

ZEBRA BY GAYLE CURTIS

COWBOY BOOTS

The cough was a nervous one, and more of a gentle clearing. It was a habit Arthur had started when he was a teenager, and he made a mental note to address it. He noticed everything now, all the small details he'd spent so many years ignoring. The same way he saw a sharper shade of green on the leaves, the deep blue in the sky, and the soft grey of the sea. Even the pattern on his Aran sweater was more noticeable these days. Not that he was wearing one today.

'What were you thinking about on the way here, Arthur?' Valerie asked him.

Arthur paused for a moment, checking the nails on his twiggy arthritic fingers as he so often did. There were several things that he had fleetingly contemplated during the twentyseven-minute journey, but he settled on thought number three-hundred and forty-two that fell through the sieve of his mind. 'I was wondering what might happen, what we would talk about,' he finally said.

'That's entirely up to you, Arthur. This is your time, your space.' Valerie jotted something down on a leatherbound notebook. 'Can you remember anything significant that might have led you here today?'

'Not really, no,' Arthur said, his eyes searching the floor, as though the answers might have gathered around his feet.

Valerie smiled. 'Why don't you start by telling me something about yourself,' she said.

Arthur shifted in his seat. He was momentarily confused. Many years had passed since anyone had asked him that. The question made him feel untethered, somehow, a balloon floating into the distance.

'My wife, she doesn't know I'm here.'

‘Where does she think you are?’ Valerie asked, getting up to pour them both some water. He couldn’t help noticing her bare legs and extraordinarily high shoes. He knew Wolf would have tutted her disapproval.

‘Sorry, what was the question?’ Arthur asked, feeling his face flush.

‘Is it important to you that your wife doesn’t know?’

‘I don’t think she’d agree with this at all.’ Not one little bit, Arthur thought, but didn’t say.

‘I asked you to tell me something about yourself. Is that a difficult question?’

‘Not really. What do you want to know?’

‘Anything you like,’ Valerie said, smiling.

It seemed a ridiculous request when there was so much to say about one person, and Arthur searched the floor for the answers. Reflecting on himself wasn’t something he did very often.

‘There has been a monumental shift in your life, hasn’t there?’

Everything started to rise within Arthur, a boat filling with water before upending itself towards the seabed. So many things flashed before him – his place of work, his children, his home, his parents, his wedding day. All significant points on the map of his life, and yet, the last few years, he couldn’t make sense of any of it. He had done everything that was expected of him, and now all he felt was desperately unfulfilled.

Valerie handed him some tissues. He automatically reached for one, unaware he was crying.

She placed the box in front of him and linked her fingers together in her lap.

‘Sorry,’ Arthur said.

Valerie waved a hand reassuringly.

‘This is all such a mess, and I don’t know where to start,’ Arthur added, his voice held the slightest of quivers, and he paused to gather his emotions together and tuck them back into the breast pocket of his jacket.

‘We can work our way backwards if that’s easier,’ she suggested. He could see she was wondering where his shirt and trousers were, her eyes kept wandering down to the uncharacteristic cowboy boots he was wearing. Thank goodness he’d had time to put on some underwear.

Arthur took a deep breath. ‘The doctors have fixed my heart, but it still feels broken,’ he blurted. ‘I’m no better off.’

‘I understand,’ Valerie said. She stood up abruptly and held out her hand, startling him. ‘Come quickly, we’re running out of time.’

BIRD CAGE

Don't die, I whisper to the bird, pleading with it, like it has any choice in the matter. Its beak opens wide, like a bell flower, mouth stretching to its limit before closing slowly, halfway, a heartbeat swaddled in soft feathers gently pulsating in my hand. I wait, patient and calm. It has a fundamental decision to make; stay alive or let go. The bird stares at me with a look of fear and confusion. I whisper to it to keep going, to live, to thrive, that I know how it feels, but its onyx eyes begin to close. I hold my breath, waiting for its body to start flipping around, fishlike, gasping for air as death tries to drag it across the border. My skin prickles in response to the heat and the cool shadow cast across the balcony, but today is a good day, and with a sudden jolt it comes to and flies onto the wall, pausing for a few moments, cocks its head towards me before swooping and dipping into the dusky sky. Time is a gift and death is postponed. A miracle that only I have witnessed.

