



HAPPY BIRTHDAY

by James Brown



“Your birthday’s coming up,” said Mum.

“Mmm,” I said. Birthdays were a problem. I didn’t like parties, but I didn’t want no one to notice, either. Plus my birthday meant having two birthdays – one with Mum and one with Dad. It was awkward.

“Would you like to do anything special?” Mum asked.

“Maybe Jeet could come round.”

“Like he did yesterday and the day before?”

I explained that the day before, I went to his place.

“OK,” said Mum. “It just doesn’t seem like having Jeet over is very different from any other day.”

“There would be cake.”

Mum laughed. “There might be. What sort would you like?”

“Birthday cake.”

Mum threw her tea towel at me. “You’re not helping.”

“OK. What about a cheesecake?” I’d had some at Dad’s – it was surprisingly nice. It didn’t taste like cheese at all.

I had a similar conversation with Dad on the phone a few days later except I asked him for carrot cake.

“Great. I’ll pick you both up from school. We’ll have fish and chips and carrot cake. Jeet can stay over as well.”

I groaned inwardly. I couldn’t say I’d rather stay at Mum’s because he’d get all sad and grouchy. “Sure, after school pick-up,” I heard myself repeating.

I kept putting off telling Mum about the new plan. Finally, I explained that Dad wanted me to go to his place on my birthday, even though it was midweek and he usually picked me up on a Friday. “But I can see you before school,” I said.

Her face fell. “Oh,” she said. “Well, I guess you were here last year ...”

Portioning my time equally between them was hard work. Sometimes I’d just rather hang out with Jeet.

“Happy birthday!” Mum beamed as I emerged sleepily into the kitchen. Normally she was gone before I got up. “I was worried I’d have to wake you. On your birthday!” She enveloped me in a hug and managed to sneak in a kiss. Over her shoulder, I saw a cheesecake on the table.

“I won’t sing,” she said.

“Er, thanks,” I said. “I mean for the cheesecake.”

“You can have some for breakfast. I’ll have your present for you after school.”

“Cool, but no rush. I’m at Dad’s, remember? You can give it to me tomorrow.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” she said, too quickly.

I felt a weight lift from my shoulders when Mum finally left for work.

After school, Jeet and I waited for Dad. Kids streamed out the gate like water from our drain when it blocked.

“What are you nerds doing?” asked Tyler the loudmouth.

I didn’t want people to know it was my birthday. Jeet understood. He pulled out a piece of paper. “Conducting a survey,” he said.

“About what?”

“Gullibility. Want to take part?”

Tyler looked worried. “Will it take long?”

“No. In fact, you’re done. Thanks for participating.”

This game amused us until we were the only ones waiting. It wasn’t like Dad to forget a pick-up. I tried texting. No response.

“Maybe his phone’s out of charge,” said Jeet.

“He texted for my birthday just before.”

“Maybe his car’s out of charge.” Jeet loved Dad’s electric car. “Let’s just go to your mum’s. We can work on the *drain*.” ‘Drain’ was our code word for tunnel. I brightened.

I let us in and texted Mum, although she was often too busy at work to check her phone.

“Happy birthday to you,” said Jeet, handing me a small parcel. I unwrapped it carefully, saving the paper. It was homemade sweets from his mum and little sister.

“Wow, thank you. I mean, thank her. Them.”

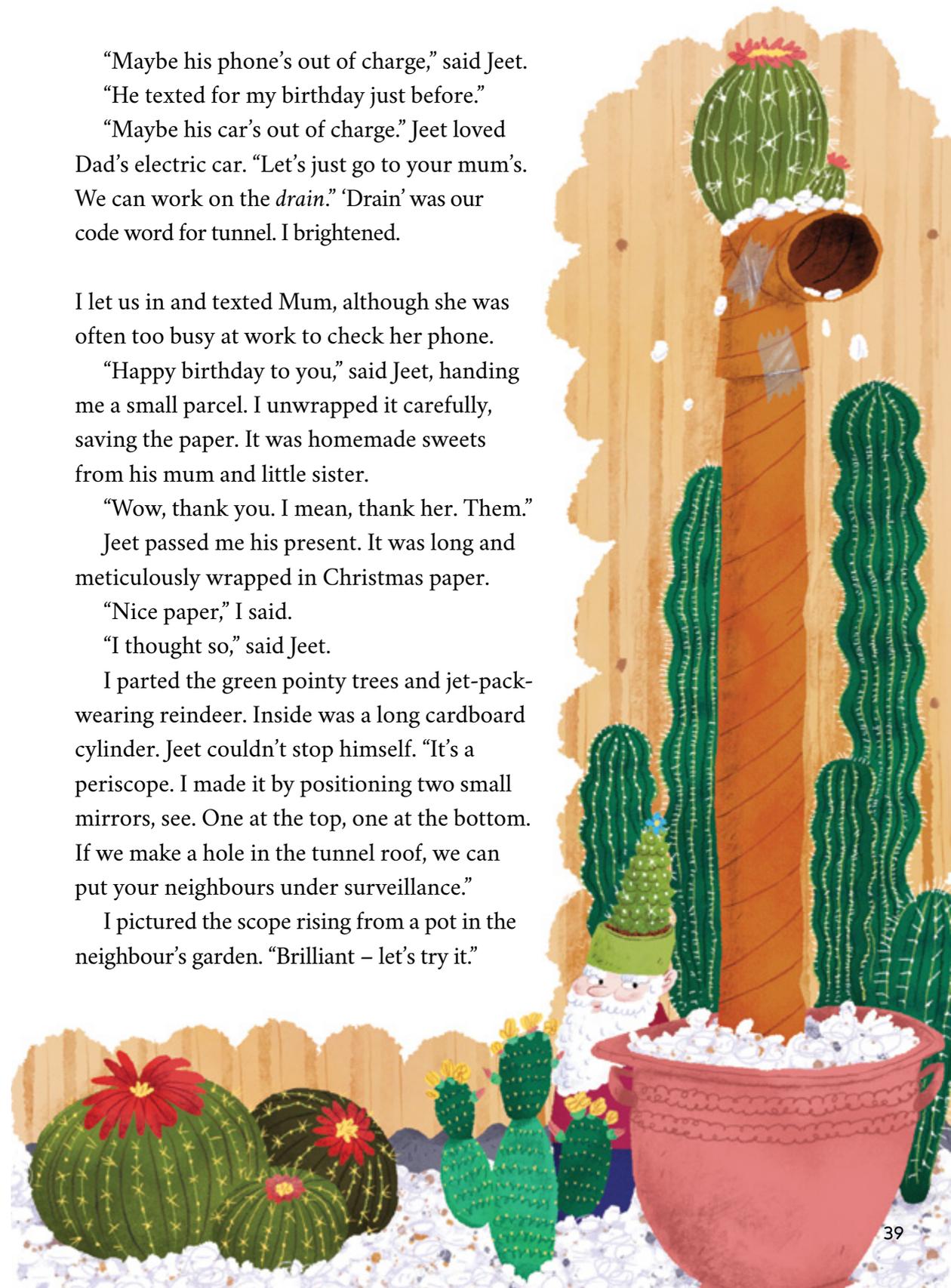
Jeet passed me his present. It was long and meticulously wrapped in Christmas paper.

