

The Tail of Uzay Yavuz

Written by Guy Bass

It seems obvious now I think about it, but at the time it didn't occur to me. To me he was just Uzay Yavuz, my best friend.

People ask me how I didn't realise. How could I not? But I say to those people, sometimes you have to be looking for something to really see it. I suppose I wasn't looking.

The clues were there, of course. Uzay was by far the shortest pupil in my class. I almost stepped on him on the day we met. It was the beginning of the autumn term. I had new shoes and they felt as uncomfortable as when I tried them on in the shop. "Those shoes will last you a lifetime," my mother said. Of course they didn't even last a year – I was growing fast. Or fast for me.

So there I was, stamping around to soften up my shoes and I nearly flattened Uzay. It's an odd way to meet your best friend but stranger things have happened.

Uzay was from out of town. He'd come from the country with his family to start a new life in Istanbul. I did ask him why he'd moved but I can't remember what he said. Something about foxes, maybe. I'd not been long in the city myself. "We're kindred spirits," Uzay said. It was a funny thing to say but he was right - we got on straight away. It made it easy to look past the stuff I guess I should have noticed.

It turned out we had loads in common. We were both quite nervous around new people. We both liked being outside, making dens and just messing about, but we hated the cold. I said I'd rather hibernate for the whole of winter than go outside in the cold. "Tell me about it," replied Uzay.

After the first week of school we were inseparable. We sat together, ate together (I got fat eating Uzay's lunch 'cause he'd barely touch it, just nibble on the same bit of fruit for ten minutes), and generally hung out, scrapping, playing football or, if Uzay had his way, foraging for nuts and berries.

So it went on until that afternoon in late October. Uzay and I were walking home from school when he looked up... and screamed. I've never seen or heard anything like it. "It's after me! It's after me!" He was howling at the top of his voice, which was still just a little squeak but very unsettling. Before I knew what was happening Uzay had bolted, run off through the estate. It took me nearly an hour to find him. He was hiding under a car, shaking like a leaf.

"You all right?" I asked. "What was that all about?"

"B-buzzard," he whispered. He could barely get the word out.

"Buzzard?" I repeated. I had seen a big bird circling above us on the walk home... it could have been a buzzard. But seeing a buzzard wasn't as weird as all that; I'd seen loads. "What are you talking about? Why did you run?"

Uzay suddenly looked embarrassed.

"Buzzards... well, buzzards, falcons, birds of prey - they're my natural predator," he said.

"What was I supposed to do? It's *instinct*. I just panic whenever... why are you staring at me?"

"I literally have no idea what you're talking about," I replied. "Natural predator? Who runs from a bird?"

"Wait a minute..." said Uzay, rubbing his nose. "You *do* know I'm a ground squirrel, right?"

My mouth fell open and it - the truth - hit me like a runaway bus. How could I not have realised? It suddenly seemed crazy that I hadn't noticed. Nothing could have been more obvious. The buck teeth... the fur... the tail... the fact that he barely came up to my shin. He was wearing a tiny school uniform but that shouldn't have fooled anyone into thinking he was a human being. I guess everyone must have known but me. I felt stupid - Uzay was a ground squirrel and there was no disguising it. In the end I just shrugged.

We were still best friends, of course - for a while at least. Uzay left my school after just one term. We lost touch soon after that. I heard a rumour he'd moved to the suburbs in Anatolia, got a job, married and had kids. I'm not sure how long ground squirrels live but they really do grow up fast.

So when people ask me how I didn't realise that my best friend, Uzay Yavuz, was a ground squirrel, I shrug like I shrugged at Uzay that day with the buzzard. Stranger things have happened, I say... Sometimes your friends are just your friends.