It's not unusual for me to come home and find dead birds on the terrace, if the sun is shining on the windows in a certain way, they hit the glass and fall to the tiled floor. It's just the way the buildings are positioned, to absorb the sun at the best times and shelter from the earth-shattering storms we have here.

There was a time when I convinced myself I could heal the birds, they so often came back to life in my hands. Sometimes, I put them in the revival box, but not this week. Mr Alicante doesn't like birds. He mentions them again when I open the door to him a few minutes later, checking the place is feather free before he enters. His teeth are missing at the front, giving him a lisp, and he speaks quickly in Spanglish, as if somehow, it's a satisfactory

translation. All the time my soles have walked this dusty ground and I'm still not fluent, it's just the way my brain works.

Mr Alicante squeezes my shoulder and laughs, not with me but at me, and not in a good way. His body odour is cloaked in a scent that is sickly sweet like syrup, his breath a base level of intensely rotting meat, more apparent when he laughs. His stench is getting worse, and the air is so still and humid outside, the aromas from the kitchen don't seem to smother it like they used to.

Mr Alicante stares at the box of books on the table and then pulls the bubble-wrap back with his cigar fingers. I move towards them, protectively.

'Is that. . . Are you. . .?' Mr Alicante waits for me to fill in the blank, but I don't answer him.

'It's not what you think,' I say, with finality. I walk out onto the balcony, praying he'll leave. I'm not good at telling people to fuck off. I glance back and see him wandering around, viewing the apartment with a different gaze now. He pauses in front of a copy resting on the table and I watch his bulbous eyes eating the thick, imposing dark tome.

'I need to get to work, I'm going to be late,' I call to him quickly, as I make my way towards the door and focus on my feet. There's a tiny, downy feather stuck to one of my toes, and for a moment I am transfixed. The bird has left its presence. To my dismay, Mr Alicante hasn't followed me, and I watch his sweaty sausages hover over the embossed lettering on the book, but he sees me looking and thinks better of it. Of all the items in my apartment I don't want him to notice, and he homes in on them immediately, like hostages signalling for help.

He says something that I piece together when he's finished speaking, as if we're on some sort of time delay in two different countries. He doesn't want any attention drawn to the place or a repeat of last time. I laugh ironically that he thinks I want to go through *that* again either. It took me weeks to scrub the graffiti from my apartment door. I stopped using one of

the elevators to bring my shopping up because someone had written something bad about me in there. It's in scarlet red and when I repeat the words in my mind, I hear scratchy violins, tuneless and high-pitched, making me feel nauseous.

I see a lot of things in colour or with music. It's not until your mind breaks and people start sifting through the debris that you discover not everyone thinks this way. I can't see what's so unique about it. It just gives me a whole bunch of headaches.

Mr Alicante talks in yellow and not always the nice bright kind, sometimes it turns brown, like vomit. He's doing that today and I need to get him out of my flat. His heavy, dirt encrusted gold bracelet hits the door lock when he leaves, and I close my eyes because the past comes rushing towards me, and if I don't grasp it and throw it away, the mass will punch me in the chest and knock me over.

Before I leave for work, I switch off all the lights and stand by the sheer curtain next to the sliding doors and watch the family opposite. My live television. The boy is sitting on his bed, with some sort of device in his hands that he's watching intently. In the room attached to his, I see his mother sitting at her dressing table, applying some makeup. I watch her for a bit – I'll probably see her in the plaza later, I might even serve her some drinks, but she won't recognise me. She pauses and stares into the mirror, and I see her pull at the skin on her face and around her eyes, like she's kneading butter into the flesh of a chicken. She holds her lank dark hair up but quickly drops it down, before giving it a ruffle. She has small tight features, and I think she's probably quite pretty beneath all her make-up, a girl encased in papier mâché. They are both quiet, no entertainment tonight and I am pleased because I am going to work. I have been late on more than one occasion, mesmerised by the drama, feeling grateful but strangely jealous theirs isn't my life.

