

# Toy Town



*John Muckle*

Jack Mudie felt he was a shadowy figure to his family, obscure even to himself. He put down his phone and sat quietly at the desk in his bedroom. The bamboo blind was down but sunlight filtered through its slats, lending a little warmth to his dusty living space. His papers were strewn about the floor, teaching materials mostly, unpaid final demands for council tax, water rates, and what have you. But what exactly did he have? A view, for one thing: a room with a classic view, if he cared to look out at the trees and what have you, the da-da-da, and opposite the lit windows of other living spaces.

The blossom and the leaves had come quickly this year, as if squeezing themselves violently into existence following a long period of turbulent weather: unseasonable snow, icy winds, bursts of tropical heat. What was going on in the eco-system of the world as they had known it? Frankly, he didn't care all that much. In between scuttling forth on his journeys across the city, Jack had spent the past few months assembling memories, fancies, and splurges of invention into something he was calling, to himself, a novel, although in some quarters there might be disagreement about this appellation.

As his fingers flew over the keyboard of his laptop or scribbled out his inspirations in notebooks, he'd been wondering how

he had the cheek to call what he was doing invention, imagination, storytelling, or any of the other fudgy terms for composition, narration, scribbling, and moulding into unity. Theirs had been in his estimation a whatever period in human history, and in his own life as he spiralled on towards his final years. Perhaps this was it, and that was that.

His mother was dying in hospital, not at home as she would have wished, and his father was refusing to visit her. No amount of bullying or cajoling by Mikey, his brother, was going to make any difference to that. Jack had sat quietly beside his mother's hospital bed, spooned ice cream into her dry, sunken mouth, and tried to make out words in the faint mumbling sounds which sometimes came out of her mouth. Dad was in bits. He'd sat with his father, listened to his brother hammering on and on. Sometimes he thought the sole purpose of his brother's rivers of speech was to batter him into submission, bang nails into his head, and to prove for the last time Mikey's superiority and dominance in the family, his greater worthiness of the name son. All this 'man-up' shit. Telling his poor stricken father to 'man-up'. Fuck that. His need for authority. Basically, he was a pain in the arse, they both were.

Jack wanted to abandon him, once and for all to leave them all behind, his clinging family with their tedious repeating loops. But he spent a lot of time alone, and his own repeating loops were not much more beguiling. Is that all human beings were made of? A few strips of worn out tape spooling around the brain's playback heads forever, a few tones that beat out 'me, me, me, me' forever, until the game was up? People were pushy, more or less so, but few were truly reflective. This went for Jack Mudie himself. Wasn't it possible that what he passed off as hard-won wisdom was merely the recurrence of opinions and attitudes he had arrived at sometime near the get-go of his conscious life, or before, and that he now ground out fresh-minted as points of final destination? More than possible!

One thing his writing had taught him was to be aware of how little he himself knew about anything – things he was supposed to know, for instance, like his supposed nearest and dearest (though he could make a stab at them, he felt), and beyond this a whole murky world of relationships, systems, and ideas that others seemed to dance through with such confident aplomb. But he could only sketch them in vaguely, in accordance with some ideas he'd inherited from

somewhere or other – and it was always the worst ones which stuck firmest, occluding earwax muffling the world, leaving him with vague sonic guesses that invariably turned out to be wrong.

When you were wrong it was like being locked out, losing your key, or even worse being supplied with a replacement key that didn't work. This had happened to Jack very recently. He'd dropped his keys he knew not where. After ringing his downstairs neighbour's bell, he got into the flat by removing the cardboard he'd put up and reaching through the window he'd broken with a large stone last time he'd lost his keys, a wire-reinforced pane which he hadn't bothered repairing because he knew it would sooner or later happen again.

