THE MIDNIGHT TRAIN



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VIKING

Also by Matt Haig

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THE MIDNIGHT TRAIN

MATT HAIG

VIKING

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To Andrea

‘No space of regret can make amends for one life’s opportunity misused!’

— Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

Honeymoon

As the water taxi sped across the lagoon, the two young honeymooners gazed ahead in awe.

Wilbur squeezed Maggie's hand and leaned into her as they sat at the back of the small boat, the sun glittering on the water in front of them.

'I love you, Mr Budd,' she told him, her words as natural as breath.

'I love you too, Mrs Budd.'

Maggie laughed, softly, at how funny and official that sounded.

They held hands as the boat chugged its way towards the city, their fingers intertwined like tangled roots. The ninth of August 1974.

Wilbur turned away from the view in front of him, towards the person he had known since childhood.

'We'll always be like this, won't we?' Maggie asked him.

He smiled reassuringly. 'Of course. Why wouldn't we?'

They kissed as the lagoon merged into the Grand Canal. 'I don't know. Time changes things.'

'But look at Venice. It's not changed in hundreds of years. This could be 1574 just as easily as 1974.'

She looked over towards the city. 'Aye. Let's ignore time. Let's be Venice.'

He watched as she held up her Pentax camera, a wedding present from her father, and aimed it towards the Doge's Palace, its pink and white stone facade and intricate arches rising directly above the lagoon like a Byzantine fever dream.

'For ever,' added Wilbur, laughing.

She put a hand through his tousled hair, which was just about the longest it ever got to. 'Yes, for ever and ever and ever . . .'

The boat slowed a little. 'There,' said the boatman, pointing towards a pretty but slightly decrepit terracotta building. 'Hotel Proserpina.'

Wilbur and Maggie had never been abroad before, and the sight looked exotic and full of promise. And neither of them, at that moment, could see the figure watching from the shore, the one who looked so much like Wilbur himself that it would have been impossible to tell the difference.

An hour later they were sitting in easy silence drinking wine in the shade at a café by the Grand Canal, watching the city unfold.

Wilbur was wearing the same sandals, flared jeans and short-sleeved green shirt with large collars that he had worn on the plane, and Maggie was in her orange jumpsuit. He told her she looked like a film star and she told him to stop being corny but she smiled all the same.

A vaporetto full of tourists chugged by. Maggie began reminiscing about the wedding.

'I've never seen your mam so happy,' she said. 'She didn't mention . . .' She paused, didn't want to taint the moment.

'Dougie? Aye, no. She didn't. I've not seen Mam like that. Not since everything that happened. I think the gin had helped. Your dad too . . .'

'Look at you,' Maggie said, smiling under the sun's glare.

'Look at me, what?'

'Sitting back in your chair like an emperor.'

'I'm just happy.'

'As you should be. You are on your honeymoon.'

Wilbur felt her study him a little closer.

'You're not thinking about the shop?'

He shook his head. 'No, actually,' he lied. Or half lied. 'Not right

now. I'm just thinking about you. And it's quite an occupying thought . . .'

And it was really nothing at the time, this contentment. It flowed through their open fingers like a stream, and they imagined it would always be like this, and that the stream would never dry up. It would just flow and flow and they would never have to think about where it came from. And never make the effort to scoop it up and drink it in, as if life could stay a honeymoon for ever.

After the wine, they walked towards the church of St John the Almsgiver. Maggie playfully sang a snippet of her favourite song, 'Bridge Over Troubled Water', as they spied the Rialto Bridge in the distance.

They passed smart Italian couples. Open shirts and glamorous dresses. A busker playing the accordion. An old American man smoking a pipe and talking to a companion about the resignation of President Nixon.

'It feels so different, doesn't it?' Maggie observed.

She looked up and around. Absorbing the colours. Terracotta and pink, a dash of yellow, the deep blue shutters, everything in the sunlight looking like it had been brushed with honey.

'Different to where?'

'To everything we've ever known.'

He laughed. This was the very happiest he had ever felt. Happier than he once thought he could be, in the dark days. Just walking beside a canal, glancing at the woman he adored.

He turned to Maggie as she smiled a full-beam smile full of life. Her face was as open and pure as when he had first met her. And so was she. As tough as Sheffield steel and as warm as the sun. He was mesmerised by her. She could make him temporarily forget the wounds of his past and he hoped he did the same for her. He hadn't wanted to fall in love with her, or anyone. Love was a dangerous thing. But now it had happened, he was grateful. He felt whole with her, like a question that had found its answer.

Wilbur stopped Maggie for a kiss as they were about to go up the steps of the Rialto Bridge.

'We could move here,' he said.

Then, a few minutes later, as they passed a bookstall on the bridge, 'I could sell the shop.'

He was joking. They'd only just got there, after all. But also, in a way, he was being serious. Serious in the sense that he was connecting to something free and spontaneous inside him.

'What would we do?' Maggie asked, indulging the fantasy.

'You could be an artist . . . or do art tours.'

'And you could set up a little bookstall like that one back there on the bridge.'

It was then that Wilbur heard the whisper. Something up close in his ear. Cold breath.

You need to keep hold of this.

It caused Wilbur to brush his ear.

'You all right, love?' asked Maggie.

'Oh, aye. Just a mosquito or something.'

And he thought nothing of it. Sometimes thoughts rang loud. That's all it was.

He held Maggie's hand, squeezed it. He felt a bit woozy and discombobulated amid the crowd in the heat, but still the happiest he'd ever been.

They kept walking, but there was quickly something else that captured Wilbur's attention. Something that couldn't be dismissed. Maggie gave him a concerned little look. Maybe she thought he was thinking of his brother. But no. Ahead of them under the portico, beside a little shop selling glass sculptures, there was a sight so odd it filled Wilbur with dread.

A man, rendered faintly in the air. Not transparent, but not fully *there*. It was the man who had watched them arrive, but this time he wasn't unseen. A man who looked uncannily like Wilbur himself. A doppelganger. The same sandals, flared jeans, short-sleeved green

shirt with large collars. The tousled hair and large sideburns. The lean, six-foot-one frame. The twenty-nine-year-old Wilbur of that August in 1974. The one with the world in his hands.

This other Wilbur seemed to notice that he had seen him, and waved, as if it was the most normal thing in the world. Wilbur raised his hand slightly.

'Wilbur, you okay?' asked Maggie, concerned.

He didn't want to worry her. He shook his head. 'Aye. Just going a bit mad in the heat.'

'Come on, lad,' she said, in an exaggeration of her own accent. 'You need a nice spooky church and some Titian to gawp at.'

He laughed. But as he kept walking down the ramp, he heard something else.

A faint whistle, a rhythmical chugging.

Almost like a train leaving a station.

Fifty-two years later . . .

The Thread

Wilbur Budd died around midnight, but he had trouble remembering the details.

He had been standing out on his gravel driveway saying goodbye to his piano teacher. 'Thanks,' he said, a bit breathless from the walk through the house. 'Have a good time tonight in Cambridge.'

The piano teacher opened the door to the car that was waiting for her. She was in her forties. Half his age. But already seemed to have life sorted out. She smiled in the afternoon sunshine as Wilbur's gardener drove by on the tractor-mower, attending to the lawns that rolled down to wild meadow borders. A Saturday in April. The sky was blue, the breeze light, and birdsong could be heard above the distant traffic. One of those bright, cool days that sprinkled hope throughout spring.

'I will. And thanks for the conversation. Remember what I said, don't try and rush it when you play. Take your time . . . Slow and steady. You'll get there in the end.'

'Yes,' said Wilbur. 'I suppose I will.'

He felt a bit light-headed. A bit nauseous.

Wilbur raised a frail arm, clicked the gates open and waved her off as she departed down the country lane, then walked the short distance back to the house.

He had been having piano lessons for two years, ever since he had seen an advert in the window of a music shop. His doctor had told him of the importance of learning new things now he was in his eighties, and he looked forward to his weekly lessons.

Once back inside, he walked over the flagstone floor and across the vast living room towards the piano.

He felt peculiar again. This time there was a pressure in his left shoulder, but it passed and he sat down and began to practise his study piece, remembering to take his time.

Music had a way of threading through decades like nothing else. A song, after all, was a needle pulling the thread of time, stitching disparate moments into something whole. It was bittersweet. The needle could hurt. And this piece had too many memories. Yet his life was what it was. He had the life he had.

He was about halfway through the piece, struggling to reach an E flat with his little finger, when the phone rang. The landline. It took him a while to get to the phone. His legs weren't what they were. Nothing was. He braced himself for a sales call, or one of those robot-voiced scams. They were just about the only calls he received nowadays.

But no. It wasn't a robot or a scammer. It wasn't anything to do with marketing or artificial intelligence.

'Hello, is that Wilbur?'

It was a voice he hadn't heard for a long time. For decades, in fact. It sounded a little fainter. A little weaker. But it was definitely her.

Maggie

'Maggie. Oh lord. Maggie, is that you?'

He stumbled slightly and lowered himself into the nearest chair. Across the room a wedding photograph perched above the fireplace, tucked amid trophies for British Business Person of the Year. Wilbur and Maggie walking out of the church.

'Yes, it's me.'

'How did you get the number?' Instantly, he cursed himself for asking. It sounded so defensive. He wanted nothing more than for her to have his number, and to call him, but it had come out all wrong.

'You gave me it, remember. You sent me a message on Facebook six years ago.'

'Oh. Oh yes. Oh yes, I did. I did. I thought you never saw that message.'

'I saw it. I don't do Facebook, but I saw it. I just didn't know what to say . . .'

Wilbur was feeling the pressure in his shoulder again. He stared at the wedding photograph through the distorted Perspex of one of his trophies. Maggie's laughter and Wilbur's uncomplicated smile. On paper their marriage lasted for twenty years. Though if he was honest, it died way earlier. But back then it was going to be for ever. 'Where are you?'

'I'm in Sheffield. What about you? Bedfordshire, right?'

'Yes. Clophill. It's a lovely little village.' He nearly added: *but it is lonely*. 'Maggie, it is good to hear from you . . .'

It was strange. After all these years, he didn't know how to talk

to her. It was as though the passing of time brought its own formality. How someone you once slept beside every night could become a stranger through years of silence. As though, except for brief interludes, the natural setting of humanity was to be impossibly distant from each other.

He tried again. 'I have things I've been wanting to say. To ask you. To make amends for . . .'

'Don't be silly, Wilbur. It's all water under the bridge . . .'

'It's so funny you should say that. I've started playing the piano.' He looked down at his time-weathered hands. The veins like a map to an unknown town. 'I have lessons every Saturday. And I've just been playing "Bridge Over Troubled Water", and remembering how you loved it. It did rather take me back.'

'The good old days.'

'Yes. The good old days . . .'

'Wilbur. *Wilbur*.'

That second Wilbur had a firmness to it. He realised he was just prattling on without asking about her. 'I'm sorry, Maggie. How are you? It's been so long. I saw on the internet that you had an exhibition for your art in—'

'Oh, that was years ago,' she said, almost shy. 'I hardly do it any more.'

He worried she was about to tell him she was dying. That did seem to be the prime reason people from his past contacted him. To tell him they were about to die, or that someone else he knew was.

'It's really silly.'

'What's silly?'

'This phone call.'

'It's nice to hear from you.'

'Well, I have no reason at all to phone you. In fact, I always told myself I never would . . .'

'Oh. Right. Yes.'

'Not out of spite, or anything. Just, it's a little bit sad, isn't it? But then recently I thought it would be – well, I wanted to hear your voice. Which sounds ridiculous.'

'No. Not at all.' And then he smiled. 'My voice is pretty special.'

Her small laugh ended with a sad inflection. 'Well, you still have some of your accent. Just.'

'Just.'

'I suppose I could have listened to you doing a speech on the internet. Or one of your telly interviews.'

'Oh, you don't want that . . .'

'I just wanted to hear you.'

He thought of sitting next to Maggie on a bench in the park as she drew a picture of the pond, a lifetime ago. 'I'm here. I've got so much to ask you. There's so much I want to know.'

There was a little silence. He imagined her thinking, *If only you had always been like that*.

He thought of all the things he didn't know about her. All the mysteries that had been created by their decades apart. Did she have a partner? Had she had one? Was she happy? Had she made new friends? Did she still have any of the old ones? What shows did she watch? How did she spend her days? How was her quality of life? How was her health? Could she still walk about okay? What did she think about the state of the world? What was the view from her window? Had she ever tried matcha? How *was* she?

'I don't know if I want to tell you anything at all, really,' she told him.

His mind felt foggy.

He stared at the wedding photo some more. Maggie's smile in that August sunshine as she stepped out of St Timothy's Church into a cloud of confetti. Such happiness. Their old friends framing the picture – Charlie, Claudette, Doreen. Just names now. People he didn't even know were alive. The fragility of the past.

'I just dreamed of you last night,' said Maggie. 'Of us. Not much

happened in the dream. But it was so vivid. It was before London. We were in the house in Broomhill, talking, as if no time at all had passed. But we were happy. Just so happy. It's so silly. I wonder why that, last night, was the—'

'Oh, Maggie. I dream of us too.'

'I don't ever remember dreams, but this morning I did. I'm sorry. I think I should go now. It's a little too much. I just needed to—'

'You've only just—' Wilbur stopped himself. He wanted her to stay on the line. It was torture to hear her for just a few moments, and then for it to be over. But he knew she didn't owe him anything at all. Life was as it was. No one could change what had happened. And so much had happened. That was simply what it was always meant to be.

Still, he couldn't help himself. 'I would like to speak to you again. Would that be all right?'

'Yes,' she said, in her frail and aged voice. 'I would like that.'

A Fragment

He put the phone down to find he was out of breath. As if having run a marathon. But he had the sudden urge to find something. He wanted her letter. Proof of their time as a couple, or rather, the first record of their separation.