In the flat above them, Mr Oxford has a female visitor. He's too old, fat, and sweaty, and as usual, she's too young, boyish, and small.

I know Mr Oxford by name because sometimes we get his post in the lobby, and I drop it round to him. He's foreign like most of us here, and comfortably lost in a country that neither accepts nor rejects him. He used to come to the apartment for holidays with his wife, but now he lives here permanently, so I gather she's left him, one way or another. Whether she's nailed shut underground or above it, I'm sure it's a happier outcome for her. I hold my watch close to my eyes and check the time. Five more minutes.

Mr Oxford pulls his huge frame from the sofa in three heaves and pours the girl a drink from the tray he keeps on the sideboard. I can hear the muffled tones of her chatter, as she stands up and walks to the open doors to look out at the mountain in the distance. Everyone does that, it's hypnotising. I can stare at it for ages, usually until the sun disappears and the lights from the buildings in the town below push through the inky velvet. I always wait until I can't see the great gaping mouth of the cave in the centre of the rock. I used to wonder what was inside, but if you go in there, you're not coming out again. When the cave is pursuing you, it follows, no matter where you are, it can see you. It's black and its navy, like the darkest, coldest depths of the sea, and it gives me the bends when I stare for too long, and I don't want to go back there again.

I focus on Mr Oxford and catch a brief glimpse of him looking at the girl, hitching his thin rimmed glasses up the bridge of his long shiny nose, adjusting the arousal in his trousers. He puts something in her drink, although, I'm too far away to see what it is. He swills the glass and then walks across the room to hand it to her. I've seen him do this many times and figure it's a relaxant. After what I've seen in there, they need it, trust me. He makes them face the television, so he can watch gameshows while he's thrusting into them. It would be comical if it wasn't so fucking tragic. The *lucky girl* snatches the drink from his hand and necks it.

I leave the apartment, close the front door in three, and open it to five, then count to seven before slamming it again.

NARNIA

The wardrobe, previously unnoticed by Arthur, reminded him of the one his mother had inherited – curved and wide, with one door that had to be wedged shut with a tightly folded old Christmas card, otherwise it creaked open eerily in the middle of the night.

Arthur followed Valerie through the door and was quickly swallowed inside through some coats and straight out the back. He found himself standing next to Valerie in a forest. He watched her straighten her skirt, brush down her blouse and fix her quaffed hair.

‘There, that wasn’t so bad, Arthur,’ she said. ‘Do you know where we are?’

Arthur shook his head, suddenly feeling very self-conscious in his current attire.

‘Maybe you’d like a coat from the cupboard before we set off?’

Arthur shivered at the suggestion, drawing his attention to the mist of his breath, and the snow that lay in drifts between the tall pine trees. ‘Where are we going?’

‘All in good time,’ Valerie said, slipping a large fur coat from its hanger and draping it across his shoulders. ‘All in good time.’

‘This reminds me of something. . .the wardrobe, the coats. . .’

‘No, it’s not Narnia, and nor do I know a Mr Tumnus,’ Valerie said, testily. ‘Everyone asks me that.’ She held out her elbow for Arthur to take. ‘Shall we?’ They linked arms. He wondered who she meant by everyone, but he didn’t like to ask.

The snow creaked beneath their feet as they walked, and for the first time, Arthur was glad of his choice of footwear. There was silence, like it was night-time during the day. They stopped abruptly, and Arthur followed Valerie’s gaze. He had been so mesmerized by the snow underfoot; he was completely unaware of the familiarity of where they were. In the distance he could see a row of cottages on a hill, and then it dawned on him, his bearings falling into place.

‘That’s where I grew up,’ Arthur exclaimed.