At the Housing Trust, there had been a bit of an argument. A rather stern, moralizing woman whom he had never seen before but who seemed now to be in charge, informed him that his request to borrow the master front door key to the house was out of order, just not possible. His downstairs neighbour had told him that the keys were impossible to copy anyway, she having tried twice to have hers duplicated for her son, who had stayed with her for six months a few years ago.. Jack duly told her story to the woman at the Housing Trust, which seemed to have changed her mind, if only to contradict him and his ill-informed neighbour. What she had been lacking in was this woman's permission to cut a key.

Meanwhile, the younger woman, pretty, mixed-race, well-dressed, who sat at the front desk, smiled wryly and said it wasn't a problem. She fetched the key (which he had to promise the older woman he would bring back before five o'clock) and took the master over to their designated locksmith ("Extortionate!" said the younger woman) by an unfamiliar bus they helpfully suggested to him.

These were smaller buses than the usual kind, and the journey he made to the locksmith (a journey which was to become familiar) followed a long and winding route through hilly North London streets. It was a beautiful journey, the small bus half-full of women and young children, friendly, chattier than they would have been on a full-sized bus, and the dark orange houses were residences he would have loved to have owned. Who had originally lived in them? What class of people, and what had their lives been like? These were questions he had often asked himself but had always been unable to answer satisfactorily. This didn't prevent them from popping up again.

When he reached the locksmith's, the man behind the counter took the passkey from him, found a blank and fitted it to his cutting machine. He popped the correct holes and grooves into it mechanically, without removing his mobile phone from his cheek. Jack paid fifteen pounds by card and was shortly handed both master and a duplicate along with a receipt. He enjoyed the return journey on the half-size bus more than he had his outward trip. This time a small boy had waved at the driver, standing with his mother and sister at the side of the road and waving until they were out of sight. Jack had waved back shyly.

However, once back at his home address, he discovered without real surprise that the new key didn't work – although the master did, perfectly – and he wondered if perhaps the downstairs neighbour hadn't been right: somehow the keys were actually uncopiable. She had also remarked that Turks were untrustworthy; they would say anything. Jack wondered if there might be something to this, although the man at the locksmiths, the locksmith, in fact, had not been Turkish.

Nevertheless, he made an immediate return journey on the miniature hail-and-ride vehicle that pushed through the same sloping avenues of attractive villas, again admiring the filigreed decorative flourishes in the brickwork of some of them, their overwhelming design-grace, as always preferring those with the original window-fittings. This time another man was also riding on the bus, pricing a minor building job on his mobile. Jack could not tell exactly what it entailed, nor did he particularly care – but he heard the man pointing out that he and his partner had been doing similar work for years, suggesting politely that his prospective customer could phone around for more quotations and, if he was still interested, get back to him. Middle-aged and dressed in working clothes, the man got down at the next stop, leaving Jack to his anxieties.

He was worried that – five o'clock fast approaching – the locksmiths would be closed by the time he got there. But when he did arrive the key-cutter was no longer speaking on his phone, and he carefully compared the master and duplicate keys before refitting them to his cutting machine.

“Sorry about that,” he said after a couple of minutes, casually handing them over. “Should work now.”

“What was the problem?” Jack asked.

“The first cut wasn’t deep enough.”

“The first cut is the deepest, hmm?”

“Now it is perfect,” said the locksmith.

He trudged back to the bus stop outside Sainsbury’s to pick up the return bus to where he normally resided. While he was waiting there for it, a small man with long dreadlocks sprinted past them across the carpark, his arms full of clothes on hangers he had evidently stolen. The thief kept glancing behind him, without slowing his pace, but he wasn’t being chased. All the people at the bus stop turned to watch him pass out onto a further road and make his escape.

This time a young West Indian woman boarded mid-way through the journey. Wearing a pair of loose men’s trousers, struggling on crutches but with a radiant face, she addressed the other passengers.

“Is it just me or has it got a lot colder today?”

Several of them agreed vigorously, shivering, turning up the collars of their coats.

“It’s freezing!” she exclaimed, smiling at all and sundry, obviously feeling that she was giving voice to some closely-guarded secret, speaking of something about which they had as usual been misled by the authorities.