He hadn't looked at it in years. It was under the eaves of the attic, behind a door. He went there and crouched down on his hands and knees to crawl deeper into the cupboard, passing a chaos of old bills and documents and Trade magazines. Motes of dust floated around his head like a miniature galaxy.

'What are you doing, Wilbur?' he muttered to himself. 'Silly old fool.'

Then he found it. Or at least one of its pages. The last page. He tried unsuccessfully to find the others, ignoring the fact he felt increasingly unwell. He was panting now and his head spun when he stood up. He gathered himself and went downstairs with the yellowed page in his hands.

The Last Page of Maggie's Letter

. . . You are forever somewhere else, even when you are right next to me.

It is important for me not to succumb to fantasy. I doubt I will even travel the world. I imagine I will be consumed with looking after my dad's increasing needs back in Sheffield.

Anyway, this is not easy.

I know you think of me as strong, but I am not.

I feel as fragile as a leaf in the wind right now.

It seems like I have been holding my breath through this whole letter.

I feel if I exhale I will cry and never stop crying.

I know you went through a lot when you were younger, as did I. But we can't be trapped by that for ever. I can't fix you. I can't even fix myself.

This is heartbreaking. But sometimes you have to let your heart break in order to stay alive.

I want you to understand that.

I want you to understand too that our love is always still there. Can you remember my silly theory of art? That people grow old around art but the art stays fresh? Well, I think in a way that is true for memory. I don't know how to explain it but I like to believe we are still, somehow, at the theatre when you walked over to me. Or on our wedding day. Or on our honeymoon. Or looking up at the stars one drunken evening. Or happy, pasting up wallpaper at Broomhill.

I love you, Wilbur.

But I am also leaving you.

I don't know where the past hides, but I will meet you there.

Maggie

x

Miles Away

As he read the words, Wilbur was overwhelmed by a pain in his neck, running down his arm, coupled with a pressure in his chest. By the time he got to the end of the letter the pain was so intense it engulfed everything else, making his surroundings seem miles away. He staggered outside to get the help of Josh, the gardener, occupied on the tractor-mower. Wilbur reached the lawn before collapsing, while the letter lay back in the house on the kitchen tiles, never to be read again.

The Wilbur Station

Wilbur wouldn't wake up in the ambulance. He wouldn't wake up in Bedford Hospital. At one minute after midnight his heart beat for the last time.

He was dead.

And the interesting thing about death is how there is no *thinking* you are dead when you are dead. Like life, it arrives as its own self-evident fact.

That wasn't to say it wasn't confusing. Or troubling.

It certainly became that way.

But at first, the moment after he died, he had felt a light.

It wasn't really the white light he had heard about. It wasn't something to walk towards, but something already there. It was more of a soft yellow, like the sun through a thick layer of cloud.

He had a fleeting sense of calm.

A harmoniousness.

Maybe this was it. Maybe this was how it was going to be. Hovering in golden light for all eternity. A soul suspended in a happy void.

An existence outside time or pressure or concern.

But then, he was falling with nothing at all below him, gaining a kind of weight, until he landed back inside himself. Or something that felt like himself. Something like a body. He looked around. He was somewhere darker now but he could still see well enough. There was a red-brick wall behind him and paving below him. It looked a little like the first train station he had ever known, but instead of a sign reading 'Sheffield' there was one which said 'Wilbur'.

The way he was experiencing his moment of death was as a kind of train station.

A desolate platform, in the middle of nowhere. Without a train.

'This is . . .' he said, gaspingly. But he was too shocked to finish the sentence. Even the fact that he was speaking was a shock. His mind was reverberating as if from some giant cosmic cymbal crash.

The paved ground ended a short way in front of him, in a drop towards the steel rails and wooden sleepers of a train track.

He saw something twirling through the air.

A small, rectangular piece of card. He reached out and caught it. A ticket, with the following typed words:

Single journey
The Midnight Train
Departure Time: 00.01 Sunday 19 April

'Hello?'

But there was no one around. There was nothing to do except wait.

The Midnight Train

The strangest thing of all, given that it was death, was that he could breathe better than he had been able to for years.

It wasn't – obviously – *actual* breathing. But it had the feel of it. Some kind of procedural memory of the soul. Just as he had the feel of his own body. But, no. Not really the feel of his actual body. This body he was in now wasn't aching or stiff. His fingers felt like they would be able to play the piano with ease.

He looked down and saw he was wearing flared jeans, a short-sleeved green polyester shirt and a light suit jacket with wide lapels. Toes stuck out of sandals he hadn't worn since the 1970s. He had no bunions. He saw his arms, tanned and young.

He felt the young skin of his face. Not *really* young – he could feel his closely-shaved stubble – but tight, and relatively untextured. Apart from the two large sideburns.

There was an energy inside him. It was quite remarkable. A kind of flame that had flickered and faded over the years but which was now back, and ready to be appreciated. That was the whole trouble with life. It gave you every day in succession, so that every miracle to be cherished became a norm to be ignored. But now he felt it again.

Alive.

And next he heard something in the air.

A whining sound, growing slowly.

A mechanical chug. A rising rhythm growing in force, accompanied by a whistle. A train.

As it approached he saw plumes of vapour. It was a steam engine.

He recognised it as a three-cylinder passenger express engine, specifically, complete with carriages trailing behind. He knew this because as a boy he'd had this precise train, but in miniature. It had been his pride and joy. The *Duke of Gloucester*. It looked exactly the same, but larger, gleaming with deep, dark-blue magnificence.

But in place of *Duke of Gloucester* written on the grey nameplate on the side of the boiler, it said, in bold black letters:

THE MIDNIGHT TRAIN

Someone stepped off the first carriage.

An old-fashioned but not particularly old-looking woman.

She was dressed in the style of a former time. Possibly the same time as the train. Long pencil skirt, prim blouse, cloche hat. She had perfect posture and a small, stern mouth. He felt like he recognised her from somewhere.

'Good day there, I've been expecting you,' she said in a mildly tremulous voice, a clipped, old-fashioned English that was instantly familiar but from where he couldn't recall.

'Sorry,' Wilbur said. 'If you don't mind me asking – who *are* you?'

'Let's start on a first-name basis. I'm Agnes, and this is the Midnight Train.'

Death was also the death of sense, it seemed. 'I'm really sorry,' he said. Exasperated, bewildered, scared. 'But – I hope you don't mind me asking – what the bloody hell are you talking about?'

What Agnes Was Talking About

'When you came into Bagdale's Bookshop as a little boy, years before you worked there, you used to see an old woman who once ran the shop,' said Agnes. 'Well, that woman was me.'

'Mrs Bagdale!' said Wilbur, as it all fell into place.

Mrs *Agnes* Deborah Amaryllis Bagdale of Bagdale's Bookshop, Commercial Street, Sheffield. In her day – before Wilbur had known it – the shop had been a delight on the inside, but a rather unassuming place from outside except for the fact that it was next to a bakery. Passers-by who stopped to browse the books in the window also inhaled the scent of bread, which had the rather magical effect of giving the stories they were looking at a fittingly well-baked scent.

It was a bookshop that had thrived for three reasons.

First, there was no competition; it was the only bookshop in a city of nearly five hundred thousand people.

Second, it was the kind of shop no one was intimidated to enter. Partly because there was a wire-haired fox terrier called Clementine who always lay on whatever patch of floor hadn't been colonised by piles of detective novels.

And the third reason, the main reason, was the bookshop owner, Mrs Bagdale herself. She was from Norwich but had moved to Sheffield and set up a bookshop after her husband died in the trenches at Ypres.

Agnes Bagdale loved books and loved people and believed that life could be improved by having more people read more mystery novels. Besides this, or because of this, she had an almost supernatural ability for pairing the right person with the right book. She

could chat to a steelworker who hadn't read a book since childhood and know within a minute the perfect book for him. If they had a certain nostalgic twinkle in their eye, she might give them *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells, for instance. If they were particularly interested in Clementine, she might recommend Hugh Lofting's *The Story of Doctor Dolittle*.

'Books,' she once said, 'are mirrors for the soul. So if you catch a glimpse of someone's soul, you will know the mirror for them.'

The bookshop had thrived. But eventually Agnes's health deteriorated and her son Arthur took over. Now, Arthur Bagdale was a trier, but he just didn't have his mother's knack for bookselling, or her charm. And over the decades the passion and the hand-selling and the fox terrier were replaced by a sense of *ticking over*.

Still, Wilbur had always enjoyed the shop when he went in as a child in the 1950s, long after Arthur – Mr Bagdale, as he knew him – took the reins. Wilbur loved being there, even as Mr Bagdale scolded him for never buying anything.

And he had met her a few times, Agnes Bagdale, in her later years, wheezing from her bronchiectasis as she sat in a chair reading a Raymond Chandler or Patricia Highsmith or some other twisted detective novel. Often scolding her son at how he was running the shop, his refusal to follow her principles of bookselling, or simply telling him to treat Wilbur kindly.

And there she was now, in front of him. The kind but formidable and possibly unyielding woman he had met, like the aged photograph in the back of Bagdale's stockroom.

'Call me Agnes, please.'

Wilbur was eighty-one years old, and also dead, but he nodded like a scolded schoolboy. 'Sorry. Agnes.'

'You knew me near the end of my life but who you see now is me in 1921. In my prime!' Agnes confirmed. 'When I was happy, a year before I set up the shop.'

'Right.'

A brief sadness passed across her face. A regret too deep to voice. She pulled herself together with a brisk inhale and a straightening of her spine. And then she told him everything.

Agnes's Choice

'I am a ghost. But not an ordinary one. I am here to be your guide through your life. The one you just lived.'

'But—'

'You see, young man – I know you died at eighty-one . . . but look at you. Handsome and young.'

He looked again at the smooth skin of his hands.

'I am, I suppose, your own personal instruction manual. And the Midnight Train is simply the journey everyone goes on at the end of their life. It's not always on a train. But it is normally a mode of transport. For your father, it was an aeroplane.'

Wilbur thought about this. It sounded familiar. He'd had a conversation recently with someone about the afterlife, but he just couldn't remember the details. It was strange. How he could remember things from decades ago – like Agnes Bagdale – but the few days before his death, everything was unclear. It was like death was a fog that spread and slowly dissipated behind itself.

'How do you know all this?'

'As I said, I am not an ordinary ghost. In taking on this role, in choosing to help you, I was given knowledge. I am very much the spirit of Agnes Bagdale. But with some added extras that I seem to have been blessed with in order to guide you. You pass through the walls of eternity and it happens. I suppose one way to think of me is that I am the soul of a bookseller combined with the reality of time and the universe. So I know all kinds of things. About you, mainly.'

'What even *is* this?'

'This is death. Where your life flashes before your eyes. This is how it happens. Fast and slow. Like life . . .'

Although Wilbur accepted the reality of his death, he was a little slow in accepting the details. He glared at Agnes. 'No. Stop it. This isn't real. This is some kind of delusion, an afterthought . . . like a brain blip after dying . . . I saw something about it once . . . about how brainwaves continue for a while after death . . .' She was clearly – he tried to tell himself – some kind of deathly hallucination, and it wasn't bad etiquette to be rude to a hallucination. And yet, he did feel bad for his tone.

She picked a speck of fluff from her shoulder, then gave him a brisk smile.

'Listen, Wilbur, reality is different in death. And it takes some getting used to. On the train, you will be in the world of the Dead. But when the train stops, you will, Old Bean, be going back in time. As a ghost. Back to a very real and living world. Then, at the final destination, *eternity*.'

'Eternity? You mean, heaven?'

'Well, that depends.'

'On?'

'On how heavenly you find the idea of seeing people again.'

'You mean I could see Maggie there?'

'When she dies, yes. Yes, you will. Other people too. People you knew in life. Your brother, Dougie, for instance . . .'

He shook his head in disbelief.

'In fact,' qualified Agnes, 'in eternity you see whoever you want to see. You are free. And happy – or you could be . . . All that jazz.'

'Could be?'

'Yes. The happiness is dependent on how you view your life. That's the whole point of this train. It's to help you understand your life . . . to really know what it has been. Now, your moment has come, Old Bean. Ticket, please.'

He looked around. He noticed the train station wasn't really a

station at all. It was just a platform. And the platform was barely longer than the train. The paved ground ended in a ragged line, like a torn piece of paper, and beyond that: nothing.

The whole place seemed suspended in the cosmos.

There was, quite literally, nowhere to go.

So, after a few seconds of deliberation, Wilbur walked towards Agnes and handed her the ticket. And, feeling a sense of apprehension, he stepped on board.

The Yellow Sky

It was an old-fashioned set-up. Instead of there being rows of seats there were just two long cushioned benches facing each other. The cushions were covered in a rich green velvet. The floors were wooden and varnished. The walls, around the windows, were dark panelled wood.

The train started to move. It travelled smoothly at first, and Wilbur stayed standing rigidly still, looking out of the window.

The sign saying 'Wilbur' slid out of view.

'Off we go,' smiled Agnes.

He waited tentatively to see what would happen when the train left the platform and went into the nothingness.

And what happened was that it moved into a kind of swirling darkness, where the occasional strand of light wound through the black like strands of cotton.

Wilbur then noticed his reflection.

It was a shock.

He really was a young man again. His face was smooth apart from the broad sideburns. His hair was to his shoulders. And chestnut-brown, not grey. And it had a bit of its old bounce to it. He had good posture. He looked like 1974. Healthy in a mildly hippyish way. He had never liked his looks at the time but he now realised that, back then, he was really not a bad-looking man. He stood up a bit taller.

'Steady,' he muttered as the train juddered, quite violently, for a few seconds. This caused him to fall back onto a seat.

'You are the age at which you came closest to your true self,'

said Agnes. 'That's a small quirk of ghosts and a rather appealing one, I feel. Call me sentimental.'

Wilbur glanced down at his own short-sleeved shirt and his flared jeans. He remembered them from photographs.

'*Venice*,' he said. His first time abroad. 'I am the age I was when I was on my honeymoon. I am twenty-nine years old.'

