

The Space Above the Wardrobe

by Chris Wright

an' Mister Patterson was out at his car wif a small plastic kettle an' he was pouring it over the frosty windows an' I couldn't take my eyes off of him 'cause he didn't open the door an' start the engine first like Dad did

an' he didn't turn on the wipers wif them making that horrible screech as they fought the ice

an' he stepped 'round the car flicking hot water over each window not seeing the water freeze again seconds after 'cause his attention was elsewhere an' his eyes stared at the bottom of the car

an' he returned to the driver's side setting the kettle on the pavement an' he dropped down onto his belly wif his boots holding him stiff

an' spread fingers propped him up against the pavement like Spider-Man on a skyscraper turned on its side an' he peered underneath the car first on his front then twisting onto his back like the man who fixes dad's car

an' mum burst into the living room catching me staring out the window wif the TV rumblin' in the background

—Will ye turn off them bloody Transformers?

an' sure I wasn't even watching *Transformers* an' anyway they turned into robots an' this was *M.A.S.K* where one vehicle turns into another duh

an' she knocked off the TV wif a thump

—Mu-um.

—Sure yer not even watchin' it.

an' she bent down to lift my sticky cereal bowl from the floor

—Mum what's Peter's Dad doing?

an' she stood an' looked out of the window an' her face went all sad

—He must've dropped his keys.

—But they're in his hand. I can see 'em from here.

—Go on an' get ready for school. You're gonna be late.

an' Dad sauntered in fixing his tie

—Tell him Mum said as she left the room.

—Come on son listen to your mother.

—Dad?

—Yes son?

—What's Mister Patterson doing?

an' he looked out of the window his face scrunched up

—Checking his car.

an' he turned an' left the room as he finished the sentence like he knew the questions I was gonna ask

—What for?

an' Mister Patterson disappeared again under the other side of his big red car

—He’s checking for bombs.

an’ my older brother Bill was sat on the arm of the sofa smirking an’ wearing his new big school uniform which had the blue tie instead of my stupid red one

—Nuh-uh.

—Yuh-huh.

an’ he widened his eyes an’ shook his head from side to side mocking me

—Da-ad Bill’s telling lies.

an’ Mum stomped in again.

—William will you stop telling lies an’ go clean your teeth.

an’ I gave him a big cheesy grin

—I’m not even lyin’.

—Mu-um Bill says Mister Peterson’s checking under his car for bombs.

an’ she stopped dead her face red wif anger an’ I wasn’t sure who was in for it me or Bill

—Jesus Bill. He’s only eight. He doesn’t need to be hearing that.

an’ she didn’t deny it

—Is he really checking for bombs?

an’ she sighed

—We’re going to be late.

an' loadsa questions flooded my head like is Mr. Patterson a secret agent an' does he go on secret missions against a villainous organisation like V.E.N.O.M. an' has he a team of heroes ready to be called upon at a moment's notice an' would they really blow him up

an' sure they never actually killed anyone in the cartoons

an' I darted after Mum as she went out to the hall

—Mum should we be checking under our car for bombs?

—William see what you've started she said through her teeth.

—Who'd want to kill Peter's Dad?

—I dunno the bad men.

an' I knew all about the bad men but they always seemed far away like a body dumped in a country road or a shooting or bomb in parts of Belfast I'd never seen 'cept on the news

an' the next day I sat opposite Peter at break-time tucking into his crisps an' a carton of juice an' usually I'd have taken extra time to enjoy the pop of the straw through foil but I couldn't fink how to ask him 'bout his Dad

an' after all Peter was renowned for his tall-tales an' always had the latest toy or game but you were never allowed to see it or play wif it an' his latest was that he had *Boulder Hill* — the M.A.S.K. petrol station an' secret Headquarters wif the petrol pumps that turn into cannons — but his Dad made him keep it in the space above the wardrobe an' he wasn't allowed to show it to friends 'cause it's so expensive but I knew it was rubbish 'cause if I had it I'd have all my friends round to play wif it every single day

an' I blurted out the question as he took a break from bragging to shovel a handful of Wotsits into his face.