Valerie smiled; her attention fixed on the hill. That's when Arthur heard voices and excited squealing. A moment later, a red toboggan came into view, stark against the brilliance of the snow. It picked up speed on the descent, the two figures inside whooping and shouting as they hurtled towards the ice-covered pond. Arthur held his breath and felt relieved when it stopped abruptly. The man sitting in the back had pulled the brakes. It was a few seconds before Arthur realised who was sitting in the toboggan.

'It's me and Birdy,' Arthur said, the words catching in his throat. He watched them grab the rope on the toboggan and breathlessly drag it back up the hill, their strides hindered by the deep snow.

He was quiet for a moment. 'Why are you doing this?' he said, darkly, turning his back on the scene and facing Valerie.

'This is nothing to do with me,' Valerie said, 'this is all down to you.'

He waited for her to say something else, but there was nothing more, and he could see from the expression on her face she wouldn't be pressed further. This was for him to work out by himself, and he knew that deep down.

'We used to come here when the snow was heavy enough,' he said, glancing around. He could see the main road in the distance, but there were no cars. In fact, when he scanned the area, there was no one else, no other sound but his own and Birdy's.

'Where are the others?'

Valerie turned to look at him. 'That's a good question, Arthur, and one I'm not going to answer.'

Arthur shivered, wondering why Valerie wasn't feeling the cold like he was. 'That's me in the toboggan with Birdy, isn't it.'

'Indeed, it is. Big Bear and Birdy.'

'You're showing me the past, a memory?'

‘Correct,’ Valerie said, folding her arms.

‘Is this a modern-day Christmas Carol?’ Arthur said, suddenly feeling the urge to lift his arms in a ghoulish manner.

Valerie stared at him for a moment. ‘You look utterly ridiculous, Arthur,’ she snapped. ‘Now, come along.’

Feeling thoroughly admonished, Arthur stopped and pulled the coat around him, wishing again he hadn’t been so hasty when he’d left that morning. When he looked up, he found himself standing by the fire in his parent’s sitting room.

‘What’s going on?’ he asked.

‘Shush,’ Valerie said. ‘Pay attention.’

He turned to see his mother sitting in her usual chair by the window, concentrating on the folded newspaper she was holding. A knife sharpened pencil in her hand told him she was doing the crossword. In a very sunken armchair by a door hiding a winding staircase, his father was smoking a pipe, also concentrating on the pages of a newspaper. He knew without looking that he was studying the horses. Both had spectacles perched on the end of their noses.

Arthur cleared his throat, suddenly feeling very uncomfortable.

Valerie turned to look at him. ‘That is incredibly annoying,’ she whispered.

Before Arthur could apologise, a man he recognised walked through the door with Birdy, her cheeks flushed from the cold. He watched Birdy now, gripping his hand, one foot on top of the other, shyness stopping her from venturing further into the room. The wound in his heart pulsed, leaking a pain that spread across his chest.

‘Hello,’ his mother said.

‘Close the door, you’re letting the heat out,’ Arthur’s father grumbled.

Birdy stayed where she was. ‘Who are they?’ She whispered to him.

‘You know who they are, they’re your Nanna and Granddad, silly. My parents.’

‘Why doesn’t she remember who they are?’ Arthur asked Valerie.

‘I don’t know. Maybe she didn’t see them very often.’

‘That’s not true,’ he said, slightly indignant.

‘Christmas and Easter, was it?’ Valerie scoffed, turning her attention back to the scene.

‘They always said no.’ Arthur blustered.

‘Have you ever wondered why?’ Valerie asked him.

Arthur was quiet for a few moments, casting his mind back. ‘Is this about Prue?’ He searched the scene before him, his mind elsewhere. ‘I think they got on well enough,’ he said, as if the memory was unfamiliar to him, although he knew it was a lie.

Valerie leant back to look at him. ‘Do I really need to remind you your parents lost their daughter not two years before Birdy was born?’

