

For Mustafa who first told me: *“It’s your movie –
if you don’t like it just write yourself a better part in the script!”*

and Gal, who showed me how magic happens.

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BOZO

and the Storyteller

Tom Glaister



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And it was Peter who first assured me that the story really deserved to come to the light and let everyone know that ultimately, we all write our own stories.

—Tom Glaister, Sardinia, June, 2008



Chapter 1

The Storyteller

With the rising of the second crescent moon over the Kraggy Mountains, the Bloons realised that it was almost time for the Story to begin. Whether they were surfing the sand-dunes with their outrageously long feet, or simply engaged in a staring contest with a nearby star, they instantly forgot what they were doing and hurried over to the big rock where the Storyteller sat. The scarlet light of the three moons glistened on their blue skin as they skipped over the sandy ground, and their excited grins revealed beautiful, yellow teeth.

Before long they had formed a semicircle around the big rock. Late-comers jostled for a place. Those who ended up at the back lashed themselves with their long tails and swore that tomorrow they'd turn up three hours early to be sure of a good seat. Bloons could never remember anything for long, though, and they soon forgot their disappointment as they waited anxiously for the Story to begin.

The Storyteller sat above them on his stone perch, his eyes closed in deep meditation. He sat motionless, save for the twitching of his large, grey ears that seemed to be searching for a distant signal. His skin was pale and thin and wrapped around his skull like the parchment of an old manuscript; his biography written in the sag of his cheeks and the lines around his eyes.

Whether it was because of his drooping moustache or the melancholy look in his timeless eyes, the Storyteller seemed this evening to be far older

and weaker than ever before. He was, of course, older than all of the Bloons put together but now, as his trailing white hair and goatee beard stirred in the breeze, it occurred to them that perhaps the Storyteller would not be with them for ever. The prospect didn't bear thinking about.

The Storyteller opened his eyes. They seemed to protrude so far from their sockets that each of his listeners felt he was looking directly at them. A hush fell as his eyes turned from red to amber and then finally to green, signalling that he was about to speak.

'My dear Bloons,' he began, in a voice that seemed as faint as the light from the distant galaxies. 'I passed my younger years travelling between the stars, unearthing the secrets that they yielded and sharing my wisdom wherever I went. I was bold, learned and profoundly unhappy. It was only when the invisible currents of the universe carried me to Bloonland that I found meaning to my life.

'In the three decades that I have passed here, I have found that simplest of treasures that every traveller longs to discover: a home. Among such foolish and touching company, I have felt welcome and loved in a way I never imagined possible. Together we have watched the Story unfold and, for a time, it was my salvation.'

He paused to breathe and it sounded as though his lungs were full of dust. Swallowing heavily, he raised his head and continued: 'For ten thousand nights I have told you the Story, and for ten thousand nights you have gathered to listen. Once, the looks on your faces inspired me to carry on living, as each night we travelled together through the latest chapter. I suppose that, for most of you, I remain a fearsome old man, irritable and aloof. Yet, with the Story, a piece of my mind became real, and you have come to know me better than any other.

'However, I can ignore no longer the fact to which I have closed my eyes and ears for so long: the telling of the Story has finally taken the very life out of me and soon I shall die. Ten thousand nights is far too short a time to have lived with such delightful folk, but now we approach the end. My soul shall float away on the breeze and the Story will be no more.'

A great gasp went up around the circle as they saw there was no glint of humour in the Storyteller's eyes: they had not changed colour. Some of the Bloons stuck their fingers deep inside their ears in the hope that they might

be able to keep out the Storyteller's words. *Tell us that the moons will fall out of the sky, they moaned. Tell us that the light of the stars will go out like a candle. Tell us anything but that the Story will end.*

For as long as they could remember they had gathered each evening to hear about the strange green and blue planet that had only one sun and one moon. That alone would have evoked the sympathy of any Bloon, but the Storyteller said that hardly anyone bothered to look up at the skies these days. Instead, they had captured tiny creatures called Eleckyttrons and forced them to make light.

The antics of the Hoomans who lived in the Story left the Bloons weeping with laughter, and they spent their days chatting about the previous night's chapter. In reality, of course, they had little else to do – life in Bloonland was a stress-free existence of eating, drinking and clowning around. When they were hungry they simply bent down and took a bite of the cheesy planet itself. Then they washed it down with a drink from the fermented streams that flowed down from the grape bushes in the hills. They made merry in the mornings and sometimes impersonated the Hoomans from the Story, strutting around the place with a self-importance that left the other Bloons on the ground clutching their sides in hysterics. A long nap through the heat of the day, and it was soon time to go and listen to the Storyteller.

In truth, they knew very little about the old man. None of the Bloons could quite remember when he had arrived on the planet, and none wasted time on such an abstract question. They loved him for the Story that he told, but otherwise he was something of a mystery to them.

The sight of him gazing up at the constellations and working away on his charts made them feel sleepy and gave them uneasy dreams. The Storyteller belonged to another world of languages and symbols, mathematics and mystery: nothing for a Bloon to be worried about. While they loved the Story, they tended to avoid the Storyteller, and passed their days on the other side of the planet.

Only one of the Bloons, a tubby youngster by the name of Bozo, ever sought out the company of the Storyteller during the day. He would look over the old man's shoulder as he worked on his papers. The sight of the strange script filled him with wonder and fear. Occasionally, the Storyteller

would deign to explain the meaning of the strange words or encourage the Bloon to learn the foreign alphabets. But then the letters would wriggle out of focus, and more often than not Bozo dozed off on the Storyteller's shoulder halfway through the lesson.

