



THE
PSYCHOLOGY
OF
TIME
TRAVEL

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KATE
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For Matthew Murtagh



MARCH–DECEMBER 1967

Barbara

The laboratory, in Cumbria, was home to four young scientists. Margaret was a baroness turned cosmologist. Lucille had come from the Toxteth slums to make radio waves travel faster than light. Grace – who never gave the same account of her history twice – was an expert in the behaviour of matter. And the last was Barbara: the baby of the group, hair so fair it was nearly white, ruddy-cheeked and naively wholesome. She specialised in nuclear fission. All four women were combining their knowledge in a new, and unique, project.

They did so in near isolation. The lab overlooked the Lakeland Fells. Some nights, when Barbara's head was too full of equations, she would run outside with Grace and yell at the darkness because they liked to hear the echo. There were no neighbours close enough to complain. No one visited by day either – not even the postman. Each month Barbara collected mail from the village five miles away: bills for Margaret, the latest *Paris Match* for Grace, and letters from Lucille's grandmother in Montego Bay.

But one spring afternoon, a van stopped outside the lab with a delivery for them all. The driver jumped out and pulled open the rear doors. He unloaded a hutch full of rabbits.

When he left, the women carried the hutch to the workroom, and peered inside. The rabbits had crammed themselves into the darkest corner. Their ears and limbs lay flat against their bodies. Each hair trembled. The rabbits were watchful and chary of their new owners. They were right to be.

Barbara snapped on a pair of latex gloves. She opened the wire door and reached for the nearest rabbit. His fur was brown and his eyes black. He struggled for a moment then settled in her arms. Through her lab coat Barbara could feel the warmth of his body.

‘Shall we give him a name?’ she asked the others.

‘Yes,’ Margaret said. ‘For the history books!’

‘He’s a scruffy fellow,’ Grace said. ‘His name should be scruffy too.’

‘Call him Patrick Troughton,’ Lucille suggested.

Everyone laughed.

‘Patrick it is,’ said Barbara. ‘Shall we capture this on film?’

They all agreed, and Barbara fetched the camera. Through the viewfinder she watched her colleagues pose: Lucille, coiffed like Aretha Franklin with NHS glasses perched at the tip of her nose; blue-eyed Grace, her petite features framed by a dark pixie cut; and finally Margaret, smiling imperiously and smoothing her steel-blond bob.

Barbara set the timer and ran to stand at Lucille’s side. This was a special occasion. The women erupted in laughter, from shared excitement, as the camera clicked.

‘Right then, ladies,’ Margaret said. ‘Let’s put Patrick to work.’

At the far end of the workroom was a hollow steel machine, about the size of a hatbox. The women had spent two years on its design and construction. It could propel a

marble up to thirty seconds through time. On most attempts the marble arrived intact.

Today, Patrick would become the first living time traveller – just as long as he, too, remained intact.

Barbara weighed the rabbit. On examination, his mouth and nose were clean, and his feet were free of abscesses. His nails were recently clipped. She shone a torch into his ears to check they were clear. He appeared to be in excellent health. Finally she checked his respiration and heart rate, and wrote the figures down.

‘Normal range,’ she told the others.

‘Mine isn’t,’ Grace replied.

More laughter; nervous this time. The team needed a successful animal trial. Without it, they’d never get funding to develop human time travel.

‘We’re all set,’ Barbara said, and placed the rabbit in the time machine. She adjusted the dials. Now she must join Margaret and Grace and Lucille as spectators. There was nothing to do but wait.

At the machine’s whine Patrick’s ears twitched. He shuffled and sniffed the metal walls, but they were too smooth for him to climb.

‘Three... two... one...’ Barbara counted down.

Patrick’s fur was fading to fawn, like a coat lightened by years of wear. He grew steadily paler, towards translucency, until he resembled only a ghost of himself. He slipped out of existence. The dematerialisation was complete. The steel cavity shone with afternoon sunlight.

Please come back, Patrick, Barbara prayed. *Come back safely.*

The women edged closer to each other. Grace gave Barbara’s arm a reassuring squeeze.

And as surely as he'd disappeared, the rabbit returned. Whole. With an understandable expression of surprise.

'Oh thank God,' said Lucille.

