



Budleigh Salterton/Audify creative Writing Competition 2017

Runner-up 17+ Category

Sophie Olszowski (age 51)

When Adnan came to live with Nick and Sally he brought a small bag of belongings, fractured English and a shattered soul.

The neighbours arranged a meeting. It wasn't attended only by those who lived nearby: Adnan's arrival brought a community, united by hostility, out in force.

Most, Nick didn't recognise, including the small, tired-eyed woman who ushered them into the hall and gestured, in a way that suggested to Nick she felt uncomfortable, towards some plastic cups of orange juice and three rows of rapidly-filling benches. Nick declined refreshment and slipped into a space at the back.

The meeting's chairman, a large red-faced man wearing a blue blazer with gold buttons (such was the gravity of his role) introduced himself as Rodney Merriweather, adding that his wife (he nodded towards the small lady but offered no name) had pens and paper if anyone wished to take notes.

Mr Merriweather had the air of a man whose life had been important (to himself at least) and who wanted those who saw him now to be clear that this event was beneath his status, but the crisis worthy of his time. A solution could be found only under his guidance.

"The problem as I see it" he began, setting out the stall he wished all to follow "...is that while this, this chap, might be alright, even if he is, if he is allowed to stay, who might come next? And how many?"

He then invited questions that ranged from "What does he do?" to "What *might* he do?" and encouraged speculation, before exploring, at length, one woman's view that "He's a fit young man, why isn't he fighting for his country?"

No-one questioned, or seemed to know (or care) where his country might be, who he might fight for, or against, or to what end.

Nick sat at the back of the hall, his anger mixing with numb resignation, until blue blazer said it was important they meet again in six weeks "to review the situation." He asked if anyone had final questions and Nick raised his hand.

"I'd like to say something if I may. Adnan is living with us."

Rodney looked startled "The meeting is finished, I'm afraid."

"I think not, until you have agreed your next date? This won't take long."

Rodney's dislike of this challenge to his authority was palpable; a vein swelled and pulsed in his neck.

Nick moved to the front and faced the gathering, now suspended in discomfort.

"Hi, I'm Nick Saville. We live at 14 Tredagar Road where Adnan is staying while he settles in the UK and waits to bring his family here." As the hackles of prejudice rose around him, he continued "We're having some friends round on Saturday; if you would like to join us for tea you'd be most welcome. About 4 o'clock. No need to let us know."

Nick paused, briefly, before adding (unplanned) "With due respect, many of you seem very interested. You may learn more about Adnan from being there on Saturday than from being here today. Thanks for your time."

Nick didn't linger; no-one seemed to want further details about how to find the house.

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With half a dozen close friends in the garden and his sister Fay chatting to Adnan as they walked slowly among the pots of herbs that separated the patio from the lawn, Nick was reassured. Making Adnan feel welcome might be beyond the scope of any gathering, but an hour or so being cherished was surely a start?

As Nick walked through the kitchen to refresh a teapot he heard a gentle tap at the front door.

Rodney's wife was the last person Nick expected to see and he took a moment to recognise her.

"I, I was at the meeting" She looked frightened, like an animal unexpectedly meeting its predator. Nick felt a brief flicker of pity.

"Yes, I remember. Do come in."

Mrs Merriweather glanced behind her, as if looking to see whether she'd been followed, and darted inside.

"I can't stay long. Can you....please tell me a little about him?"

Nick didn't sense any of the hostility he'd felt at the meeting but was cautious about this woman and her motives.

“Let me introduce you. He’s in the garden.”

“Rodney doesn’t know I’m here” she said in a rush, as if trying to draw Nick into her conspiracy. “But what you said at the meeting was true, and...” Mrs Merriweather flushed “My husband is very sure, but we don’t always see eye-to-eye.”

Nick didn’t know how to reply and felt himself soften slightly.

"He's called Adnan as you know from the meeting; he's 36 and a doctor."

Mrs Merriweather looked expectant for more.

“He's married, although his wife only made it as far as Greece, and he has” Nick paused, briefly “He has a son.”

“Nick, where’s that teapot?” Sally called as she came in from the garden.

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t know we had another visitor.” Sally smiled and held out her hand “Sally Saville, Nick’s wife. And you are?”

Nick willed his wife to realise that this frightened bird was ready to fly and said quickly, as welcomingly as he could manage, “Mrs Merriweather was at that meeting in town last week” raising his eyebrows, hoping Sally would realise which meeting “I’m delighted she decided to come and meet Adnan.”

“Oh, I really don’t think I can stay that long.”

“He’s just outside.”

Nick almost felt unkind; this quivering quarry was so easily trapped.

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“The nice small lady. Who she is?”

