

# The Biscuit Man's Wife

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Bailey said she's died in her bed, but Luca didn't believe him; he'd seen her move, he swore he had, a large mishapen lump that caused the duvet to ripple as she turned, almost like his mum's belly in those ancient, final days before his brother arrived. They argued about it most of the time, whether she was alive or The Biscuit Man was keeping her stiffened body because he was too stingy to pay for a funeral. Bailey claimed if they ever had the nerve to run in and look beneath the bed they'd find thousands of pounds stacked in black plastic bags. Luca didn't believe that either, though he often imagined greasy notes and their dull shine, like tiny leather jackets.

He was up on his feet as soon as he heard the door, casting aside his gamepad, running from his bedroom, leaping over his brother who was playing imaginary Star Wars with a Happy Meal R2D2, thundering downstairs to the door. He took a peek through the keyhole like his mum taught him. Four cone-headed figures, all recognisable.

Made locks clunk and turn, opened up.

'Wha gwaan?'

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Heads low, faces shielded by peaked hats and practiced scowls.

'Cool man. Raa, it's col out innit?'

'Wha you doin?'

Bailey said, chewing hard. Luca glanced at his scuffed trainers and saw a sweet wrapper dance before their collected feet as though it was basking in a hot summer's day, not six degrees in autumn. The paving slabs behind his friends were dark with rain. He squinted at the sky. Spitting.

'I beg you don't drop sweetie wrappers outside my door.'

'Safe man.'

All grinning, hearing his mum's voice.

'I beg you move it.'

Bailey gave his toothy white grin, the one older girls said was cute, trapped the gyrating wrapper beneath his Nike and scraped it away like doo doo. It lay there, winded, before the

breeze picked it up and shimmied the wrapper high in the air, searching for a more deserving audience.

‘So wha yuh doin?’

‘Playin Call ah Duty.’

Bailey’s nose wrinkled; he didn’t like computer games.

‘Comin out?’

This was from Troy, who did. Not today though.

‘Where you lot goin?’

‘Biscuit Man’s innit.’ Vincent piped up. Probably the last you’d hear from him all day, Luca thought. Quiet as a gnat’s fart.

‘I’m comin,’ he said, surprised he’d struck the right tone of casual.

‘Come then.’

‘Hold up a sec.’ He eased the door closed, guarding against embarrassment.

‘Daaaad.’

A long, horrible pause. Then;

‘Yes.’

‘I’m goin out, OK?’

‘Not OK. How do you phrase that question?’

He squeezed the door further shut, could hear the rustling clothes and low voices of his friends. Stood on tiptoe.

‘Can I go out?’ Weighing up his chances, throwing in the clincher. ‘Please?’

Holding his breath, waiting.

‘Go on then; and take your brother with you.’

He screwed up his face, stamped on the ground, swung a blow with his right in a roundhouse thrown with so much power it spun him around on the spot. He swore beneath his breath, counting to ten. On the pavement side of the door, silence had fallen.

‘Is that clear Luca?’

‘Yes daaad...’ The words falling from his mouth without having to think, then he was facing the opening door, facing the boys.

‘One minute yeah,’ he said, shutting

the door before they could respond, bounding back the way he’d come.

A world of limited colour. Grey up, grey down and grey to the sides. Concrete all around. Even the sun was nothing more than a brighter variation, more white than everything else but still dull, mute behind imposing granite sky. And then there was his brother. Skipping along beside him, Happy Meal toy in hand, oblivious to the fact that he was rolling with the man’s dem, oblivious to anything. He loved Sam and everything, but *damn*. He’d kill dad for this.

They crossed sullen blocks, hoods raised, gloved hands against faces to guard eyes from circles-flying grit. Crisp packets flew low, like dying birds. The rain was a feather-like mist sparkling on their clothes. Bailey turned back.

‘Wanna see suttin?’

He took his time before answering. Shot another glance at his oblivious brother. The unspoken statement, the word always lopped off the end, was *bad*. *Wanna see something* bad. No one ever said it otherwise. ‘S’pose,’ he said. The casual tone was really working today. ‘Like what?’ Bailey took an abrupt left turn, started walking away from The Biscuit Man’s flat. Troy and Vincent, also caught flat-footed, closed the space between them, following by Sam and Luca’s side.

‘His brother showed him yesterday,’ Troy said.

‘So what is it den?’

‘I’m not s’posed to say.’

‘C’mon man.’

