

TAG

by Jane Buckler



Illustrations by Phil Dunne

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Thanks to the staff and students from Islington Arts and Media School, Haggerston Girls' School and Bow Boys' School for their valuable contributions. Also many thanks to Connor Flynn, Steph Gill, Simon Crane and Brenda Valdes.

PART 1

Tomas crouched down behind the science block. He could hear shouting from the other side. It was only Neron and the others, but he kept quiet. He pulled a biscuit out of his pocket and bit it. Above him the sun stopped and looked down. It was really pretty – reds and yellows and light green. He waited for the sun to rise up a bit, to get higher, to get stronger. He watched a leaf lick and curl in the wind then settle on the ground. A couple of times he spat to hit it but he missed. He stood up. From behind, he looked almost like a girl. His brown hair curled around at his shoulders. He pushed it back over his ears but it fell down again so you couldn't see his face.



‘Where’s Rusky?’ said Curtis. That was what they called him; that was his tag. ‘Rusky’: A Russian person, a person of Russian decent. Tomas thought it sounded a bit like a dog’s name.

‘Where is he?’ said Curtis again. Neron didn’t respond. He was tired of people thinking it was anything to do with him if Tomas came into school or not. He wanted him to come in, but he didn’t seem to be able to do anything about it.

Neron looked around him. The art room was a mess. A girl was lying on a table at the back and three boys were taking it in turns to try and tip her off. Two boys came in with their hoods up. Mrs Durrant, the art teacher, stared at them like a witch working her classroom magic, until they pulled them down. They liked her; they did what she said. Even Tomas liked the art room with its chalky smell and colours. But not today. Today he preferred the green of the grass

and the bright burnt orange of the sun.

‘Tomas?’ said Mrs Durrant in Neron’s direction.

Neron shut his eyes.

Mrs Durrant didn’t know if this meant ‘*don’t ask me*’ or ‘*don’t wait for him*’ – whichever it was, she decided to start the lesson.

‘What will you be doing in five years time?’ said Mrs Durrant, kicking off the Olympic theme.

‘Waiting’ said Curtis. It was meant to be a stupid answer, a joke, but it was true. Curtis had been waiting all his life for something to happen. He just hadn’t woken up to the fact that he had anything to do with it.

‘You’ll be nineteen’ she said.

‘How old would you be, Mrs Durrant?’

It was cheeky but Mrs Durrant didn’t care. ‘I don’t like to think about it, Curtis.’ she replied.

This was also true. She would be fifty two

in five years time. She hated the idea of turning fifty. 'Five years time. London 2012. The Olympics.'

'Big Party' said Grace.

Mrs Durrant smiled then turned and wrote a name in big letters on the board.

ADA FERNANDES

'Ada is a photographer', said Mrs Durrant. 'Is she the Olympic photographer Miss?' said Curtis.

'She's coming to work with you on a project about the Olympics. What it means to have the Olympics coming here in 2012. Which seems to be not a lot at the moment.'

'Nah, Miss, We're going to be famous and win the Marathon' said Zeinab, moving around on her feet like a break dancer, and heading back up the paint-splattered floor.

'Somebody is' said Mrs Durrant. 'Somebody your age right now is training

to win the 2012 Marathon.'

Everybody went quiet for a moment, and the idea of some thin kid breaking the tape, neck forward and arms to the sky, hung in the air like a promise.



There, inside the school, Tomas' class began the Olympic project with four questions: Who I am? Where do I live? What have I got to offer the world? Who will I be in 2012?

The questions had a swing to them that Tomas might have liked but he couldn't hear them. He was still outside thinking about whether to stay out or go in. Or was he thinking about it? Maybe he wasn't. It had gotten to the stage where school happened to him or it didn't happen. He'd hear the bell, like a starting gun, going off. Something deep within him made him run in or run away. He felt like he couldn't do anything

about it. Like school was another planet and he was an alien. An alien boy from Mars, like his Dad.

His Dad was very proud of Russia's space programme. He even believed in life on Mars. He said that adult Martians were all quite young, about thirty to thirty five years old. His Dad would be about thirty five now. Tomas hadn't seen him since he was seven. He'd gone back to Russia, to train kids in athletics. Maybe he, Tomas, was really a boy from the future. His Dad was a dad from the past. He left school by the back gates.

