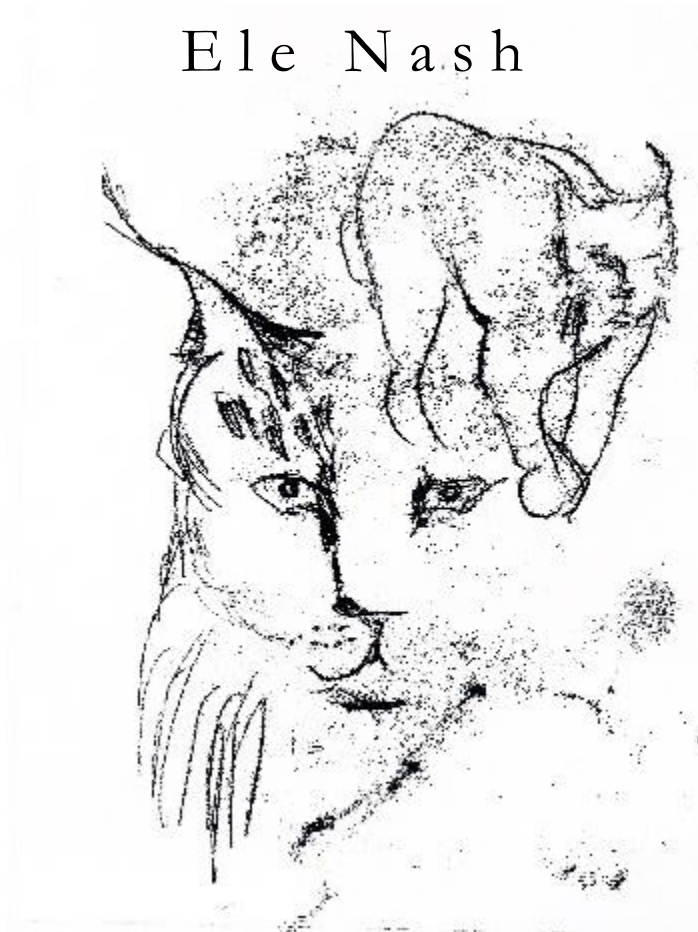


GRAFFITI JUNGLE

Ele Nash



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ONE

Satisfied, Della Wiskin put down her very best pen; her list of top ten Kung Fu actors was finished. Above her, the little top window was ajar. The hum of cars on the road eight floors down filled the flat and the icy breeze lifted the paper at its corner and made Della shiver.

She was – as usual – lying on the floor, with her feet just touching the dining table and the top of her head brushing against the end of the sofa. Her long black hair spread across the carpet, leaving strands of itself behind to make friends with Mackerel's cat fur. This was Della's space. She was marking her territory.

The smell of Mum's fruit tea reached Della before she did. Mum used to drink coffee but she announced last week that caffeine caused early ageing and she would only drink fruit tea from now on. This was Mum's third mug that morning but she pulled a face after each sip like she wasn't really enjoying it.

'What are you doing down there?' Mum said just as her mobile beeped. Mum's frown deepened as she glared at the screen.

Della angled the list so that Mum could see it better. 'I've decided on my 'Top 'Ten,' she said. 'Bruce Lee is number one.'

'Bruce what?'

'Bruce *Lee*.'

Rather than asking something important like why he was her number one Kung Fu actor, Mum placed her phone back in her pocket and sighed. 'Your dad just texted. He has to work overtime at the hospital. He can't have you until late tomorrow.'

'Oh.'

Della tried to push the thought away but it popped up anyway: *Is it so bad to be stuck with me an extra day?* The cornflakes she'd eaten for breakfast curdled in her tummy. A familiar dark feeling swamped her for a moment, prickling from her palms to the soles of her feet. She squeezed her eyes shut and forced the feeling away.

'I can go to Dad's anyway,' she told Mum, opening her eyes and trying to refocus.

Dad's flat was two bus rides away on the opposite side of the city to Mum's. Della spent half her time there, watching non-stop Kung Fu films. No one told her to move or be quiet. Sometimes Della enjoyed it but then it could get kind of lonely too. It felt to her like Dad only made it back to the flat for food or to sleep, working extra hours at the hospital as well as his evening classes teaching Kung Fu. But Dad didn't think of Kung Fu as a job. It was a way of life.

'I'm old enough to sleep there by myself,' she added, hoping Mum would wrap her in a hug and tell her 'I want you to stay here' – because being here, however unwanted, was better than being alone in Dad's flat. Again, the darkness threatened but again Della kept it at bay.

Mum exhaled in one long steamy puff of air. 'Twelve is *not* old enough to be in a house all night by yourself.'

'What about a flat?'

'Della!' She took a sip – then another. 'I'm not in the mood.'

Mum pulled out one of the dining chairs and flopped into it. Della couldn't decide whether she was glad Mum thought twelve was too young or whether she should be outraged – because twelve was old enough to do lots of important things.

