for them. As God is my witness, I am going into battle. I will get my revenge.”