And now, as all of the other Bloons attempted to plug their eyes and ears, Bozo was the only one who tried to face up to what the Storyteller was saying. He began to think very hard and flipped upside-down to sit on his head so that the blood would flow to his brain. He screwed his eyes tight in concentration and attempted to create some space in his head so that an Idea would come along. Presently, he felt one come looking for a nest, and he trembled slightly as its invisible wings fluttered against his cheeks. He struggled to keep perfectly still and held his breath so as not to scare it away. Slowly and with a great deal of caution, the Idea floated around to his ears and made the unusual decision to make its home in the mind of a Bloon.

Bozo opened his eyes and looked up at the Storyteller. The old man sat on his rock cross-legged as always, but now with his head clasped deep in his hands.

'Master!' Bozo cried. The Storyteller wearily lifted his head to meet Bozo's gaze.

'Yes, Bozo?' he responded, in his long, rolling voice.

'Master, forgive me, but did you say that it is the Story that has made you ill?'

The Storyteller nodded grimly and replied, 'Since it has been the focus of my every waking moment – not to mention my dreams – for more than a century now, I can only conclude that the Story itself is the cause of my demise.'

Bozo's eyes glistened. 'Then might it not be that a Cure also lies within the Story?'

'It may well be,' the Storyteller agreed. 'But the Story is a projection of my own mind, and is too vast for me to explore. I cannot tell the Story and search within it at the same time.'

Bozo tumbled over from his upside-down position in excitement. 'Then send me into the Story to search for the Cure,' he said.

The Storyteller shook his head. 'Bozo, you must understand,' he replied.

‘It would be suicidal. When I die, the Story will simply fade away, along with everything and everyone inside it.’

‘But, Master, what will become of us without the Story? You know what it means to us. Left alone, we will drink from the wine-streams until we fall off the planet in despair. I would rather die within the Story than outside it.’

The Storyteller fell silent for a long time. His eyes screwed tight in deep thought, he poised as still as the rock he sat upon. Only the odd arch of one of his bushy grey eyebrows gave any clue that he was awake. In the meantime, many of the Bloons dropped off themselves, dozing on each other’s shoulders, their tales curled around their necks like scarves.

Then the eyes of the Storyteller flashed open and his gaze fell upon Bozo like the light of a torch. Bozo was sitting alone and out in the open. He longed for a rock that he could hide behind. He could feel the eyes of the Storyteller burning through his head but he dared not look up. It seemed to the Bloon that the old man was looking right into his mind, as though it were an open book. He could feel the Storyteller probing his thoughts and feelings, perhaps testing him somehow, seeing if he really had the courage to go through with this.

Bozo cowered lower and lower where he sat, until he wished the ground would swallow him up. Just when he felt he could stand the interrogation no longer, it came to an end, and Bozo was released from the old man’s terrible stare.

‘I will accept your courageous offer, Bozo,’ the Storyteller finally declared, ‘though you are younger than a strand of my hair. But I must make myself clear: I still possess enough strength to write you into the Story, but I doubt I will be strong enough to bring you back again – unless, of course, your mission is successful and I am restored to health.’

‘So you must ask yourself this: are you prepared to leave behind your friends and home, perhaps never to see them again? And should I die, what will become of you? Would you risk oblivion on a fool’s quest to save an old man and a worn-out old Story?’

Bozo gulped and looked around at his beloved Bloons to find them all staring at him with a mixture of curiosity, fear and respect. They were the only friends he’d ever had and it was impossible to imagine life without them. He remembered the thousands of races they’d had surfing down the

dunes, the long mornings of making up songs beside the wine-streams, and the nights of playing dot-to-dot with the stars. There was not one Bloon whom Bozo did not love as much as himself. He would have given his life for any of them.

And yet Bozo always knew he was a little different. Often, when his friends had fallen happily asleep, Bozo lay gazing at the distant galaxies and wondering what secrets they held. He had never mentioned to anyone his dream to travel, and had no idea how he might ever begin. He doubted anyone would understand, anyway. All the other Bloons were perfectly happy where they were.

'I'm ready,' he announced. 'When do I go?'

The Storyteller heaved a great sigh and called Bozo close to whisper some instructions in his ear. Then he withdrew a small, green pouch of golden sand. He blew a few grains into the air around his audience, and at once the Story enveloped them all. Every word conjured an image and they drank in the narrative like a collective dream.

The Hoomans believe the weather to be a matter of chance, a science of equations and circumstance with the odds heavily stacked against those who live far to the North. They invent all kinds of long words to describe things they don't understand, and they hope to hide behind them. They say things like 'cold atmospheric front' but still don't know whether to take an umbrella with them when they go out.

The truth is that the weather is simply how the sky gods like to express themselves. Some of the sky gods are fierce and angry, often whipping up winds and hail. Others are always in a good mood, and bring blue skies and sunshine wherever they go. Other deities find it hard to get out of bed in the morning, and when they do they bring a good deal of mist and grey cloud with them.

In general, these sky gods are attracted to Hoomans of the same temperament. So the gods of sunshine and fair weather like to hang out where the Hoomans laugh and joke a lot. Where the Hoomans like to complain and whinge about things, the rain gods of drizzle and gloomy clouds gather together for months at a time.

Once in a while, the gods quarrel and they boom out thunderous arguments above the Earth. If no one backs down, then they fight with long, jagged

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