

Warthearm

by Ajay Nair

'Quark, Quark, come here, come here fast.' In his excitement, Maz mangled my name more than usual. I was named after Superman's alter ego, but in the jaws of Maz's speech impediment, I had become just the tiniest tiny part of matter. It was less a speech impediment and more a random re-wiring in his brain really, because only certain words were twisted and altered by Maz, not all.

'What is it Maz? Why are you screeching like Holly-Polly?' Holly-Polly was Holly, the only girl I'd ever kissed. Her voice was like a length of scratched tape, but her kiss had tasted like butterscotch crumbles.

'Look, look, Quark. Look here. Warthearm. A shiny warthearm.' Maz was on his elbows and knees, his fat ass sticking out in their air like two cannon-balls ready to be shot off. He was peering at a long, shapeless earthworm, its skin translucent and its blood, fluorescent green. It was as if someone's spittle had come alive and turned green and was crawling along the floor of the forest. Maz's eyes were hard blue marbles. Marbles at one end and cannon-balls at the other, Maz was all about convexities.

'Yeah, well, good for you. Now come on before it turns any darker and we are eaten up by something bigger.' We had strayed too far into the woods already and it was time to go back. My voice had broken a couple of months back and I seemed braver than I really felt when I ordered Maz to haul himself up. My brother, Stroman, had warned me that after dark, the woods were not the place to hang around in unless you were interested in becoming some creature's dinner. Normally, I didn't trust Stroman but I believed him nevertheless. It was the same way I dealt with god as well — the Bible by my bed was regular reading material but I never prayed.

'No Quark, let's stay here till it turns dark. That way we can see how much the warthearm glows.' Maz was not scared of anything. His mind was too small to be occupied by any kind of fear.

'Don't be stupid Maz. Let's go now.' The earthworm was going round in circles and though it was interesting, watching it did not strike me as an attractive enough alternative to getting back home and eating a warm jam-encrusted roll.

Maz did not seem to hear me. He was hypnotized by the sight of the revolving, lurid earthworm. If he got any closer to it, it would climb into his eye for sure. I did the one sensible thing I could do. I slipped my slippers off, walked up to the earthworm, and with the ball of my big toe, crushed it dead. Its blood splashed onto my toe, and its circular walk ceased instantly.

Maz let out a piercing scream that rattled me. I stepped back, tripped on my discarded slippers and fell backwards.

'What did you do that for Quark? Why, did you kill him?' Maz shot up to his full height — he was a big boy, a foot wider and a foot taller than me. He was shivering with rage like how my grandfather had shivered the night he died. I had been by his side then and I swear I saw his last breath, and his life leaving him suddenly that night, though everybody says that's just my fancy.

'Don't be such a sissy. You will find plenty of these tomorrow when we come back. Now let's go.' I lifted the slippers and started walking back barefoot. For a few moments, I thought that Maz was not following me but when I turned around, he was right behind me, sobbing quietly.

Just as we were emerging out of the woods, the sun was dropping out of the sky. I spat at it out of the corner of my mouth. It was then that Maz cried out and pointed at my foot.

'Look at your toe Quark. It's like the warthearm.' I looked at my big toe and saw it glow eerily green. I panicked and ran across the field at the edge of the woods, the soles of my feet hurting as fresh, sharp grass pricked them. All the way, the green glow brightened till my toe was a tiny torch.

I was out of breath when I reached home; there was a tap outside the kitchen by the back and I ran straight to it. I could hear Maz panting some way behind. I let a jet of water hit my toe hard, and with my other toe, tried to clean the blood away. Instead, it seemed to shine brighter, and I felt a tendril of slimy warmth creep inside the toe. Even as I looked, a tiny tail stuck out from the edge of my now throbbing nail.

There was no time to lose. 'Maz, get me the knife from the kitchen.' My voice rose to a scared, high pitch. Maz looked like he hadn't heard me; he was again on his hands and knees, looking intently at my pulsing green toe.

I ran into the kitchen through the back-door and found the biggest knife there on the counter. By now, I felt as if all the blood in my body was rushing to my toe and was mixing with the earthworm blood there. I lifted my foot onto a stool and with one quick, clean stroke, cut my big toe off.

For a long, uneasy moment, nothing happened. Then the hurt flooded into my head and I screamed. I yelled for Maz to go find my brother, hot tears streaming down my face. I had collapsed on the floor. When I could focus my eyes for a moment, Maz was kneeling in front of me, but he was not looking at me. Instead he was looking at the toe I had cut off. It was still green and it was crawling around in a clean, perfect circle, a small tail sticking out from the end of it. That was when I passed out.