She found the weather mysterious. So did Jack. Would they wake up in the morning to golf-ball-sized hailstones? He remained sceptical about the key until he pushed it into the lock and found that, this time, it did indeed work to perfection. But he was too late now to return the passkey to the Housing Trust. It would have to wait until the following morning, he decided he would drop it off there on his way to work. The downstairs neighbour had remained behind her own locked door, unavailable for further questioning about the misinformation she’d blatantly proffered earlier on.

Keys were indeed a difficult business, and once you had one available you would be wise to keep it close at hand, if not firmly within your grasp, at all times. He kept his in his left trouser pocket and felt the top of it with his thumb frequently. A few days later he ran downstairs in a hurry to fulfil an obligation in Chingford, only to find he was locked in: in a further mysterious twist, the front door lock had jammed. The neighbour spoke at length, as usual, then phoned the Housing Trust whilst he sat on the stairs to wait. Within the hour, as

promised, a representative of the designated locksmith had arrived to repair the defective mechanism, but Jack had already called Hazel Miles to cancel his tutorial session with an overlong explanation.

Travelling back and forth between the town he lived in and the rural place where his parents and his brother resided, Jack had begun to notice a strange but interrelated series of phenomena. It was as though the reality of one place was partly obliterated by his being in the other. When he was in his parents' bungalow he found the details of his urban life and the places it took place in started to become vague generalities about the places and people in question, and when he was at home the reality of their place, his parents' place, darkened like a map withdrawn from torchlight.

The effect was certainly one of darkening and lighting up, but being in the lit-up place obscured the details, almost blotted out entirely the place that had fallen into shadow. As if the existence of one precluded the other, although there was no proper relationship apart from the long thread of railway track running between them. Therefore, to think or speak of one place whilst in another was difficult, to say the least, and certainly different than speaking or thinking of the place you were actually in.

But then, he realized, this was no more than a subjective phenomenon, amounting only to an experience of how little real detail he retained, how quickly it decayed and floated away, how little he solidly knew about either place or the people who lived in them. Out of sight, out of mind. The mind, his anyway, really was feeble when you got right down to it, although powerful as well since it was able to generate a whole cartoon version of imaginary places to replace them in their absence. How completely the reality of other people dropped away when they were gone, leaving only shadow puppets in a theatre of his somewhat lacking imaginings.

It was a disappointing insight into himself, for all that it was one that he (and others?) had gone on living with for quite some time. It was a matter of picking up and putting down, stepping into a set of half-familiar relationships, or trying to hop from one place to the other. An act of mental reconstruction was taking place every time, he realized, an effort which produced poor, softened, self-serving reflections of those people and places he was trying to bring to mind in his recollections, putting them in order as he went, giving

them a final so-called 'life' in his so-called novel.

All his became particularly obvious and painful when it was his own particular mother dying in her generic hospital bed. She was slipping away forever without ever having been known, or so it seemed, and conversely it became difficult for Jack Mudie to believe that he himself had ever – except perhaps in childhood – been anything more to her than a dimly apprehended shadow, a glitch in her mind, an irritating shadow moreover which frequently angered her by not behaving as it should in her own puppet theatre version of the world, as they had watched it slowly disintegrate under the onslaught of her growing dementia. But he knew, they all knew, that she had always been mad, and furthermore he believed that they had been the main cause of her insanity.

Anyway, this is perhaps why the towns he dwelt in remained strange to him, and why he remained an outsider in them both. Running through the strange town, surviving due to inefficiencies in the administration, the lack of mesh and cohesion to be found in their hollow notions of community and representation. Did he believe in any of this ridiculous crap? How might it have turned out for the best?

In the winter, his father used to take the gearbox off a car and carry it upstairs to their council flat to work on in front of the fire. Newspapers were spread on the carpet, and a sheet held over the fireplace to get the flue roaring, until it finally caught alight and flew up the chimney, and all those words flew up with it, glowing for an instant then grey flakes drifting away: that was their world, it had gone forever, and good riddance to its facsimiles, thought Jack.

