

BETWEEN
SEA
and
SKY

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LITTLE TIGER
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The sea is as near as we come to another world

– Anne Stevenson





ONE Nat

The dares have started early this year. Normally we wait till summer, but there are still two weeks of school to go and coloured flags are already appearing around the bay. Like everyone got bored at the same time.

It's a trail. You put the flag someplace you shouldn't go. The marshes or shoreline, or ground still saturated with poisons from way back. Mostly it's the solar fields. The fields of silicon panels that have been our playground since we were five, even though they're strictly no access.

The flags are calling cards. Proof you've been where you say you've been. Then you dare someone else to go and get them.

I call on Lucas at 8 a.m. sharp. He's in the apartment next to me and Mum, on the top floor. *The most stairs*, Tally says when we leave her behind on the first floor.

The best view, we retort. *Yeah, of the solar fields*, she'll fling back at us.

"Flag day! Flag day!" I chant through Lucas's letter box. The door swings open into my face.

"Watch it!" he says, stepping out in front of me. "You want my parents to hear?"

"You're joking, aren't you?" I say. "No grown-ups would be awake this time on a Sunday! Mum says her eyes need to be shut for twelve hours straight after a week in the growing tower!"

Lucas smiles good-naturedly. The growing tower is the heart of Edible Uplands, the crop-growing complex where most of the adults in the compound work their shifts. Vegetable and salad plants stacked up in rows in a pink incubating light. Mum says it's like looking into a permanent sunset, especially since Central District upped their quotas again. Sometimes I wonder if they need the extra food at all. Maybe it's stacked in warehouses somewhere, rotting, and all they really want is to show their power over us.

Lucas and I spring down the concrete stairwell. We always take it three steps at a time.

"Tally?" Lucas asks at the first floor.

"She'll be at the bike sheds already," I say, swinging past him and leaping down to the ground floor.

Tally whistles when she sees me. "Nat! Mate! You've not

chickened out then?”

I shake my head, fast. Tally, Lucas and I have flagged together since nursery and today it's my turn to place the flag. A red one. Everyone uses red for their hardest dares. It's meant to be someplace dangerous, that's the point, but we've always left Billy Crier's windmill alone.

“We need to up the stakes. You said it,” I say.

“*We've only got two years left, but we're still playing baby games,*” Tally had said at lunch yesterday. I'd known straight away where I'd have to go.

At some point kids stop with the daring. They get pulled into work at Edible Uplands or the desalination plant. Or inland – some assignment will come up at the polytunnels or one of the factories. We've got to make the most of our time together.

“Least there's no wind,” Lucas says. I take a gulp of air. It's hot, with the lingering taste of salt. It hasn't rained in weeks.

Tally leads the way out of the compound. We live in four floors of concrete and steel, on stilted metal legs. Like some spacecraft landed years ago to refuel but never managed to lift off again. The legs have been surrounded by seawater so many times during floods that they're starting to corrode.

Even the concrete's cracking now, imploding from the inside. They built it cheap, Mum says. They didn't reckon on the wind and the heat and the salt. They should have

built it further back – it’s too close to the sea.

“It’s not too late to change the plan,” Lucas continues, looking back at me. “Your mum won’t want extra points.”

We’re standing under the board where all compound families are listed and where civil disobedience points go up against the names. For shirking shifts or missing quotas or going over the boundary, or a long list of other things Central deem impermissible.

Even when everyone’s been compliant, peacekeepers still come from Central every so often to take away the top offender for the prison ship. It’s a deterrent and reminder. Never forget the rules.

“Mischa better watch out,” Tal says, whistling. “His dad’s three off the top.”

I hate that list. Our friends and neighbours, their names blur together when I look.

“We won’t dare Mischa,” I say quickly. “Not this time.”

“Or Eli,” Lucas cuts in. “His family’s not far behind.”

Tal shakes her head. “Nah. Sara and Luna, that’s who we’ll pick. Their families barely have any points at all. Those girls know how not to get caught.”

