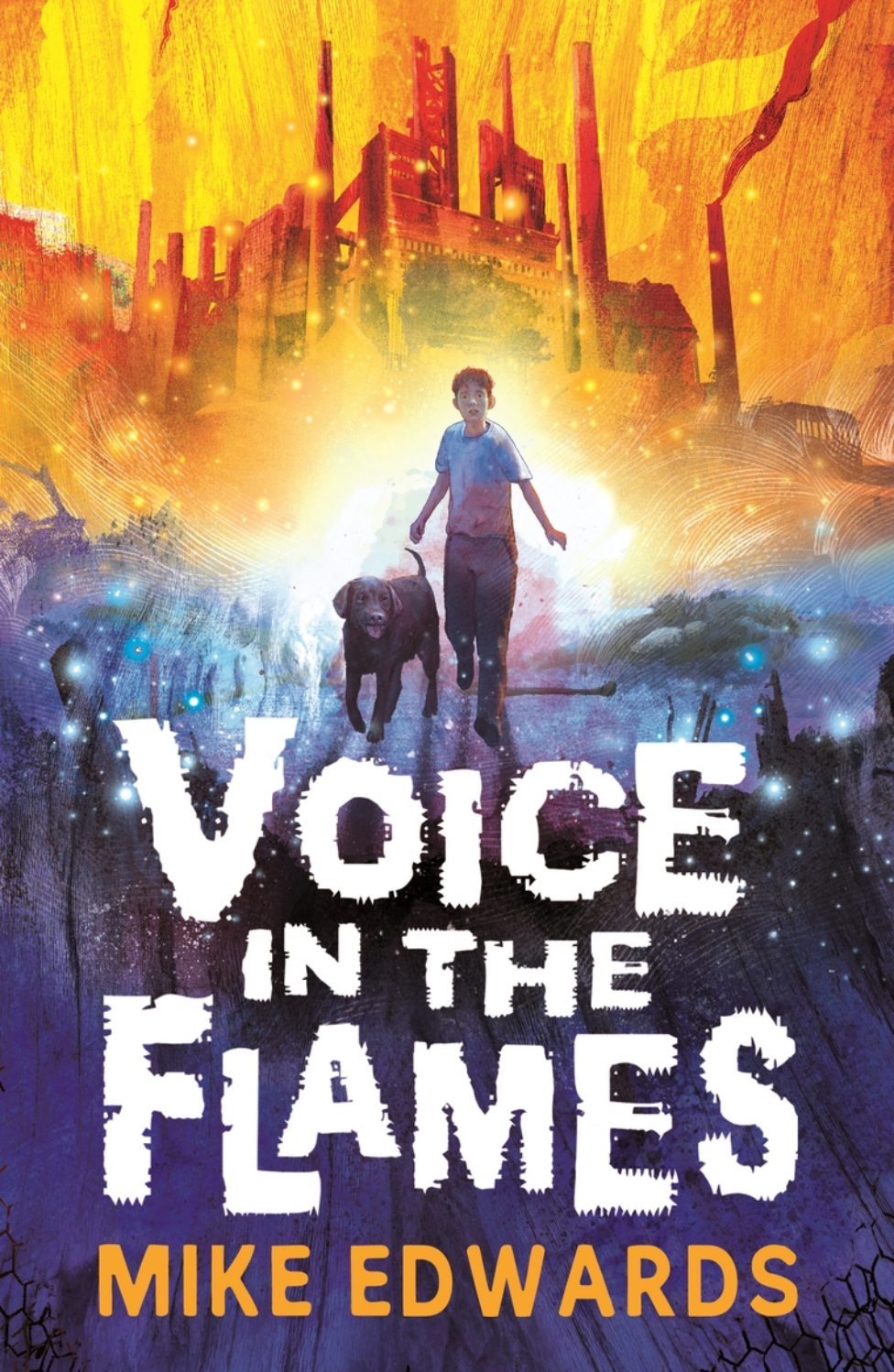




VOICE IN THE FLAMES

MIKE EDWARDS

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SOS

“Two points for either S,” Beans says, placing the bright red ball down and shaping to kick. “And three points for the O cos that’s like the bullseye, mate.”

Me and Beans are outside the old steelworks site, kicking a footy against the corrugated fence that runs all the way around the perimeter. The letters SOS are daubed in white spray-paint on the fence.

