

The Way Home

"Let's not cut through the churchyard," said Kabir, slinging his rucksack onto his back. Raj stared at his friend and grinned. Mr Jenkins watched as the two boys left the afterschool football club and headed off for home.

"What have you got in there? It looks as if it weighs a ton," replied Raj, laughing.

"We'd better get a move on. You look like a packhorse!" He wrapped his Bolton scarf round his neck as they made their way to the High Street, chatting and joking.

"Is your mum going to let you go to the match this Saturday?" Raj asked, tugging his coat tighter as the wind whipped a few snowflakes down the road. Streetlights lit up the road and the snow had begun to settle. They had hung around playing footie after school for too long and getting home late might mean trouble. The High Street glittered with Christmas lights and there were plenty of late-night shoppers hunting for bargains. The mini-market Tesco was doing a roaring trade in tinsel and wrapping paper. Mr Singh waved to them as they passed his grocery store.

"My mum will be furious," muttered Raj, "but we can save a few minutes if we cut through Eden Grove." They turned into the alley and, without thinking, increased their pace. It was dark and quite narrow. The houses here were back-to-back and lots of families parked their cars on the pavement so that there wasn't much room. At the top end, they could just see what looked like a furniture van parked up. Two men were opening the back doors and tugging something out. It looked like a bulky roll of carpet.

"Hurry up!" snapped one of the men, lugging his end of the carpet.

"Ok. Keep your hair on," replied the other. "Let's get inside in without dropping him!" They both laughed as they staggered across the alley and into the back door of an old building. The boys froze and stepped back into the shadows so that they would not be seen.

"Did you see what I thought I saw?" hissed Kabir.

"I reckon they've got a body in there and they're hiding it in that old building," replied Raj. "Come on, let's take a closer look."

"I'm not sure about that," whispered Kabir. He hung back as his friend edged down the alley towards where the van was parked. Sighing, he followed and the pair of them soon reached the back of the van. They peered in and could just make out that it was full of clutter - old bits of furniture, boxes and crates, some ancient paintings and what looked like African face masks and a bundle of spears.

Kabir tugged Raj's jacket and hissed, "Let's get out of here before they come back." A light shone through the doorway of the old building and they could hear the two men thumping about. It sounded as if they were hauling the carpet roll up the stairs. There was a lot of huffing and puffing so the boys knew it had to be pretty heavy. At that moment, the light from the doorway went out and they were standing in almost total darkness. "It must have been on a timer," muttered Raj, not sure whether he should investigate or wait for a while until the coast was clear. Kabir had already begun to make his way back up the alley, towards where the lights of the High Street waited invitingly.

Kabir hadn't taken more than a few steps when a hand grabbed him and a voice hissed, "What are you two up to, creeping about?" A torch beam shone directly into his eyes, making it impossible to see. "The front entrance is round the other side of the museum, you know, and the exhibition doesn't open till tomorrow."

"The what?" stuttered Kabir.

"The exhibition. It's going to be amazing. Statues from around the world. We're just the delivery team but at least we get to see it all being set up. We've just taken in an amazing statue of a warrior. Well-wrapped, so it wouldn't break. Nearly broke my back though!" The man laughed. "It's free entry from tomorrow. You lads might enjoy it." He peered at the two boys.

A few minutes later, Raj and Kabir were back on the High Street, taking the long way home. "What a couple of prize plums we are!" laughed Raj, punching his friend's arm. "I thought they were carrying a dead body!"