Fitting cogs together, scrubbing wire brushes in petrol baths, worn bushes all carefully replaced, reassembled, all to make ends meet. Except they didn't always, they sometimes flapped loosely in unrealized, unsingable songs, and at the end of a week he and his mother scoured the flat, looking down the back of the red settee for pennies: worn or not, twelve of them would buy five Players Navy Cut, and he'd been sent down to Iris, in the middle shop, to hand them over. He'd felt no shame in this. On payday, a comic he'd eyed for many weeks would at last be his: Classics Illustrated, *The Black Tulip*. It was a rare flower, coveted by all who saw or heard of it, grown in a greenhouse in old Amsterdam by careful selective breeding.

One snowy Christmas day he'd unwrapped his first guitar. How its tan sunburst had shone! He'd started to strum on it tonelessly, slowly learning to play Silent Night and Old Black Joe. Gone are my friends, from the cotton fields away. Keith Steel, a merchant seaman, lived in an upstairs flat with his mother. Here and now, in the strange town, Jack remembered him in his sailor suit. He'd given Jack an old guitar of his own, a slightly better instrument, darker anyway, with ancient varnish that scraped away in powder under his fingernail. Keith's guitar had a battered air of having accompanied a drunken merchant seaman over the seven seas.

He'd tried to learn 45s, destroying them one by one on a wind-up gramophone. Jack needed lessons. His mother suggested he should ask Mr. Hopkins, from the last shop, the grocers. A lucky guess. Behind his white coat, cheese wire, whirling bacon slicer, and a jar of broken biscuits on the counter, he was a retired amateur jazz musician with a grey goatee who played guitar and soprano sax. He'd taught Jack on Fridays, early evenings. Chords, simple classical pieces. Jack's fingers had been too small for the fretboard, Mr. Hopkins' wife always knitting an endless cardigan, and towards the end of the lesson she would bring in unbroken biscuits on a plate, coffee in small green cups. Once, after much persuasion, Mr. Hopkins had taken out the treasured Soprano and played them his tune. They'd sipped and listened, listened and sipped. Ain't Misbehavin'. Mrs Hopkins glinted behind her winged spectacles, knitting, because he was savin' all his love for her.

If you really wanted to be a drug dealer in London, not just a fake one like Gay Tony, your best option, the best job you could possibly have would be as a bus driver on one of those winding hail-and-ride routes. They could just put their hands up with a couple of twenty-pound notes in their palm, and the driver would stop and pull a wrap out from behind his counter. The mayor could issue you with a special licence to carry a weapon. Nah, said Maleek. That's clever, but you would soon be caught. They got cameras all over them buses. Not the little ones. Hmmm. Tyrone a no show. Sally put him in the sitting room to wait. Again, it was an experience of being locked in. She'd removed the inside handle. It was her punishment room, Tayone said after he'd turned up and been debriefed about his mock exam performance.



Jack hadn't minded being Sally's prisoner. A beautiful, sexy woman whose harsh tongue inflamed his Wednesday evening sessions with an (as always) half-reluctant boy, she had put in only the briefest of appearances, just enough, more than enough, to make her a fit. She looked like Kelly Rowland, Queen of Nellyville. Did she think of him when she was with her boo? Jack purposely spun out each and every conversation past its tolerable limit: a few seconds before she slammed the front door in his face.

When he went down to be at his mother's bedside, he had noticed Mikey's head was shaped like an unopened bulb, bulging but tapering away at the top; a sprig of hair remaining on its summit formed the wisp of a question mark above his large eyes. They were sitting in the Highfield Social Club. The place was half-dead. *Don't Look Back in Anger* played on the jukebox, put on by the clutch of twenty-somethings clustered at the end of the bar; to them a classic of twenty years ago, it reminded Jack of the woozy, unhappy hedonism of the daft university students he'd been teaching at the time. It put him in a place he didn't mind remembering.