'Respiration and heart rate?' Margaret prompted.

Barbara took the measurements. Patrick was so solid in her hands. He felt *real* – and he made their work, thus far theoretical, feel real too. To Barbara's relief, his heart and breathing – though faster than before – were still in a normal range.

'We've done it,' Barbara said. 'You bloody brilliant women. We've *done* it.'

They hugged, their voices mingling as they spoke over each other, and Barbara's vision blurred with tears. She was so grateful – for Lucille's superluminal research, and Grace's thermodynamics, and Margaret's utter, unshakeable conviction that they would succeed. The team were pioneers. They were going to be the first people to travel through time.

'This occasion calls for cigars!' Lucille said. 'What's on the menu this evening?'

Barbara wiped her eyes. 'I'm afraid all that's in the larder is sardines and baked beans. With evaporated milk and tinned peaches for dessert.'

'All lovingly decanted,' said Grace.

'Speaking of feasts,' Margaret said, 'we should give Patrick a last supper. Check his digestion's shipshape before dissection.'

'No!' Barbara exclaimed involuntarily.

'No?' Margaret repeated. 'Why shouldn't we feed him?'

'Feed him – but don't dissect him.'

'We must, darling,' said Grace. 'The sooner we check for internal injuries, the sooner we can plan human trials.'

Grace was right, and Barbara struggled to reply because

she was embarrassed by her own sentimentality. She'd conducted her share of dissections over the years. However, none of those animals had achieved anything as wondrous as this rather dim, rumped rabbit: he was the first living creature to ever travel through time. A summary execution horrified her.

'We have all the other rabbits for replication experiments,' Barbara said when she found her words. 'There's going to be lots of dissections to choose from. Patrick doesn't need to be one of them.'

'Actually,' Margaret said, 'I *can* see the benefits to keeping him alive. The press will be interested in the first rabbit time traveller. You know how gaga the public go over animals.'

Press coverage would make it easier to attract funding. Up till now they had got by on a few small grants. They had been helped, too, by Margaret's wealth. But they would require much greater investment to continue. Clearly Margaret thought Patrick could play a small part in winning the money they needed.

'I suppose he'd make a sweet lab mascot,' Grace said.

'So Patrick lives,' Lucille concluded.

Patrick swiftly became Barbara's pet. She took responsibility for feeding and watering him, and for changing his bedding. He came to recognise her voice. His personality turned out to be a playful and affectionate one. He'd even sit on her lap if called, which gave her quiet satisfaction. Everyone recognised that Patrick belonged to Barbara. But when she was forced to leave the lab – before the completion of their project – she was not allowed to take Patrick with her.

*

5

All four of the pioneers were still working together when the military agreed to subsidise tests with humans. Most of the money that flowed through was spent on fuel. The pioneers' small prototype machine had minimised fuel requirements by using existing wormholes, but this cheap, crude technology was only suited to small inanimate objects – or expendable travellers like Patrick – because the risks of malformation were high. Safe time travel was more energy intensive.

Money was also allocated to labour. Transporting people through time required a machine the size of a tennis court. A fleet of engineers came to the Fells to assist with the build. They sheltered in a circle of caravans, while the pioneers continued to sleep in the lab. One of the engineers mentioned to Barbara that down in the village, the locals were convinced the time travel project was a ruse: the engineers were building a nuclear weapons site, and the secrecy was meant to prevent demonstrations. The idea of a functioning time machine seemed too absurd to believe. Barbara was faintly amused by this, but didn't dwell on it, because the villagers seemed so remote from her day-to-day work. All the world seemed distanced from her. She knew Margaret cared a great deal about public perceptions, and was driven, in part, by a need to make her mark before everyone. Whereas Barbara was excited by the prospect of time travel itself, and loved her colleagues because they were going to help her achieve it. Her life had shrunk to the size of the lab, but she felt it was about to grow – grow as far as the time machine allowed her to travel. It was easy then, to throw herself into the complex, grinding mathematical work the team needed to make their project succeed. It was easy to forget to rest, or to eat, until the others made her. Three in the morning would roll round

and she would still be at her desk. Grace would pad across the workroom, her satin eye mask high on her head – the one Lucille had adorned with curly eyelashes in permanent ink – and she would implore:

‘Come to *bed*, Bee.’