“Adnan, I really don't know. I met her in town the other day.” Nick glanced at Sally, realising he could hardly continue “At a meeting to discuss you being here and how to stop others like you from coming.”

“She was very nice. I tell her I play violin, and that I have two sons.”

Nick wanted to kick himself; of course Adnan has two sons, and now Mrs Merriweather will think inconsistency is all part of the plot. “I'm glad she was nice. I'm sure everyone was pleased to meet you, to welcome you.” Nick felt disloyal at the likelihood of this being a lie as he spoke, but Adnan nodded and smiled.

"She seemed a little nervous, but so kind. I am tired now, speaking English for so long. I like very much all your friends. When I have helped you tidy I must call Asha and then I will be glad to sleep."

Sally put a gentle hand on Adnan's arm "Why not go upstairs, call Asha now, and have an early night? Nick and I can tidy up. I'm not surprised you're tired."

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"I just can't see how we can get from here to integration, can you?" Nick took a plate from Sally and dried it as he spoke "I mean, of course our friends and family came, we always knew they would. But then that ghastly emissary from the meeting snoops around."

"Do you really think that's why she came? That hadn't even occurred to me; you're more cynical than I thought. She seemed genuinely interested, and kind, Adnan said."

"Of course she was interested, but only so she can beetle back to ghastly old blue blazer armed with more ammunition for the next stage of their campaign against him."

"Oh come on. How could a short chat give her ammunition, if indeed that's why she came?"

"Just you wait. And actually, you say a short chat, but weren't you amazed by how long she stayed? When she scuttled out, she scuttled fast, but she could have gone much sooner. I reckon their meeting here will be reported as the impossibility – despite her best efforts - of making any sort of meaningful contact with a man so culturally different and so damaged from trauma."

"Adnan very seldom talks about what happened, even to us, I'm sure he won't have told her. Telling her about playing the violin was surprising enough."

"He told her he has two sons."

"Yes, yes I picked that up too."

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Adnan had left for his walk when Nick came down.

Even when early morning sun turned the water a gentle silver and the waves did nothing more than caress the sand, the sea frightened Adnan. But he had to go. Once, Nick and Sally offered to keep him company, but Adnan needed time alone on the beach. The only place that might return his son; the only time he allowed himself pure anguished recall set against the numbing daily ache with which he'd learnt to live.

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The boat, so crowded, taking them to Greece. One vast wave that swept Adnan's tiny baby from his arms. Asha's howl as she saw her newborn son flicked like a rag into the air; clutching their toddler to her chest as Adnan plunged into the water. Screaming, searching.

When the rescue boat came, they dragged Adnan out of the sea, exhausted, still shouting for Karam.

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The package on the doorstep was bound in layers of bubble wrap held tight with masking tape. Adnan picked it up, gently, and took it inside.

Nick, drinking coffee at the kitchen table, pushed his laptop aside “What have you got there? Here - put it down here.”

“It was by the front door. It seems...it seems to be for me?” Adnan showed Nick the label: in the smallest, neatest, writing “Adnan; c/o the Savilles.”

Beneath the tape and wrap, a plain white card, one short paragraph in the same hand. Beneath that, the smooth varnished curves of a violin.

“Dear Adnan, I enjoyed meeting you. I never play any more. Could you give this a home? And perhaps teach your sons when they arrive? Welcome”

Adnan put the unsigned card on the table for Nick to read and ran his fingers along the violin’s fingerboard, tracing the edge of its waist. Tears ran down his face “I told only the small lady about playing. This must be hers. But why she has left no name? I need to find her, to thank her.”

Nick wondered how he could explain to Adnan that Mrs Merriweather would not want to be found, at least until or unless she confessed to her husband her various acts of treachery. For now, Nick said gently “Adnan, I’m so sorry. I was wrong to say that you have only one son....”

Nick trailed off, unsure how to finish.

Adnan shook his head gently.

“You know every day I go to the sea?”

Nick nodded, silenced by humility at sharing this moment – any moment - with a man who knew what it was to survive their child’s death.

“I know Karam will not be there. Not in your gentle English sea, not any more in any sea.”

Adnan pulled out a chair and sat, head bowed, hands clenched.

“You have children. You know they will always be part of you. I did not ever dream this; a son should not die before his parents.”

Adnan looked again at the violin, and back at Nick.

“I will never teach Karam about music, about love, about the kindness of strangers - people like you and Sally - or about the lady who came with this.”

Adnan paused.

“All this I know. Just as I know I may never again see my homeland, just as I know I will not always be here with you. Just as I know one day his brother will choose to go. But Karam. Karam can never again leave. So I am blessed. Karam will be with me always.”