Beans made up the rules of the game. “Better than just booting it,” he said. Now, taking a deep breath and focusing like he is taking a penalty in the world cup, Beans takes a short run and kicks hard. *Boom!* The ball misses the letters and rebounds with a clatter off the fence.

“How many points for that, Beans?”

“Jog on,” he says, scowling.

I chip the ball back. It hits the first S.

“Two points,” I say, trying not to sound too cocky.

It *was* a pretty good chip, though, and sports aren't even my thing.

Beans, footy-mad, retrieves the ball, squints at it and looks again at the fence, weighing up the angle. Then he wellies it. This time he makes a hit on the end S.

“Two points! Levelled it. I'll have that.”

I consider my next shot a bit more carefully. I reckon I could get the O from here.

Behind the fence, the towers of the disused works loom like giant candles alongside squatter factory buildings and cooling towers. It's still weird seeing it all quiet, chimneys not smoking, no clanking and rumbling, no hot burning smell. The steelworks used to be like background noise around here but not any more. You know how when there's a clock ticking in a room and it stops, the room is quieter but it's sort of louder, too? You *feel* the ticking has gone? Maybe it's just me. It's weird: even though the smoke and the dirt was probably bad for us, I miss it. When the works was all lit up at night, there was something sci-fi about it. *Blade Runner* sky, Dad called it. It really was, too – ugly and stark but beautiful at the same time. There was one tower that

used to shoot this great line of flame up and the flame would hang there like a patch of the sky was alight. A giant orange-red eye watching over Easton. Proper mint.

You get used to stuff, don't you? The steelworks were just always *there* and it's not the same without them.

SOS.

Can I hit the *O*? Straight down the line, clean in the middle. That stupid wobbly-painted *O* that looks more like a badly drawn egg. How hard is it to draw a circle?

SOS. This isn't the only place the letters are painted on the fence. There are others all the way around the perimeter. *Save Our Steel*. Before the works closed, there was a campaign to try and save it and the slogan SOS was everywhere.

But it *wasn't* saved, and now all of the SOSes look sad, popping up along the fence as far as you can see, SOS, SOS, SOS, SOS. Like the fence is repeatedly saying sorry.

Before I take my kick, I put my hand into the pocket of my tracky bottoms, take out Dad's good luck stone and rub it with my thumb.

Beans sees I've got the stone. He knows it was my dad's, knows that it was something from the works and

now it's something I like to have with me. If he thinks it's weird, he doesn't say. Beans isn't like that. He just gives a nod and a tight smile.

I put the stone back in my pocket. "For luck or whatever. Daft really."

"Not daft, mate. All the best sportspeople have their little rituals and that."

Whack!

I kick hard and send the ball high. *Way* too high. I've skied it, proper rugby style, and now me and Beans watch, Beans's gob dropping wide, as the ball clears the fence and lands on the works site.

Beans howls, head thrown back, proper laughing his cap off.

"Ha! That's ten points, mate!"

"Aw, Beans! I thought I had that. Your ball. Soz."

"Don't worry about it, mate. It's not even my third best."

"I'll get it back."

"What are you going to do, pole vault over?"

He's got a point. This section of fence is made of heavy panels, no gaps. Too smooth and high to climb – and

even if I could, it's sharp and spiked at the top. A little way along, though, the solid panels give way to slatted metal bars. From here you can peer in. On the other side is a great square of ashy land, dilapidated sheds, piles of rusting junk and rubble, a wasteland under the shadow of the main works building.

If I really crane my head against the bars, I can just about see the ball. It has landed on a pile of mangled scrap metal and ashen rocks that look like something from the moon. Set against the grey white, the bright red ball looks like a cherry on top of a dessert.

"I can see it, Beans."

He pushes in beside me. "So can I. We're not getting that back."

Too quick to give up, Beans, like.

"We can, mate. I can. It was me who put it over, so I'll get it back."



A VOICE IN THE SMOKE

I can find a gap in the fence big enough to squeeze through. Surely?

I'm not going to lie; I've put on a bit of beef lately. I blame Mum, we're proper knacking the takeaways these days. She's at Parmo Palace every other night, getting our tea in. If I'd resisted a chicken parmo, chips and garlic sauce just *once*, I'd probably slip through the gaps easy.

OK, so I'm not tall and thin like Beans (he gets called Beans because he used to get called Beanstalk) but I'm small enough to give it a go.