—Was your Dad looking under his car for bombs this mornin'?

an' Peter went unusually quiet an' his face reddened an' he looked at me like he might hit me in the face an' I'd never been hit in the face before an' the idea of it made my heart bump fast in my chest an' I didn't want him to hit me or fall out wif me because he was my bestest friend in the whole world but I had to know

—Shut up Daniel.

an' everything went quiet like proper silent an' all the faces round the wee table were just wide-eyes an' O'd mouths wif crisp coated baby teeth an' chocolate smeared tongues twisting like worms but even in the silence he didn't deny it the same way mum didn't deny it

an' I was expecting him to make up some long story but he lifted his toy police car an' stormed off just as the bell went

an' then at lunchtime Peter went quick at the bell an' no one'd seen where he went so I searched our usual spots an' he wasn't there so I searched the places we daren't normally go without a teacher an' he wasn't there either but I found him halfway through lunch playing on his own in the dark trees at the end of the playground where Johnny Martin said he seen a Witch that one time which turned out to be the new dinner lady smoking

—Go away he said as soon as he saw me sneak through the trees

—Can I play?

an' he didn't answer so I sat down opposite him an' pulled out my Ferrari F40 from my trouser pocket an' ran it along the ground near him in the hope his Police car might chase it an' I even made all the right noises to draw him in like the scrawk of the tyres an' the revs of the engine an' the cry of the driver taunting the coppers to come an' get him an' soon his car skirted close to mine veering off at the last second but he didn't even do the sounds

—Are you mad at me?

—No.

an' my Ferrari zoomed up the tree root that had broken through the ground creating a perfect ramp an' it took off just as the Police car passed underneath an' I let out a yee-ha like I was one of the Duke boys making a fool out of Sherriff Rosco P. Coltrane an' I swear I saw a smile on Peter's lips as he followed the same route an' took the same jump the yee-ha catching in his throat like he had the cold

—Can you keep a secret?

—Yeah 'course.

—Promise?

an' I nodded

—My Dad was checking for bombs.

—Serious?

—Serious. He has to. He's a Policeman. The bad men put bombs under Policemen's cars because they don't like it when they get arrested Peter whispered

an' the Police car screeched to a halt at the end of the root the Ferrari pulling up just behind an' he flipped his car around to face mine

—But you can't tell anyone.

an' he revved his engine an' took off towards me with tyres squealing forcing my Ferrari to pull a full 180 an' take off towards the trees

—Swear?

—Swear.

an' sure wasn't it that night I jumped out of bed the walls shaking to a terrible noise like thunder
an' I thought the world was ending like in the bible stories my Granny read me where the seven
Angels sounded seven trumpets the rapture she called it

an' by the time I got to my parents' room Dad was at the window looking blue in the light of the
moon 'cept for his face which glowed orange with each suck on his cigarette as he glared at the
smoke rising up over our wee town repeating 'Fuck's sake' an' 'Bastards' over an' over again
while Mum cradled me wif my skin goosied an' shaking an' my chest heaving wif big sobs

an' my sadness didn't last long 'cause two days later Mum took us into town for the Bomb-
Damage Sale although she kept saying she'd wished it was at the other side of town nearer
'Marksies' but I didn't 'cause I knew the shops up the top of the town where the bomb went off

an' mum dipped in an' out of the shops slowly like she was doing it on purpose as she pawed
items she'd never buy an' she tried on clothes she'd never wear all the while my feet danced wif
excitement an' when we finally reached the toy shop I bolted like a dog through a door an' she
called after me but I ignored her

an' I ran past rows of pink toys for girls followed by the pale colours of the babies' toys an' when I
spotted *Lego* I knew I was close an' I slowed as I passed through *Ninja Turtles* an' *Transformers*
an' finally *M.A.S.K* an' there it was wif the box crumpled at the corner where it fell in the bombin'
an' a whiff of smoke on the cardboard an' a giant Half Price sticker stuck on the front of *Boulder
Hill* an' I could barely hold it in my little hands so I had to lift my knee an' place it underneath just
to read the writing on the back

—I thought you were getting that for your birthday Mum said when she found me.

