

Going Home



*a
novel*

Tom Lamont

“Pepped up and gorgeous, just bristling with life.”

—The Guardian

GOING HOME

TOM LAMONT



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THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK
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[Joel was in...]

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A Note About the Author



To my mother,
and in memory of my father

Joel was in the park. He had to save all the dandelions—they were at war against the birds. It was so good, this game. His name for it kept changing. Today the weather was green. Today (he pushed out his tongue to check) the weather tasted of fresh. He was allowed fifty pushes on the swings. He couldn't ask his mum for more, it was already such a lot.

At home, later, they were going to watch a tiny bit of TV. They were going to have a tiny bit of chocolate. One of Joel's hobbies was to collect sticks from the park. If anybody saw a stick and it was shaped the same as a sword, or a gun, or a gun-sword, Joel wanted to know about it. Shout.

He collected answers to your questions. Joel Woods. Two! Salt-and-vinegar flavour. If you asked him he would admit that he was scared of wild animals, robbers, monsters, some robots but not if they had kind eyes. His mum was his best person, even when she was a tiny bit ready to stop playing. Joel knew how to count to sixteen. Beyond that he knew how to guess. It was his birthday next July. He had none brothers, none sisters, none dads. He did have a bedroom of his own, and a religion, and a favourite cartoon, which was about another boy who was secretly magic. Joel's hope was: in the future, him and this other boy would meet.

He had none cousins, none grandparents. His mum said, I worry I'm not enough for you. Their favourite dinner was baked potato. Joel lived in the London borough of Enfield, in England, in Earth. If he ever got lost at the park he was meant to find another grown-up with a child. They wouldn't know many facts about him. It would be Joel's mission to tell them the facts: his name, his age, what crisps he liked, what he collected, the enemies he was scared of, where he lived, how many turns he was allowed on the swings, what exactly had been agreed about TV and chocolate, all the conditions of his big life.

Joel saw another bird. Right, you.

He was the fastest boy alive—when he needed to be. He collected sound effects. He looked forward to later. He liked that it wasn't later yet.

SPRING
TO
SUMMER



The North Circular Road was a threshold. As soon as Téodor Erskine crossed those four lanes of traffic and drove into the London suburbs on the other side, he felt he'd left the city behind. It was misty tonight in Enfield, winter's dregs turning his childhood neighbourhood a colour that was grey-green and miry as seawater. When he reached Ben's road, Téó, obedient to rules, squinted to read a sign that laid out the local restrictions. Thirty minutes to wait...then he could park for free. He hesitated.

Park anyway.

That's what Ben Mossam would've said. Meaning, I've got the cash in my pocket. I'll cover any fines you get.

Park anywhere.

That's what Lia Woods would have said. Meaning, who cares about a sign? What *sign*?

Lia was their group's one girl. He hoped she would join them later in the pub; she still lived on these roads. Decision made, he carried on driving, ready to use up half an hour in the nearest shop. He asked himself, will I buy the expensive beers to remind them that I'm doing well in my job? Will I buy those thicker, better crisps?



“Don’t—I’m thinking. You’re someone’s son.”

“That’s right,” he said.

“Don’t tell me.”

Téo understood. He was almost memorable. Middle-sized and not athletic, he was shorter in the world than he was in his head. If he were ever shown a menu of genie wishes, he meant to add five inches to his height and leave matters there. He looked all right in photos. Especially his chin: it had a rare central dimple. At the age of thirty, Téo kept his hair short against the threat of it spooling out coiled and unruly, which he had been famed for and lightly teased about at school. For clothes he favoured zips, pockets, your lasting materials. He was loyal to his colours. He wore the same pale blues or charcoal greys or over-washed whites, whether for work or a weekend in Enfield or only to hang about doing nothing in his rented flat by the river.

Téo was sure that London had taken the measure of him. London had reached its decision. He was average as a citizen. And in among his responses to this (some frustration, some self-pity) there was peace. Where he lived now, in Aldgate, near London’s financial district, nobody expected much of him. Neighbours on his floor called him Tee-oh instead of Tay-oh, leaving out the Polish stress. He could escape the building with nods in reply to greetings, silences not chats. He hadn’t made many friends since he moved in from the suburbs, a deliberate fending-off of additions to the guilt they could still exact from him at home. He had been careful to arrange a life in which he could leave obligations at the door of his flat, next to the coins he saved for Ben’s poker nights and his shoes that were comfiest for driving.