'Juice,' Gigi said, appearing from the bedroom they shared wearing only a nappy – she was yet to master toilet training even though she was three. Her hair was frizzy and matted at the back, like she was perfecting a nest for birds to set up home. She was Della's little *half*-sister because her dad was Jack – who had no appreciation for Kung Fu.

‘What do you say?’ Mum set aside her now finished mug of fruit tea and waited for Gigi to add ‘please’.

‘Now,’ Gigi said.

Della couldn’t stop a laugh escaping. Despite being completely annoying, Gigi had a great sense of timing.

‘Don’t encourage her, Della,’ Mum growled.

‘I’ll get your juice,’ Della offered and attempted to get up – but pins and needles vibrated in her right foot.

Mum gave her one of her fishy looks. ‘You want to stop doing so much of that kicking stuff.’

‘Kung Fu.’

‘Quite,’ she blinked. ‘That’s what I said. Kicking stuff. If you’re not doing it, you’re watching it.’

Disapproval echoed around the walls and settled on the space where the TV used to be. The wall bracket was still there looking like a hand reaching out for a new TV. But Jack had made it very clear, a number of times, he couldn’t afford one until the sales. The death of the TV got blamed on Della. But it was Gigi, clutching her soggy toy elephant, Fanty, whose surprisingly graceful spinning hook kick had sent Della flying into the screen. The TV and Della had both made an ominous crack.

Her elbow had been badly bruised.

The TV had broken.

Jack went mad. He loved his TV. He loved it more than anything – except the footie. When the footie was on, Jack was in heaven. Since the incident, Mum had been more vocal about how ‘bad’ Kung Fu was. Just once, Della wished Mum would tell her how good she was at it.

The pins and needles fizzed. Trying not to wince, Della hobbled to the far end of the living room to the kitchen. Gigi followed, clutching Fanty against her bare chest.

‘The weather guys might actually have it right,’ Mum said. ‘I think it will snow. I can always smell it coming.’

Della peered out the window as she handed Gigi her juice. The sky was a sheet of unpromising grey. From here, she could see the identical block of flats next to theirs and the labyrinth of terraced houses beyond that. Their block was positioned up on a steep hill. The main road snaked away toward the city, a distant mesh of uneven shapes.

Della’s eye was caught by a shiny blue van turning into the pub carpark below. She watched it park next to the wall of graffiti. She hoped they were tourists. Tourists loved the city’s graffiti but not many made it this far to see it. Some of it was proper art, street art, by the Graffiti Godfather, Banksy. But Della thought a lot of it was just vandalism.

‘Fank yoo,’ Gigi said to Della, unexpectedly.

‘Good girl, Gigi!’ Mum gasped. Gigi’s eyes widened in her version of a smug look. Mum, buzzing on fruit tea as though it were caffeine, turned to Della. ‘How about we try something with the broccoli?’

‘Broccoli?’

Gigi’s sippy cup was dripping on the floor.

‘For a cake.’ Mum said. ‘The broccoli needs eating and I’m sure I read somewhere you can replace flour with broccoli.’

Della loved baking with Mum. It was the one – and only – thing they did together. But she didn’t like eating her baking. Mum had strange ideas that always left a stranger aftertaste.

‘How about,’ Della said slowly. ‘Chocolate cake.’

Mum’s eyebrows shot up and she looked for a moment quite young and pretty. ‘Yes,’ she said, kissing Della’s surprised cheek. ‘Chocolate broccoli cake! What a fantastic idea.’

Mum set about gathering up ingredients from the cupboards and fridge. Della helped, desperately hunting for flour so that they didn't have to use the broccoli.

'Jack likes coming home to the smell of baking.' Mum smiled but she looked as grey as the sky.

Jack had left that morning wearing his overalls and paint-splattered trainers. He was not a street-artist; he was a decorator. Della noticed he didn't kiss Mum goodbye. They must have rowed. They often rowed. Maybe Mum asked him yet again when he'd get around to decorating *their* flat.

'Flour!' Della said with a little too much relief.

Mum stared at the bag of self-raising in her hand. Sprinkles fell from it like snow. 'Don't you want to use the broccoli?' she asked, her eyes as wet as Gigi's when she was told it was bed-time.

'Oh... I...'

The sound of keys in the lock spared Della. Riley – Jack's thirteen-year-old son – stepped into the flat with about as much grace as a real-life Fanty.

'This isn't your weekend here,' Della said before she could stop herself.

'T'is,' Riley said, sliding off his trainers. He left the revolting things in the middle of the carpet – on *her* space of carpet – and shoved an indignant Mackerel off the chair. 'S'not *your* weekend, Duller.'

She realised he was right but that wasn't the point. He knew she hated him calling her Duller. With every ounce of strength, she axe-kicked his head off.

She didn't, of course.

But she might yet.