He felt the tremor in his voice, wasn’t sure if they caught it. Troy’s amber eyes looked wistful until you realised he was cross-eyed. Not badly, just enough to make you look twice. Vincent walked with his head down, as though he wasn’t paying attention,

but Luca wasn't fooled. He knew him well enough to guess he was taking in every word.

They approached the rear blocks, where the silence was even more noticeable and the empty playground swings creaked, their only passengers the breeze. There was more mud here, more discarded furniture and dead clusters of damp leaves. A bank of solid earth rose until it met a chain link fence, marking the estate perimeter. In earlier years they'd climbed that fence, escaped to find nothing on the other side; just more bare earth. Watching Bailey stride in front of them, jeans sagging like a toddler's, Luca noticed how tall he had got over the summer – how the hell hadn't he seen that before? Bailey was always the tallest of their group, but now he'd grown a head higher in secret, maybe even overnight. Nah, Luca thought to himself, he'd probably been that way for months. Vincent would have noticed that shit.

They stopped not far from the bank of earth. Luca craned his neck to look at the tower block. His brother was trembling from cold, teeth clicking. He looked around.

'What is it den?'

'There.'

'What?'

'The rug.' Bailey pointed. 'Look at the rug.'

It was ordinary enough, garish, thick, glittering with raindrops. Dark red with a yellow diamond woven dead center, curved feathers at each corner. A lump in the middle as if the rug was covering something.

'Yeah. So?'

'There's a dead body underneath that,' Troy said.

Prickles of cold needles. Luca looked at his brother, whose mouth had fallen wide open, then at the boys to see if they clocked their reaction. Troy was

still staring at the rug. Bailey was glaring at Troy; he hated his thunder being stolen, even for a minute. And Vincent was looking at him. He gulped, clenched his fingers.

'Don't believe you.'

Bailey laughed. 'Luca never believes nuttin!' The others joined in. 'There is. My brother told me. He knows him.'

'How'd he die den?'

He was beginning to feel warm and could tell Sam was fidgeting, knew what he wanted, but forced calm into his voice, ignored him.

'I dunno, do I? Davis says he jumped. Marrow says someone pushed him. I dunno.'

'From there?'

Lifting his chin towards the blank shine of windows.

'Nah, here.' More chuckles. 'You chief.'

'Suck out, liar,' Luca said, but this time it came out wrong. Kind of weak, breathy. Scared.

'Let's go,' his brother whined, voice high, and from somewhere Luca felt a rush of love. He was suddenly glad Sam had come along. He was his alibi.

'Alright Sammy, don't worry,' he said, trying not to smile. He lowered his hood and grabbed his brother's hand, walked away without another word.

It was true The Biscuit Man's flat smelt of piss, but that didn't stop the Youngers from visiting, even the aging Youngers, the ones on the verge of being Olders, kids in Years Eleven or Twelve who smoked and had sex and bragged about both. Because the flat was not only dark but also central heated, the smell hit the children as soon as the door was opened, ushering them inside with a great deal more enthusiasm than The Biscuit Man himself. He was squat and sour as Cola Bottle sweets, the flesh on his face

sagged and yellow like a waxwork dummy. He wore a flat cap, a shirt and vest, sackcloth brown slacks that reminded Luca of a character from the period dramas his mum loved so much. He hardly ever spoke to the children, simply taking their orders, then their money, and disappearing into a back room. If he forgot to close the door they sometimes caught glimpses of stacked boxes, as if they were all the room contained; crisps, sweets, and of course, McVities biscuits.

They lined the dark passage, bumping each other, soft-swearing. The Biscuit Man stared over their shoulder like always.

'Whaya after?'

'Can I get a pack of Salt N Vinegar Walkers, Star Mix an a Fanta?'

Looking over the next shoulder.

'Some chocolate McVities, Tangtastics an a Coke?'

The next.

'Can I have... Cheese n Onion Walkers... An a Coke?'

And finally him.

'A Ting, some Tangtastics an chocolate McVities.' Sam nudged him. 'Make that two Tings, an Salt N Vinegar Walkers. As well as the rest. Alright?'

Sam was nodding, grinning. The Biscuit Man made for the back room, closed the door behind him tight. Bailey began to walk away from them, down the corridor.

'Where you goin?' Luca spat.

'We'll see who's a liar, me or you,' Bailey said. At the end of the corridor was the room. Her room. He reached for the wooden door handle. 'I betcha any money she's dead.'