Téo went home once a month.

He heard complaints if his visits became any less frequent than that. Instead of taking the train, north out of Liverpool Street, he liked to drive—slowcoaching up the A10 on a Friday after work, light to light, passing bars and pubs and cemeteries, later the hospital where he was born. This far north, the suburbs touching countryside, one location was always quite far from another. He felt better bringing the car.

“I’m Vic Erskine’s son,” he told the shopkeeper, “Téodor. People call me Téó.”

“Ah,” said the man. “Been ill, hasn’t he?”

“Who, my dad? Yeah.”

“He’s got Parkinson’s, hasn’t he?”

This place!

“It’s something like Parkinson’s,” Téó explained. “One of the surname diseases. Your slow declines. I come back to see him as often as I can.”

They had verbal contractions, specific to this suburb, that were rarely heard anywhere else. Along laddered roads of terraced houses, on estates or mansion roads, they spoke a muddled Londonese that was everything: part Irish, Asian, African, Mediterranean, Jewish, Eastern European. It sounded good tonight. Téó was excited, suddenly, about seeing old friends.

He was asked by the shopkeeper, “How far away do you live these days?”

“D’you know Aldgate?”

He had ferried some beers to the counter. He chose crisps.

“Only Aldgate,” whistled the shopkeeper.

“Bit east as well. You might call it as far as Whitechapel, yeah.”

“Not that far though.”

“I hear you. I should visit back more often. There’s no excuse.”

Except this, thought Téó, the grief, the guilt.



“Boys,” he told them in greeting.

Cards were being shuffled. Stacks of one- and two-pound coins were being put in order on the table. Téó sat in an empty chair. There was that armpit stench of raw weed and their same sixth-form favourites played from a speaker on the kitchen counter. It was about to be a Friday session, the format of which hadn’t changed in a decade. Poker at Ben’s then pub. Before anything else the crafted spliffs, held for the next man around the table with

the stub pinched carefully, like something of interest found on the floor. Téo (big on the diplomatic smiles, not about to judge them so soon) passed around the offered spliff without comment. There was some teasing tonight about his major career decisions. He joined in where he could.

“Where did you leave us for, T? Car college?”

Snorts, as cards were sent skimming around the table.

Gathered in by player after player, these cards were examined for their value. People had a habit they copied from Ben. They put their cards on the table and they pressed their fingers down on top, as if each card had a mind of its own, as if each card might choose to flip over and reveal itself if not properly held in check. Ben’s voice broke first out of everyone. He was tallest. He seemed to snooze through the arrival of his muscles. Thanks to Ben they all learned the unbestable social move that was the no-show, its consequences for others, that chilly redundant feeling that ran through you as soon as you realised you were the dickhead left to wait. Téo was irritated to feel it tonight. He asked, “Where’s Ben, if we’re starting already?”

They were in the Mossam house, seated around a Mossam-owned table, but this was no guarantee of Ben Mossam’s company. A roamer, Ben stashed house keys in the gardens front and back, free for anybody to use. Properly described, the house belonged to his parents. It was left to him one miracle day in the new millennium when they had graduated from school. Ben’s mum and dad were about as eager to sack off Enfield as Téo. They flew out to their second home in the Mediterranean and rarely came back, leaving the house in their son’s care for a term without limit. It was lofty and many-bedroomed. It had a lift. Ben figured out his economic advantage soon enough. While the others in the group went to college or took jobs, settling for the agreed patterns of a swap whereby hours of your freedom went out one door and what came in the other was meant to be the stuff of life, a broader mind, your opportunities...while the others knuckled down and worked, Ben never did. He never had to.

“Will he be at the pub?” Téo asked. “Will anyone be there?”

He was winning at cards for once. A sullen quiet had settled over the table.

“Pub?” they asked. There were pouts. People shrugged.

“It’ll be the same lot as always in the pub.”

“The usual lot.”

“*You* lot, yeah,” Téo said. “Anyone else though?”

Finally a few of his friends smirked. As a group they had a note they could hit, an elastic, elated “Oh-h-h-h-h!” that meant some suspicion of theirs had been confirmed, some trap fallen into. “Téo’s like: he comes back to see *us*.”

“When in fact.”

“He wants to know about Lia Woods.”

“He wants his second chance with Lia.”

“Second chance!”

“More like ninth chance.”

“Ninetieth.”