“We could always do fifth field instead. We haven’t done that in ages,” Lucas says. He’s still trying to give me an escape, but there’s no way I’m backing out now. Not in front of Tal.

“Where’s the fun in that?” Tally’s already saying. “Fifth field

is just like first field, and second and third.” She lets her voice drone on for emphasis.

“No,” I say, determined. “It’s Billy Crier’s windmill. Just like we said.”

“Cool,” Tally says breezily, and lifts her bike down the last few steps.

The mirrored fields dazzle you when you come out from the compound’s shadow. Fields of silicon stretching away either side of Drylands Road, until everything becomes sky. There’s shortages of most things round here, but sky we have in abundance.

Most people went inland during the floods. When the seawaters rose, they drowned whole villages and towns, sweeping people right off the edge of the earth, spreading disease and famine. But some people were brought back to the bay after, when the wind pumps were working again, draining seawater out of the land. Edible Uplands and the solar fields were built, and our compound, with its housing, service shops and school. Those are the things our district is known for. Them and the prison ship, brooding out on the horizon, representing everything bad about the sea.

“Race you!” Tally calls, jumping on her bike, and Lucas and I ride after her, our bike tyres cartwheeling over the maintenance tracks.

Even when there’s no wind, there’s something. Energy, from the ground maybe. It builds in the rotating

wheels and passes up into you.

We leave our bikes stashed under one of the panels in third field. We make sure they're hidden, so no one recognizes them as ours.

I used to love these fields. It was a novelty to be out of the compound at all and we'd spend whole days tramping through them. The fields felt alive – electrons bouncing round the silicon panels, taking sunlight, parcelling it up into electricity. It's pretty miraculous. The shine just wears off after a bit.

“Looks like we're clear,” Tally says, scanning the field either side. We have to be careful. If you're caught in the fields, it's one civil disobedience point. Points for minors go up against your parents. You only get your own chart when you start your shifts. No one wants to risk their parents being sent to that ship, to spend the rest of their days at sea.

We proceed on foot, single file between the panels. Tally first, then me, then Lucas.

We've flagged most places there are to flag already. All around the harbour, Customs and Immigration and Edible Uplands. Last year a flag was left at the top of the growing tower and all the kids in the compound were grounded for a month. Every single one, because no one would break ranks and say who it was that had climbed the rickety ladder. Flag rivalries aside, growing up in the compound makes you pretty tight.

Billy Crier's windmill isn't like the growing tower. The danger isn't just in the climb.

It's older than the other wind pumps. It predates not only the floods and the Hunger Years, but the Decline, and even the Greedy Years before that. It's from when the land was still healthy enough to farm, before the poisons and the saltwater got in.

"It's just a story. He was probably never even real," Lucas says, as the windmill looms closer, black and broken.

"Yeah?" I say, looking back.

Lucas nods emphatically. "Dad says they only tell about Billy Crier to keep us out of the fields."

"Liar," Tally pronounces, staring back at him defiantly.

Lucas blushes. "Well, the ghost bit at least."

"I guess Nat's going to find out," Tally says, crooking her neck ghoulishly and making an eerie kind of cry.

I laugh, to show I'm not bothered.

Billy was the same age as us. He was a runner for the smuggling gang that operated in the bay in the Hunger Years. People were so desperate for food they were dragging eels out of the marshes. If customs officers were coming, runners got the windmill operators to stop their sails at a diagonal cross, so the smugglers knew to sink their goods. It was a throwback to another time – some ancient signalling system.

The night Billy Crier was running, his dad was in the

marshes, in one of the little wooden boats. There'd been a delivery from the next district and Billy's dad was taking packages of food up to the old town.

Billy got word customs officers were coming, but when he got to the windmill, the operator refused to go up. A summer storm was coming and the brakes for the sails weren't working properly. It was too dangerous. Only Billy thought it wasn't as dangerous as it would be for his dad to be caught out on the marshes, with a full shipment of food, so he climbed up himself to stop those sails.