Arthur cleared his throat again. Of course, he remembered. How could he forget the sudden death of his sister and how that had affected them all.

Birdy had climbed onto his mother’s lap. He remembered how they had bonded so quickly, like they had known one another forever. One clinging onto what she had lost, and the other grasping something she’d never had.

‘Life stopped for them,’ Arthur said, his emotions welling inside him.

‘People cling to the comfort of familiarity,’ Valerie said.

‘I could never understand why they didn’t want to go out. Have a change of scene.’

‘Perhaps you can now,’ Valerie said, gently.

‘To lose a child. . . ‘ Arthur quietened himself, as he always did when his feelings threatened to spill out.

‘You’ll be off to school soon,’ his mother said to Birdy.

‘This September,’ Arthur heard his younger self say. He was suddenly struck by how drawn and unhappy he looked.

‘Big girl, now,’ his mother continued. ‘The last time I saw you, you were teeny tiny. No bigger than a little ladybird.’

Birdy giggled. ‘No, I wasn’t!’

‘You were,’ she boomed, tickling her under the chin, making her laugh even more.

Arthur watched his father. The newspaper had lowered, and he was staring at them both over his glasses, pain beneath the disapproval.

‘He was always like that, even before my sister died,’ Arthur said.

‘Do you want to help me make a pot of tea,’ his mother said to Birdy?

‘We haven’t got time for that, Mum. We need to get back.’

‘I’m sure it won’t matter if you’re a bit late. Sit down and talk to your father for a while. It’s been an age since we saw you.’

Arthur suddenly felt a pang of guilt. ‘I did visit,’ he said to Valerie, but she was silent, watching the scene before them.

He saw himself sit down on the small two-seater, waiting for his father to put the newspaper away, turn the radio down, and the television off.

‘I’d forgotten how bloody ignorant he could be,’ Arthur turned to Valerie.

‘That surprises me.’

Arthur was about to protest again, but then he remembered what had happened, and thought better of it. Minutes passed as they watched the silent and awkward scene, and eventually Arthur’s father placed the newspaper in the log basket, and began refilling his pipe, still not saying a word, and instead looking past him at the horse racing.

‘Can I go and see what Birdy is doing in the kitchen?’

‘Uncomfortable viewing, isn’t it?’ Valerie said.

Arthur tried to move, to follow his mother and daughter, who he could hear chattering and laughing in the other room, but his feet were like heavy blocks, so he was forced to keep watching the stilted exchange between himself and his father. Now, he was beginning to understand.

‘No, you don’t,’ Valerie said, hearing his thoughts, and shaking her head. ‘This is just the beginning.’

ENCOUNTERS

‘If you play “Purple Rain” once more, I’m going to kick that door in, rip the stereo out of its socket and throw it over the balcony. Comprenez?’

‘It’s my favourite colour,’ I say, smiling sweetly. I am mystified by what might have caused my neighbour’s aggressive, foul tempered mood.

‘He’s dead, get over it,’ Brian says, walking towards the elevator, changing his mind last minute and taking the stairs. I imagine him tipping through the spiral centre, passing six concrete floors before splitting his shiny bald head on the mottled marble tiles below, spilling the contents across the shiny surface, a trodden conker. Brian is an anagram of brain, a cryptic label signifying he doesn’t appear to have one.

‘Who’s dead?’ I follow him.

‘Listen,’ he pauses halfway down the first flight, ‘just keep it down, okay. You’re not the only one trapped in this hell hole.’

I smirk and press the button on the elevator, pretending I’m going to use it and wait for his flipflops to schlep down the stairs, but he’s still standing there when I peek around the wall.

A black cloak smothers us, and he shouts for me to hit the light, the timer always too short for those of us who live on the top two floors.