‘In a minute.’

There was always another minute needed, so Grace would have to drag her by the arm into the dorm. There were four iron beds, but once the frosts started and their breath misted indoors as well as out, the women doubled up for warmth like babes in the wood. Often Bee didn’t sleep even once she was under the covers because her mind raced with her work. But it was comforting to feel Lucille’s arm slung over her in slumber, or to hear Grace’s soft breath.

In waking hours the others were as diligent as Barbara. She concentrated on minimising the amount of fuel they would require; Lucille perfected the warping of wormholes to maximise the speed of travel; and Grace carefully tested the composition of objects that passed through the time machine for any changes that might pose a safety risk. Their endurance paid off. The time machine was completed by the first week of December. Rather than switching it on, the pioneers announced the machine would be activated in the New Year. Margaret told the engineers this was because most journalists were already thinking about their holidays and it would be easier to get their attention in January. Barbara wondered whether they believed her. The invention of time travel, surely, would be a big story for any journalist, however demob happy they were. Privately, Margaret had said that they should proceed with a December date for their inaugural trip, but she didn’t want an audience. If anything went wrong she wanted full control over who knew.

All the engineers accepted Margaret's instruction to take leave. They were eager to see their families, and loath to spend more time in poorly heated caravans, no matter how cheerfully adorned with tinsel and red baubles. Barbara knew that her parents would expect her in Cornwall – that Margaret would be expected in Windermere by her aunt, and that Lucille would be expected in Liverpool by her mother. Grace would have been welcome at any of the pioneers' homes. But by consensus the pioneers stayed in the lab instead; now that their work was nearly complete, none of them wished to leave. They were going to change the world.

*

On Christmas morning the pioneers donned their boiler suits and trod the brittle white grass to the time machine. Barbara set it to transport them one hour into the future. The women held hands. They stepped, in unison, through the machine entrance, and heard the doors slide shut on the present. Barbara's eyes did not adjust to the darkness. She smelt ozone and heard steel parts screech against each other. Her ears rang as the machine fell quiet. Behind her the doors slid open again – she could feel winter sunshine on her neck, and see her own shadow on the smooth grey floor. The pioneers dropped each other's hands and turned to face the light.

At the entrance to the time machine, the women's future selves stood on the grass. They looked as gleeful as the hosts of a surprise party. The future Grace hopped on the spot in excitement.

Barbara's gaze was drawn to her own twin.

Your face is the wrong way round, Barbara thought. You've been burning the midnight oil – that's why you're pale. You are trembling – you are blinking over and over. Has the hard work been worth it? You can remember my feelings. But I don't know what you're feeling at all.

Barbara tentatively extended a hand in greeting.

Her older self laughed and crushed her in a hug.

'Isn't it funny?' the elder Barbara whispered. 'I feel protective of you.'

Barbara laughed too then. What could she do but laugh? It was absurd, to embrace one's self. She was still laughing when the pioneers stepped back into the machine to go home. She was still laughing when they arrived in their own time. The world she returned to seemed brighter and more deeply coloured than before. Wasn't it wonderful, she thought, that time travel had granted her a new joy in her surroundings?

'Are you hearing things differently?' she asked the other pioneers. 'Your voices sound musical to me.'

Her friends exchanged puzzled glances.

'Someone's had too much excitement,' Grace told Barbara fondly. 'What's for Christmas dinner?'

'Tinned turkey,' Barbara said. 'And baked beans. Lovingly decanted.'

*

On Boxing Day they made their second trip into the future – in fact, they made numerous trips, returning to Boxing Day in between each one without stopping to rest. The effect was dizzying. If the pioneers left their home timeline at noon, they might arrive in the next late at night, and the transition

felt instant. Their daylight hours shortened and lengthened drastically.

‘Enough,’ Lucille said when they returned home for the fifteenth time. ‘I need sleep.’

‘I don’t,’ Barbara sang. ‘I don’t. I don’t.’

‘You oddball,’ Grace said. ‘We always have to wrangle you like a toddler at bedtime.’

Margaret appraised Barbara. ‘I think we should all get some rest.’