All the kids in the compound know the story. A freak gust of wind blowing in from the sea. Billy losing his footing. His necktie getting caught on the sail. They say he only wore that necktie to look older, like his dad.

The storm meant it was three whole days before they could get his body down. Or so the story goes.

Lucas glances across to me. "You don't have to do it, you know."

I don't say anything. We're standing at the bottom of the windmill. It's like you slip through to a different time here. No one comes, not even maintenance. Green straggly vegetation has grown up, and though the gulls barely bother with the land, sometimes they come here and sit at the top of the sails, watching.

Lucas's grandmother says the gulls are the souls of all the people that drowned in the floods.

“Nat, mate, did you hear?” Lucas says, determined to give me the chance to back out. It doesn’t matter to him that Tally’s listening.

The panels have started up with their whistling. It makes my heart skip a beat or two. There’s a film of sweat on the back of my neck. “Do you think Billy was scared?” I ask suddenly. “The night he climbed?”

Tally’s gone ahead into the doorway. Her face is dim in the shadows. “You know Crier wasn’t his real name?” she says in a lower tone than usual. “It was ’cause of all his crying that night.”

Lucas giggles nervously. “Well, he can’t have cried for long, can he? Not after a fall like that.” He does the same neck twist that Tally did earlier.

A gull screams at the top of the windmill and flutters up into the sky. “Something scared it,” Tally says, looking at me intently.

I push past her into the windmill. I want it done with. I want that flag up there and it to be someone else’s job to get it down.

I peer up through the space in the ceiling where the steps used to be. Someone took them out years ago to deter climbers, but they didn’t do a great job ’cause the next set of steps is still there. And the set after that. More like a ladder than actual steps, but still there. You can see them all the way to the top, like snakes and ladders.

The noise of the panels has got up outside. A pinging, like someone repeatedly twanging an elastic band.

“You got the flag?” Lucas checks.

“Course!” I show him a flash of red from my pocket.

“You don’t have to climb out properly,” Lucas says, scared now. “As long as you can see it from the outside. The flag doesn’t have to be right out on the sails, does it, Tal?”

Tally shakes her head. She looks scared too, just a tiny bit, and a shiver runs down my spine. Tally shrugs when she sees me looking. “It’s just a flag, isn’t it? We could even leave it down here. The others would still be too scared to come in.”

We all nod. This place is taboo. There are no names sprayed on the walls like you get round the compound – bored kids, proving their existence. Billy’s windmill is totally empty. Just the few odd stinging plants – nettles and thistles. Sometimes the plants grow round Edible Uplands too, before maintenance get paranoid about pests or disease and rip them up. Nothing can jeopardize the growing tower. It’s what keeps us all alive.

“Right, I’m going up. Catch me if I fall,” I say, stepping through the doorway.

Lucas tuts disapprovingly, but comes forward to give me a leg up to the first floor. I scabble on to the dusty floorboards above.



TWO

Nat

It's dark inside and there's an odd creaking that sounds throughout the building. The sails don't turn any more – they were permanently braked years ago – but it feels like they're going round anyway.

“You all right, Nat? Are the steps sound?” Lucas's voice trembles slightly. He hates flag days. If it were up to him, we'd leave all our flags in the compound.

I put my hand on the iron rungs to the next floor and give them a shake. They groan, but don't wobble enough that I can back out.

“What's it like?” Tally calls.

“Dark. Dusty,” I say.

“And? Is there anything there?” she says impatiently.

“Nothing,” I say. “Some old sacks. Names on the wall.”

“Names?” Tally shrieks. “Someone's been up?”

I laugh quietly at her indignation. “Not for ages. They look old. Carved in the wood.” I run my fingers over the letters. I shiver – it’s like fingers walking down my spine. “Billy’s here,” I whisper.

“What?” Tally shouts.

“Billy,” I repeat, louder, uncomfortable now, like I’m trespassing somewhere sacred. “His name’s here.”

“Billy Crier?” Lucas asks.