They roared, well pleased. Whenever Téo was away from here, commuting to his job, eating takeaways and watching episodes, these friends at home receded to become a distant choral voice in his emails and his message threads. They weren’t important. They weren’t always distinguishable as individuals, with their teases and repetitions, their limited repertoire of jokes. Some of them weren’t even *in* the group the last time Téo lived in Enfield. They’d only been absorbed by default, for reasons of having hung around long enough he supposed. They adored Ben and relied on Ben’s energy and ideas, his money. This Friday night would feel undercooked till Ben showed up.

“Oh-h-h-h-h!” the group was singing.

“I’m here to see my dad,” Téo corrected them.

So they took pity, and Téo felt guilty about using his dad to deflect a cuss.

He said, “I haven’t seen her in a few months. How’s she doing?”

“Lia?”

Téo waited.

“She’s the same. She isn’t any better.”

“You know Lia.”

“She might be out tonight,” someone said.

“If she’s up to it, she reckons. If she can find someone to mind the boy.”

Téo had met Lia’s son Joel a few times. He had done a bit of babysitting. There was a teenager Lia relied on. She had an elderly neighbour waiting on the sidelines. If either of those options fell through, and if Téo happened to be back for the weekend, Lia asked. He had made her promise she would ask. Summoned over, three or four times so far, he got a hug by the door and maybe a compliment, about how he was the only one in their group who was mature enough to be trusted like this. But his babysitting hadn’t amounted to much. Whenever Lia left him alone, Téo sat on her sofa for a few hours, alert and suspicious, expecting some test of his ingenuity or his reflexes. He was apprehensive about the business with the nappies and the milk, the telling them they couldn’t eat any more sweets and such. Was it water you did give small children or never gave them? In fact, every time Téo had gone over there to babysit, the boy just slept. Occasionally Téo ventured into the dark and pungent bedroom to make shushing noises. That was it. He wondered whether parents didn’t hype up the difficulty, their innocent joke at other people’s expense.

He hoped she would be at the pub, if only so that he could try some of the kinder, wiser enquiries this crowd would never stretch to. He looked at his cards and he bet big by his standards. The track that played was kind to his moment, cresting into a breathless explanation of a rapper’s big win. “Phew,” Téo said, when the remaining players showed inferior cards. He claimed his money, dragging a mess of coins towards his lap.



From the front of the house there was the jangle of an opening door and a slack, shouted: “Yo.” Everyone sat straighter. Téo criss-crossed his hands to

clear them of the feel of touched money.

Ben Mossam was pharaoh in this crowd. Be your good fortune (you understood) to get an audience right away. Téo watched his old friend as he entered the kitchen, moving slowly and deliberately around the table and placing his hands on everyone's shoulders as though to press them back into their chairs, no need to stand for me, no need...How long-limbed he was, thought Téo, how restless, with the insect energy. Ben had had terrible skin at school, thank God. For years there was lots of conspicuous defusing work going on between his chin and his skullcap. Those problems had long since cleared. Ben was handsome.

The last around the table to be reached in greeting, Téo rose out of his chair. He timed it awkwardly, right as more cards were sent skimming in his direction. One of the cards slipped over the side of the table and fluttered to the floor: a valuable king.

Téo knelt to retrieve it.

"Didn't see, didn't see," Ben protested. He showed his palms to underscore his innocence...and Téo—it was ridiculous—he flinched, not meaning to. Ben said, "Think I'd hit you? Come here for a cuddle."

It was a fluke of administration that made them friends. They were put next to each other for carpet hour in primary school. By secondary school they were touching fists after collisions in lunchtime football matches, to demonstrate that theirs was an impressive bond. Aged fourteen or fifteen, Ben was kindest, substituting himself out of a game he was winning to lead Téo to the medical room. Absolute warhead of a shot. No chance of ducking. Téo's nose went click like two fingers, like pay me some attention over here. Older, aged sixteen or seventeen, they learned to be mild rivals, reading insults that weren't intended. Even saying hello they wound up in shambles, one stretching out his hand to shake when the other meant to embrace. Tonight, following Ben's clear lead, they embraced. The others around the table chimed in:

"Lovebirds."

"Let each other breathe."

