

The Boy Who Painted The Future

When Archie Meed came to our school, I knew there would be trouble. He wasn't a bully or a bad kid. He was the opposite. Archie was weedy with round glasses and a uniform that swamped him. When Mr Nelson brought him into Art that Monday, I thought it was a mistake. This boy didn't look big enough to be in Year Six.

“This is Archie Meed,” Mr Nelson announced. “Archie's moved from Gobbleswood Preparatory due to difficult circumstances. I'm sure you'll be friendly to him.”

Mr Nelson might as well have given Archie the kiss of death. Kids from our school prided themselves on beating up Gobbleswood boys. Archie's face coloured as though it was baking under the intense stare of the whole class.

“Now, where shall I sit you, Archie? Our class is rather full,” Mr Nelson said. Every kid cast their gaze down onto their desk.

“Ah! I'll put you next to Jack. He's a star footballer, our Jack. Are you a football fan, Archie?” Archie was guided over to the seat beside me.

“N-not really,” Archie said, clambering onto the chair. A kid like Archie wouldn't last a minute in one of our games.

Since our class were in the middle of a project, Mr Nelson gave Archie a sheet of A3 and told him to draw whatever he liked. I got on with my project. As long as I worked with full concentration, Archie didn't dare interrupt me and I didn't have to be seen talking to the awkward new kid.

At the end of the lesson, I glanced at Archie's desk. He'd painted a scene in a house. It was brilliant. I'd never seen a kid our age paint so realistically – it was as good as one of Mr Nelson's paintings.

Then I realised that I was in the painting. I was sitting at the table – which was exactly like the table we ate at in our living room – with my parents and my Aunt Joan. Archie had not only got me

just right but also the rest of my family, who he'd never met. Everything in the picture - the table, the crockery, the wallpaper – was a perfect copy.

“Do you like it?” he asked, looking up at me.

“How did you know?” I said.

“What?”

“How did you know to paint it like that?”

“I don't know.” Archie shrugged. “I didn't really think about it.”

I thought about it all the way home. Someone who had seen me, with my Dad's blue eyes and my Mum's curly brown hair, could have a lucky guess at what my parents might look like. But how had he painted my Aunt Joan? My Aunt liked dying her hair wild shades and wearing embarrassing clothes that were meant for teenagers. Archie had painted her with purple hair, a green dress and a string of beads. Although she changed every time I saw her (which thankfully wasn't often) Archie had painted the features of her face so well that it could only be her.

When I got home, Mum put her head around the hall door while I was kicking off my shoes.

“Go upstairs and get changed, love – your Aunt Joan's come over for tea and I've got a meatloaf in the oven.”

Normally I would have protested, as meatloaf was only slightly less disgusting than Aunt Joan.

“Are you alright, Jack?” Mum asked. “Has something happened at school?”

Well, you could say that.

“Woo-oooh! Is that my little Jacky?” Aunt Joan's mop of purple hair appeared behind my Mum. She pushed through so that she could grab my cheeks and smear her greasy lipstick on me. She was wearing a green minidress and her long string of beads clacked against the buttons of my blazer as she leant forward to kiss me.

The next week in Art Archie painted me scoring a goal against a team in a red strip. At the match after school, the team from Buckham were wearing their red away strip instead of their usual

white. I scored the only goal, from a header. Just how Archie had drawn me.

The next day I found Archie eating his lunch on the steps of the library. He had spent his first two weeks being bullied by the two hardest kids in Year Six, Bruce and Kirk Wayland. The twins had practised their fighting techniques on five younger siblings. There wasn't much they didn't know about making smaller kids cry.

"Alright?" I said.

"Oh, hello Jack."

"You know those pictures you paint? Could you paint one of Spurs? They're playing Arsenal on Saturday and -"

"I don't know if I can. I can only paint the pictures when they have someone I know in them."

"Alright. How about you paint next week's match against Rutters Park? I'm playing up front and if we win we'll take the cup."

Archie put his sandwich down and took the notepad and pencil I pulled out of my bag.

"Just a rough sketch," I said. "Doesn't have to be all pretty."

I watched as Archie began to draw. It didn't look like much at first as he began sketching. I looked away.

"Done!" Archie announced, after five minutes. I looked at the pad. It was rubbish. It was a scribble of what was meant to be me but didn't look right, running towards a goal drawn at a funny angle, dribbling a ball that looked like an egg.

"It's not like the other ones you did," I said.

"No," said Archie. "I can't do those unless..."

"Unless what?"

"I can't explain. It's like I don't have to try. It's like someone else does them for me."

The following week Archie came into Art with a muddy shirt and a bleeding lip. He'd been crying and it didn't take a genius to guess who he'd had a run in with. When he started drawing it took a

lot to keep the pencil steady.

Mr Nelson reminded us about the trip to the National Gallery on Wednesday. I wasn't going as the match against Rutters Park was the same day. The football team were the only ones in year six not going, along with Archie, since the trip was booked before he joined the school.

By the end of that lesson, he'd painted another good one. He was hiding half of it with his arm, but I saw part of our school bus, with kids inside. He must have been thinking about the trip. As he uncovered the other half of the painting, I saw that the windscreen of the bus had been smashed by a huge tyre and the pupils in the front seat – Bruce and Kirk Wayland, who were always made to sit at the front where they could be watched by the teachers – had suffered terrible injuries from flying glass. Other kids were hurt too, but Archie had drawn the twins flopped back in their seats, blood pouring down their faces. The tractor tyre that had come through the windscreen had rolled off a truck, which Archie had also drawn.

“That's sick, Archie,” I said. “You could have just drawn something happening to *them*.”

I didn't like Bruce and Kirk much either.

“I didn't make it up – it just comes out like that!” Archie said. He was staring at the painting.

“Is this gonna come true – like the other pictures?” I asked. The other pictures had been about small things. Even winning the football wasn't that big. Not compared to this. Archie looked from me to the painting and back again. Then he tore it into a dozen pieces and ran out of the room. I picked up the torn pieces carefully, as some of the paint was wet. I didn't want to leave them there in case Mr Nelson saw. I shoved them in my bag.

On Wednesday before school my Mum got a phonecall from Archie's Mum. Mrs Meed was upset because Archie was missing. He'd been gone since last night. She rang my Mum because I was the only kid Archie had mentioned was his friend.

“Jack, this is important. Did this Archie say anything about running away?” Mum asked.

“Honestly, he didn't! We're not even friends,” I said.

I went to my room and got Archie's torn up painting out of my bag. It was slightly smeared but I managed to put it back together alright. When I put the last two bits in, showing the front of the bus, I realised the picture had changed. There was no tyre and no truck. No one on the bus was bleeding, and the twins were laughing. Only the driver looked worried. He looked as though he was yelling something.

Archie was standing in front of the bus, eyes closed, about to be hit.