Barbara obliged by getting into her camp bed but as soon as the others slept, she intended to use the time machine again on her own. Once the others were breathing deeply she extricated herself from Lucille’s embrace. Clean boiler suits, ready for the next day, hung on the wardrobe door. Barbara stepped into one of them, taking care to be quiet. As she left the bedroom, Barbara thought Margaret’s eyes opened and fixed on her, but she turned over without comment.

The time machines ran on pellets of atropisium, encased in a lead briquette to minimise the handler’s exposure to radiation. Barbara went to the fuel stores, which were in a separate building, to collect a couple of briquettes. She slipped them into her pocket. But then she was distracted. Instead of proceeding to the time machine she was transfixed by the storeroom’s overhead light. How beautiful the glow was! The bulb’s reflection on the concrete floor was astonishing – as if Barbara had broken through to a deeper level of sensory awareness. The transcendental nature of time travel had opened up this new world for her. She knelt on the ground, as if she could lap up the reflection like a dog at the waterside.

The following day she was woken by Margaret. Barbara lifted her head from the floor, disorientated. Her thoughts

were racing, and they had taken on an unusual quality: she could *hear* them. They were as loud and indistinct as a rioting crowd. Margaret's voice competed for her attention.

'I've been looking for you everywhere,' Margaret was saying. 'What are you doing in here?'

'I don't remember.' Barbara's jaw ached. She must have been grinding her teeth in the night. The inside of her cheek was raw, as if she had been chewing it.

'Never mind, we haven't the time. I contacted the BBC this morning, to tell them the good news. They're sending a crew now.'

'That's good.'

'Are you sure you're quite well?' Margaret said. 'You seemed feverish yesterday. If you're coming down with something I can manage the interview with Lucille and Grace. It's absolutely vital we make a good impression.'

'I'm fine,' Barbara said, although there were black arabesques writhing at the edge of her vision. 'Will we know the questions in advance?'

'We can rely on them to ask about paradoxes. They'll almost certainly raise that hoary canard about killing your grandfather before he grows up.'

'I think I can handle that.'

'Good. Wash your face and comb your hair, dear, we need to be presentable. Everyone in Britain is going to see your face! Everyone in the *world*.'

Barbara did as she was told then kept quiet while the others talked and laughed. The BBC crew arrived shortly, which was the cue for everyone to congregate outside the time machine. Barbara didn't like the influx of the camera and sound men. Over the past months she'd grown used to seeing only faces that she knew. For reassurance she

looked again at her friends, and realised for the first time that Margaret was holding Patrick. He didn't much like to be held. Rabbits generally prefer to have all four feet on the ground. It was only Barbara's lap he could ever relax on.

'Why isn't he in his hutch?' Barbara asked.

'Patrick's our mascot! He should be here, of course.'

'Can't *I* hold him?' Barbara would benefit as much as Patrick. His warmth might calm her. She could still hear the rioting crowd of voices in her head.

'You can't be jealous of me holding your rabbit!' Margaret said in surprise. 'Come on, that newsman's beckoning us.'

They spent a few minutes rehearsing the interview, so that the questions and answers would flow convincingly. The lights were tremendously hot and bright. Barbara kept staring at them, and the newscaster reminded her to look at him. He was a grey-besuited man with a salmon pink pate. Then the real interview was under way.

The questions began benignly.

'So which period of history are you going to visit first?' the reporter asked. 'Tudors and Stuarts? The Roman Empire?'

'Sadly, we won't be shaking hands with Henry VIII,' Grace said. 'Time travel requires a particular infrastructure. You can't go back to any period before the machine's invention.'

'Which is no bad thing!' Lucille exclaimed. 'For some of us in particular, history would be a dangerous place.'

'Are there limits on travelling into the future, too?' the reporter asked. 'Can you tell me if I have a pools win on the horizon?'

'At the moment we're making trips of a short duration,' Grace explained. 'But the distance is getting longer all the time. We've already met some of our future selves.'

‘How does that work?’ the reporter asked.

Margaret took the lead. ‘Well, for our first excursion, we activated the time machine at ten a.m. on Christmas Day. It transported us, instantaneously, to eleven o’clock of the same morning. At half past eleven we activated the time machine again, and travelled back to one minute past ten. What that means is between ten and ten-oh-one we didn’t exist in the world at all. But between eleven and eleven thirty, there were twice as many of us – and we were able to meet!’