When I peer over the railings, he’s still there squinting up suspiciously. He does this thing with his mouth, like he’s sipping coffee, but I always imagine his dark beard is irritating him. I lean out of view and hold my breath and finally hear the *clack clack* of his footsteps on

the stairs. I count to fifty and then look over the banister and hear the familiar vacuous sound of the door as it closes, and I can finally make my way down and head out to work. I pause at the top of the stairs and listen for Kenny Rogers, but apart from the usual traffic, the voices are quiet. When I first arrived here, his voice was loud. Walk into the sea, jump off the balcony, throw yourself down the stairs.

‘You should definitely do that one,’ I hear him say, quietly. It’s a whisper in comparison to the chiming bell it was before. I press my hand to my chest and tell myself I am getting better.

‘That’s what you fucking think. You’re such a joke,’ Kenny Rogers says. His words are washed down by Chatty Annie’s usual laughter.

‘Fuck. Off,’ I say through gritted teeth.

The woman from Mr Oxford’s flat is sitting at the bar when I get there. I recognise the bright coloured electric blue boob tube and orange skirt ensemble against the streaks of pink in her hair. At least her time there has been mercifully short. I only stopped to watch the dodgems for a couple of minutes on my way in and Craig says she’s on her second drink. ‘You know her?’ he asks but I don’t answer. Craig doesn’t persist, he remembers what I said to him about asking questions.

‘Why are you so familiar to me?’ the woman asks as I start tidying the bar area. No one cleans it like I do, there are always some coin-sized blotches of syrupy sugar that you can only see by squatting down and looking at the counter at eye-level.

‘I don’t know,’ I say to her, concentrating my attention on the flat surface. I count nine. Nine liquid sugar spots, waiting to trap hair and skin particles, grime and germs, containing me in this bar, long after I’ve left it.

‘Yeah, yeah,’ she waves her chipped nails at me, ‘I’ve seen you in the arcade.’ She has a strange accent: English, with a touch of German or possibly Dutch.

While I think about what she’s said, I pay her no attention, as I line the spray up to the level of the counter and press the pump exactly seven times – customers have complained about the fumes, so I have no choice but to do it this way, crouched down on the floor.

The woman doesn’t say any more, and I look up to see she’s distracted elsewhere. Her head is turned towards a couple playing a game of pool. We’re the only bar along the plaza with a table – it attracts the tourists and that’s how we make most of our money. I watch the woman for a few moments, trying not to think about Mr Oxford’s sweaty flesh pressing forcefully against her, and his fist using her top as a rein. She’s trying to cut in on a joke the couple are sharing but they don’t even acknowledge her. There’s a nasty mark on the back of her neck, and I imagine spending time with clients like Mr Oxford probably carves a deep emptiness within.

I nudge her arm and offer her a napkin from the metal box on the bar. ‘You’re bleeding.’

She turns around and stares at me, her eyes still glazed from the drug Mr Oxford put in her drink and frowns.

‘Your neck.’

‘Oh,’ she says, and takes the tissue and places it on her skin, as if she’s suddenly realised it hurts. ‘Thanks.’

Craig walks up to me in an attempt at being bold, but he’s short and slight against my tall build and he can’t quite pull off an authoritative air. ‘Don’t let her loiter, it’s not good for business,’ he nods towards the woman as if she’s deaf. She turns away and concentrates on the game of pool. None of the women who come in here budge until they’re physically removed, and Craig knows neither one of us are going to do that.

‘What business?’ I ask Craig. Apart from the couple playing pool, there’s about five other people in the place and they’re all regulars slipping their own chasers into drinks they can make last longer. ‘She’s paid for her drink, what’s the problem?’

Craig leans in conspiratorially and tries to speak without moving his lips, like a bad ventriloquist. ‘All I’m saying is, I don’t want her sort encouraged in here. I’m trying to attract a better class of clientele.’

‘Maybe you should think about changing your T-shirt,’ I say to him. He’s a fan of inappropriate cryptic slogans that rattle around my head in the form of neon signs for hours.

‘Very droll,’ he says, walking away, but then he turns back. ‘I almost forgot. Someone rang asking after you.’