The barmaid sent over a couple of glasses of something that tasted a bit like anisette. Brought to them by a thin, youthful woman from the Midlands. She had four grown-up children and had been one of their mother's main carers. Maybe it had been her idea. She was a lovely woman. At last Little Richard came on and Mike told him something he'd recently read on Wikipedia about his career. Jack felt at a wrenching distance from it all, as perhaps did Mikey, but no, he had been playing tapes as usual.

Peace to him, peace to all of them. After all, they hadn't asked to be related to him any more than Tyrone or Maleek had demanded he give them English tuition. The former polite and thoughtful, although completely uninterested, the latter bouncing off the walls of Hackney Youth Hub. One of the naughty boys, as his mother had described them to all her carers, with one of the last of her smiles, her face alive with irony.

Earlier on, his brother had shown him the latest of his dioramas, constructed of model cars and accessories he'd bought over the internet or had found in Taunton. It was a scene from the late forties of a woman standing beside a silver Airstream caravan, looking obliquely out with her arm raised to shade her eyes towards

what might be a horizon. Her husband, in knee-length shorts, prepared to throw a frisbee for a jumping, excited dog. Behind him was a Nash Countryman of the correct year and a downloaded wraparound photo of the landscape of the Rocky Mountains, below them a piece of AstroTurf cut to fit the top shelf of one of his car cabinets. The other held his reconstruction of a Studebaker garage, with two Golden Hawks in different states of repair, one of them undergoing restoration on a ramp. Mikey had got him to try out his virtual car racing set up in the spare bedroom, and also performed a couple of magic tricks.

They sat and drank until closing time, and as usual Jack felt his brother's slight irritation when he turned down his tilted-glass offer of one last drink. He'd had enough, enough so that he felt a bit unsteady as he tottered around to their parents' bungalow. His father was still listening to the radio in bed, which struck him as a good sign of something. Jack had fallen asleep straight away in relief, as he usually did after one of these long, strained sessions.

Now he was back in town at his desk in front of the sticky keyboard at which he wrote his dirty little books. Jack Mudie. The man without a story. But there was a wisp and a wire curled up around here somewhere, a final connection always to be made, at which point the whole gizmo would light up like Christmas and begin to whirr a little bit. The windmill on the music box would turn again. The Antelope would leap from its signboard and become a real antelope, running like hell to get away from the two White Lions. And so it would all come out straight and true in the end. Suddenly, through the fog of this belief, he remembered the absolute certainty with which his father once demonstrated the action of a magnet upon iron filings, the unerring patterns they made, the invisible field of astonishing forces, and the important idea – held to have a mysterious explanatory power – that like repels like and opposites attract; leaving him to pry the two magnets apart for himself with his small, grappling fingers.

Dad remembered, those special moments that seemed to define something for him. Do you remember when we worked on that Buick? Comes out of nowhere with that smile, and Mum used to curate these moments of his sometimes, mentioning them, imbuing them with further portent and significance. The lord had spoken. And it wasn't even that she particularly revered his defining memory

moments herself, although he 'often mentioned' them, just that she thought that he, Jack, should mark them, remember them, guard their meaning. Do you remember when we worked on that Buick? As if that was the only moment of contact they had ever achieved, was it really the only significance his eldest son's entire life had for him?

It wasn't, of course, but there was always something irresistible to him about the way these things fell out, offering themselves up for meaning like the wishbones of Christmas turkeys they had eaten long ago in his childhood, prised apart between his father's short blunt finger and his own pink twig. But who would get the bigger half, who would be allowed to make their silent wish?

Making somebody else listen to your memories was like showing off your gold filling. A way of registering your contempt for them, with a none-too-appetizing treat. If you are noticed at all it is as a denied influence at first, doomed anyway to become memory's tool in one way or another; automatic cheerleader to their inner theatre of recollection, internalized approver of dubious exploits still at a planning stage. For every Saturday afternoon sports watching armchair ham there was a mum on hand with an ever-replenishing round of ham sandwiches. Without her dark energy to drive them, they would all flop down, like broken puppets.

