

The Gardener takes the Vandal in B3

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The residents of Highbridge Park were an eclectic group, esteemed for their contribution to the town of Greenwich. They were busy folk, and all agreed that they didn't know what they would do without the junior gardener.

Hugo had volunteered in the park for many years before the council appointed him an official position. He carried out his responsibilities dutifully and pleasantly.

Between tasks, he liked to lend a listening ear to the park's residents. Hugo prided himself on his ability to engage in a variety of interesting topics.

He talked politics with Mr Dodson, who was very educated and clever.

He talked sports with Freddy Tops, a famous football player in his time.

He talked literature with the fair Miss Solestra. Admittedly, he did a great deal more listening than talking where she was concerned.

On this particular morning, Hugo had abandoned his usual duties to clean Mr Dodson's shoes.

Mr Dodson was getting to an age where bending to touch one's toes required forethought. He sat on his favourite bench near the park's entrance while Hugo rubbed the cloth left to right.

They conversed in their usual fashion. Mr Dodson was hard of hearing, and Hugo had to shout to be heard. The bird's defecation had put the poor man in a sombre mood, though he was brightening considerably as the conversation warmed to one of his favourite topics.

"Yes, you are right, Mr Dodson," Hugo replied loudly. "Universal healthcare is a must."

"Morning Hugo!"

Hugo jumped and spun. A man had appeared on the path. He wore a zip-up jumper and jogging pants. Hugo's hand went instinctively to his left breast. His fingers started to tap rhythmically. They slowed when he recognised the man, or more specifically, his cup.

Coffee-man was on his morning stroll.

The grey brush over his mouth twitched and his eyes crinkled. "Cleaning up, are you?"

Hugo nodded mutely. People like Coffee-man made him anxious in a way that he never felt around the park's residents.

Coffee-man ambled closer. "Oh dear, looks like the bird got his nameplate too."

Hugo looked at Mr Dodson's bench. He peered at the writing on the plate. Hugo was not very good at reading. Fortunately, that was compensated for by his excellent memory.

LOCAL HEROES OF GREENWICK

Henry Dodson 1896-1967

The first elected mayor of Greenwich, fondly remembered for his years of service to the community and heroic rescue of the Prewett children from their burning house in 1943.

A white streak covered the first E and R in HEROES.

Hugo sighed in dismay. He looked into Mr Dodson's eyes. The indignity of his situation was reflected in his cool stare and stiff lip.

Hugo set to work.

After a bite to eat, Hugo took a stroll through the gardens of B1 for the simple pleasure of tipping his hat to Miss Solestra.

The park was divided into a grid, unbecoming of a place of tranquillity, yet easy for Hugo to memorise. There were six squares in total between the intersecting paths. He had the columns labelled A-B, and the Rows 1-3.

Miss Solestra stood in her usual place beneath the old elm tree. She was the founder of Greenwick Primary School and had written several novels. Her smile was sweet as she perused her book. She was too engaged to look up.

Hugo didn't mind.

He smiled to himself and went to the old football ground in A2.

Freddy Tops stood with a footy in hand. In all the years Hugo had known Freddy, he had never seen him kick it.

Most unusually, he had painted himself pink.

Hugo waved, but Freddy was not looking as happy as his bright colouring would suggest. In fact, he looked quite angry.

As they spoke, Hugo realised it was not Freddy's doing. Someone had scrawled words and pictures over him.

The words were poorly written, hard for Hugo to interpret.

He read the letters one by one, sounding them out as he went.

F-U-C...

"Hugo, there you are!"

Hugo startled. The groundsman and a woman in a blazer approached him. His fingers sprung to action.

"You remember Suzanne Sullivan, from the council?"

Hugo looked at the woman. There was a red line across her face. It parted, showing gleaming teeth.

"How are you, Hugo?" She took Hugo's hanging hand. He was relieved when she dropped it.

Groundsman surveyed Freddy with his arms crossed. "Terrible, isn't it?"