‘I see. Isn’t that rather risky?’ asked the reporter. ‘Everyone’s seen *Doctor Who*. What if your future self accidentally killed you? What would happen *then*?’

The question was Barbara’s cue to speak. She replied: ‘That’s called a paradox. A paradise, a paradigm, a patrick...’

‘Say again, Dr Hereford?’

Barbara rubbed her fingers and thumbs in agitation. Her jaw was working up and down again. The crowd roaring in her head had reached a crescendo. ‘Hereford is my name. People have names when they matter. We picked a name for our rabbit because he is pious, I mean a pioneer. I am a pioneer; and I *won’t* be dissected, not for anyone! Not for you, Mr Salmon Pink Pate, Mr Cat Would Eat You All Up. I won’t be dissected, or neglected, or resurrected!’

Lucille put a hand over the camera. ‘The interview’s over.’

‘But, Dr Waters!’ The newsreader grasped Lucille’s wrist to loosen her grip on the lens. ‘Our viewers will be very disturbed by this outburst. Don’t you have an explanation?’

‘She must be delirious,’ Lucille said. ‘Have you never seen a person with flu?’

‘She’s *clearly* unwell,’ Grace said. ‘Margaret, go ring the GP, fast as you can.’

Even in her disarray, Barbara saw Margaret’s lips tighten.

Margaret rarely took orders, and Grace rarely gave them. But Margaret left to make the call, the rabbit still in her arms.

‘No!’ Barbara cried out. ‘Leave Patrick with me!’

Grace brought her face close to Barbara’s. ‘My poor darling...’

The GP did not diagnose flu. Instead he suspected manic depression and sent Barbara immediately to the psychiatric hospital. It was in the ward that Barbara saw the footage of their interview, played over and over again on the news. Was she on drugs, the reporter speculated? Or had the process of time travelling, of which we understood so little, somehow destabilised her? The nurses switched the TV off when she shouted at the screen. She remained distressed, wondering what the other pioneers thought of her breakdown. Manic depression was a more frightening illness than influenza. She wished they would come to see her, or telephone her, so she could ask them if they were still her friends. Every visiting hour, she looked out, hopefully, for the arrival of Grace or Lucille or Margaret. She was sure they would come any day now. Any day.

Ruby

Ruby Rebello's grandmother was the time traveller who went mad.

Ruby had known this all her life. Granny Bee's meltdown had been broadcast to the nation and lingered in the popular memory for decades. Ruby's mother explained what had happened to Granny Bee when Ruby was quite small, but insisted that they mustn't mention it again. Well into adulthood, Ruby obeyed. A fascination with these family secrets led her to become a psychologist, yet she still refrained from asking Granny Bee about her past. She assumed this was what Granny Bee wanted.

And then, one afternoon, the past caught up with them.

They were in Bee's back garden, near St Ives bay. Bee was completing a crossword, while Ruby was changing the oil of her motorcycle; she had ridden from London the previous day. Breno, Bee's collie, was seeking refuge from the heat indoors. His staccato barking suddenly drowned out the drama playing on the radio.

'Must be someone at the front door,' Bee said, without looking up from her puzzle.

‘Are you expecting visitors?’ Ruby smeared oil across her flannel dress.

‘Not a soul.’

Whoever caught Breno’s attention had gone by the time Ruby reached the porch. The path was quite empty. There was only an origami rabbit, sitting at the centre of the doorstep. Ruby picked the rabbit up. Two words were inked in copperplate on his ear: *For Barbara*.

Ruby looked around once more – as if the messenger might be hiding behind a shrub or hedge, to watch her reaction. Breno sat panting happily. He could normally be relied upon to pester lurking guests; they must have passed out of his range.

Defeated, Ruby returned to the back garden.

‘Look what I found by the door.’ She placed the rabbit on the picnic table.

Barbara put down her pen, and ran her finger over the rabbit’s ear.

‘Do you know who it’s from?’ Ruby asked.

‘Grace Taylor. She wrote her capital letters that way – all curls. A mystery present is just her style. She liked to keep everyone guessing.’