‘Who?’ I feel the right side of my mouth twitch, lifting my cheek, followed by my ear, like someone’s pulling a piece of string in my head.

‘She didn’t leave a name. Just said she was your sister.’

I feel an electric prod in my stomach.

‘What did she say?’

‘Nothing. She just asked if you were here.’

I don’t respond and crouch down to continue with my cleaning.

‘She said she’d call back. I didn’t give her your mobile. You asked me not to.’

‘Correct,’ is all I say to Craig without looking at him and he knows that’s the end of the conversation. A hundred questions spin around my mind, the zoetrope picking up speed, and I can’t pause any one of them to build anything into a constructive thought. My peripheral view is filled with Prues. No Arthurs, just Prues. I feel certain everyone knows her, and therefore, knows about me. Staring and whispering, staring and judging. My insides are caving, threatening to topple me. I focus on cleaning.

Following two more drinks, the woman at the bar, whose name I discover is Gina, begins to chat freely to me, to the couple playing pool and one of the regulars at the bar, without a care for anyone's response, before staggering outside for a cigarette. I can see her sitting on the wall looking out to sea. She doesn't come back in and when I've finished my shift, I take her a can of coke and a basket of fries from the kitchen. She snatches both gratefully, greedily stuffing chips into her mouth with her grubby fingers. Salt and grease cling to her chipped nails. When she's finished, she rests her head on my shoulder. 'I hate my life,' she says.

'You're supposed to,' I say to her, knowing exactly what the phone call means.

THE POCKET WATCH

That night, Arthur dreamt Valerie was sitting at a table with a deck of tarot cards spread out in front of her.

‘Ask me a question, Arthur. Anything you like,’ she had leered at him, her quaffed white hair bouncing with intent. He woke up, his heart pounding, and a thin mist of sweat on his forehead. It had all been a dream, of course it had. Just a silly dream. His subconscious must be processing all sorts of memories, he thought to himself. He began to search for his watch on the bedside table and instead, his fingers rested on something much larger. He pulled himself up and reached for his glasses so he could see what it was. It looked like some sort of locket, but it was far too large for that. In focus, he realised it was his father’s old pocket watch. It was an item he had been fascinated by when he was a boy and promised to him after his father’s death. Arthur opened the engraved gold case and stared at the hands on the face. He knew what the time signified and when it had been deliberately stopped. The little hand in command of the big hand, emblazoned on his mind, like a memorable date in his diary.

It began to tick backwards, and Arthur snapped the watch closed and placed it back on the table. He stared into the orange light, the glow reflected through the colour of the curtains. He nodded knowingly, and lifted his hand to his chest, the usual pain aching within. Still there, still haunting him, and he believed he would never be rid of it. Somehow, he must try to live with it. He had heard that about grief – there forever, changing form, like a shapeshifter. Cossetting all your yesterdays. Arthur sighed deeply. Strong, hot tea, that’s what he needed.

His mind playing tricks on him, that's what his mother would have said. He pulled back the blankets and stared down at his cowboy boot-clad-feet.

'Come on, Arthur, we have work to do,' Valerie said, her head appearing round the door.

'You know none of this is real?' he said, dragging himself out of bed.

'Get your coat, and meet me outside, I have a surprise for you.'

Arthur sighed, shaking his head again. He stood up and fetched his coat from the old wardrobe, reaching inside so he could feel the hard wood at the back, confirming his suspicions. It had all been a dream. When he closed the door, he found himself sitting next to Valerie on a station platform bench. An old steam train was just pulling in.

He looked around. 'I know where we are, I've seen this hundreds of times,' Arthur said.

'I'm impressed,' Valerie replied. 'A favourite?'

Arthur could feel his cheeks begin to flush, the realisation of what she was showing him suddenly dawning. The unanswered messages on his phone stung him now. Birdy, he whispered, tears suddenly blurring his vision. 'Why are you doing this to me? Is this some kind of twisted joke?'

'Not at all, Arthur.' Valerie reached for his hand, and for a moment he thought she was going to whisk him off somewhere else, but she didn't.