'Yes, so that means that was when you were, well, most *you*.'

He turned to the window again. It was like looking out on an unusual kind of Impressionist painting.

There was a slightly uncanny yellow, jaundiced sky. In the background, an indecipherable blur of people and objects. But in the foreground, things were a little clearer.

Buildings that didn't seem quite fixed, slightly bobbing around, more like boats in the sea than structures solidly attached to land.

'So where are we? Where is this train going?'

'Not where, Wilbur,' she said, with a mirthless chuckle. '*When*?'

True Self

It wasn't night, but it wasn't day, and nor was it anything in between.

The sky, Wilbur would soon realise, was like memory itself. It could contain everything at once.

A war plane tilted at a dangerous angle.

'That's your father's plane . . . the one he tried to navigate through enemy fire.'

Wilbur stared up at the old Hurricane. 'What? How do you know that?'

'I told you. I am the universe. I don't mean to sound immodest but I know everything about your past, even before it was your past . . . And what we are seeing now are the memories you never lived but which are inside you, facts pressed deep into you from before you even heard them.'

The plane exploded into the sky and disappeared. Wilbur searched for it but it was gone and he felt its absence like a grief reborn. He had imagined the event a thousand times over, had spent countless hours as a child staring up to the clouds and thinking about it, wondering what his father had thought in his final moments. It was a strange thing, to grieve someone he had never known. The man who died a hero months before he was born. To see the ripples in a pond but never the heavy stone that caused them. And it was even stranger, now, to see how quick his father's death had been, given how long he had spent thinking about it.

He felt a tight panic in his chest. An overwhelming, gasping grief as if it had only just happened.

Instinctively, he closed his eyes.

Agnes spoke to him.

'It's a lot to absorb, admittedly. I understand that. But you must look out of the window where possible. I don't mean to be pedantic, but the whole point of a life flashing before your eyes is that you see it.'

So Wilbur forced himself to look.

Outside, things were getting a little more real. The shape of a city was emerging. Low roofs of terraced houses. A distant steeple. The clock tower of a town hall. Wilbur noted the landscape was no longer bobbing about.

And then, with a mechanical sigh and wheeze, the train came to a halt.

'So what happens now?' Wilbur asked, his heart still racing from witnessing his father's death in the sky.

'You get off the train. And then, when you hear it again, you get back on. It's really very simple.'

Outside the window he saw a broken wall and an expanse of rubble. At first, he saw nothing much else.

Agnes smiled, like an apprehensive parent at the school gates. 'Off you go, Old Bean. Your past is waiting. But promise me one thing: you get back on the train when it arrives. Promise?'

Wilbur didn't have a reason not to return to the train. He didn't want to miss eternity, after all. 'I promise.'

And then he walked to the door at the front of the carriage, ready to step off.

The Time Traveller

He opened the carriage door.

He was now somewhere quite light.

Sunshine and pretty cotton-wool clouds. He looked around and saw the rubble. Acres of dust and bricks. Fragments of walls, like lost pieces of a giant jigsaw.

There was a billboard on one wall, still mostly intact. An old-fashioned advert. An elaborate illustration of a swan standing on a box of matches.

It was all distantly familiar, but he couldn't place it until he caught sight of the row of Victorian houses.

He knew this street. It was Glossop Road. In his hometown. Sheffield.

He was back on the same street in the north of England he had known as a child. The one that had been bombed by the Germans at the start of the war and which still looked like a wasteland years later.

'Oh my,' muttered Wilbur. He had never been able to process the scale of things or the truth of difficult emotions. So even now, he was reliant on understated mutterings to comfort him. *Oh my*.

Then there was a noise. Or, more accurately, a collection of noises. Boys, yelling at each other. He looked a little further along the street and saw them.

Children dressed from another age – from the 1945 he was born in. Long grey shorts and high socks, shirts, one with a tank top, shouting and playing football.

A little further down from the football, there was a man with a sack of coal on his back.

The past. The actual past right there in front of him. As real as it was when he lived it.

Wilbur began to move across the rubble. It felt good to be walking. His legs and hips and back so young and loose again.

As he approached the street he recognised one of the boys. The smallest, reluctantly forced to stand in goal. The familiar resting scowl there on Dougie's face. Thin as a rail. Knobble-kneed. One of his shoes coming off the sole at the front. Must have been about seven years old.

'Dougie . . .? Dougie . . .'

He was close now. Close enough, surely, for his brother to see him.

'Dougie . . . Dougie . . . it's me, Wilbur . . . Dougie, lad!'

Dougie pulled at a thread on his tatty tank top. Not even a flicker of response.

He just can't see me. I really am a ghost.

A thought confirmed when someone kicked the football and he flinched as it headed in a low arc towards him, then through his chest and out his back without him feeling a thing.

Here, in the land of the living, he was a mere observer.

A tall boy ran through him too and collided with Dougie. Dougie went flying to the ground. And Dougie being Dougie, didn't take it too well.

'Hey, Bobby, watch it! Idiot!'

'You mardy little pillock.'

Bobby Thomas. Thirteen years from now you will be arrested for a series of burglaries over on the Ecclesall Road and sent to Leeds Prison.

And as for Dougie . . .

The other boys stood around chuckling. Dougie pulled himself to his feet and swung at Bobby, a boy almost twice the size of him.

Dougie pounded at him with an infinite fury and put up a reasonably even fight for a little while.

'Oh, Dougie, lad,' sighed Wilbur. 'You really were always this way, weren't you?'

'Bobby, get off him,' one of the boys said. 'Get off him, that's his mam.'

And then he saw it was true. There was a woman pushing a pram along the pavement.

Dougie's mother. Wilbur's mother. Edith.

She was wearing a floral summer dress that she would have made herself. She looked flush-cheeked and lost, in a kind of trance. Then she saw Dougie fighting and her face switched. Instantly hardened. She left the pram and walked over, as determined as a dog at the butcher's.

'Dougie, you little blighter, get here now!'

By this point Bobby had laid off but Dougie was still flailing at him. Wilbur watched Dougie grimace as their mother quickly reached for his ear and yanked him away.

'Mam,' Wilbur said, as she walked right through him.

Before she reached the pram, the baby began to cry.

It was only then that he realised the baby he was listening to was himself.

The Dead Gazing at Their Past

It was strangely reassuring, hearing himself cry. He didn't really know why that was. Maybe it was because being a baby was the most optimistically pure phase of life: you would cry when you were distressed and expect a solution.

'Mam, get off me . . .' said Dougie, as the other boys resumed playing.

Wilbur followed them all along the street, right to number 77. He remembered the door having flaked and scabbed paint but it hadn't got to that stage yet.

'If your dad was here he'd knock you into next week.'

'Dad's dead, Mam. Hitler got him.'

She clipped the back of Dougie's head. 'Stop that talk out in the street.'

'But he is.'

'I bloody know that, lad. Left us with nothing but another mouth to feed, didn't he.'

And she stared down at baby Wilbur, like he was another problem she could really do without. She'd found a way through her grief. And it was called resentment.

She opened the door. Tilted the pram and pushed baby Wilbur inside. Dougie followed, picking at his tank top again. The door shut. Wilbur tried to push it open and found himself stepping right through.

He was back in the house where he was born. Back in the small living room, made smaller by brown wallpaper, the laundry drying

on racks that didn't fully fit in the kitchen, and the ridiculously oversized table.

It wasn't really a table, he remembered. It was a steel air-raid shelter the government had given to people who didn't have a garden, and therefore couldn't have the larger and more secure outside shelters. When he was little he liked sitting under it. It made him feel safe, as though the father he had never known was still around.

Maybe he had *been around. Maybe that was all ghosts were. The dead gazing at their past.*

It was dawning on him: he was really back here. Being dead wasn't to step out of time, but to step out of its usual rules.

He walked into the room.

Dougie was sulking in the armchair, while their mother picked baby Wilbur out of the pram. She put him on her shoulder as Wilbur walked closer. He had a good look at himself.

'Hello, me,' he said.

Then he realised something. Something quite remarkable. The baby's eyes had been floating around and then they had fixed. The baby was looking at him. This little living Wilbur was, somehow, staring at his dead self.

The Ghost

'Hello? Wilbur? It's me . . . you.' He waved at his baby self. Then moved a little. The baby's eyes followed him, there was no doubt about it. 'I'm the ghost of you. Yes. You are me and I am . . . the Ghost.'

He could no longer think of himself as Wilbur, but as a ghost of who he had been.

'I was once you . . . My life is over now. And what happens at the end of life is you get to travel through your life.'

The Ghost smiled broadly. Then the baby began to cry.

'I'm sorry,' the Ghost soothed. 'I'm so sorry.'

His mother went to the kitchen and tipped out her purse. And then, with great worry and care and trembling hands, she meticulously put every single coin, even every halfpenny and farthing, into separate piles to be counted. The Ghost stood beside her and pointlessly told her that one day he was going to buy her a house.

'Oh, George,' she said, softly, as the tenderness got the better of her. 'I wish you were here. I wish you hadn't left me alone with another mouth to feed.'

She stood there a while, lost to emotion, and then brought her attention back to Dougie.

'Now, listen. I'll be back later. I will be back at nine when I finish at the Queen's Head. You look after Wilbur.'

'But what if he's hungry?'

'He won't be hungry.'

'What if I'm hungry?'

'Dougie . . . you had your dinner.'

'Mashed potatoes! Jimmy Gower gets steak and kidney pie.'

Edith sighed. 'Good for Jimmy Gower . . .'

Two minutes after Edith left the house, the Ghost was watching his brother trying to cope with a crying baby.

'Wait there, Wilbur,' he told the baby tenderly. 'I've got something to show you.'

And then he thundered up the narrow staircase. The Ghost looked behind. Saw Dougie's shoes in the kitchen, the sole hanging off one and the leather dusty and cracked.

Dougie stepped down the stairs seconds later, delicately this time, with a toy train, precariously holding the front and three carriages, letting the two in the middle dangle a little in the air.

'Do you know what this is?'

The Ghost watched the obliviousness of his baby self.

'This is the *Duke of Gloucester*! The greatest train there ever was! A three-cylinder express passenger engine! The first in all the world!'

The baby gave a little cry and clenched his tiny hands, his face red. It was probably a bit of colic, but it passed.

'No!' said Dougie. 'It's all right, I promise you.'

All his life Wilbur had thought the train was something his mother had saved for, because, of course, he'd never had a recollection of this day or of what his brother proceeded to confess.

'I got it from Redgates! It's a giant toy shop. I saw it in't window 'cause it's on the way to school. And I know stealing is wrong but it's also wrong that a little bairn didn't get a toy like all the other bairns did just 'cause Adolf shot their dad out the clouds. I told Mam that a kid at school was moving house and clearing out his toys and I dunno if she believed us but she let me keep it.'

The Ghost stared down at his young six-month-old face looking up with wide-eyed gurgling love at Dougie and the train.

'You're smiling!' Dougie said, with a tenderness that surprised the Ghost. 'Wilbur, that's a smile on yer face!

The moment ended with a hard knocking against the door and Dougie placing the train on the floor and the baby back in the cot.

'Back in a minute, Wilbur! I'll see who it is!'

And who it was happened to be the man Dougie hated more than any other in the world.

Mr Parkin

The man at the door was tall and slim and was wearing a smart suit and an expression of stern indifference.

The Ghost instantly recognised him.

Mr Parkin, the landlord.

Back in those days, he had owned all the houses on Glossop Road, and many beyond. And since the war he had been raising rents to account for the houses that had been destroyed by bombs. Which seemed to Wilbur's mother doubly unfair. Because not only had he killed her husband – taking the main income with him – but now, from beyond the grave, Hitler was raising her rent too.

And just then Wilbur's baby self began to cry again from across the room, and cry so hard that it took the Ghost a moment or two to hear a shrill but distant whistle, and the mechanical chug of a train.

Wilbur heard the sound of the train and saw it arrive on the street behind an oblivious Mr Parkin. Plumes of steam headed to the sky. As invisible to the living as it was vivid to Wilbur. But he stayed watching the scene.

'Is your mammy there?' Mr Parkin asked. There was a soft creep to his voice, or at least that is how the Ghost had always thought of it. Like a panther treading through undergrowth.

'No. She's working.'

Dougie's face was defiant. The Ghost thought about how it must have been for him, feeling he had to be a protector while still a young lad.

'Well, it's Friday. Did she leave the money for me?'

Dougie shrugged. 'Don't think so.'

Mr Parkin raised his eyebrows. 'You don't think so . . . It's very important, little Douglas, for people to keep their promises . . . And I am afraid your mother is very bad at that. You must not follow in her footsteps. God said that when a man takes a vow he must not break his word. That is there in the Holy Bible.'

'I don't like the Bible much,' Dougie said with a familiar fearlessness. 'Apart from the story of the Ark. I like that Noah saved the animals.'

'I like the story of the Ark too,' smiled Mr Parkin, for a moment looking almost kindly. The Ghost certainly had never remembered him as kindly. He had always been just a strict and unscrupulous, evil landlord, but you can't live for over eight decades without realising people were always complicated. Or that there was something internal that pulled against the external perception. 'I like that Noah rose to the challenge and got the Ark done on time. And speaking of being on time, tell your mother that I am a generous man, but my generosity runs out. And I will return tomorrow morning . . . I am *not* a charity, tell her.'

And with that, he turned on his heels and walked two mere steps to the house next door, where he knocked again, after another rent payment.

Dougie shut the door, and Wilbur saw the worry on his brother's face – nine-tenths fury, one-tenth fear – and he wanted to soothe him.

'It's all right, Dougie.'

It sounded hollow, even to a ghost.

Then came another voice.

'Oh dear, Old Bean. Falling at the first hurdle . . .'

She was right there, beside him, as unseen by the living as the train.

'Agnes.'

'You promised to head to the train the moment you heard it . . .' Agnes was exasperated. 'Don't dilly-dally. Hop on board.'