Like the other pioneers, Grace Taylor had become a household name. But Ruby had never heard Bee speak of her old colleagues. This breach of familial silence left Ruby unsure how to react. Instead of looking her grandmother in the eye, Ruby stared at the toes of her boots.

‘D’you hear from Grace often?’

‘No.’

‘You didn’t want to stay in touch?’

‘She kept her distance, after I first went into hospital. All three of them did. I did try to contact Margaret several

times, early on – there were issues over who owned what in the lab. But she wouldn't talk to me directly. It wasn't just my career that was over. It was our friendship.'

Ruby dared to look up. Bee was smiling sadly.

'Granny, that's awful,' Ruby said.

'In some ways it's just as well. Your mother doesn't like me to discuss that time of my life.' Bee's mouth pursed in a moue of anxiety. For years Ruby had thought Granny Bee's past was too painful for her to mention. Ruby hadn't known Bee's silence was imposed by Dinah.

'Why doesn't she like you to talk about it?' Ruby asked.

'The idea of time travel frightens her.'

'That's true for lots of people. It seems such an... *alien* thing to do.' Time travelling was an elite profession, out of reach for the average Joe or Josephine.

'Yes, but your mother's fear was very personal. She was scared of what it had done to me. And the one time she encountered some other time travellers... let's just say that didn't go well either.'

'You don't need to talk about time travelling with her.' Ruby took Granny Bee's hand. 'You can tell me what happened, instead.'

'Yes.' Bee smiled, squeezing Ruby's hand in return.

*

Back in the cottage, Bee pulled down shoeboxes from the top of her wardrobe, which were swollen with creased photos from the past. The box contained scenic pictures of the Fells where Barbara had worked; horizontal triptychs of mist and rippling earth and water. Others were technical shots, of machine components and test subjects, which Ruby assumed

were a record of experiments. But she was most interested in the four women. She picked up a sun-bleached photo. There was Bee, her rosy face still recognisable; Lucille, who looked so full of wisdom and mischief; Grace, exuding all the cool of a French New Wave actress; and Margaret, her face already showing the determination that would make her one of the most powerful women in Britain. Such different women, and yet their laughter and uniforms suggested camaraderie. Bee didn't look mad. She looked like she belonged.

Bee pointed at the photograph.

'That rabbit in my arms was the first time traveller. He was my pet.'

'Is that why Grace sent you a paper rabbit?'

'Maybe.' Granny Bee took the origami from the pocket of her pinafore. She unfolded it into a small square of paper. 'Hm. That's interesting.'

'What is?'

'There's information printed on the back. It's notice of an inquest. From Southwark Coroner's Court.'

Ruby craned forward to look. The inquest was to be held in February 2018, and concerned the death of a woman in her eighties. The space where the victim's name should be read *Undisclosed*. But the most intriguing information was the date of death: 6 January 2018. This woman wouldn't die for another five months.

'This is from the future?' Ruby asked.

'Looks like it.'

'Why would Grace send this?' The most obvious explanation was that the body belonged to Grace herself. Or – Ruby's throat tightened – it belonged to Bee. 'It isn't a *warning*, is it?'

'What melodrama! I think it's a memento mori.'

‘A what?’

‘Dear me, Ruby. Fancy a woman of your education not knowing that. A *memento mori* is a symbol, to remind you life is transient. We all need a spur to action now and then.’ Bee’s eyes were bright, and she fingered the grey paper eagerly. ‘I think often about how I should spend the life I have left. And I’ve decided. I’m determined to time travel again. Just once would do – just once before I die. Grace is back in touch – that’s a good sign she’s willing to listen to me now. And I’ve got a plan to make Margaret listen too. Margaret was always very pragmatic. She may have seen me as a liability. But that’s not true any more. If I can make a new scientific discovery – something Margaret *wants* – she’ll let me back in. I know she will.’

‘Oh, Granny. I don’t think this is a good idea. The last time you time travelled you were so ill.’ Ruby had looked up the old news reports of Bee’s breakdown. It had sounded dreadful. To see Bee return to that state would be unbearable.

‘Life’s better with a few risks than a lot of regrets,’ Bee said.

Fear made Ruby curt.