Mr Aziz saw him leaving. He shouted something but Tomas was moving too fast. He couldn't remember the boy's name. '*Russian boy*' he wrote down in the book at reception. '*Year 8. 1.45pm.*'



PART 2

Back in school the class were writing down answers to the four questions. Neron wrote

Hi, I'm Neron
I live on an estate, Popham
it's called.
Everyday I go to school I see
gangs making trouble

'That's good, Neron' said Ada Fernandes, the photographer. She had a thick Spanish accent. 'That's real.'

Neron didn't actually live on an estate. He was thinking about his friend. He was thinking about Tomas. He was thinking about the gangs Tomas sees everyday.

Under the desk, he pushed the buttons
on his mobile phone.

Wh*re R u? Fl@zh.

Nothing came back.

In the second lesson, the photographer
was joined by a poet. 'This is Langston.
He's a poet' said Ada. 'Read him what you've
got already.'

'I'm the writer, half of a fighter' read Neron.

'Like that' said Langston. 'Like that a lot.
Wish I'd thought of that.'

Neron couldn't help listening to the
poet, listening to him punch it out. Neron
was receiving it, even though he tried to
push his aerial down. The group searched
for metaphors. Olympic ones. Giant unreal
comparisons that leapt, jumped and
twisted. He crunched the end of his pencil.
He realised he was actually working. He
stretched his face wide and blinked a bit.



PART 3

Outside the sun shone like a medal on a
t-shirt sky. Tomas hurdled the park wall
and set off towards the wood. He grabbed a
leaf as he passed and mashed it in his hand.
The green dye left a mark on his palm. It
was an entry stamp into the secluded places
that he loved. He rolled the leaf between his
fingers then put it into his mouth. It tasted
bitter. He raised his shoulders in the breeze.

Then he saw him. Curled up on an old
metal hub. He was the size of a large cat
lying there. The fox looked up at him, almost
as surprised as he was. Tomas reached out
to stroke him but the fox sprung to his feet
and headed off.

'Foxy' said Tomas. It was the first word
he'd spoken to anyone all day. He followed

the fox as far as the park gates. Every now and then it would turn around and look at him, then run on. 'Foxy' he said again, but Foxy had disappeared.



At home that night, Tomas tore a piece of toast with his teeth and wondered what Foxy was eating.

Alexa, his sister, yawned, then looked over at him. 'Kareena likes you' she said, without any emotion.

Alexa was sixteen and her blonde hair shone like a girl from a story.

'Because he's gorgeous. A gorgeous Russian boy with a gorgeous Russian eye.'

'Eyes, Mum. He's not a Cyclops.'

'What is Cyclops?' asked Mum.

'A gigantic one-eyed monster' said Alexa. Alexa became the monster and grabbed Tomas and wrestled him to the floor.

There was nothing more important to these three people than these three people.

Mum looked at the photo on top of the TV. There were four smiling faces, grainy and blurred, in a white frame. '*Six months*' he'd said. Dad's alien spaceship must have taken a wrong turn. She imagined him there, in some underground city, just as he had described to her.

Alexa coughed as she pulled herself up. 'Neron says you should come into school tomorrow, they're doing photography.'

Tomas looked up.

'Tomorrow?' said Mum, 'I thought you'd been in today?'

Tomas turned away from her and flopped down on the sofa.

'What am I going to do with you, Tomas?' his Mum said, shaking her head.

Alexa grabbed him again and tickled him until he shouted out for her to stop.

'It's not funny this' said Mum. 'And it's not

just about you, either. There'll be another letter. There'll be another visit. I'll have to go in. Think of me, Tomas. Think of yourself. Think of the future.'



PART 4

It was nothing to do with Neron that Tomas came into school. He wanted to see Kareena. Mrs Durrant nodded to him and smiled as he entered the room.

On the desk at the front were fifteen cameras. Each camera had four eyes, not one.

'Welcome home, Rusky' said Curtis.

He shrugged; it was a kind of '*hello*'. He never knew how to cope with coming back in. He looked at the cameras. He'd never had a camera.

'Pick it up, if you want' the art teacher said.

He didn't. He went over to his desk and sat down.

Ada came in carrying a folder of images. 'Hello' she said to Tomas, like she knew who he was. 'You been off sick?' Somebody

laughed. 'Right' said Ada, looking at the blue camera 'It's a point and shoot camera.' She picked one up and pointed it at the kids. 'Just point and shoot.' Then she lowered it like a cowgirl and put on an American accent. 'Shoot from the hip' she said.