—It's half price.

—Still dear.

—Pluh-ease Mum I'll work for the rest. I'll clean the fireplace an' everything. I swear.

an' when she 'Hmmm'd' I knew there was hope

—Are you going to clean your room?

—Of course.

—Properly?

—Ye-es I said my legs jiving like I needed a wee

—Fine.

an' she reached out to take the box off me but I tugged it outta the way 'cause I wanted be the one to carry it to the till

an' I hadn't seen Peter for days an' I wondered if he'd found out I got *Boulder Hill* an' was deliberately avoiding me but I knew something happened when a dark mood fell over the house an' later that night after Dad drank more than usual an' had words wif Mum he thought we couldn't hear but him drunk was loud an' his words were angry an' sad an' it took another jig-saw puzzle of conversations for me to get an idea of what had happened

an' a bomb had been driven into town an' abandoned by the bad men who phoned the news people to tell them where it was — why tell them where it is if they don't want to get into trouble? is it because they do? —an' Peter's Dad had been in the town keeping people safe an' had been helping get the drunk people away from the bomb when it went off an' my Dad had heard from another Policeman friend that they found a torso on the roof of the bank right next door to the toy shop an' it belonged to Mr. Patterson an' I wasn't sure what a torso was like if it was some sort of watch or a bitta clothes

an' the following morning my little black suit a white shirt still in the packet an' a black tie were laid out at the end of my bed an' I put it all on 'cept the tie 'cause that was Dad's job an' when I found him he was doing his own tie in the mirror on his wardrobe door an' when he saw me he froze losing his place an' he huffed an' puffed an' he undid the half knot an' threw the tie on the bed

—Stupid fucking thing.

an' he dropped onto the bed wif his head in his hand an' I kept quiet not wanting to disturb him
an' I was going to wait until he was doing my tie to ask him what a torso was but when I saw his
face I decided against it

—Bring it over.

an' he held out his hand but didn't look up an' I put the between his big fingers an' he turned on
the bed to face me before slinging the tie over the back of my neck like a cowboy would in the
old black an' white Westerns he loved to watch an' he pulled me in close like he used to do when
I was younger an' smiled wif his mouth but not his eyes an' the sad made my tummy feel empty
an' the more I pushed it down scared the more would come out of me; a wobbly lip an' shaky
hands an' our eyes met for a moment wif big thick tears in mine an' then his

an' it was then I learned Daddies cry too

an' we said nothing for ages

an' we sat together as a family at the back of the funeral an' Dad slipped forward to hug Peter's
Mum as she passed while my own Mum stood back an' dabbed her eyes an' then afterwards back
at his house I sat wif Peter in his bedroom in silence 'cause I didn't know what to do or what to
say

an' I took out the Ferrari F40 I had smuggled in in my jacket pocket an' screeched it to a halt
beside him an' he smiled as he reached into his toy box an' pulled out his Police car ready to
chase the bad men once again

an' I never told Peter about *Boulder Hill* an' sure I couldn't even bring myself to play wif it once I
found out what it cost an' now it stays in the space above the wardrobe gathering dust

About the Author

Chris Wright is from Bangor, Northern Ireland. His short fiction has appeared in *The Honest Ulsterman*, *The Cormorant*, *Parentheses International Literary Arts Journal*, *The Wellington Street Review*, and many more. In 2020, his work will be featured in several print anthologies, such as *Declarations on Freedom*—commissioned to celebrate 700 years since the Declaration of Arbroath—*The Bramley*, the *Reflex Press Anthology*, and the *Write Festival Anthology*. In 2019, alongside appearing in dozens of publications, he was highly commended in the *Writers' Forum Short Story Competition*, won a place on the *Stinging Fly Summer School* in Dublin, received a *John Hewitt International Bursary*, as well as a *SIAP Award* from the *Arts Council of Northern Ireland*.

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