In places the bars look like they have been pushed aside a bit, slightly dented, where maybe vehicles on the site yard have backed into them or people stronger than me have tried to prise them apart. I keep following the fence, Beans telling me I really don't have to bother, but I do. I *do* have to bother. I put the ball over; I'm getting it back. It's the *principle*.

I find a section where a bar has rusted and is hanging on like a rotted tooth. I only need to wiggle it, and it falls neatly away. Nice one! I'll even be able to prop it back after and no one will know I moved it.

There are signs up and down the fence warning that Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted and that the site has twenty-four-hour security, but across the wide space that leads up to the factory it looks like an empty wasteland. The ground is scattered in cold ash, and dotted across the flat expanse are mounds like the one the ball landed on, heaps of brick, rock and coal: hardened, volcanic.

I can tell, now I'm almost in, that Beans *does* want his ball back. He is hovering behind me, peeking through to the site while looking around carefully for any sign of a guard.

The sun is starting to set over the hills behind the works; the sky is getting an orange-pink glow. The works is in shadow, a silhouette of candle-like towers and rust-roofed buildings. "Off you go, mate," Beans says.

I push through the gap and dart across the dusty ground to the pile of rock and scrap. It's a load of dismantled parts of machinery from the factory. Rusted

pipes and heavy metal grates and panels, scorched and coated in ash. It's not as easy to reach the ball as it looked. It's now slipped into a gap between a twist of pipes and steel panels, wedged and slightly out of shape. I have to clamber onto the scrap pile, pitting my clothes in ash, and reach in to try and free it – but it's stuck hard. I pull and loosen it but then it falls deeper into the pile. Damn.

It's hard to see much in the dark tangle of scrap and stone. I can't see the ball any more, but I sense something. A slow groaning movement, like more of the heap is about to fall away, like something deep inside is straining against the dismembered factory parts, moving through the broken lengths of pipe and pushing against the rusted door panels.

Aargh! I feel a sharp pain at the top of my leg, as if I've been jabbed with something hot and sharp.

I jump back.

There is a shimmer. The sort of wavy heat-ripples that streak the air on the hottest summer days. And smoke. Smoke is coming from the mound, a thin grey line rising as though the heap of junk is exhaling a poisonous breath.

What the...?

The smoke gets thicker and flakes of ash, like black snow, swirl among it.

I hear a dry scratching sound, like nails on sandpaper, or a match trying to be struck. *Tukkit tukkit tukkit.*

It gets louder. The more I hear it, it morphs into ...

Tuk it tuk it...

Took...

It sounds like a *voice*. Cracked and desperate.

I freeze. I'm hearing things. There's no one there. There can't be. And yet I can hear it, coming from inside the mound but around me, too, in the gathering smoke.

Took it...

Time to do one.

I turn, leg it fast as I can across the yard and bundle through the gap.

Beans is where I left him, playing around with his phone while he waits. He looks up. "What happened, mate?" he says. "Wait ... you're grey!"

I *feel* grey. I'm clammy and my heart is racing but Beans is talking about the flakes of ash that have landed on me, turning my dark hair white and covering my shoulders like toxic dandruff.

“What was it, man?” Beans says. “What happened?”

I shake myself off, brush off the dust and ash, and now I feel ... I feel a bit of a divvie to be honest.

“I don’t know, mate. You know when a place has a weird feeling? There was smoke. Some of that metal is still red hot somehow, and then ... I thought I heard something.”

“What?”

“Sounded like ... na, it sounds daft, man.”

A voice in the smoke? What’s up with me? I proper bricked it, and for what? For some smoking pile of scrap making burning noises.

It *felt* real, though.

“What? What’d you hear?”

“I don’t know. It was weird ... I thought I heard a *voice*.”

“A voice? You bang your head or owt? That can make you go well weird. That’s why I stopped boxing. Was mint until I got punched.”

“I didn’t bump my head,” I tell him. “It was probably the smoke, toxic and that, all of them burning chemicals.”

“Look at your trackies, man,” Beans says. “What happened there?”

I look down at myself. What *has* happened? There is a circular scorch mark over the pocket, the material blackened and singed. It's the pocket with Dad's stone in, and as I tentatively feel the scorch mark I realize the top of my leg is still throbbing.

"I caught myself on something ... something hot. But I'm fine. It's nowt."

Beans looks at me, concerned. Then he looks back at the works site. "I told you there was something weird about that place! Haunted as. I *knew* it."