'They like shooting people round here' said Curtis.

'Pity they don't use Lomos' said Ada.

Neron looked at Tomas to see what he was thinking. Did this woman know what he'd seen last year on his estate? What had started all the bunking off? She didn't. She didn't know anything about it. What she knew about was Lomography. Casual, snapshot photography using a Lomo camera. Over-saturated colours, off-kilter exposures, blurring. All part of the Lomographic technique. These are the words that Ada used to talk about it.



She started to show examples of work done with the Lomos. 'Look at these' she said. 'They're all blurry and grainy and cracked-up. You press the button once; you get four shots of the same thing. It moves along, like a cartoon, like a little animation. Cool, eh? Here are some Rules'. She began writing stuff up on the board:

- TAKE YOUR LOMO EVERYWHERE
YOU GO AND WHENEVER YOU GO.
- USE IT ANY TIME — DAY OR NIGHT.
- GET AS CLOSE AS POSSIBLE TO THE
OBJECTS OF YOUR DESIRE.
- SHOOT FROM THE HIP.
- DON'T THINK.
- BE FAST.
- DON'T WORRY ABOUT THE RULES.

Tomas thought about all this. He stared at the photos. He noticed an image of an old

car driving along a wet street. Because there were four photos it looked like the car was going along, like in an old movie. The street looked grey. It reminded him of somewhere.

‘That’s Russia. St Petersburg’ said Ada. ‘It’s the most beautiful place in the world in winter. The sun is perfect.’ She spoke directly to Tomas. ‘These cameras are Russian. They are all made in Russia. You can actually see the factory where these cameras are made in one of the photos. The Russians are very proud of these cameras. Quite right, too.’

Tomas reached out. The cameras were made of plastic – bright red and bright blue – they looked a bit like toys. Some of them had cords to pull instead of buttons to take the shot. There were two cameras with no viewfinder at all, like someone was having a joke on them.

Ada looked serious. ‘Go on’ she said, ‘I love these things.’

Tomas lifted the camera the way that he

had reached out to touch the fox. He screwed his eyes up behind the lens. He moved it back and forth, adjusting it, then looked in again. This time, he saw something. He stood up and walked slowly in and out of the light.

At break, each camera was allowed to find two people to take it for a walk. It was a gesture of trust on the part of the photographer.



PART 5

Kareena was sitting on the grass with her friends. When Neron and Tomas approached them, one girl said 'You the Paparazzi or something?' The girls started teasing the boys and making them laugh.

'What d'you want to be in five year's time?' said Neron.

'A long way from you two' said one girl, and the other laughed.

'I wanna be a dancer.' Kareena turned right round to look at them. Tomas smiled. Neron took a picture.

'My dream' she said, 'is to fall deeply in love and marry and have minimum five kids' then she burst out laughing and Tomas pointed the camera at her.

'We're taking pictures of dance and sport

and stuff' said Neron.

The giggling started again. 'What d'you want us to do?' asked Kareena. 'Take our clothes off?'

Tomas could feel his cheeks burning up.

'Maybe jump off a wall or something?' said Neron

'Sure,' said Kareena 'Come on'. She got up and pulled the other girls with her, dragging at their arms. Higher up there was a slope, then a brick wall which rose out of the grass. Kareena climbed up onto the wall.

'Okay, go' said Neron. As she jumped, her face lit up, and even as she was coming down, it looked like she was lifting up, upwards into the sky, like an angel.

'Pole vault next?' said Neron.

'Yeah, yeah' said Kareena, and the girls started to pick up their stuff and head off.

Neron followed them, talking all the time. Tomas hung back a bit. He watched a shadow move along the bottom of the wall

and dive down the slope, then up again. The fox stopped in its tracks. They looked at each other.

‘My school’ said Tomas, as if needing to explain why he was there, why he wasn’t in the park. He dug his hand into his pocket and pulled out a biscuit. He threw it down on the grass in front of his friend. The fox jumped away, then returned immediately, sniffing the ground, his body low and shaking. His head went from side to side, lifted the food hungrily and took off with it in its mouth.

‘Good fox’ said Tomas. He knew he could follow the fox, but he didn’t. For once, it made sense to him that he might go back inside the school again.



The art room smelt of glue. The PE teacher sat on the edge of a table, with his legs up.

His trainers were smart and clean. He looked like a tiger in a zoo. He wanted to be outside.