“Nice paper,” I said.

“I thought so,” said Jeet.

I parted the green pointy trees and jet-pack-wearing reindeer. Inside was a long cardboard cylinder. Jeet couldn’t stop himself. “It’s a periscope. I made it by positioning two small mirrors, see. One at the top, one at the bottom. If we make a hole in the tunnel roof, we can put your neighbours under surveillance.”

I pictured the scope rising from a pot in the neighbour’s garden. “Brilliant – let’s try it.”



We went to the spot along the boundary where we were helping dig a trench for a new drain. Mum was freaking about the cost. I raised the scope over the corrugated-iron fence. The neighbour's dinky, manicured garden and house appeared in the viewfinder. "Coast clear," I said.

Behind our garage was a deeper hole for the drain's sump. It had planks on the bottom. Except it wasn't the bottom. Jeet jumped in and removed them. That was our secret. The hole went deeper. At the true bottom, a tunnel veered under the fence. It was about a metre long – so far. Jeet checked the roof supports and resumed digging. He filled a bucket with dirt, and I hauled it out on a rope and distributed it alongside the trench.

Jeet's muffled voice came out of the hole. "Whoa. Alien object." The tunnel wasn't big enough for two, so Jeet crawled out so I could crawl in. "In the roof," he called.

I looked up. A black polythene mass bulged near the last support. I gave it a poke. "I think it's lining their pebble garden," I said. The neighbour's pebble garden, complete with gnomes and cactuses, was directly over the fence. "Hey! If we make a hole, we could syphon some stones for our slingshots." Without thinking, I stabbed with my spade. A torrent of pebbles poured in. "Aargh!"

Jeet pulled me backwards. The flow subsided. We froze. "Check for bandits. I'll seal the breach," he said urgently.

I climbed out and raised the scope. No movement from the house, but one section of their pebble garden had drained like a galaxy into a black hole. Jeet emerged from the tunnel.

"Status?" I said.

"Plugged with four by two. Bandits?"

"Clear. But we have a problem."

I passed Jeet the scope so he could survey the damage. "Yes. Catastrophic surface failure," he confirmed. "Quick, the bucket."

He jumped back into the hole and started frantically shovelling stones. I hauled them up and stood on our recycling bin so I could tip them over the fence. By the fourth bucket, we relaxed a little. We had this. The pebble garden was a mess, but it was back. And some cactuses had gone, but we could solve that later.



We retreated inside. The sweets reminded me it was my birthday, and we began eating them. I checked my phone. "Aargh. Dad's not even in town. He never meant pick-up today. He meant Friday, like normal."

Jeet shrugged and started on the cheesecake. Then we went to play Poltergeist, a really bad video game we liked.

It was dark when we heard the front door. Mum walked in, looking startled. "What's going on? Happy birthday. Hello, Jeet."

"Where've you been?" I said a little crossly.

She frowned. "I went to a movie because I didn't want to be here by myself on your birthday."

I explained the mix-up. "Oh, dear," said Mum. "Well, let's sort some dinner."

Jeet was looking out the window. "What if we attach a broom handle to the trowel so we can operate it from our side of the fence? And we could adapt a fishing rod to lower in cactuses?"

"Lower in cactuses?" repeated Mum.

"Kitkat's been poeing in the neighbour's pebble garden," I said hurriedly. "I think he's dug up a few of their cactuses."

Mum smiled. "The neighbours might notice you and your contraptions." "Then we'll do it when they're not home."

"If they're not home, you could just nip over and replant the cactuses. Or ask permission even."

Parents never understood. "It'll need to be a night operation," I mused. "But no torches."

"You'll probably need your slingshots," said Mum.

I gave her a look. Was she making fun of us?

Jeet nodded. "And night-vision goggles. I've seen how to make them online." He sighed. "But you need a smart phone."

Mum handed me a parcel.

"Happy birthday. It's from me and Dad."



illustrations by Josh Morgan

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