Together, hand in hand, they saw Bobbie, the eldest of The Railway Children, standing on the station platform and watched through the smog as her father appeared. Before she ran to embrace him, Arthur stood up. 'I think I've seen enough. I don't want to do this anymore, Valerie.'

'I never said you did.'

'You're punishing me, trying to make me feel guilty for my failings as a parent. Well, let me tell you something, my dear, I don't need any bloody reminders.'

He turned away from her and headed down the platform until it was just railway tracks. Valerie didn't follow him, and he continued into the dimming light, embarrassed now at his outburst, if you could call it that. If he could just keep going, the pain would pass. That's what he would do. Keep walking until he could no longer put one foot in front of the other. Or a train hit him. He began to wonder how long it would be, and how far he could travel before he heard the familiar sound of the horn. The further he walked, the more he felt the overwhelming need to surrender, to let himself drown, because he knew the ache would never go away. He stopped, his body a heap, then he lay down on the tracks, supine to the stars sparkling in the cold night sky.

'Don't be so absurd, Arthur,' Valerie said, suddenly peering over him.

'Leave me alone. I'd quite like to go home now.'

'And where is that?' Valerie asked him.

She crouched down. 'Have you ever thought this might not be about you, Arthur?' She held out her hand and helped him up to the embankment. 'Sit here for a moment and calm yourself down.'

'I can't do this anymore. I can't go on.'

Valerie reached for his hand again. 'But you will carry on. No one is punishing you, Arthur, it's just the way you see it, right now, but it will change, once you understand what this is about.'

'Why don't you just tell me?'

'I can't do that, Arthur. It would be meaningless.'

He looked up to see a train hurtling towards them down the tracks, and he raised his arm to protect his eyes from the glare. When he opened them again, he was standing in his garage at home. He could see himself and Birdy, busy at his work bench. A tall cylindrical black box stood in the foreground. 'The telescope!' he exclaimed.

Valerie smiled.

‘Will we really see the moon?’ asked Birdy.

‘We can but try,’ Big Bear said.

Arthur looked on as he helped his youngest daughter move the contraption outside onto the patio. He remembered the old cupboard he’d sawn to bits, the books he’d studied, and the small pieces they’d both found amongst the junk in the garage to put it all together. A rush of memories stirred up feelings he’d forgotten about for so long, so clear and warm beneath the dust he’d covered them in. He had loved the weeks they’d spent putting this together, even the times he was frustrated, and she was bored.

He watched them now as they made several attempts to get it in the right position, almost giving up, the cold November frost getting the better of their hands. But then one final attempt, and suddenly, a large pot-holed sphere had come into focus. Birdy squealed with delight.

‘Did you see it?’

‘Is it really the moon, Dad?’

‘Of course, it is, Birdy,’ he said, moving the contraption to get a better view. ‘Isn’t that something! Let’s see if we can focus a bit better.’

‘That was such a special moment,’ Arthur said, glancing at Valerie. He paused when he thought he saw a tear in her eyes. He decided not to draw attention to it in case he embarrassed her and turned back to the scene in front of him. When he looked back, Birdy was staring through the large glass windows into the sitting room where Wolf was watching television with Monkey and Rabbit.

‘What’s up, Birdy? Don’t you want to have another look?’

‘Does this mean you won’t come outside with me anymore? Now that we’ve made the telescope.’

‘Don’t be silly, of course I will.’

‘But we’ve finished it,’ she said, defeatedly.

Arthur saw himself struggling to find the right words. He recalled now why the memory had made him feel so uneasy. The problems Birdy had. The terrible fear of being inside, so overwhelming, she would calm herself by standing outside in the dark.

‘Can you remember why she spent so much time outside, Arthur?’ Valerie asked him.
‘And why she has watched *The Railway Children* a total of 57 times?’

He inhaled, trying to still the tremor spreading through his heart. ‘Yes. Yes, I think I do,’ he said, gravely.