“Just Billy. And his mates, I guess.” I read them out. Billy’s last on the list. *Jones, Yusuf, Mara, Olive, Billy*. The names are written together, but in different writing, like each of them scratched out their name themselves.

BILLY. The letters are jagged and deep. It could be any Billy, but I know it’s him. I feel it. Billy Crier, up here one summer’s day with his mates, or at night, after the windmill operator had gone home. Billy, carving out his name by torchlight. Never imagining what would happen.

“Nat, you going on up?” Tally says. “We don’t want to hang around longer than we need to.” She sounds nervous.

I’m almost on the third floor when there’s a scrambling noise below. “Nat! Nat!” Lucas shrieks. “Someone’s coming. Uplands people. Hide!”

Tally swears loudly. “How did we not see them coming?”

“Lucas? Lucas!” I hiss. But there’s silence below. Tally and Lucas have already scarpered.

I'm about to leg it back down when I hear footsteps outside. Voices.

I pull myself up the rest of the way on to the third floor, wincing when the ladder creaks. The voices outside carry on uninterrupted.

I crawl along the wooden floor to where there's a little window at floor level. I lie horizontal and peer out to the ground below.

There are two people. A man and a woman. They're both workers from the Uplands, I recognize them. They're wearing white, wipe-clean, seamless suits, that are anti everything – bacteria, virus, fungus, general grime. The woman's got a box and is looking down into the thistles like she lost something. She picks something up with gloved fingers and holds it out to the man. I can't make out what she's saying.

They seem to be transferring leaves to the box. The man keeps pulling a face and rubbing his hands on his legs, like he's touching something unpleasant. The woman lifts up a leaf to her face and stares at whatever she's seeing on it.

"That's all of them, surely? Don't know why Central are so bothered. Not if the things die anyway," the man says, louder now. He sounds bored.

The woman gazes to the top of the windmill. "I swear I saw something. Some movement."

I retreat back into the darkness, willing myself invisible.

The man's looking now too. "They say this mill's haunted. That boy who was strung up on the sails, back in the Hunger Years." He laughs nervously.

"Billy Crier, poor lad," the woman says sadly, before they both head off down the maintenance track with their boxful of whatever it was they were collecting.

I jump back down the ladders. Both flights to the first floor, then a final leap down and out into the sunshine. My eyes blink after the dark of the windmill.

"Tal? Lucas?" My voice sounds empty across the fields. There's nothing but the hum of the panels.

I crouch down next to the thistles. I've never noticed the leaves before. They're pointy, with prickly hairs on them, like the nettles that grow round the compound, before maintenance come and rip them all out.

No one would come out here for thistles. What was it they were collecting?

I rifle through the plants. They're just leaves. I'm about to spring up, to get away from this place, when I notice it. A creature – moving, living. A tiny black thing with miniscule hairs. It's inside a sort of webbing. It looks a bit like a maggot, the kind you see when the vacuum packs of meat are left open too long. But from the way the woman was looking at the creatures, boxing them up, they can't be maggots.

There's a prickle on the back of my neck, as if someone's

watching, and I look round again for Tally and Lucas, but they're nowhere in sight. There's no one there, just me, and Billy's ghost.

I go through the thistles again, quicker now. There are more creatures further on, huddled together on a fresh set of plants. The man and woman must have missed them.

I drop one of the creatures from the leaf on to my palm. Its little, segmented body soft against my skin. It tickles.

There are always scary stories about pests or fungus coming to the bay. About the Hunger Years coming back with a vengeance. Mum gets angry when I don't take them seriously. "*You don't know what it's like, Nat. To know hunger like that.*" The adults have the Hunger Years etched deep in their heads and their bellies. That's why they put up with all the rules.

"Are you dangerous?" I whisper to the tiny creature.

I take out the red flag from my pocket and spread it over the ground and then transfer the creatures into it. There must be two dozen or so. I add some leaves, because from the holes in them, I think that's what the creatures eat.

I don't know why I take them. Perhaps it's because the Uplands people want them. Or maybe it's something to show Tally, to make up for not hanging out the flag.