Wilbur took one last look at Dougie and said a goodbye before walking back through the bricks and climbing the metal steps of the front carriage. As he did so, he noticed there were no visible rail tracks. Not like what he had seen back at the ghostly station. And yet, as the train started to chug away from that day, it did so smooth and straight and with a tightness that suggested the tracks were there.

'I saw me.'

'That's what it's all about.'

'No. I mean, the baby version of me could see . . .' He made a flapping gesture to himself.

Agnes nodded nonchalantly. 'Well, that's quite possible. Babies are the biggest of all the mysteries in the universe, and no one understands them.'

'So, when I see my older self, will they see me too?'

She looked stern for a moment. 'No. And in the unlikely event that they could, you don't try and get their attention. You don't meddle, Wilbur. You accept. That's the way to eternity. The only way. There are rules. You get on and off the train as required. You never try and speak to yourself. And you must *never* be there when you fall asleep. One, two, three. Do you understand?'

He didn't. Nor did he understand why her tone was so forbidding. 'Look, I am grateful you chose to be my guide. But I don't know why it has to be like this. I am already dead. Why the need to be so strict? You were kind to me in the bookshop, when I was little. You talked to me about stories I should read . . .'

She looked at Wilbur like he was missing the point. 'It would be unkind of me *not* to be a little strict, Wilbur. Now, you brought up stories. What is a story if not the product of following the rules? Even my favourite author, the great Mr Raymond Chandler – known more for his style than his plots – well, he said that his

style was "the product of discipline, of a carefully trained sensibility". And as with stories, so with life. And even – no, *especially* – death. Without discipline you will never understand your own story, without discipline you will not stay the course, without discipline you will not make it to the eternal destination at the end of the line. Following the rules is a bore. But it is also the only way.'

'But a writer changes things. A writer *edits*.'

Agnes was confused by this and pouted a little to contemplate it. 'I must admit you have a point. A very small one, but a point nevertheless. But the fact of it is that I am trying to look after you here.'

It sounded strange, to have someone looking after him. After all, he was dead. Yet he had to admit he quite liked it. He liked Agnes's antiquated and rather unyielding manner. His last few decades of life had been quite structureless, and lonely. He had floated to earth like a sycamore seed. And he imagined that to navigate something as wild as death needed someone who knew the rules. Especially as train travel was involved. And yet, a question remained.

'But what if there are things that I did wrong?'

Agnes's face abruptly softened. A smile emerged, accompanied by a tender laugh. 'That, Old Bean, means you have lived.'

It Goes By So Fast

Outside the window, debris from his childhood sped by:

A glimpse of his wrought-iron school gates.

Himself on a bed reading a library book – *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood*.

The haberdasher where he spent hours as a young boy as his mother chose fabrics for clothes or curtains.

Walking out of Bagdale's Bookshop empty-handed and heading back to the library.

He stood up and moved through the train as it rolled along its invisible track. Eventually he sat down on the long parallel seats covered with green velvet.

Staring out, he saw Mr Parkin's umbrella resting in the kitchen.

He kept on seeing his mother, getting cross with Dougie, or staring at young Wilbur like he was a problem she could do without.

Then, something happier.

A house with unseen walls. The house wasn't any he had lived in. But he was there, a young, slight-shouldered boy, standing amid a crowded living room of children and adults, watching television for the first time.

'The second of June 1953,' he said aloud, as if answering a question in a pub quiz instead of sitting alone in a carriage. The Queen's coronation, he remembered. Mrs Yelland's house. Number 40. The first on their road to get a television. All he really remembered about that day was food. It was one of the rare days of his childhood where his stomach didn't rumble even once. Fish-paste sandwiches and coronation chicken.

And then it disappeared out of view as the train moved on through time.

This troubled him. The speed he was travelling. He hadn't had that many truly monumentally good days in his childhood, but that had been one of them and so he wondered why the train hadn't stopped. Maybe there would be no stopping again until his death. Maybe that was it. Maybe you see yourself as a baby and you see yourself dying and everything flashes in between. Perhaps there were only bookends.

But, no, he felt the train begin to slow again and he saw himself on his bed, reading.

He looked out of the opposite window.

An Elvis Presley record spinning on the old turntable at the Milk Bar, where Dougie took him one Saturday.

Then that faded, dissolved into nothing along with everything else, and in no time at all, the Midnight Train had come to a stop.

Dust

He was inside Bagdale's Bookshop.

It was quite dark, darker than he could remember it, and dust hung in the air on shafts of sunlight.

There was a boy of about thirteen years perusing a shelf of books. A tall, slightly intense-looking boy, now pulling out a copy of *The Old Man and the Sea*.

The Ghost stood there watching as a man in a cardigan and thick-rimmed glasses spotted the boy and hobbled over to him.

'Mr Bagdale,' muttered the Ghost, as the man walked right through his ghostly body on something of a furious mission. The shop owner was only in his late forties but looked twenty years older. He had a lopsided gait and a croak in his voice attributable to pipe smoke and whisky.

'You!' said Mr Bagdale.

But young Wilbur was already on the first page, and lost in the simplicity of the sentences.

'I said *you there*!'

The Ghost remembered this. Or at least thought he did. But this was not the only time it had happened. It was something of a pattern.

Wilbur turned around. 'Oh. Hello, sir.' This was, after all, the era when every adult man with a cross look on his face – there were a lot of them – was an automatic 'sir'.

'Is there any chance that you will be buying this book? The one which you are tarnishing . . .? Or is this your usual Saturday routine of clogging up the place without a penny in your pocket?'

Bagdale's Bookshop was now a very different proposition to the

one when Mrs Agnes Bagdale had been in charge. Young Wilbur had never known what it was like back then, but he had overheard people talk about it. His new English teacher, Miss Graham, for one, had reminisced about the 'days when you could go in and trip over a dog and land in a happy pile of detective novels'. It was a bit more formal now, and the books were all on shelves. It had lost its chaos, but also its customers.

Unlike his mother, Mr Arthur Bagdale didn't really care about books – or readers or authors – and was just running it like any other business. One where readers didn't count unless they were spending. And, of course, Wilbur had no money to spend.

'If you aren't buying a book, get out of here, lad.'

Then came the sound of tutting from behind the counter. Wilbur turned – along with his ghost – to see an old and frail woman sitting there, reading a novel called *The Long Goodbye*.

'Oh, Arthur, leave the boy alone,' she said.

'Agnes,' said the Ghost, realising it was her.

'Stay out of this, Mother, this isn't your shop any more.'

Agnes smiled a sly little smile. 'I know that. Because my shop had actual customers.'

Mr Bagdale reached for the hip flask in his pocket. Took a swig. 'Well, this boy is not a customer. He is a browser. That is why I got rid of the chairs, Mother. We don't want people just sitting there, reading . . .'

'Oh yes, wouldn't that be terrible,' she said with a wheeze. 'A bookshop with readers.'

'Mother, please.'

'Books are there to be read. And a good rule for a bookshop is to let people fall in love with books. Not that you have followed any of the rules I've told you . . .'

'I am running a business here, Mother, not a public library.'

'Thought you were running a distillery,' she grumbled, 'with all that tasting you are doing.'

'I've tidied the place up. I don't need your rules. It used to be a mess, Mother.'

'It was a happy mess that followed some very strict thinking. Rules should be there to help. To let things live. You don't have rules. You just have a grouchy temperament, Arthur. You need to read more.'

And then she looked at the young Wilbur, after Mr Bagdale yanked the book from him to squeeze it back on the shelf. She placed her book down on her lap. She had no hat, these days, but her white hair was short and elegant, and she wore a red knitted shawl.

'Don't worry about him, Old Bean.'

The Ghost smiled. It was strangely reassuring to remember that he had been called Old Bean by Agnes even when he was twelve years old. And then – something else he remembered – the old lady pulled out her little purse and put some shillings down on the counter. 'There. You should read it. It's a good book . . .'

Mr Bagdale gave her a scornful look. 'Mother! We can't be giving books away!'

'It's not giving . . . It's paying. I am paying with my own pension for a book.'

Wilbur felt awkward, and a little ashamed. He knew his brother would not have hesitated to take it. Hell, Dougie would have already shoved the book up his jacket and walked out with it. 'It's all right. I can get it from the library . . .'

And Wilbur quickly walked out and into a grey afternoon as his ghost stood there, watching the front of the Midnight Train arrive right inside the shop.

Agnes's ghost leaned out. She looked first to her old self and then to her son, taking another swig from his flask. It was hard to read her face, or what she was thinking. But her tight little smile seemed to be fighting back some powerful emotion. 'Come on, Wilbur . . . Let's be on our way.'

Acceptance

'We don't have long till the next stop,' said Agnes, as Wilbur watched old schooldays flash by.

'So you saw your whole life flash by too?'

'Yes. Once upon a time.'

'And how was that? Was it hard?'

She smiled and swallowed and said, 'It's always hard. In places. But this is how I see it – a book can contain infinite emotion but when you have finished you close it and put it back on the shelf . . . What choice do we have except to, well, *accept*?'

'I don't know . . .'

'Anyway, Old Bean. Look. We're stopping . . .'

Out of one side of the carriage Wilbur was at the library, out of the other he was reading a comic with his friend Charlie. And then everything faded, as it tended to do when the train reached a stopping point.

'When is this?'

'Oh. Nothing important. Only the first time you ever saw her . . .'

The First Time He Ever Saw Her

He was there again.

Glossop Road.

Looking around he saw he was in *almost* the exact same place the train had stopped before. Only on the road itself now.

He saw the rubble had been cleared away. In its place was a small row of newly built red-brick council houses.

And then the Ghost turned around and saw himself in his scruffy school uniform and tattered shoes with holes in the toes – sitting out on the doorstep reading Hemingway with a frowning expression of focus.

He did this a lot, he remembered. He probably read the whole library out there. Books for kids, books for grown-ups. Ageless tale after ageless tale. *The Three Musketeers*, *Treasure Island*, *Frankenstein*, *The Moon and Sixpence*, *The Secret Garden*, *Rebecca*, *Moby-Dick*, *The Call of the Wild*, *Cold Comfort Farm*, Kafka's short stories, and a strange and exciting science-fiction novel called *The Invention of Morel* that he had picked up because the author was from Argentina and he wondered what imaginations were like so far away.

Stories were his playground. They were his freedom. Through them he could imagine himself a rich man, an adventurer, a hero, a villain, or simply incredibly well-fed. Depending on the tale, he could picture himself surviving hardship or living in greatness. They gave him room to exist beyond the red bricks and restricted life of Glossop Road.

The Ghost remembered them all. Sometimes, like today, it was

a book he had first laid eyes on in Bagdale's, and sometimes just something he had happened upon while at the library.

'Oh, Wilbur,' sighed the Ghost.

Wilbur looked up from the page to have a little break to think about something. He was casting his eyes further along the pavement, seeing in the distance the glimmer of smashed glass from a beer bottle. Then he went back to reading again.

He had been encouraged by his English teacher, Miss Graham, to view books as a means to an end, towards opportunities in his life. But for Wilbur, reading was more than that. He didn't read because he wanted a good job. Though he absolutely *did* want a good job, when the time arrived. But no. He read because stories gave him room to grow beyond the world he was given. They helped him feel as if the lives he read about intertwined with his own, like threads in an ever-expanding rope. Stories made him strong.

Whenever the weather was warm or even mild he would sit outside on the street reading. He wasn't and had never been the most social of creatures, but he had always liked to be out in the world rather than retreating from it.

Sometimes, if boys were playing football out in the street, he would get a jeer or two, but generally he was left alone. Everyone knew who his brother was, and Dougie was nineteen now and would gladly and enthusiastically punch anyone in the face who disrespected his family. He would possibly even bite them too, as he was something of an animal.

Wilbur the Ghost walked over.

Once there he stood for a little moment, then crouched down beside himself with ease. He had the hip mobility of a twenty-nine-year-old once more.

'You loved that book, didn't you?' he said to his young self. 'What's this? Your second or third time reading it?'

Obviously there was no response. The consciousness of young Wilbur was on a different plane to the consciousness of his spectral

form. But remembering how his baby self had followed him with his eyes, he held out hope and placed a hand in front of young Wilbur's eyes. And waved it.

'Come on. Look. Can you see me? You saw me once, little lad. Can you see me again?'

But no. Not a glimmer from those studious eyes.

Two girls were walking along the pavement. They were in uniform but not that of Willow Park. About the same age as Wilbur or a smidge older. They were from De la Salle, the grammar school on the other side of town. This wasn't unusual. Glossop Road ran all the way into town and was often full of young folk from all over the city after school hours, heading to browse shops or sit in the Milk Bar listening to rock and roll.

The girl on the right had red hair and freckles and a scrunched-up expression that seemed to indicate a hard and humorous attitude to life.

The other girl was holding her satchel in front of her. In contrast to her friend there was a calmness to her. This was the first time he ever saw her, the first time he noted her smile or the intelligence of her eyes.

It was Maggie.

He remembered this day. And it was, he supposed, why he was stopping here. There were days in life that rolled by and were never really thought of again. And then there were days that were so beloved or important that they contained inside them everything that came after. Russian doll days, that were always inside the expanding future.

And so now he was watching it all once more, in vivid detail.

The girl with the red hair – named Doreen Taylor, he would later find out – nudged her friend to point out the amusing sight ahead of them. The strange skinny boy reading outside on the street. And he could see now what he had never seen the first time. The moment Maggie Shaw first laid her eyes on him. Her expression seemed to contain amusement, curiosity and sympathy.

Then Doreen spoke up.

'Flippin' 'eck, Maggie, there's a boy sitting out in't street thinking it's a library.'

'Don't worry 'bout her,' said Maggie, needling her friend. 'She's never read a book.'

'I can tell.' Wilbur suppressed a slight smile.

Maggie laughed.

Doreen lost her humour. 'Cheeky wazzock.' And she elbowed Maggie towards the wall a little.

'So what are you reading?' said Maggie, tilting her head to see the cover.