They talked about which sports were in the Olympics. Most of the boys wanted to do football. Most of the boys were surprised that it was an Olympic sport. A couple of skaters had brought in their boards.

So, what did they want to photograph? What kind of equipment did they have in school? Everyone broke up into groups to think about what they wanted to do.

‘What about you guys?’ said the teacher.

‘Athletics’ said Tomas.

Neron just stared at him. ‘What?’ he said to his friend, in disbelief.

‘Sure. Go for gold’ said the PE teacher.

Outside it was a warm afternoon and the light was good. Tomas watched the PE teacher setting up the hurdle blocks and thought about his Dad. His throat tightened. He could feel the palms of his hands getting hot. He shook them to get rid of the feeling.

When it was his turn to go, he rushed forward, faster than all the rest, his legs leaping over the blocks again and again. He felt high and clear and wide of everything and the pain disappeared.

The cameras clicked. The PE tiger looked impressed. Really impressed. The Russian boy hadn't really featured in his jungle before. He decided he was going to ask him to be in his athletics team.



It was a whole week before the photos came back. Everyone decided which photos they thought were successful and why. Everyone liked Tomas jumping the hurdles. There was going to be an exhibition, there was going to be a book.

At the back of the art room Neron handled the photos he had taken with great pride. It was as if he had really captured Tomas,

by being fast, by not thinking. Close up and straight from the hip. Now that he'd caught him in the photos perhaps he wouldn't keep running away. There he was, Tomas, leaping up and down over the hurdles, with the ghosts of his past running behind him. It was a cloudy colour dream.



PART 6

The light was fading. Tomas wanted to catch the park before it closed but needed to be as late as possible to be sure to see the fox come out. An old man was making his way along the path, and further up, a group of kids were gathered, laughing.

‘In my country’ muttered the old man, ‘fox who comes to city is sick, is dangerous. But everything is different in London.’

For the second time that day, Tomas’ heart started to race. The gang had cornered the fox and were taunting him, setting in like a pack of hounds wanting blood. The fox snarled and spat, he growled and sneered, bearing his pointy teeth and dripping saliva. It flowed from his wet mouth like molten lava from a tiny volcano. Every now and

then he whimpered and turned in a circle, then turned back again.

Tomas felt the craziness of the fox. Why doesn’t he run? What’s the matter with him? he thought. Then he remembered what he had seen before. On his estate. He remembered how hard it was to run away. And how hard it was to stop someone hurting someone else.

The fox yelped again. One of the gang went in, as if to hurt the animal, but this time it didn’t budge. Now that he was still, Tomas realized that the fox was wounded. A knife or a sharp stick had been pushed into his side, and there, for everyone to see, a sticky cut bubbled blood.

‘Hey, Foxy’ said another and moved a little closer.

‘No’ whispered Tomas. ‘No.’

The gang moved in again, and this time, the terrified fox lifted itself up on two legs then bumped down. It screamed. This was

like a private circus, a scene from another century, a past time where boys like this might have been away at war. Without thinking, Tomas screamed back. It was a wild howl. The kids, who hadn't seen the boy hiding behind them, all turned, and as they did the fox disappeared into the bush leaving a thin trail of red behind it.

Tomas ran. A couple of the kids shouted back and started to chase him, but after a minute or two they saw it was pointless and dropped back, swearing hard and spitting into the dust. Tomas kept on running. He hadn't known what he was going to do before he did it. It was a Lomographic act – fast and unthinking.

At the edge of the road he stopped and rested with his hands on his knees to catch his breath. He looked like an athlete running a great race. He glanced from left to right, then ran off taking a slightly different course home to prevent any two-way

conflicts. Somewhere, deep in the dark city, a fox licked its wounds, then curled up to sleep.



It was two days before Tomas saw the fox again. The shy creature, whose wound was beginning to heal, waited by the shadow of the school wall for his biscuit, which he grabbed and then ran off. This time Kareena saw him too.

'Want to come and see where he lives?' asked Tomas.

'I'll come to the park, but after school' she replied.

Tomas looked embarrassed.

'I'm not getting into all that' she said, firmly.

'I meant after school anyway' he said. He was lying, but it was a turning point. He looked at her again. He was fed up of

being on his own. He wanted to belong to something. Or somebody. He needed to join in. Kareena had a tiny chain round her neck with a word running along it. He screwed up his eyes to read. The word was *paradise*.



After school, the sky seemed higher, much higher than before. The clouds drifted in and out of one another, connected, like friends. The three of them sat on the steps outside, Neron, Kareena and Tomas.