'Where's me breakfast?' he said, stretching out his skinny legs. Riley talked in warm, slow vowels like Jack. Neither Mum nor Dad were local so Della didn't have the same accent. She hoped Gigi wouldn't either so she would be more her sister than Riley's.

'Gigi,' Mum breathed, not having heard Riley's request.

Della followed Mum's gaze around the lower half of the living room. More specifically, to the walls which were a grubbyish sort of white but which now had their very own freshly-drawn graffiti.

'Mint,' Riley said – like he thought it was brilliant. 'Gigi following in me footsteps then?'

Riley liked to think of himself as the next Banksy. He was actually a pretty good artist – though Della would never have told him that. Gigi, though, was clearly not good. Her 'art' was one endless scribble.

Mum looked to be collapsing in on herself. Her fingers twitched – Della was sure she was itching for a mug of high-caffeine coffee. 'Where is the little...? Gigi? Gigi!'

Mum marched into the bedroom.

'It'll wash off,' Della ventured.

Riley, oblivious to the tension, said: 'Be careful if you goes out.'

Della narrowed her eyes at him. 'Why?'

'A beast is loose on Bedminster Down.'

Mum, huffing about finding Gigi, stormed out of the bedroom and into hers and Jack's.

'Let me guess,' Della said. 'The beast is Mackerel.'

Riley smiled but it was a mean smile. 'Probably *t*'s just a fat cat like Mackerel.'

'Mackerel's not fat,' Della said, then tried to sound less defensive. 'She's just fluffy.'

Riley snorted. 'Telly said *t*'s big as a dog. Could be a leopard. Leopards loves eating bratty girls, mind.'

'It'll be eating you first then, Riley.'

Riley rolled his eyes. 'Oh, because I's a girl? Mature, Duller.'

Mum puffed out of her room and started ransacking the coats cupboard. 'Gigi,' she said, forcing the anger from her voice. 'Come out now.'

Della waited for the fallout but Gigi wasn't in the cupboard.

‘Maybe she’s been got by the beast,’ Riley sniggered.

Instead of chopping Riley into a thousand pieces with her bare hands as she’d like to, Della span around, opening one of the kitchen cupboards. A bottle of bleach fell out but no Gigi. Visions of Gigi somehow being dragged away by a mystery beast filled Della’s head.

‘They wouldn’t,’ Della said, scanning the flat hotly for signs of Gigi. ‘They wouldn’t just let a beast – a leopard or *anything* – stay loose in the city anyway. The zoo will catch it, won’t they?’

Mum swung about the room. ‘Gigi, come out now. And would you two stop going on about beasts.’

‘The zoo,’ Riley said, ignoring Mum’s bad-tempered attempts to search behind the curtains. ‘The zoo reckon no animals are missing.’

‘I bet you’re just making the whole thing up.’ Still, Della couldn’t stop her voice sharply calling: ‘Gigi! Gigi, where are you?’

And then Della saw Gigi.

Hiding behind the chair Riley was sitting in.

She was still drawing.

‘Uh, Mum,’ Della said.

Gigi was using Della’s pen - her best pen. Her list-writing pen. Which was waterproof and therefore not washable.

Mum, hands on hips, stared down at Gigi. ‘What do you think you’re doing, little lady?’

‘Proper art, Gigi,’ Riley said, getting up off the chair and out of Mum’s livid line of fire. He darted over to Della – not to her, but to the kitchen – and started pulling out half a loaf of bread.

‘I don’t think that will wash off,’ Della said in what she hoped was a helpful way.

Mum tried to take the pen out of Gigi’s fist but Gigi didn’t let go. She started to cry instead.

‘Give me the pen!’ Mum seethed.

Riley now had the box of eggs. Della tried to take them from him. ‘Mum wants to bake with those.’

Riley held onto the egg-box as stubbornly as Gigi was holding the pen.

‘It’s not eaten since lunch yesterday,’ he said.

It was most likely true; Riley’s flat never had any food in it. His mum forgot the essentials a lot.

‘Just eat the bread then,’ Della practically yelled, tugging back the box.

Gigi’s cry was a roar. Mum managed to pull Gigi out from behind the chair and hoick her up onto her hip. Gigi still clutched the pen.

Riley, though, let go. Della had the egg-box. Then she didn’t. In trying to catch it, she managed to knock the lid. The eggs fell out and smashed dismally on the floor.

Mum, her expression as ravaged as the broken eggs, looked first at the almost-finished loaf in Riley’s hands. Then she winced at her stomach, at where Gigi was kicking her with Kung Fu-style agility. Even Mackerel got the once over - she’d started to cough up a fur-ball.

And then Mum turned on Della, with the ruined eggs at her feet.

‘Della,’ she growled. She sucked in all the air in the flat. ‘I have to get out of here,’ she said, and she handed Gigi to Della. Gigi’s face was now purple with howling. ‘I’ll be at Auntie Li’s. Make sure the flat is tidy by the time I get back.’

The door slammed.

The chocolate broccoli cake would have to wait.