'*The Old Man and the Sea*.'

'What's that about, then?'

'It's about this old fisherman who's really unlucky because he hasn't caught a fish in ages but then one day he catches a fish but it's too big to put on his boat and—'

'That sounds as dull as owt,' said Doreen.

'Aye, it does a bit, to be fair,' Maggie agreed. 'I've been reading *How Green Was My Valley*. I like it. The characters are like people but better because you don't have to talk to them.'

Wilbur looked up at her and stood up. There was something about her that made him want to be taller. 'Yes. Not many folk are worth talking to.'

Doreen nodded. 'My dad says that. He's miserable too.' Then, randomly: 'He's a foreman at Hawke Street.'

'It's the steel works,' explained Maggie.

'I know.'

'Does your dad work there?' Doreen asked. 'Maybe my dad's your dad's boss?'

'No. Well, he used to. He died in the war. He was in the air force. I never knew him.'

And Maggie's face flinched just a little, as if some of his pain had splintered and shot through the air just by saying it. She was

then and always as incapable of hiding emotion on her face as a river was able to hide the ripples from a fallen stone. And the Wilbur of 1958 clearly felt rotten for sending the conversation downward.

'Sorry,' Doreen said. She wasn't too bad underneath it all. 'That's horrid.'

'Don't be. It's all right. You can't miss someone you never knew.' Possibly the biggest lie he ever told. He wanted to change the subject. 'I'd like to be a writer.'

He didn't know, even at the time, if that was what he wanted to be. But in that moment he did. In that moment he wanted to be whoever had written *How Green Was My Valley*.

'Nah. Really?' said Doreen. 'Do you, honest like? Aren't writers lettuces?'

'Lettuces?' Maggie asked.

'Aye, big and boring wet things that people say do you good.'

He showed her the front cover of his book, and remembered something Miss Graham had told him. 'Ernest Hemingway is not a lettuce. He blew up Nazi submarines in his own boat with his own explosives.'

'Marilyn doesn't think writers are dull,' added Maggie. 'She's married to one.'

Doreen tilted her head. 'Is she 'eck as like!'

'She is!'

'Marilyn Monroe?'

'Aye. Unless you know of any other Marilyns.'

'But she could have Rock Hudson. She could have Marlon Brando . . .' Her eyes widened at her own expanding revelations. 'She could have *Elvis Presley*. What is she doing with a *writer*?'

The mystery hung in the air for a while.

'I don't know,' Maggie said. 'It's odd. Maybe she just likes him.' She smiled at Wilbur and he smiled back and his ghost stood there understanding, like they didn't, the enormity of this moment. 'I

think I'd like to be a writer, actually,' she continued. 'Better than being a secretary or a housewife.'

Doreen looked disgusted. 'Is it? I can't *wait* to be a housewife. I'm going to be like a Catholic and have twenty babies.'

As the Ghost watched, he thought of Doreen the last time he saw her, in about 1980. She had just left her slob of a husband and their fish and chip shop to finally find love and self-acceptance with a woman called Rosie who she had met on holiday in Lyme Regis, while perusing postcards. Looking at her now, Wilbur could see the sadness in her, a desperate and overcompensating effort to be something society was ready to accept.

Meanwhile, young Wilbur watched Maggie laugh and was momentarily mesmerised.

'Nineteen boys and one girl,' Doreen said. 'Called Jacqueline. Little Jackie. I can see her pigtails. Anyway, I thought you wanted to be an artist.'

Maggie was a bit embarrassed then. 'Not really . . .'

'She likes drawing,' Doreen explained. 'She's really good. She can even do horses.'

Maggie changed the subject. 'We're off into town. You can come with us if you want. We're off to the Milk Bar.'

'Aye,' said Doreen. 'You look like you need a milkshake.'

Wilbur thought about this. His mother wouldn't care. She would be off out in a minute anyway to begin her shift. But he had no money at all except a few farthings in his jam jar upstairs, and he doubted that would be enough for a drink.

'I don't know,' he said.

Maggie looked at his shoes. At the small hole in one of the toes. He felt the shame of it.

'Our treat,' she told him, meeting his eyes. And there was something about the way she looked at him that made him feel better, like she didn't judge him in the slightest. And that might have been it, that might have been the seed that was planted in

his mind, that would years later bloom into the courage needed to ask her out.

'Yeah,' he said. 'I will come along.'

But then, as so often when young Wilbur had been on the cusp of happiness, reality snatched it from him. As though he had a reverse guardian angel, trying to test him, trying to sour him and make him bitter ahead of time.

The Broken Glass

'Oh no,' said the Ghost out loud to himself. 'I remember this.'

And he looked and saw it before they did: the car, which would soon come and pull up right beside them.

Not just any old car either.

An all-gleaming, elegant black Wolseley smoothing along the road as ominously as a panther. The kind of car that in the twenty-first century would only be seen carrying a bride to a wedding. But this one had a blue and white sign saying POLICE on it just above the front windscreen. Wilbur stood up, burning with shame, and started walking down the street a little way.

'Wait up,' said Maggie.

Wilbur didn't know what to do, so he stopped and just stood there, facing the car and the two policemen on the front seats.

'Have they come for you?' whispered Doreen, making light of it. 'For reading dull, fishy books in the street?'

'No.'

Wilbur had already seen his brother on the back seat. The policeman in the passenger seat stepped out of the car. He had a long solemn face which stared straight at Wilbur.

'Ooh,' said Doreen, as the policeman opened the rear door and out stepped Dougie. This was 1958 Dougie. Rebel-mode Dougie. Greased-back hair and tightly buttoned shirt and drainpipe jeans and white socks and large brogues he called his beetle-crushers. The one who pinned Wilbur up against the wall in arguments and stole his food when their mother wasn't looking.

Doreen's voice was deliberately loud enough for all to hear. 'Who's that wrong 'un?'

Wilbur shrugged. He turned back to the girls quickly, but not fast enough to avoid Dougie's eye. 'No idea.'

Dougie was sharp when he wanted to be. He'd heard all this. The Ghost could see the hurt in his face.

'Well, that's charming, Wilbo.'

Doreen laughed. Maggie grimaced at the awkwardness. Young Wilbur turned to face the scene.

'Is your mam in?' the police officer asked him.

'I don't know,' sighed Wilbur.

'Yes you do,' said his ghost. 'Don't lie to the police officer.'

But, of course, it didn't really matter. What was going to happen was going to happen, and he couldn't do anything but watch. Which was all a ghost could do.

Wilbur stared at Maggie and wanted to telepathically convey that he wasn't just a bad little brother ashamed of his sibling. That his life was complicated.

And somehow the way Maggie was looking at him made him feel she understood. That was one of her gifts. The way she could read the whole book of someone from a single page.

Dougie, meanwhile, was smiling a rare smile. Wilbur hadn't caught that smile at the time but his ghost did now. It was an interesting character trait: that the closest Dougie ever got to contentment was when the trouble inside his head was aligned with the trouble he caused outside it.

'You're a dark horse, lad,' he said, looking at Wilbur with the two girls, as both policemen dragged Dougie over to the door of number 77.

'Ooh, we're going to get a show,' giggled Doreen, before getting a sharp elbow from Maggie. 'A matinée.'

Wilbur and his ghost both felt the burn of shame and hurt as

their mother answered the door. She had been drinking the sherry she got cheap from the pub: her cheeks red and her expression dazed. This was a new development. Normally she only drank on her days off or after her shift, not before it.

'Oh Christ, what's he done?'

'Look,' said Wilbur, 'you two better go without me. My mam will need me.'

Doreen giggled. 'We can stay. This is fun.'

'*Reenie*.'

And with that Maggie tugged at her friend's arm to leave, and the Ghost watched his young self stare at them as they walked away, towards ice cream and milkshake and a jukebox.

But suddenly she stopped. Looked around.

'I'm Maggie, by the way,' she said. 'Maggie Shaw. And this is Doreen but I call her Reenie. What do they call you?'

He stood there in his ragged uniform. 'Wilbur. I'm . . . Wilbur.'

'All right, Wilbur.'

'Careful walking down there,' he added, with genuine concern. 'Someone's smashed a bottle and there's glass all over.'

'I see it. Thank you.'

'Knight in shining armour!' laughed Doreen. 'Ashamed of his brother, mind.'

And Maggie giggled a little as they went down the gentle slope of the hill, then turned back and smiled at him.

As he watched Maggie leave he felt embarrassed for her having got a taste of his chaotic life. She looked around once more, the concern and warmth clear and direct. It wasn't love at first sight. But it was a kind of deep and instant friendship, an invisible thread in the air between them that he didn't know how to hold on to.

'See you around, Wilbur.'

Meanwhile the professionally solemn police officer was taking Dougie's flick-knife out of his own pocket.

'We caught him in town, Mrs Budd. Causing trouble with some

other lads. He had this on 'im. They're making it illegal just to own one of these. So, if he gets caught again, he could end up in the nick.'

And the Ghost knew what was ahead. He remembered the family argument that evening. He remembered his mam missing her shift and scratching her skin until the friction made a mark, and crying and becoming ferocious and calling his brother Satan and she seemed to believe it, and he remembered Dougie kicking walls and punching his fist through a window. He remembered lying on his bed trying to escape into his book but unable to concentrate on a single sentence. He remembered Dougie getting drunk on their mother's sherry, and leaning over him and spitting on Wilbur's forehead as he lay in bed.

'You're not better than me, Wilbur . . .'

But to his relief he didn't need to relive all that because just then he heard the loud whistle of a steam train, ready to take him away.

The Portrait

The Midnight Train was going at quite a pace now.

It was hurtling towards its top speed. Although there was no rail track to speak of, there were the continual and ascending sounds any other steam train would make. The whistle, the mechanical chugging, and the brutal clatter of wheels.

Inside the carriage, though, it was quite refined. The green velvet and varnished wood panelling. The elegant carriage signs. There was even, between two of the windows, a framed portrait. A traditional kind of oil painting. Wilbur stood up now to go over for a closer inspection.

Up close, he realised it was a boy. A teenager's face. His own face. The same face he had just seen, sitting on his doorstep, talking to Maggie. A studious, slightly troubled expression.

It took him a second or two to realise that this was no ordinary portrait. As the train kept moving, so did the portrait. His hair grew slowly and suddenly shortened and grew again. His face broadened and hardened a little.

It was ageing, in line with the journey through time.

He sat down opposite it to get a longer look.

'It's a good likeness, Old Bean.'

He jumped and turned to see Agnes, sitting there beside him on the seat.

She smiled. 'Really captures you.'

She caught a glimpse of him outside the window, on his doorstep, reading Oscar Wilde.

'But I should probably point out it's not a portrait-in-the-attic

situation. Quite the opposite. You are getting older in line with the painting. It tells you precisely where – forgive me, *when* – you are. What is that shoddy miracle from the twenty-first century? Satellite navigation. Consider it like that . . . But more beautiful. Because you really are a handsome chap. Or you were, once upon a time. Even if you never realised it. So many young women dreamed of you . . . Even if, really, you only used to dream of one . . .'

The wheels started to clatter with more urgency and Wilbur grasped the seat, feeling a hollow kind of nausea only the dead can feel. 'Why is everything speeding up?'

'That's what life does. Listen, Wilbur, I'd keep your focus out of the window. You don't want to miss too much. These are your young years.'

'Well, there will be some things I very much want to miss.'

'Ah, but the more you pull away from something, the more it finds you.'

He nodded. 'But what if it is something you could never really face? Something that pushed you off the rails every time you were near it?'

Agnes smiled, kindly. 'The Midnight Train doesn't have rails. Not once it is up and running. That's the brilliance of it. It goes where you need to go, whenever that may be. Time is not even.'

Wilbur understood what she was saying. He had lived long enough to know that time and meaning were not shared out equally. Some personal eras were relatively empty. The temporal equivalent of air. And then you would come across a day – or even a minute – and it would have a whole decade's worth of weight. It would be everything. It would have the power to change an entire life.

'The Midnight Train,' continued Agnes, 'goes to the places that, together, at the end, will give you the truest assessment of your existence. That way, when you enter eternity, you will understand yourself completely. The deeper that understanding, the better. That's what it is all about. It's like that Kierkegaard quote. "Life can

only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards." And this train offers a solution. Life *re*lived forwards.'

She smiled again and her eyes shone like a new morning. A kind smile, garnished with equal parts warmth and worry. She was complicated, he realised. More complicated, possibly, than she had been in life. Maybe that was what death did, or eternity. Maybe it complicated a person.

He was going to ask about eternity, for her to tell him more. But she seemed to understand the question before he had spoken it, as though she could see the thoughts crossing his mind as easily as you could see clouds crossing a sky.

'As I have told you,' she said, 'eternity is a movable concept. It is what you make it. To get the most out of it, you need to know yourself. And that is what these windows are for.' She looked a little sad for a moment. But then put on a brisk and professional smile. 'I'll leave you to it. Toodle-pip.'

And it was then that she disappeared right before his eyes.

The Speed of Friendship

Days, weeks, months, years flashed by.

Sometimes it was a blur and sometimes something would appear so near and with such precision he would recognise it instantly.

He saw himself in his best friend Charlie Applewood's living room, playing dominoes in front of a black-and-white game show.

He liked Charlie a lot.

But because he knew Charlie well into adulthood, he had kind of forgotten the teenage Charlie. The Charlie with smart, parted hair and the most pristine short-sleeved white shirt buttoned to the top and the nervous smile.

The one who had been bullied at school and loved comics and B-movies about flying saucers. The Charlie who dreamed of alien abduction and who stuttered when Miss Graham asked him to read out loud. The one for whom listening to music was a religion. The one who cried when Buddy Holly died. The one who always seemed to be nodding his head to a tune he was just playing in his brain. The one who had a mind that could travel far in any direction it was facing. The one who would later on end up an unacknowledged genius of maths and physics, a long-haired hippy, a lover of Joni Mitchell songs and Ursula K. Le Guin stories (thanks to Wilbur's recommendation), then a deep David Bowie fan, then a married father of a daughter who wouldn't be born for another three decades. The one who would work for him. The one who would continue being his best friend until Wilbur blew it.