'My Dad says the Polish are coming over to build the Olympic stadium and are taking all our jobs.' As she talked, Kareena filed her nails. They had silver stars and moons on them. Tomas looked at her. It was the first time he hadn't liked what she'd said.

'You mean people like my Dad?' said Tomas.

'You're Russian or something, aren't you?' She was annoyed that he'd think she'd

insulted him.

'Your Dad will think that's the same thing, won't he?'

'Probably' said Kareena.

'Great' said Tomas, sarcastically.

'Cheap labour' said Neron, 'That's why most of us are here.'

'London's weird' said Kareena.

'Will you go and live in another country then? In five year's time?' asked Neron, like he was hosting a TV show.

'No, don't think so. I like it here.' Kareena put her nail file away, she blew at her hands and they sparkled. 'I want to stay. All my family's here... and all my friends.' As she said 'friends' she pushed Tomas hard and he fell forwards tumbling down the steps and rolling over onto the grass.

The boys were laughing. 'Five years time' she said, standing up 'I'm gonna be famous.'

'Me too' said Neron, liking her spirit.

'A singer, or something' she said.

‘Watch me.’ She put her fist up to her mouth and swayed from side to side. It was impossible not to believe in her. Tomas wished he had a Lomo with him. It was true, you had to take it everywhere you go and whenever you go.

‘I’ll be a writer’ said Neron. ‘I am a writer.’ He looked really pleased with himself. Like he’d already achieved something.

‘And you,’ said Kareena, pointing at Tomas. She was a princess with a magic wand, towering over the two princes, princes that had come from far away lands, princes that had been torn up by the briars of the forest, that had walked the dark night and seen terrible things. ‘You will be...’ She was holding her hands out now and looking at them, her nails flickered in the sunlight ‘A star. A big star.’

Tomas was held there; that shot, that timeframe, a clip in the film of his life. It was a precious trophy of peace and friendship

and of all that he might achieve. And a dream came to him, a dream of forgiveness, a dream that told him that maybe, in five years time, his Dad would come for him. He would get off the tube at Stratford, with his young athletes from Russia in their Russian kit, and he, Tomas, would be there waiting for him. They would walk into that stadium together, joining the world and all its peoples to do their best, after all this time.



QUESTIONS

1. What reasons can you find in the story to suggest why Tomas might be bunking off school?
2. How would you describe the characters of Tomas, Neron and Kareena at the start of the story? Do you think they are different by the end of the story and why?
3. Athletics includes many different events, but all come from the most basic idea of physical competition. The sport is the perfect expression of the Olympic motto: Citius, Altius, Fortius – Faster, Higher, Stronger. It requires athletes to run faster, throw further, jump higher and longer than everyone else. When do we read/hear the motto in the story and what could it mean for Tomas and his friends?

EXERCISES

1. World of the Story – Draw a big circle on a piece of plain paper. Under the following headings fill in the answers for TAG:
 - i. who are the characters
(include names and, if stated, tags),
 - ii. what is the location/setting/s,
 - iii. what are the themes of the story,
 - iv. how would you describe the
atmosphere/pace
2. Draw an outline of one character in the story and give them a 'prop' or special object that they might carry with them most of the time.
3. Make a note of all references to the Olympics in the story? Where does the writer use Olympic metaphors?
4. Write a poem or song lyric that Neron might have written about his life and his dreams for 2012. Try using some Olympic metaphors or images.
5. Create a t-shirt design for TAG based around the characters, story and or Olympic themes.

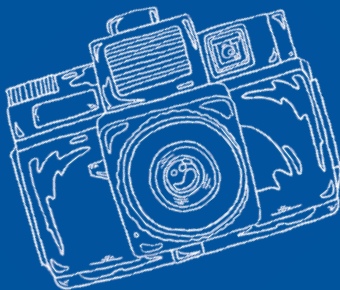
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Creative Partnerships London East and South is keen to explore different ways of telling the stories of the projects we support.

Jane Buckler visited a number of schools and met young people who have been involved in projects to talk to them about their work and their experience of working with creative people.

We hope you enjoy this story.



Creative Partnerships

Creative Partnerships London East and South
Discover, 1 Bridge Terrace, Stratford, London E15 4BG
T 020 8536 5558 F 020 8555 3948
E londoneastandsouth@creative-partnerships.com
www.creative-partnerships.com/london

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