Dad, always with a smile on his face at the thought of a car, a bike, lighting up in company like an extension-lamp plugged into the grid, the grid. Jack had always admired him for having a job he liked, being a mechanic, which he might deny, but it was the whole of the best part of him, finally what had made him be like himself.. Not so chirpy nowadays, devastated by mum's death, he held *Motorcycle News* in his mottled brown hands, he read all day long, not trying to reconnect, watching the rebuilds on the rebuild channel, rubbing away at the hours until he himself was rubbed out.

All these ridiculous things were prodded towards you, and fatefully, faithfully, you picked them up. His father had always got the main part of the wishbone, and it had turned out just the same this time. The lion's share of suffering was perhaps his final prize. It had been more than he could possibly bear, yet somehow or other he had done so. He appeared unchanged, the only way they could really accept him. And at the end of the last day, he was alive to watch cars being rebuilt on telly and read the motorcycling papers. Mikey brought them around for him, kept him talking.

Stationers Park was a long narrow piece of ground which tumbled down between two nearby streets, amongst the most agreeable in all Toyland, red and stately, suitable for Christmas cards, framed by a procession of alien pollarded trees on the steep hill from the top on which Jack had recently taken a photo with his phone, only to be asked by a passing woman if he happened to be David Icke, or 'Ick' as she pronounced it. Finally, the penny had dropped with him, who she was referring to, but fearing she might be a follower of his instead simply said that no, he wasn't the lizard-fancying conspiracy theorist. "But you are him," she had insisted. "You look exactly like him." Jack had apologized for not being so and descended the hill to his assignment in the beautiful Christmas card house, actually a well-appointed foster home, a surly runaway of a boy who was determined not to be inspired by anything, not even stories about space and long multiplication.

Jack was back there today, wandering around the park, biding his time, drinking an Americano at a trestle table before his weekly torment with the lad. It really was a pretty little park, locked up at night, a river of brightly dressed children continually streaming around it from top to bottom, either in school uniform (he had once seen his tutee hiding under his jacket passing through), or gambolling at the side of responsible-looking young middle-class parents wearing whatever they had now instead of kagouls, carrying those modest frayed bags stuffed with anything sensible a child could possibly need, their awkward, slightly frail looking bodies obviously bursting with inquisitiveness and intelligence. The park had everything – a dried up rocky stream with a muddy pool at the bottom end, a stony bridge you had to clamber across, holding on, a couple of tennis courts, the back end of a mid-Victorian church now repurposed into fifteen flats, the vicarage still next door, and at the top of the park a trio of bowl-like baseball and football courts in which a few boys wearing sharp sports strip practiced in the early summer evening. A few groups of mums and adolescents sat around smoking and chatting at folded steel municipal picnic tables.

Something about the place, its continual ambulatory circular traffic, reminded Jack of the cliff top garden at Sidmouth where he and his brother had scattered his mother's ashes, partly at a bench looking out to sea, partly beside some shrubs planted in a clump around a secluded bower. Both had a certain holiday gaiety he

supposed, something worn-in and reflective, public memory gardens with open lockable gates. She would have liked the park, Jack thought, as he tried somehow to mentally attach her to it, but she would not have wanted to stay long or come back. It was a pleasant place, lovely enough, but mainly for young people not old ones like herself and Jack. He would do just as well to avoid it himself in future, and probably would not be returning often to the Sidmouth cliff garden either, much as mum had loved its fragrant borders, its mini-amphitheatre, its old potting sheds and greenhouses for bringing on cacti. Maybe there was something about places where you scattered ashes. You didn't really want to go back to them. You had a kind of secret with those places – not a public memory. Mr. Jinx flowed down from the shoulder of her ruby dress, a river of tortoiseshell fur.