He remembered the strange atmosphere at Charlie's house. The quiet beyond quiet, even though his parents were in, all because

his dad beat his mam *except* when Charlie had a friend round because they 'put on a show'. It made peace. And Wilbur was not just Charlie's best friend but his *only* real friend at that point in his life. Wilbur thought Charlie was amazing and that the world was stupid to only see the amazing in extroverts and fluent talkers and tough fighters. Charlie could name the square root of 169 and explain the structure of an atom, as well as being the kind of kid who would hum music without knowing he was doing it. They always talked a lot, but always *about things*. In knowing Charlie it became clear that a big reason books and comics and films and music exist is to give people a way to talk about things without talking about them.

He told Wilbur that his book recommendation – *The Count of Monte Cristo* – had made him feel like he could survive anything. But still, Wilbur didn't like seeing his friend picked on. And he was picked on for everything as a thirteen-year-old. The stutter, the humming, the comic books, the narrow shoulders and general look of someone who would fly off in the wind.

Out of the window the Ghost saw his young self getting a bloody nose for sticking up for Charlie at school.

A blink after that he was watching Maggie say 'hello' to him as she walked out of the library as he was going in to study with Charlie. Charlie elbowed him and gave him wide, knowing eyes.

He saw himself writing a poem, after completing all his homework.

And there again was Wilbur and Charlie, this time out on the street watching a flat-capped steeplejack high on a ladder taking down a giant industrial chimney brick by brick.

A world he had thought was long gone, right outside the window.

The Bookshop

Sometimes the biggest moments in a lifetime are also the smallest, pondered the Ghost.

And sometimes people don't quite know they are the biggest moments until you are able to step out of a train and look back at them.

Like getting a holiday job in a bookshop back in 1961, during the school summer holidays.

BOOKSELLER WANTED – MUST BE CLEAN AND OBEDIENT. That had been the sign he'd seen in the window of Bagdale's. So he'd gone the next day – *this day* – looking as clean and obedient as a collie at a dog show.

Agnes Bagdale had died a few weeks before, which had prompted Arthur to get a bit more serious about the shop and hire extra help. Of course, Wilbur was a little worried. Mr Bagdale, after all, had told Wilbur off for reading books without buying them countless times.

So it was lucky that Arthur Bagdale's eyesight wasn't great these days and he didn't seem to recognise Wilbur. Especially as Agnes was no longer there to defend him.

So Wilbur had a general conversation with Mr Bagdale and the grouchiness he had so often seen him display was only just discernible. Things went even better when he found out that Wilbur's dad had been in the RAF. Mr Bagdale told him it was a scandal widows were taxed out of their war widows' pension.

'I lost a lot of my friends in the war,' he said. 'A lot of good men. My best pal was in the air force. He got killed somewhere over Cologne. Poor Jonesy.'

He stared into space for a while, then pulled a hip flask out of his pocket and swigged back, closing his eyes as if in deep prayer.

Then, hip flask back in pocket, he told Wilbur that he'd get the job if he could go up to a customer in the shop and hand-sell a book.

'Um, what? Right now?'

Mr Bagdale tutted, the grouchiness returning. 'No, lad, when they land a man on the moon. Of course, *right now.*'

'All right. Yes. Um. No problem!'

Wilbur scanned the shop and found a young, bespectacled, sleek-haired, arty-looking man from out of town. He went over and chatted to him about the John Coltrane record that he spied in a bag under his arm. Wilbur didn't really like jazz but could feign a convincing interest.

The man told him he was a trumpet player with a London quartet who were playing at the jazz club in the basement of the Hallamshire Hotel.

'Have you read *Absolute Beginners*?'

'No, man.'

'It's about the scene in London. It's about youth and life and jazz. It's got everything.'

The man read the first page and nodded as if listening to music. 'This is my bag, my man. This is the book for me.'

The Ghost felt sad for a moment, thinking about that first sale. The joy of selling books. The joy of joining the right book to the right reader. Like when Charlie had been bullied at school and Wilbur knew he would find strength through the swashbuckling words of Alexandre Dumas.

That was his skill. Like a travel agent of the imagination. And it was a skill he kept through the 1960s. The idea that a novel was a dead daydream that came alive through reading. The joy of matching *A Clockwork Orange* or *The Bell Jar* or *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* to people who would appreciate them was a fine art and he had loved it.

Meanwhile, the living Wilbur took the man over to the till.

'Well,' Mr Bagdale said a little later from somewhere beneath his eyebrows, 'my mother used to do that. And I've never seen anyone else do it quite so well . . . She would hire you. I know she would. I think, young man, you have yourself a job.'

The Big Importance of Small Things

The ghost followed Wilbur out of the shop and all the way to Endcliffe Park, through sun-dappled streets.

He stood and watched his sixteen-year-old self walking across a buzzing road to the park, with adverts for Guinness and Corn Flakes recently painted in bright colours on the sides of the buildings behind him. He was walking to Charlie's house. He had a spring in his step because of the new Saturday job.

A homeless man with a shaggy beard and frayed suit was sat on a bench.

'Hey up, Wilbur, lad. How goes you?'

'Hey there! I'm well, thanks. You?'

'Can't complain. The sun shines down on me. That's all we can ask for, isn't it?'

He saw Victor a lot around town, and always chatted to him. Victor Willows. He had fought in the war two decades before and when he came back he had nothing. His house was bombed and he had lost his family. He held out a tin of coins and gave it a rattle. 'Don't suppose you have a copper or two for a cheeky old beggar?'

'Actually, Victor,' said Wilbur with an amicable smile, 'today you are in luck.'

He liked to give him money when he could. And today he could. He dug deep in his pockets and gave him all he had. Which amounted to three shillings.

'Ta, Wilbur, laddo, and not just for the coins.'

'What for, then?'

He tapped a finger just under his right eye. 'Seeing. Thing is,

Wilbur, this world is full of folk who look but never see. I am looked at a hundred times a day. But not many see. Thanks for seeing, lad. Keep that, lad. Stay seeing . . .'

'I will,' said Wilbur.

'You liar,' muttered his ghost.

The Bench

The Ghost watched his young self walking through the trees.

He walked behind Wilbur at a similar pace now. He was out into the clearing. And that was when he saw Maggie. She was sat on a bench, overlooking the pond and the small rocky waterfall, with a sketch-pad on her knee.

She was so studiously paying attention to her drawing that Wilbur decided to leave her to it and walked right past. There had been an internal debate between his extrovert and introvert side, and the introvert had won. She had looked so lost in the process of drawing he doubted she would want the interference.

'Ignoring me now, are we?'

Unlike Wilbur himself, his ghost could see the smirk on her face as she said it, leaning over her sketch-pad.

'No,' said Wilbur, nervously, as he stopped. 'Not at all.' He turned to see her. It was like facing the sun. She made him feel warm. 'Hello, Maggie.'

'Oh. So you didn't recognise me? Even though I said hello a few weeks ago at the library. I'm that forgettable.'

The Ghost watched his naive sixteen-year-old face turn a shade of crimson.

'You're not forgettable.'

Maggie couldn't contain her laughter. 'I'm just joshing with you. Don't look so scared. It's my twisted sense of humour.'

'Oh. No. It's fine.'

'How have you been?'

'Good. Grand, actually. I've just got a job. At the bookshop.'

'That's fantastic!' she beamed.

'Aye. Bagdale's. Yeah. Selling books beats Hawke Street Steel Works.'

'I can imagine.' She covered her sketch-pad. Embarrassed of her drawing. 'I like drawing but I'm not very good at it.'

'Well, I get that,' said Wilbur. 'I write poems sometimes but I wouldn't want anyone to actually read them.'

'That's a shame. What do you write your poems about?'

'Oh. All sorts of things. Stupid stuff. Clouds. Crows. The war. I wrote one about the Freedom Riders. You know, in America.'

'Ah. Politics.'

'Sometimes. To be fair, it was a really bad poem.'

She smiled warmly and made room for Wilbur to sit next to her. It was the most natural thing in the world. That was one of the things he liked about her. The way she had an impulse to make the awkward feel normal. It was a kind of care.

She was always that person. The one who was just *in tune*. The one who knew that life was easier if you cared about people. She just made life more *natural*.

They talked about different things. They talked about the library and Bagdale's Bookshop. They talked about how they wanted to see the world. They talked about how they quite liked to be spooked – her by Alfred Hitchcock films and him by Shirley Jackson novels. They talked about how weird they sometimes felt, so out of place in their town.

'I feel like no one wants you to think,' she said, and he nodded. 'Just do, do, do. No thinking. Get good marks. Dress smart. God Save the Queen. Then go to work as a secretary or be a housewife and stay home for ever and the lads go to the furnaces. I want a life of art, you know? Observing not just following . . . I don't know. I'm told I have ideas out of my station.'

Wilbur smiled. 'I like your station.'

They talked about a book they both loved, *Around the World in Eighty Days*.

'When I was little that was who I wanted to be,' she told him. 'I wanted to jump bail and board a steamer to Hong Kong just like Phileas Fogg.'

'You'd need a valet.'

'You could be my valet, lad. I'd let you.'

They giggled.

They talked about Maggie's friend Claudette, who came to Sheffield as a baby with her parents from somewhere called St Vincent in the Caribbean. They talked about old-fashioned attitudes.

'But I think things are going to change,' Wilbur said. 'I think young people are different to old people. Seriously. I think we are. It's not just the haircuts. I think there is something behind it all. I think the world will be better when we grow up. My English teacher thinks there is a revolution coming.'

'I don't know,' said Maggie. 'I think we like to think that. But maybe the revolution will just be internal. Like we learn to accept ourselves. Like, I dunno . . . trees and water. I like coming here because it seems more true. Don't you think we aren't so different to other animals?' She pointed to a duck. 'Do young ducks become better ducks than their parents? What if a duck is just a duck and a human is just a human and we don't change as much as we think? Ducks still keep quacking and humans still keep hating.'

'Oh! A cynic!'

'I don't know, Wilbur. Maybe I am. But there is still fun in observing it all.'

Emotion rose up like magma. The Ghost could hardly stand it. He felt like he needed to interrupt, but remembered Agnes telling him not to meddle. And besides, it was deeply unlikely to work, as he had been told.

But it felt so intensely strange, being there, watching this back. So lovely, so terrible, so innocent, so everything. Listening to their conversation was like watching someone learning a new language.

It was the start of something. Not that either of them knew it yet.

In fact, they wouldn't know it for many years to come. But he thought about it now. He imagined their conversations over the years as a vast plant, branching off all over the place, each conversation different but part of the same whole, growing from that first seedling on Glossop Road and trying to break out of the ground here.

'We're too young to be cynical.'

'Well, Wilbur, sixteen is old for a duck,' she said. 'Quack.'

They laughed, then sat in silence for a little while.

'Talk to her,' implored the Ghost, pointlessly. 'Come on, lad. Don't be nervous. Ask her out. It would be the easiest thing in the world for you to just ask her out.'

Eventually, Maggie spoke. 'My mam always said I was an old head on young shoulders. She said I had a different way about me. And I think she's right about the old part. I'm sixteen going on sixty-five. Mam said life is lived the wrong way round. You need to be an old head in a young body to make the most of things.'

'Your mam sounds wise.'

Maggie looked sadly across the water. 'Yes. She was. She died. Two years ago.' She closed her eyes and winced a little, as if taking a shard of glass out of her foot. 'They don't even know what killed her. But she was in pain. Her stomach. They tried everything. It was horrible.'

'Oh. I'm so sorry.'

'That's all right. Dad does his best. It's just me and him. He works for the council. Parks department. He works here actually. I'm meeting him and we're going to town. I come to the park. I like to come and just draw.'

She gave him a nervous look. But then she made the silent decision to show him her drawing. Wilbur stared at it and didn't have to feign, even for a second, a polite response. It was a beautiful sketch of the scene in front of her. The lake, the trees, even the little waterfall.

'I love it,' he said. 'It's so good. I like the way you take the whole and then focus on the little details.'

'Like the Midnight Train,' muttered the Ghost, staring down at his honeymoon-wear – the short-sleeved shirt and sandals and flared jeans from years after this encounter.

'Impressionistic but with focal points,' Wilbur continued.

She looked at him, and needed to deflect the flattery. 'Where did you get to talk like that?'

The Ghost cringed as Wilbur tried to sound suave. 'And how do I talk?'

'Posh. Long words. *Impressionistic but with focal points*.'

'It's not posh to use long words. That's what Miss Graham, my English teacher, says. I like her. She's quite subversive. She says education is a tool used to prop up the class system. She says we're encouraged to equate the upper classes with cleverness in order for the lower classes to keep doing manual labour and not dream of anything bigger.'

'All right, Karl Marx. What do you dream of, then?'

Right then he wasn't dreaming of anything at all. It was hard to dream within a moment that felt so right. 'Well, I want to go to Oxford.'

'To the university?'

'Yes. After A levels. That is what I want to do. I want to study English Literature and History.'

'I could see you as a historian. Like the one on TV who talks about Henry the Eighth and Christopher Columbus.'

Wilbur shrugged. 'We don't have a television. Our mam struggles to pay the rent. Dougie has some money but Mam refuses to take any from him because she never trusts it. He always has more than his wages, you see. And they row about it and he says it's for her and she ends up screaming or talking to herself. Sorry. Didn't mean to say all that.'

She frowned. 'Oh. I'm sorry. And I don't mean to be rude, but if you can't afford a television, Wilbur, how are you going to get yourself to Oxford University? Isn't that pricey?'

'Not if you get a *scholarship*.' He pronounced 'scholarship' in an extra-posh, BBC Radio kind of voice.

'Don't you have to be a genius?'

He kept the BBC voice going, because she seemed to find it amusing. And there was no magic on earth like making her smile. 'Well, me and Albert Einstein are really good pals . . .'