Everybody was happy. Ben had come. He had a handful of money out his pocket and he thumbed through it, asking them, “How much will it cost me if I’m buying in late?” Generous terms were offered. As if in celebration the ingredients for another spliff were brought out. Ben would assume the manufacture of the next one, not because he was the group’s leader but because he had a signature style; he made his spliffs tautest, neatest, skinniest, how the group preferred them. After tucking and massaging his creations into shape, Ben would apply the final seal with a wetted thumb, never a lick. He was much imitated in this.

Always, Ben could conjure what was fashionable from the invisible air. He used to do tricks with a football you would not believe. He was the immediate first choice of any playground captain. Presuming the universe smaller than it was, they guessed that B. Mossam would become a striker in the leagues—as soon as exams were done with and school would let him loose. It was a shame, Téo felt, that Ben had done so little with his talents. But tonight he was charmed, same as everyone at the table, to see Ben roll and fidget one of his excellent spliffs into shape. Téo whistled with the rest of them, agreeing, “It is nicely done, Benno.”



Swept up in the mood, he decided he would leave his car where it was for the night. He’d walk home after the pub. Live a little. He’d come back and collect his car in the morning. Settled on this change of plan, Téo went to the fridge for a second beer. The group cheered it. They stamped their feet. They must have been paying more attention than he realised.

“That’s Téo in for the night.”

“Oh Téo’s committed now.”

“Someone call the police.”

Ben said, “He is the police.”

“You become police, Téo, since you left?”

“You know what I am. I’m like an instructor.”

“Of what though?”

“Traffic laws. Speed awareness. It’s about being responsible on the roads.”

Téo was distracted. Yet another perfect hand had been dealt to him. He pushed forward a substantial amount of money, trusting that at least one of the group would misread his aggression as a fib and bet big in reply.

There was a notion, a notion built on truth, that Téo was incapable of tricks.

“Fold,” they said, surrendering their involvement in the hand.

“Fold.”

“Fold.”

Disavowed cards were placed on the table. Téo’s heart banged. It was only Ben to decide and Ben muttered, you know what? He was all in. He was matching whatever Téo had staked. He was putting in the rest of his money as well. “Let’s get this done,” Ben yawned, “then we can go to the pub.”

“What do you mean?” said Téo. He tried to laugh it off. “What d’you mean by ‘get this done’?” Staring at his excellent cards he did his sums again from scratch. It was beyond him, excepting moonshots and miracles, how anyone else could have the better hand.

“You in,” asked Ben, “or you folding?”

“I fold,” Téo said.



The mist had cleared. At the far ends of straight roads, where facing houses were brought almost touching by tricks of perspective, Téo could see tall leafless trees rising out of their park. Behind and above these trees, banks of pale cloud remained visible in the night sky. He thought of tsunamis in films. He thought of dust brought up by stamping.

All the way to the pub there were those in the group who wanted to point out posters advertising excellent raves, raves that Téo had missed. He sucked in the Enfield air, trying to remind himself, I have the key to a car in my pocket, I can escape whenever I want to. They pushed inside their usual pub, which always smelled of ripe ale and bleach and aftershave. The place was busy: a hundred in at least. Even so, Téo picked her out immediately. Ever since they were at school together Lia had fiddled with the cuffs of her jumpers so that the material fell away in strands under either wrist. Her limbs were often crossed, inventively. She scowled as a matter of course. In the group's mass descent on the bar, Téo ended up too far away to say hello without a scene. Instead he stood on the fringes and faked an important text to write. He was handed a pint and drank it fast, dosing to the necessary state of give-a-fuck required to be this close to her and not panic.

They caught each other looking.

Few times actually.

Once he thought that Lia offered him a silent question, her chin lifting, you okay then? He folded his lip in reply (I'm so-so) and he bowed his head, miles-highing the eyebrows, meaning: are *you* okay? Lia turned away. She leaned an elbow on the bar behind her.

Over their years in classrooms together, shouted quiet by the teachers, they had learned how to communicate silently, widening eyes, scratching ears, talking under talking. Could be, Téo had lost the knack for it. But when Lia shuffled sideways, deliberately exposing a piece of the bar behind her, it seemed to him an invitation: come and join me then, dickhead.

At the bar they touched cheeks. Her overriding scent was the same, flavoured salve, a substance that Lia applied to her lips all day long, a substance she used to graze from, nibbling it off her finger like a snack. She smelled as well of her leather coat, of nicotine, and something faint and metallic, a side effect of her medication, Téo thought. He asked her, casual as he could manage at a shout: "Who's looking after Joel tonight? The teenager or the old dear?"