

Human nature

By Patience Agbabi

I'm Sky the Planter. A paradox. Should have been called Earth. I plant seeds that sprout into techniveg, cells that morph into meat, ideas that flower into film. My best bud's Jasmine the Gatherer, Jas for short. She harvests fruits and plans Gatherings. That's when we come together to listen to stories.

Stories are Greentown's claim to fame. Folks flock for miles to hear them. Just as well cos nothing exciting happens here; not for teeners like me. You can spot a skylark ten miles off but got to travel an hour on the Understorey to find outsiders with fresh stories to tell. The Foragers seek out the new, welcome them here.

That's why everyone's talking about Kale.

He's the new teenager on the Suburban, the square mile underground estate. The first time he wandered into our Knowledge Pod, everyone stared. Not at his shoulder-length shaggy dark green hair or his pitted bronze skin. But the way he cocked his ears as if listening to an invisible tune. Another paradox but it's true.

Everyone wants to hear Kale's story and tonight he's been chosen.

Since six, we've been trickling into The Beanstalk, the clear, round, domed storyhub in Greentown centre. The roof's open to the summer sky. The Beanstalk's named after the glass pillar in the middle of the room, ridged like tree bark and glinting a frosty blue meaning the thermo's hit 25 degrees.

The room's buzzing with teeners in green growyourown tunics and reclaimed trainers sprawled on bright cushions. I spot Jas chatting with Rosehip the Forager, my friend's blue-black plait contrasting with Rosehip's frizzy red-grey curls. When she sees me, Jas bounds across the room. We bump fists as she plonks herself onto an orange cushion.

'Why's Kale just called Kale?' I ask, the question on everyone's lips.

'Hiding something,' she replies. 'Everyone's got an epithet. Maybe he's Kale the Hunter.'

'Illegal in Greentown.'

Jas grins. 'Make a great story.'

I shake my head. 'More like Kale the Recycler. Hair looks like second-hand seaweed.'

She laughs and I wince. A sudden dogged fizzing in my ears. A fly. I shake my head vigorously, fighting my impulse to squash it. It's forbidden to kill them, part of the food chain and all that. But flies irritate me beyond space. Off it soars towards the beanstalk in its blue-green shimmering armour. The biggest bluebottle ever.

A bit of shuffling near the entrance and Kale comes into view. He ambles towards the beanstalk, raises his palm and the panel rises. He enters the trunk and the panel lowers. The icy blue light dims and Kale's visible from all directions. The fidgeting and mumbling stop. He turns his head from side to side. When he speaks, his voice is surprisingly deep.

'Once, there was a story that said humanz were made to rule nature. From the birds in the air to the fish in the sea. From the plants to the plains. For centuries, humanz and nature lived in harmony. But as more humanz populated the planet, they needed more and more space to live. They built cities and lost touch with nature.'

He pauses.

Jas whispers into the silence. 'He's got an accent.'

I don't answer. The whole room has held its breath. The only sound, the urgent buzz of the bluebottle, bashing again and again against the beanstalk like it's a window. Flies are so stupid.

'They twisted the original story,' Kale continues. 'Humanz are superior to nature because we create art; but dulled the artistry in shimmering fish scales. Because we forge architecture; yet demolished the structure of a beehive. Because we make music; but silenced the sound of birdsong. Because we can reason and solve problems; yet when ants collectivised, they destroyed their anthills. But most of all, humanz are superior because we have language. Yet who can interpret the hum of a bee, the signal of a tree?'

'Me!' sings a voice. Everyone laughs. Rivers the Baker, long-limbed and crinkle-eyed, always has an answer. But Kale looks right through him.

'Icebergs were melting, forests were burning and humanz knew it had something to do with human behaviour. But they did nothing to change it.'

He pauses. Only the fizz of the bluebottle, frantically beating its wings.

'Cliché,' says a voice too close beside me. Jas! I squirm on my cushion, willing her to shut up. 'Tell us something new.'

'She's right,' says Rosehip the Forager. 'This is history, not story.'

'But,' says a teener voice, warm as the west wind, 'it's not how a story is told but who tells it that makes it new.'

Rivers the Baker rises from his cushion like a sprouting seed on fast forward.

'What happened next? Did they all die?'

Kale looks at him for the first time. 'No. Finally, they changed their behaviour. They replanted and recycled and worked collectively.'

The fly has altered its flight path now, encircling the beanstalk. It throbs under Kale's voice like a backing track.

'Why did they change?' I hear my voice saying.

A harsh voice shouts out, 'We know why. Human nature. Only acts when it faces extinction'.

Kale pauses, all ears are upon him. 'They listened to a story, not with their heads but their hearts. It went viral.'

'On the worldwideweb?' The same voice.

'No. By word of mouth. Only when it stirs the butterflies in the belly does a story work its magic. That story has been transmitted across continents and over generations in as many tongues and species as there are on the planet.'

'What was the story?' I ask.

'The one I have just repeated.'

Jas shakes her head. 'A story about a story? It doesn't even have a proper ending!'

'Then let him finish,' I hiss.

'I think the story is finished,' says Kale.

'If that is so,' says Rosehip the Forager, 'we have a custom here in Greentown. For every story, acknowledge the source. Who told it to you?'

The bluebottle buzzes.

'Nature,' Kale replies.