'Albert Einstein died years ago,' she laughed. 'So he was asking you to help with his theorems when you were five years old?'

'Four, actually.'

'Well, it's great to meet a real-life genius,' she said.

'That is why I am planning to start smoking a pipe,' Wilbur went on. 'All geniuses smoke one, you know.'

She laughed at him as he began to cradle and puff on an invisible pipe.

He paused, and stopped being a clown. Something about her face encouraged honesty. 'I don't think you have to be a genius. Because I'm not one. Just work hard . . . That's what I'm hoping.'

She stared at him deeply then. And he felt the rarest of things: seen.

'I only know one thing that old Albert said,' she told him, 'because our headmaster always tells us. But it is a good quotation: "I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious." I have always liked that. Passionately curious.'

'But it doesn't apply to you,' he said, nodding towards the sketchbook. 'You do have a talent. A proper one.'

'I don't know. But I'd like to, you know, make a living at it one day. So what makes you want to go to Oxford?'

Wilbur frowned in thought. 'I just want to get out. Do better, you know. I want to escape.'

'Sheffield?'

'Everything. I just want to do more than I'm supposed to do. I want to not have to spend Friday evening hiding behind the sofa with my mam because we haven't got the rent. Or have to worry

that Dougie is out doing something really bloody stupid. I want to see the world.'

'Venice,' she said. 'I'd love to go to Venice. It just seems so romantic. Like a dream.'

'Ah. Venice. I'd like to go too.'

'One day you will,' said the watching ghost. 'And it will be the happiest time of your life.'

She nodded. 'There's a painter called Titian. He is the best painter in my opinion. Better than Michelangelo. Better than Leonardo da Vinci. I have only seen his paintings in a book from the library. But they make you feel something just by looking at them. Something you can't explain.' She drifted into thought for a moment. Then: 'Hey, Mr Oxford University, have you heard of chiaroscuro?'

'No. What is that?'

'It's a fancy-pants term my art teacher told me about and I have never talked about it because I have never met someone so important as a *Real Life Genius* before.'

She was needling him but he liked it.

The Ghost, standing just beside the bench looking down on them like an unseen parent watching toddlers at play, hadn't remembered the details of the conversation. Just the bench and her drawing and her face. So hearing it again was like being taken somewhere new.

It was interesting, to realise that even your own past was new territory to explore. That memories were no more the real event than flags were their nations.

He wished he could be back. Properly back. Sitting on the park bench next to her. He would have asked her out there and then. He would have saved all those wasted years.

'So tell me,' said the other Wilbur, 'what is chiaroscuro?'

'It's the contrast of light and shade. And Renaissance painters were really good at this. Especially Titian. So if you see one of his paintings you might wonder how it seems to . . . shine out at you, and really it's not about the light, it's about the dark.'

'Oh, I love that.'

'That's what Mrs Bray says. The dark shade all around the face in the background makes it more . . . *magical*. And I like that idea. About how you need the dark sometimes to make the other things brighter.'

The Ghost watched them stare at each other. And Wilbur seemed on the cusp of saying something. His mouth twitched a little with it, like an egg about to hatch. But whatever it was never had the chance to be spoken. Because that was the moment a park warden in a flat cap and green overalls drove over in his little van.

'This is my dad. You'd better go. He's suspicious of boys.'

'Right.' Wilbur stood up, fast as anything. 'Quite a healthy suspicion, as a general rule.'

'See you, lad.'

'Yes. See you.'

And Wilbur walked away and his ghost stayed and watched the suspicious eyes of Maggie's father as he stopped his van on the broad path. Alfred. A man with whom he would one day share pints and stilted conversation. A man he would see cry. But that was still to come.

And then, with the sound of the train, it was time to go.

The Blink of an Eye

Out of the window he saw himself as a seventeen-year-old, in a sunlit Oxford, walking through the pristine green oasis of the garden quad of Balliol College. The day of his entrance exam.

With the blink of an eye he was gone, and the Ghost looked out and saw himself and Charlie at the Milk Bar talking to Wilbur's about-to-be girlfriend, Alice Dobson.

And then the landscape became more desolate. A desert, in fact, before descending into dark.

Coles Corner

The train came to a stop and the Ghost followed his eighteen-year-old self into town. He was smartly dressed in a suit and a black tie that he'd bought with money from his work at Bagdale's. There was a spring in his step and a little white corner of an envelope sticking out of his front pocket.

It was a cold February evening.

He was at that section of Glossop Road where the squashed-up terraced housing disappeared and the shops began. The grocer, the butcher, the cobbler, the haberdasher.

This was the start of the town centre.

It was, back then, like a road to magic. A road to possibility. And especially this night.

This Saturday.

Because he had a date.

Eventually Wilbur (and the Ghost) reached Coles department store, which had closed for the day. But he was there, his ghost remembered, because it was where everyone arranged to meet their dates back in those days. Coles Corner.

And there was his date, Alice Dobson, waiting for him in a smart green dress, smiling beneath her blonde fringe. He couldn't wait to tell her his news.

Alice was his girlfriend of about two months. A girl who he had seen at the Milk Bar over Christmas drinking a Vimto with a friend, and Charlie Applewood had dared him to talk to her, primarily because Charlie Applewood was shyer than him and had a tendency to stumble on first encounters and he fancied her mate.

Wilbur had gone over and asked her what she wanted to listen to, as he was going to the jukebox.

And she had said 'The Loco-Motion' by Little Eva, so he had put that on and – as it was three songs for a shilling – he followed it with 'Return to Sender' by Elvis Presley and 'Big Girls Don't Cry' by the Four Seasons, neither of which, thinking about it from the future, struck the right note of romantic optimism.

Alice was a year older than Wilbur. She liked that he was tall and had 'mysterious eyes'. She told him she lived at home with her parents in a semi-detached house in Fulwood, the posh part of town. Her dad had made his money in the carpet trade. She was the youngest of three sisters and was already going out on a Saturday night to dance to jazz and rhythm and blues in a hotel basement in town, and he told her his brother went there.

'Your brother is Dougie Budd? So you're a wrong 'un, then.' She seemed appalled and fascinated all at once.

'I'm not my brother. And, yeah, he was a bit wild. But he's settling down now.'

Over the space of two months they'd gone for fish and chips, walks in the park, and a cup of tea with her parents. All before dancing till midnight in the basement of the Acorn Hotel, which ended with a long goodbye kiss on her doorstep. She told him that he was a nervous kisser and asked if he had ever kissed a girl before and he'd said no.

She laughed at him, with affection, but also with something else. He couldn't help but have the feeling, a few times over this month, that he was half boyfriend and half pet.

And now this. A night at the cinema.

She smiled ambiguously. 'Look at you in your flash suit.'

'Well, I'm going up in the world.'

'How far up? The clouds?'

'Look.' He pulled the envelope out of his pocket. 'They got back to me!'

'Who?'

'You'll see. Read the letter!'

As he handed it to her, she looked distastefully at a small group of pigeons feasting on a crust of bread thrown at them by a kindly baker. And – with an equally apprehensive expression – she began to read, beginning with the letterhead: '"Balliol College, Oxford"'. Then to the letter itself, each consecutive word being pronounced with ascending disappointment. '"Dear Mr Wilbur Budd, Having reviewed the results of your Entrance and Scholarship Examinations, in conjunction with your conduct at interview, we are delighted to offer you a full College Scholarship for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in History, which in addition to your County Scholarship—"'

She broke off. 'So that means you got in to Oxford?'

'Yes. Yes, it does.'

Wilbur waited for an eagerly expected smile or a hug. But instead he got an expression of confusion and hurt. 'I thought you said they were all stuck-up. When you went to the interview. You said they were a bunch of snobs.'

'I did. They were. But I still want to go.'

'Oh. You're not worried about it? I mean, you're a lad from Glossop Road.'

'I know. Exactly. A lad from Glossop Road. I'm not even meant to go to university. Miss Graham says that if I get to Oxford it'll be an act of revolution. She says the education system reinforces the class system. So every time someone from nothing and nowhere gets in, it subverts the system. She says the scariest thing for the powers above us is an *educated working class*.' Miss Graham was quite the radical. An actual Marxist. But also the only teacher he ever saw in town, as she loved hamburgers and Coca-Cola and shopping. It was the contradictions that made people interesting. 'And they're going to pay for everything. It's a double scholarship. That means lodgings and food and tuition. My mam won't have to pay. I won't even need a job. I can just study. I'm so happy.'

She nodded but her eyes looked through him. His ghost felt regret. 'Tactless, Wilbur,' he said. 'Look at her. She's hurt.'

Of course, the Wilbur there couldn't hear anything. He just said: 'I thought you'd be happy for me too. I told you I wanted to go to Oxford the first time I met you.'

'But I'm not going to see my little Wilbur.'

'I'll come back.'

'What, so I say bye in September and hello at Christmas?'

The Ghost watched his young self as it dawned on him that there was more than one interpretation of his news. 'Well, no. I will try and get back before. And you could come to Oxford. It's not too far on the train.'

'Don't think I'd fit in with the posh brigade.'

'You're posher than me!'

'I'm not posh in the slightest. I'm a Sheffield lass.'

'Your dad is rolling in it.'

'*Now* he is. Now that everyone in the north suddenly wants a carpet. But it wasn't always like that. And I'm not posh. I'm proper Sheffield. And so is my dad. I don't think I'd ever leave.'

'You make it sound like a betrayal.'

'Well, no. Do what you want. It's your life.'

'Look, can we just try and enjoy a movie?'

And as it turned out: no, they couldn't.

The Palace

They had now reached the Palace Cinema. The focal point of their date.

It looked as grand as the Ghost remembered it as a child. Maybe more so.

A solid-looking building with ornate features. A white-glazed facade decorated with columns and fanlight windows and arches, and doors within them.

As a boy, it had seemed to him like something straight from heaven, so perfect and palatial and bright. The Ghost remembered a visit to see *An American in Paris* when he was about seven years old. His mam rarely did much with them, but she always scraped enough together to take her sons to the pictures. He thought of her quietly singing along to 'I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise', a tear rolling down her face.

He looked up above the arches, and saw two banners.

One was advertising *The Great Escape* and the other was for *The Birds*. He had read the story, 'The Birds', during a break at the bookshop. It was by one of his favourite writers, Daphne du Maurier, and he was leaning towards it, but he wondered if it would be too unsettling for Alice, who was clearly troubled by pigeons and, possibly, birds in general. *The Great Escape* had been out for a few months now, but had been a massive hit and would play for many weeks more.

'What do you want to see?' asked Alice, with a tone to her voice Wilbur wasn't used to.

'I'm easy either way.'

'You choose.'

'*The Great Escape* is meant to be good,' Wilbur said, eyebrows raised.

'*The Great Escape* is your sort of film, I imagine.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'You know what I mean by that.'

'You think I want to escape Sheffield?'

'I don't know. Maybe it's all about who you're with.'

'I'm very content with who I'm with,' he said as they walked up the steps to the arched doorways. And he really tried to believe that.

The Ghost remembered feeling a flicker of anger. After all, Alice knew about his gangster brother and his home life and his dead father. He had a lot to escape *from*. And he really did want to escape it. That had been his motivation almost as soon as he had started school.

There was a crowd of people in the foyer. Men in suits and women in smart, belted day dresses and twinsets. Quite different from the Cineworld in Bedford, thought the Ghost with a chuckle, as he watched the bittersweet memory of this night.

'I always like this carpet,' said Wilbur, staring at the chessboard pattern of red and black. 'Is it one of your dad's?'

'No, Wilbur, it isn't.'

'I forgot how bad you were at this,' the Ghost chuckled as he moved, sometimes literally, through the gathering crowd.

In the end, they opted for *The Birds*. During one tense early moment she held his hand. And Wilbur liked that feeling, of being a protector.

The Ghost stood beside them in the aisle. He had this sudden desire to be seen. Again, he knew it was unlikely, but also he felt that Agnes's strong desire for him not to 'meddle' indicated that meddling was indeed possible. A concept which tantalised him. And the reason he wanted to be seen was because he knew he was

heading into the crisis years. The years in which hope and longing and youth mixed into guilt and regret. The time of unspeakable tragedy. So he didn't fully know if he wanted to change something, but he wanted to be really *there*. And besides, he had been seen as a baby, so he could be seen again, he was sure. He just had a sense of it. More than a sense. He remembered how he had often felt like he was watching himself from somewhere else, like he was a character in a novel more than a person in the world. And there was something else he was remembering too. His honeymoon. He hadn't really thought about it for years but he was sure he had seen himself. There had been the moment where he had seen someone who looked precisely like him standing on the Rialto Bridge. It was just a fleeting thing that he'd shaken off at the time. But now he was viewing it differently, just as he was viewing everything differently, and so he tried again, he tried very hard to make his presence felt.

'I am here. Look up. Right here, standing in the aisle. I have lived your whole life and I know where it went wrong, and I know how you could avoid that . . . Please. Hear me. See me.' At one point Wilbur yawned, then twitched, then looked a little way towards the space the Ghost was occupying, then jumped a little in his seat. It was unclear what he had seen or heard or sensed.

'Wilbur? It's me – you. Can you see me? Like when you were a baby and Dougie showed you the train? I'm here . . . Just know, you are with the wrong girl . . .'

And meanwhile, Alice was asking in a whisper if he was all right.

'Aye,' Wilbur whispered back. 'Someone just walked across my grave, that's all . . .'

He concentrated back on the movie without much of a thought, and despite the Ghost's continued attempts to be noticed, he couldn't seem to make himself heard.

During the intermission, an usherette appeared, walking up the aisle with her tray.

Long brown hair clipped beneath a peakless cap, red jacket and brass buttons. The face like an open book, the slight smile.

It was her.

The Ghost remembered this well. He remembered Alice raising her hand and beckoning Maggie over.