‘If Margaret has any sense, she’ll turn you away.’

‘Dear heart,’ Bee said. ‘We can forget we had this conversation. I need never mention it to you again, if that means you’ll be less anxious. But I’m still determined to make one last time travel trip, with or without your support. I won’t stop trying, Ruby – please don’t ask me to.’

It was tempting to pretend Bee had never raised the topic. Wilful ignorance was one way to manage the stress of her wilful recklessness. Then Ruby considered how, all her adult life, she’d maintained the silence around Bee’s past. Was it right to return Bee to that isolation by refusing to support

her? In spite of all Ruby's misgivings, she didn't want Bee to enter danger alone.

'All right,' Ruby said to her grandmother. 'I'll help you.'

She watched Bee refold the coroner's announcement. Their implicit deadline – the date of death, 6 January – was concealed once more.



Odette

The toy museum relied on voluntary labour to keep afloat, and the newest volunteer was a young archaeology student called Odette Sophola. A shortage of hands meant that on Odette's first day, she would be responsible for opening the building.

It was Epiphany: the sixth of January. Odette walked up the museum steps at two o'clock, key ready. Her toes were numb despite the sheepskin lining her boots. The sky over the museum was as pale as porcelain and the chill hurt her teeth. But her eagerness to get into the warm was short-lived; for when she unlocked the doors, the reek of sulphur was waiting.

Odette clapped a hand to her nose. She stepped back from the doorway, as though, if she moved aside, the smell would leave politely like a patron. Was it a gas leak? She thought not; the stench was too stomach-turning, too *organic*. Until she found the source, opening to the public was out of the question. Rearranging her scarf into a makeshift mask, and wincing as a tassel caught her braids, she entered the foyer.

Her soles squeaked on the Minton floor. The peeling radiator ticked. Nothing was obviously out of place. It was the



first time the museum had opened since Christmas. Maybe, in the meantime, a rat had died in the walls. Or a soil pipe had burst. Odette walked to the exhibition hall and considered her options. Strictly speaking, she should telephone the museum's manager, Sally. But Odette was new. She wished to make a good impression by solving the problem herself.

A steel crook, for opening the high windows, rested against a cabinet of Roman dolls. Odette picked it up and hooked it through each window latch. Blessed ventilation. If the air cleared, she might be able to tell where the reek originated. Crook still in hand, she zigzagged across the hall. At the back of the room the pungency made her cough. It was worst by the door to the basement stairs. She was drawing closer.

Sally hadn't included the basement when she'd shown Odette round. 'Nothing's in there but the boiler room,' she'd said, 'and some toy storage.' Odette walked downstairs now, holding the scarf tighter to her face. The passageway below was narrow and dark. She flipped a Bakelite switch. The pale yellow bulb flickered and made her blink. Cracked subway tiles lined the walls. The entrance to the boiler room read *Staff Only*. Paint, or some other dark liquid, had leaked under the doorway and left a maroon stain on the lino. Not quite maroon. Noir rouge. Like a slice of agate; like her mother's nail polish.

Was now the time to ring Sally? Or possibly – the police?

Odette warned herself not to overreact. The stain may look like blood, but was that likely? Might there not be a more sensible, everyday explanation? Her imagination sometimes leapt to the wildest scenarios, and she had learnt to counteract them with level-headed questions. Better to be sure what was in that room, before she rang anyone.

She turned the handle, but the boiler room door didn't budge. Puzzling. It couldn't be locked, because there was no keyhole. She tried again, then leant her full weight against it. When it gave way she nearly lost her balance.

Her eyes watered, and she gagged on the putrid air. Something crunched underfoot – little white polygons of bone in blood. By the light of the corridor, Odette could see the door had been bolted. The brass fitting swung underneath the handle. Her shove had been enough to loosen the screws. But – if the door had been locked from the *inside*...

'Hello?' Odette gasped. 'Is anyone there?'

The boiler groaned and Odette heard the buzzing of flies. One of them flew from the shadows. It stopped to feed in a puddle on the floor, inches away from an abandoned pistol. Odette swivelled, searching for the gun's owner, and cried out. A tumble of limbs and cloth was slumped against the wall. Part of the woman's head was missing. The skin that remained was marbled – *like a piece of jade*, Odette thought.