"Absolutely," Councilwoman agreed. "Vandalism has no place in Greenwich."

"Vantalism?" Hugo repeated.

"Yes," Groundsman growled. "People damaging park property. I don't have time for it on top of everything else. Would you mind scrubbing him up, Hugo?"

Hugo shook his head. Then nodded. Then shook his head. It was the sort of question which was hard to respond to.

Groundsman clapped his shoulder. "Good man."

As Hugo got to work, he thought about the new word he had learnt.

Vantalism.

He made a mental note to ask Miss Solestra if she had heard of it before.

It was not until he had retrieved a bucket of sudsy water that he noticed something peculiar.

A chess piece stood upon Freddy's head.

Hugo sought his permission and plucked it off.

He turned the bishop between his fingers, thrilled with his find. Hugo had many chess-sets back home. New soldiers were always welcome.

Hugo arrived home at 6:15pm after his weekly game with the boys on bikes. As he stepped inside, shouting erupted from the lounge. There was a ferocious growl, followed by a volley of loud bangs.

Hugo ran to his room, covering his ears.

The bangs stopped.

Moments later, Hugo's brother, Miguel, appeared in the doorway. His mouth moved, but Hugo couldn't hear him through the covered ears and his own anxious muttering.

Slowly, he lowered his hands.

"Sorry, mate. I didn't hear you come in. Dylan and I were just playing some..." He trailed off, frowning at Hugo's cheek. "What's happened here? Looks swollen."

"Acorn," Hugo said, brightening. "Only three today."

Miguel's face darkened. "Those kids again?"

"I'm getting good."

Before Miguel could reply, his friend sauntered up behind him. He was holding a controller in one hand and a bottle in the other. "Are you going to come back and lose to me properly or use Hugo as an excuse to get out of it?"

"The latter," Miguel replied.

"Pussy."

Hugo perked up, scanning the room. He dropped to the floor and peered under the bed.

"What's he doing?" Friend muttered.

"Looking for the cat, I suppose."

"Oh, the pus-"

"You should probably go."

"Fine. Same time tomorrow?"

"Not tomorrow. After work, Hugo and I are going to..."

"Wednesday-night chess. How could I forget?"

Hugo poked his head up in time to see Friend stride away.

Miguel massaged his brow. Hugo examined the bags under his eyes. He stood and touched Miguel's head, the way Mum did when Miguel was small.

"I'm fine, Hugo." He smiled, but his eyes weren't smiling. "Come on, I'll order some pizza and you can tell me about your day."

Hugo hummed happily to himself in the flowerbeds of B3. Harper Bell, affectionately known to Hugo as the Water Angel, was bored of the current arrangement around her fountain.

She was a compassionate woman, who'd saved stranded animals during the flash flood of 1966. She had lost her life during a rescue but returned in angelic form to keep the waters of the fountain at bay. Several animals sat around her feet.

As Hugo told her about the new bulbs he was planting, a mother and daughter appeared. The girl looked at Hugo. He smiled shyly and lifted a hand.

The mother hugged the girl to her hip and led her away.

Hugo shook his head to himself. How silly of him. Girls didn't like worms and dirt.

After Hugo had finished planting, he went to see Miss Solestra. He was excited to tell her about his new word.

When he reached the grove where the elm tree stood, he was puzzled.

Miss Solestra wasn't there.

Perhaps she had taken a stroll and gotten lost. Hugo was often telling her it was dangerous to walk around with your head in a book.

He went to the grassless patch which her footprints had formed over years of standing.

There was something in the dirt. Another chess piece. A rook, this time.

Compelled by a sudden urge, Hugo looked up.

Miss Solestra hung in the branches, suspended by a thick rope, tied around the trunk at the other end.

Her face was pained.

Without having to ask, Hugo knew what had happened.

Vandalism.

Hugo reported the incident to the groundsman as soon as he had helped Miss Solestra down. Groundsman reassured Hugo that the police would be notified.

It wasn't enough.

