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Opening Extract from...

Little Egypt

Written by Lesley Glaister

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LITTLE EGYPT

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For Andrew, once again

PART ONE





SPIKE'S A THIN streak of a boy, American, with silver studs in his face and ears, pale matted snakes of hair, and a distinct whiff of the vegetable about him. He hitchhikes when he needs to travel, or else he walks. He doesn't believe in *money* – marvellous!

We met when he sprang from a skip and landed right in front of me in a tumble of rolling oranges. I screeched and clutched my trolley handle, frightened half to death. He was all solicitation and apology – charm, I'd go as far as to say. We were in the service area behind the supermarket and I'd caught him 'dumpster diving'.

U-Save throws out huge quantities of perfectly good food just because it's out of date. A sinful waste and shame, I say, and have said, but do they take heed? Once I'd regained my composure, Spike showed me his haul and offered me a caramel doughnut – delightful. And then he climbed back into the skip and called things out:

'Carrots? Hummus? Tiramisu?' and if I said yes he passed them to me and I added them to my trolley. I've seen him regularly since then and the same has happened, which does save

money, but really the fun is in the sport of it, don't you know? If I could climb and spring about like Spike I'd do it myself. The beauty of it is that you never know what's coming next. I've been introduced to all sorts of new delights that way: panacotta, globe artichokes, sushi, chicken satay on most useful pointed skewers.

Spike became a friend to me – like an angel, you might say – and it was Spike who set me free.

We were sitting on a doorstep in the service area sharing a tub of Kalamata olives. (Not the most salubrious place. Here they keep the bins and skips and bales of flattened boxes. Here the dual carriageway roars above you and occasionally a hubcap or paper coffee cup or strip of rubber tyre flies down. Here stray cats yowl and prowl – there's plenty of vermin to keep them fed. And here too, the smokers among the U-Save staff emerge to puff on their cigarettes. I've spotted I'm Doreen how may I help you?, the sourest faced person I've ever met, puffing away there. Seeing me with Spike caused her orange-pencilled eyebrows to shoot into her hairline. Most gratifying.)

It was a late September day, still quite warm, and I'd rolled up my trouser legs to sun my shins – flaky and crinkled and mapped with veins. However did they get like that? Each time he finished an olive Spike ejected the stone forcefully from between his lips, aiming for an empty beer-tin, but overshooting. I told him he was blowing too hard; he demonstrated that if he blew more softly the stone simply dropped onto his legs. 'Well, move the tin further away then, dear,' I suggested, but he merely frowned and desisted from his game.

We turned to the subject of dreams – in the sense of

ambition. His I found grand but disappointingly vague: peace, love, equality, and so on. Visions of the world as it could be. As he waxed lyrical I watched the nervous fidget of his hands – fingers young and straight but stained from smoking, painfully bitten nails.

When the olives were gone, he rolled himself a cigarette. 'What's your dream then, Sisi?'

(You see how I reverse my name? How much more comfortable it's made, by such a simple flip.)

'To leave,' I said, nodding towards my home.

'And go where?'

'Sunset Lodge. Once I've sold up.'

He snorted his derision, but I indulged myself once more in describing the luxury I'd seen in the brochures: reclining armchairs, vast televisions, tempting menus, alternative therapists, a dedicated 'friend', parties, seasonal entertainment and a 3-star suite for visitors.

Spike ground out his cigarette and fiddled with the packet of tobacco. 'Don't give in to the fuckers now,' he said.

'You asked my dream,' I pointed out.

We sat in a silence that almost approached the prickly for a while, until he broke it.

'They still hassling you?'

I shook my head, which was a lie. Stephen, the latest of the developers' representatives, waits for me twice a week in the U-Save café where I go each morning for my coffee. I conduct all my business in the café rather than let anyone into the house. (Osi would go berserk at such an invasion.) The U-Save Consortium propose to buy Little Egypt – the last remnant of the family property – to raze to the ground and erect what they call a 'mega-homestore' and it's Stephen's task to win me over.

From the scattered litter, Spike picked up a glossy leaflet advertising this week's special offers and skimmed it, scoffing. 'Thirty-six fishy nuggets – buy two get one free – that's 108 fishy nuggets. The oceans will be fished-out before they're finished.'

'And think of all those fish without their nuggets!' I jested, but he didn't laugh.

'What if,' I said, 'now don't go getting on your high horse, dear, but what if a person *did* want to sell a property to someone like, say, U-Save.'

'Then they'd want their fucking heads examined.'

He moved to a crouch as if about to spring away, but I caught his arm. 'But what if, for instance, there was something there, something hidden that got uncovered, dug up, say, during the building work?'

He cocked his head at me and squinted. 'Like Roman ruins and stuff?'

'Mmm,' I said, 'or a corpse, something in that line?'

There was a chink of silver against tooth as he puffed out his lip. 'Huh, they'd cover it up and you'd never know. Think they'd let anything get in the way of profit?'

Though he was not to know it, these were the magic words that freed me. It was a thought quite new, a revelation. Ever since . . . well for all the years, all these years I've supposed that we could never leave, that once *it* was discovered we'd go to prison; Osi, certainly, and perhaps me, too. That's what Victor believed and left me believing.

I needed to be back home to test the thought. To be alone. If Spike was right, then we could sell and go. Could it really be so? But what of Osi? I flailed about until Spike hauled me to my feet. (My knees are really dreadful, the left in particular.

You can get new ones, I hear, though not, so far, at U-Save.)

'You really think so?' I asked him.

'I fucking know so,' said he.