Her hands shook. She needed to call the police, but she couldn't look away from the corpse. During her archaeology degree she'd handled human skeletons. That hadn't prepared her for the violence of this death. The rotting flesh reminded her, as dry bones could not, that she too was made from fat and lymph and sinew. Humanity was reduced to nothing more than briefly animated meat. Odette stared and stared at the broken body. How could anyone wreak such damage? Until she understood their reasons, the world would feel broken too.

*

Her confusion deepened once the police arrived. The small museum was overrun with strangers in uniforms and hazmat

suits, creating boundaries with tape. An officer told her to sit in the foyer. Someone gave her a cup of tea but she only drank a sip because it was bitter.

She had expected to see Sally, or some other representative of the museum. No one came. Odette soon realised that the police weren't admitting anyone past the crime scene barrier at the front steps of the museum. The only reason Odette was on the police side was because she'd been first on the scene. She was part of the evidence that they needed to collect and analyse. Presumably Sally was being questioned outside – or at the station, or even on the phone. Odette preferred to think she was somewhere nearby. It made her feel less isolated.

A short round woman with a shining face carried a table into the foyer. The wood was splintering. The woman sat on a folding chair and said she'd take Odette's statement. Her voice was too loud. She used words of one syllable, as if she were speaking to a child. Except you'd smile at a child, and this woman wasn't smiling.

'Where are you from?' she said.

'I'm staying with my parents in Hounslow. Just for the Christmas holidays – normally I'm in halls in Cambridge. I'm a student.'

The woman didn't write the response down. She repeated: 'Hounslow?'

Odette sensed the underlying sentiment: if you were brown you didn't belong. She allowed a brief silence to elapse, before giving the answer the woman wanted. 'I've lived in England since I was a child. I was born in Seychelles.'

She watched the woman write THE SEYCHELLES in her notebook.

'And you've just started cleaning here?' the police officer said.

‘Not cleaning – volunteering, to get some work experience before I graduate.’

They went on to the morning’s events. Odette gave the details with detachment. She listened to herself and wondered how she was speaking so calmly, when there was a woman who, below their feet, had once been alive but wasn’t any longer. Her words dried mid-sentence. The woman repeated the preceding question.

After the statement Odette had to stay in the foyer, in case there were any further questions for her that day. No one took the table away. Another bitter tea was handed to her, and this time she drank it, not knowing how long it would be before she could have a drink at home. The question about her origins had disquieted her. It said the police saw her as out-of-place, and it was a short step from ‘out-of-place’ to ‘suspicious’. The afternoon edged closer to evening. She was moved from one side of the foyer to the other because she was by the doorway, and the police needed to verify it hadn’t been forced. Finally, the round shining officer returned, this time to take her fingerprints.

‘I didn’t touch anything apart from the door,’ Odette said.

The officer ignored that comment. When the prints were complete, she said, ‘You can go. We have everything we need from you for today.’

‘Thank you.’ Odette’s shoulders slumped.

It had long turned dark outside. Odette walked past the police officers still scattered round the barrier.

A woman, dressed in leathers and a helmet, leant on a motorcycle at the side of the road. She beckoned Odette to her.

Odette took a few steps closer. ‘Hello?’

The woman raised her visor to reveal brown eyes, almost russet, beneath the street lamps.

‘I have something for you,’ she said. In her hand was a small card. ‘Victim support. In case you need someone to talk to.’

The card had the name and contact details of a psychologist. *Dr Ruby Rebello*.

‘Are you with the police?’ Odette asked, confused. During the interview no one had mentioned victim support.

‘No, I run a private clinic, but I work with a lot of victims of crime. I treat trauma.’

Odette tucked the card in her coat pocket.

‘Thank you,’ she said, to be polite. She wasn’t the victim of this crime. Once she was at home, in her own bed, the world would surely start to make sense again. She wouldn’t be plagued with questions of how this death had occurred. She wouldn’t constantly be wondering *why*. It was the year of her final examinations. Soon she’d forget that poor dead woman. In the stress of revision and looking for a job, Odette would hardly ever think about her at all.

But no matter how sternly Odette repeated this, she knew it wasn’t true.