Hugo was going stop the vantalism himself, even if that meant missing Wednesday-night chess.

As the sky turned inky, Hugo chose himself a bench in B1. Armed with a blanket and torch from the tool shed, he kept watch.

This wasn't the first time Hugo had slept in the park. In summer, he loved listening to the insects and watching the flying-foxes flap overhead. Tonight, his hands were stiff with frost. His breath was white.

Hugo huddled under the blanket.

Distantly, he heard the boys on bikes patrolling the streets, but they didn't come into the park. The only person he saw was Groundsman. Hugo was careful to keep out of sight.

At some point, he must have drifted off.

Hugo snapped awake at the sound of footfalls. He peered into the darkness. There were clouds overhead and a dim moon, but he could make out the shadow, moving amongst the trees where Miss Solestra stood. It loomed in and out of sight. Hugo bolted up and turned on the torch.

The figure covered its eyes.

"Fucking-hell! Turn that off!"

Hugo did no such thing, though he did recognise the voice. He lowered the light. Miguel's friend glared fiercely before his eyes widened in recognition.

"Is that you, Hugo? What are you doing out here?"

"Waiting."

"For what? Frostbite?"

"Vantalism," Hugo said gravely in the same manor Councilwoman had said it.

"What the fuck is vant... doesn't matter." He shivered. "Is that all you're wearing?"

He took Hugo's arm and pulled him to his feet. "I'm taking you home."

Hugo resisted.

"Miguel is frantic. You don't want to upset him, do you?"

Hugo shook his head. Of course not!

They walked to the car, parked by the entrance. Friend threw his backpack in. "You can take the front." He helped Hugo in and fastened the seatbelt. It was a kind and unnecessary gesture.

As the car took off, Hugo's hand began to tap. Around the same time, he observed a twitch in Friend's eye.

"I don't know what goes through your head, Hugo. Do you think about your brother at all?"

Hugo didn't answer. His mind was elsewhere.

"Miguel has plenty of things he'd rather be doing than worrying about you. He should be in Europe now. Just keep that in mind next time you decide to give him trouble." The car came to a stop outside the house. "Wait here."

He knocked on the door.

Miguel appeared, looking dishevelled.

They spoke in low voices before Hugo was allowed out of the car. When Miguel said goodbye to Friend and showed Hugo inside, he wasn't looking very happy.

"You can't just sleep in the park without telling me, Hugo, especially not in weather like this. Thank God Dylan found you."

Hugo touched Miguel's head.

Miguel batted his hand away. "Stop that."

Hugo's face fell.

"I know I can't take care of you like Mum did, but I'm trying my best. Please don't make it harder for me."

Hugo felt a great throbbing in his chest, which had nothing to do with his drumming fingers.

"Can I help Miguel?" Hugo asked.

"You..." Miguel raked a hand through his hair. "Yes, you do help me, Hugo. Of course, you do. You're the only family I have left. Well," he reconsidered, "The only family I *willingly* have left." A silence passed between them. "Come on, let's get to bed. And please, Hugo, put this vandalism out of your mind. It's just kids messing around. Your friends are fine."

Hugo nodded. He did not agree, but he didn't want to upset Miguel further.

Hugo arrived at the park the following morning. The concrete was on the sky. He felt it pressing down. The trees blew, making wind.

Hugo's fingers began to drum.

He quickened his pace.

Hugo had barely passed through the entrance when he stumbled upon the scene of a crime.

Mr Dodson's chair was empty. His remains lay scattered over the concrete. Hugo sunk to the ground and picked up a shard of his face.

The sky began to cry, spattering the pavement in drops of grey.

Mr Dodson was dead. On his chair was a knight.

The funeral was held at 11am. All who could attend were lined before the grave. Hugo stood in the front row, hands clasped, and head bowed. When he returned to his spot after saying a few good words for Mr Dodson, he noticed a mournful gleam in Miss Solestra's eyes. He reached over to pat her hand.