He wanted to scream at him, felt the others' agitation; but then Bailey opened the door, grinned. Stepped inside. Was gone.

'What's wrong wi the brer man?' Luca moaned, a hand to his forehead.

Troy was speechless and Vincent's face gleamed with sweat. Something warm touched his hand; Luca jumped. When he looked down, Sam was holding his fingers tight.

The back room door opened. They all jumped that time. It was difficult not to look down the corridor but Luca kept his head rigid as The Biscuit Man shuffled their way, white plastic bags dangling from his wrist. He allowed them to tumble into his palm as though he was about to perform a magic trick, peered inside.

'Choccy McVities, Tangs an Coke?'

'Me,' Troy said, in a voice Luca had never heard.

'Two Tings, choccy McVities, Tangs...'

'Me,' he said, confused when Vincent shot him a glare. He took the white bag, figured what was irking him. The longer he took, the more time Bailey had.

'Cheese an Onion Walkers, Coke?'

'Nah,' Vincent said. 'I wanned a Fanta.'

The Biscuit Man frowned into the bag. He growled deep in his throat and shuffled towards his makeshift stockroom. No sooner had one door slammed shut, than the other opened. Bailey came down the corridor faster this time, skinning those white teeth, bouncing to their side. Luca could hardly look, but Troy and Vincent were already laughing, touching his fist as though they hadn't been scared too.

'You're stupid man,' he said, turning to stare at gnarled carpet. Bailey shrugged.

'Is she dead then?'

From Troy. Sell Out.

'Nah, she's alive,' Bailey said, still grinning into Luca's face, catching his surprised eyes. 'She was shakin an sick, but she looked right into my boat.'

'Didn't she say anything? Like,

what are you doin in her room?’ Luca couldn’t help but ask.

‘Yeah,’ Bailey said through laughter. ‘She said; “You’re a bad boy aren’t you? A very, very bad boy.”’

Walking back home he could almost sense what Bailey wanted, although he tried to fool himself most of the way. They were crossing the last block before it would have been too late when he stopped and said it.

‘Alright Luca, your turn.’

‘My turn for *what?*’

‘To see if I’m lying about the rug. I looked in the room, you look under the rug. Simple.’

He made a noise like the meerkat from the TV ad, and cocked his head in almost the same manner. Sam’s fingers were back around his. The others were standing to one side.

‘Luca let’s *go.*’

‘I didn’t tell you to go in there did I?’

‘That’s what I’m sayin innit.’ Bailey threw his retort like a counterpunch. ‘I did it to prove, right or wrong. Now it’s your turn.’

He sneered. ‘That’s stupid. So are you.’

‘Go on man. Don’t be gay.’

He breathed out through his nostrils, looked down at crushed leaves and gum splotches. Trembled inside, held it there.

‘*Luca...*’

His brother’s voice was thin, pained.

‘Come then, let’s *go.*’

Bailey smiled all the way to the bank of earth, the tower block. The last few steps he even whistled until the wind snatched the notes away. Luca spent the walk wishing someone had moved it, but there it was, a huge rug opened wide, the lump beneath. Sam was far behind the others clutching his Happy Meal toy and calling at them to stop, but Luca didn’t want

to see him, or lose his resolve, so he blocked him out. They fanned around the rug, staring.

‘Go on then,’ Bailey said, after a while.

He stepped forward. Knelt. Reached for the rug, grateful his mother insisted he wear gloves when he went out, grasped. Closed his eyes to stop the tears, but it was too late.

‘Wha you waitin for man?’

He opened his eyes, took a deep breath and peeled the rug back. At first there was nothing but wet earth and insects blinded by daylight, but the lump was in the middle so he’d expected that. He extended his arm, inching forwards on his haunches. He threw the corner away from him.

The eyes were dark, bloodshot. The skin pale and the angle of the head in the wrong place. Thick, black insects crawled between dried lips and the nose was flattened into nothing more than an inward dent, but it was a man, and he was definitely not sleeping or unconscious. The eyes were open, staring into his, holding him inside a pocket of nothingness. And then he heard their screams, the random drumbeat of footsteps, and realised he was screaming too. He got to his feet, turning to see the soles of their trainers appear and disappear, shocked for a moment until the fear struck him, and he was running behind them, desperate to catch up, screaming noises that were actually half formed words of terror, the tears blown from his eyes and into the wind.