At the end of the service, as Hugo was bidding the mourners farewell, he spied an approaching figure.

Councilwoman was picking her way towards him. Her heel sunk into the uneven tracks his friends had carved into the grass upon arrival. She wobbled and righted herself.

The red line on her face flipped as she noticed Hugo watching.

"What's going on here, Hugo?" she trilled.

"Funeral."

Her brow furrowed. She looked at the grave, marked with Mr Dodson's nameplate.

"Have you buried Henry Dodson?"

"He was murdered." Hugo added gravely, "Vandalism."

Her thin eyebrows shot up.

"I am very sorry to hear that, Hugo. I'll get the police down as soon as possible."

Her gaze swept the lawn. The red line twisted. "In the meantime, I think you should get everyone home."

She staggered off.

Hugo wanted to trust the police but couldn't. Things had gone too far already.

He pulled the knight from his pocket. It was identical to the pieces he had found at the other crime scenes. First, the Bishop in A2, then the Rook in B1, now the knight in A1.

Hugo's head jerked up.

He knew who the next target was.

The only resident in B3.

The Water Angel.

After holding a meeting with his fellow mourners and warning the Water Angel of her impending danger, Hugo took the afternoon off to go yabbing.

On his return to the park, he popped into the garden and hardware store. Among his purchases was a duck that quacked when people approached, and some motion sensor lights.

When the set-up around the fountain was complete, and everyone in position, Hugo regretfully returned home. He didn't want to worry Miguel again.

At 11:56pm, Hugo was woken by police sirens. He stumbled to the window. The cars were moving towards the park.

Hugo barged into Miguel's room and dragged him from bed. Alarmed and disorientated, he accepted Hugo's demands to get dressed.

When they arrived in B3, a small crowd had already gathered. Some stood on the grass, activating the sensor lights. They illuminated the park's residents who hid in the trees, facing the fountain.

To Hugo's relief, the Water Angel was unharmed. Her quacking guard stood proudly before the animals at her feet. A backpack floated in the water.

Hugo fished it out, poking a yabby off the strap. It contained spray bottles, a chisel, and a hammer.

Miguel's attention had been captured by the police. They ringed a tree, trying to coax a figure down.

"I didn't do it! I'm telling you, it was the junior gardener."

"Dylan?"

Miguel's friend looked down at them. He was soaking wet and had several welts on his skin.

"What the hell are you doing up there?"

"Ask your lunatic brother! Just look at what he has done with the statues. It's psychotic!"

"Why are you wet?"

"That bloody duck came to life and made me slip over."

"During your midnight shower, I suppose! *Come on*, Dylan. You're the vandal, aren't you?"

He laughed manically. "It was a game! That's all. I was leaving chess pieces behind. Each one could be used to predict the location of the next target. Hugo loves chess."

"Cut the bullshit. This wasn't a game. You were taking your anger out on Hugo because I'm not as available to you anymore. Instead of going travelling with you, I am here."

"You really want to spend the rest of your life in Greenwich running after *that*?" He pointed to Hugo.

Losing interest, Hugo bounded over to his friends. He shook their hands, offering hearty congratulations for their efforts. As he came to Freddy Tops, he recalled that the footy player had been Miguel's favourite as a boy. A reunion was in order.

Hugo glanced back in time to see his brother hurl an acorn up the tree.

A week later, Hugo was presented with a medal. He bent to receive it and shook Councilwoman's hand.

Beaming and blushing, he looked out upon the applauding crowd. Freddy stood between Groundsman and Coffee-man. Miss Solestra was reading her book, but Hugo was sure he saw her glance up. At her feet was Quacking Duck. Behind them were more of the park's residents and citizens of Greenwich.

On Hugo's request, two places had been left vacant. One for Mr Dodson. One for Mum.

As Hugo focused on them, his fingers began to tap.

Then his eyes found Miguel's.

He applauded loudest of all, looking upon Hugo with love and pride.

Hugo's fingers stilled.

He smiled back.