He remembered the nineteen-year-old Maggie noticing him and saying hello with her eyes. They had spoken once or twice since that afternoon in the park but, just like now, there had never been the right context to chat deeper.

'Maggie,' he said. Just that. Just her name. As if it was an elemental thing. Like water in a desert.

'Hello, Wilbur. Good to see you.' Professional. Only a quick double blink to reveal that she was feeling anything at all at the sight of him with a date.

'Aye. You too.'

Alice, perhaps noting that Wilbur's attention was wandering in that moment, got some ice cream. Lyons Maid vanilla choc ice. And after Maggie had gone, Alice called her back to complain it was too warm and that the chocolate was messy.

'Look at the state of it. Look how warm it is.'

The Ghost remembered the discomfort he had felt in that moment. He watched himself staring intensely down at the dark carpet of the cinema and praying for it to divide and open up and swallow him whole.

Staggeringly, Alice wasn't finished. And nor was Wilbur's discomfort. 'Where do you keep them? Down your bra?'

Wilbur looked up from the carpet, the embarrassment now replaced by a wish to protect Maggie. 'Alice, come on, she's just doing her job,' Wilbur said, not seeing anything particularly wrong with the choc ice.

'I'm really sorry,' said Maggie.

'That's all right,' said Wilbur. 'It's not a big deal.'

Alice flashed Wilbur a look. 'Oh, I know that. But I'd like my shilling back. It's the principle.'

There was a strange contradiction to Alice. The way she could casually look down at people while also questioning why they would want to raise themselves up.

Maggie said nothing. Just calmly handed her a shilling from the jar of money on her tray.

The Ghost watched himself. He saw his own eyes linger on Maggie's face. It was so strange, how life became so clear with hindsight. Like a puzzle that can only be solved in reverse.

He also wondered how much of history was this – not words and deeds but gazes and unsaid longings and subtle transgressions.

How much of it was just one near thing after another.

Silent Words

Later, after the film, Alice went to the ladies', and the Ghost saw Maggie standing next to the doors, saying goodbye to people in a way that seemed so old-fashioned and wonderful to him. Wilbur went over to her to apologise as delicately as he could manage without feeling he was betraying Alice.

'I'm sorry, Maggie. About the choc ice.'

She shrugged it off. And smiled a smile that contained only a small fraction of sadness. 'It was no bother. Hope you liked the film. I have to watch it every night. Those bloody birds are giving me a breakdown.'

'I bet. Yeah. Anyway, yeah, hope it didn't bother you.'

She stared at him as though he was younger than his years. 'You're a sweet lad, Wilbur. But you worry too much.'

'I know, but, Maggie, I just—'

He'd wanted to say something else, and for a second he felt that Maggie wanted him to. But then suddenly Alice was there and the moment was gone.

The train whistled. And he could see it, just outside the cinema at the foot of the steps. He turned one last time to see Maggie, who was now helping an elderly man across the carpet, and he felt a total love, uncluttered by time or life's many obstacles.

'I miss you,' said the Ghost. And the words stayed there, as they always had, silently hanging in the air.

The Hundred Deaths of Wilbur Budd

There were many deaths in life.

A person, it seemed to the Ghost now, died in stages. And so it was particularly poignant to see himself at a young age.

To come was the death of youth, of ideals. Of connection, friendships, principles, love. And these were often just choices. Choices that had seemed right at the time, in the moment, but when you got to the end, to the very last death, you looked back and realised all the lost versions that you left along the way.

He missed, right then, the person he had once been. And the goodness that had existed inside him, as natural as the green in grass.

A Quick Word

Agnes had wanted a quick word.

'You tried to interfere with your life back there in the cinema. That's not what this journey is about, Old Bean. No meddling, no tinkering, no fiddling with time . . . It's impossibly dangerous. Clear?'

'But, Agnes, I can see it now, I squandered love . . . I squandered time . . .'

'Yes. Yes, you really did. More even than most. But you have no choice. This train has one route and one destination. As I have said, you are here to watch.'

And then, before he had time to answer, she walked to the front of the train, leaving Wilbur to stare out of the window at his younger self also staring out of a window, wondering what his life had in store.

Miss Graham's Last Lesson

A little later, he was alone in the carriage. Or he thought he was. But then he heard a smoker's cough and looked away from the window to see the ghost of a woman. Not Agnes, but still someone familiar.

Miss Graham, who was sat near the end of the carriage, leaning against the green velvet seat.

'Oh my goodness,' he said. 'What are you doing here? I thought I was only with Agnes.'

Miss Graham had been his favourite teacher. The one who fostered his love of books. The one who encouraged him to apply to Oxford. Short black hair and equally black polo neck, a little younger than he remembered her. She was smoking, as she always did. Even in class, she would stand near an open window and smoke away.

'I'm not meant to be here,' said Miss Graham, who had always had a rebellious streak. 'But in eternity you see everything and I saw you and knew you were struggling, so I, well, I found a way.'

Wilbur was too bewildered to say anything of significance. So he just said: 'It's good to see you. So, you're dead?'

'Yup. Emphysema. 1975.' She took a long drag of her cigarette. 'I was only sixty-four. Still just about in the "gone too soon" zone. But you know what they say: it's not the breadth of the years but the depth. I had a good life, you know. Lots of travel. Lots of adventures in every continent. Lots of lovers. Lots of fun.'

'Right,' said Wilbur. He might have been eighty-one years old, not to mention dead, but he still felt too young to hear about Miss Graham's sex life.

'My time teaching English literature at your school was possibly the most conventional period of my life,' she clarified.

'Well,' said Wilbur. 'That's saying something.'

She had been an influence on him as a boy because she seemed quite rare for Yorkshire at that time. She was from London and had gone to Spain for a year during the Spanish Civil War, volunteering as a nurse. She had apparently met George Orwell while he was over there, fighting the same anti-fascist cause. And knew him well enough to call him his actual name, Eric.

She studied Wilbur a while.

'"What's done cannot be undone,"' she said, looking upwards, grandly soliloquising as if on stage and trying to reach the gallery. '*Macbeth*. Act 5, Scene 1.'

'It's like I'm back at school.'

She smiled. 'Remember how I would get the class to look at one extract here and another extract there? You were always good at analysing them, Wilbur. You were a rarity at school. Not a delinquent, not a teacher's pet, you were just genuinely *interested*.'

'Books were my escape.'

'I was so proud of you, given all that happened, that you made a success of your life.'

'I thought you would see it as a betrayal of my class. Becoming a successful businessman.'

'Well, life is complicated. And listen, even at a school where everyone struggled it was clear *you* had less to work with . . .'

This unsettled him. Obviously it was true that he had struggled, but he hadn't realised it was so visible.

'Success is just the distance you travel from where you started. And you travelled far. You did well for yourself. And your crime was to be good at what you did and set up bookshops, for God's sake. You were doing what you were good at.'

He smiled. Miss Graham had been a tough teacher. But also one who saw his potential. So to hear a compliment from her about

the rest of his life should have meant something. He felt a kind of filling up – an expanding – when someone said something like that. As though he was an empty vessel always waiting for some validation to be poured inside. But – and maybe it had been seeing Maggie – this time he just felt hollow.

'Miss Graham—'

'Please, call me Linda.'

'Linda.' That felt strange. It was interesting to discover that there was no point in or out of time where calling a schoolteacher by their given name felt natural. 'You say success is just the distance from where you started but what if at some point you were travelling in the wrong direction? What if I didn't really live? What if I found the person for me but was ultimately scared to keep that love alive? What if I was a coward who let someone down? What if I wanted another chance?'

Outside the window, he saw Alice and himself in the rain standing beneath a street lamp. She was leaving him. Not because of Oxford. But because his brother had been arrested for stealing from her dad's carpet factory.

'That, I believe, is why I decided to come here.' Miss Graham shifted in her seat, and looked behind to check that Agnes wasn't in their general vicinity. 'Now, as you know, the point of this place is to see your past slide by and then stop inside it to get a closer look. I had about seven hundred stops. But I wasn't on a train. I was on a boat. It was the boat from "The Owl and the Pussy-cat". Beautiful, pea-green. I loved that story as a child. The mode of transport always seems to have some childhood connection. It's interesting.'

'Seven *hundred*?'

'Yes. But I know someone who only had three stops. It depends on who you are, and how able you are to assess your life.'

'Will I have to relive, you know, the worst days?'

She blew a stream of smoke up to the ceiling of the train, and profoundly gazed at it fading into the air.

'I am not Agnes. I am not the all-knowing truth of the universe. Nor am I even a bookseller. I am just a ghost who can quote *Macbeth*. But my guess is yes. We linger longer on the stuff that shaped us. As in life.'

'Right, I see.'

'Now, Agnes tells you to get on the train and to not mess things up. Your choices have all been made. This is Act 5, Scene 5. Et cetera, et cetera. And this is wise advice. Because if you mess things up you lose eternity. You lose your chance to see Maggie and everyone again . . . But all I will say is that sometimes life is the most important thing. Seeing Maggie for all eternity as a ghost is not the same as sitting next to her for a single day on Earth.'

'Why?'

'Warmth, touch, presence, shared air. It's the difference between the voice and an echo. You could hear the echo of a song for all time, but it would never beat *hearing the song . . .*'

'Right, but—'

'And to live life well you need to know when to ignore what is expected of you. Even if it means breaking the rules.'

Suddenly, and seemingly from nowhere, there was Agnes standing over them, straightening her hat as if ready for business. 'That's quite enough of that.'

Miss Graham took another inhale of her eternal cigarette. 'I get the hint.' And she exhaled a cloud of smoke, behind which she disappeared.

Agnes sat down in the now empty seat, looked down at her lap and smoothed a crease out of her skirt. 'She really shouldn't have been here. And you must ignore her radical ideas. She was always in the shop, you know, telling me to stock more communists and miserable French radical theorists. I always told her life is too fragile to deconstruct it all the time. Rules may look boring, but they are there in every novel and painting. They keep things whole. And Miss Graham, well, she found it easy to dismantle . . .'

'I always liked her,' said the Ghost, feeling a flicker of bravery in his disagreement.

Agnes sighed. 'Well, yes. She was quite charming, I suppose. But think about it . . . she didn't opt to become your life guide, did she? No. That was me.'

'Something I still don't understand. Why you wanted to help me.'

'I remembered how you used to come into the shop. So hungry for books. And yet you still turned down the offer of me buying you one. I always remembered that. So I thought this was my chance. To give you a story. Metaphorically speaking.'

'Well, thank you.'

'But you are going to have to see the glass as half full. Because that way, when you reach the end of the line, everything will be fine. Eternity is good. I mean, it isn't *life,* but J. M. Barrie was right, actually. It's an awfully big adventure, death. It's not like this. There is no *rush*, no *timeframe*, no fleeting conversations on a train. There are no lessons to learn. Think of the train as the question and the destination as the answer. And the answer is always the feeling you have about your life at the end of the journey.' She smiled encouragingly and patted his knee. 'So . . . best get on with it, eh, Old Bean?'

Wilbur looked out of the window and saw himself walking past a newsstand for the *Daily Mirror*. He caught sight of the front page: CASSIUS CLAY NEW BOXING CHAMP!

The night was there as well as the day. All in the same sky. Blurring together and intertwining like an abstract painting.

A little further along, his mother was walking down the street carrying some meat from the butcher, with a face on the edge of tears, only forcing a smile as she saw Wilbur leaving the house.

It was getting closer . . .

Out of the window he saw Dougie arriving home from prison. Then he saw two tickets to the concert lying on the table that had once been a bomb shelter.

He was very nearly there, at the night that changed everything . . .

The train was slowing towards somewhere he knew he didn't want to revisit.

'I don't want to stop here. Agnes, really, I don't want to stop here!'

It was too late. 'The train is stopping. And it isn't going anywhere until you get off.'

The train gently stopped, but Wilbur – or the Ghost – was feeling more rebellious after the chat with Miss Graham.

'That's okay. I will just stay here. On this carriage. I have all the time in the world.'

A Feeling of Intense Discomfort

And he did stay there.

He stayed on the seat with nothing to look at but a portrait of a Wilbur that was stuck at the age of eighteen. Back when his forehead didn't have a single crease.

But after what felt like an hour – which could in fact have been a second or a day – it began to happen.

A feeling of intense discomfort.

Wilbur looked down and saw his clothes and tanned youthful limbs begin to flicker. He could see the green velvet seat where his denim-clad legs should have been. Blinking on and off. He was like a lightbulb that had been left on too long. But that wasn't the issue. The issue was the feeling.

An intense claustrophobia.

A *stuckness*.

When he tried to stand up he felt like he was in a straitjacket he couldn't get out of. His mind writhed and wriggled but he stayed steadfast within his seat, within his now itching, restless, burning body. He was – undeniably, indisputably, improbably – stuck.

Agnes walked down the aisle and shook her head. 'Oh dear, Old Bean. You are in quite the pickle there, aren't you?'

'What's . . . going on?'

"'There is no trap so deadly as the trap you set for yourself." That's what Raymond Chandler wrote in *The Long Goodbye*. His masterpiece, in my opinion. Even Miss Graham would agree with that . . . Now, I am the truth of the universe, yet I also contain the essence of Mrs Agnes Deborah Amaryllis Bagdale. I do sincerely

care. And you are quite a frustrating creature to care for, I have to say.'

'Please, Mrs Bag— Agnes . . . try and help me.'

She sighed disapprovingly. 'The only way you can escape this feeling, the only way you can break this curse, is to stand up and face what happened.'

'I can't face this.'

'That is right. You never could, Old Bean. But now you have to. You must leave the train or you will feel like this for ever.'

'Please. Just stop this feeling.'

'Only you can do that.'

'How do I stand up and leave the train?'

Agnes sighed. 'By knowing it is way past time.'

27 July 1964

The Ghost knew he had to do it, to face it, and yet it felt almost impossible. It was, he realised, one thing to live through pain as it comes to you, but another thing to knowingly step off a train and revisit it. But he closed his eyes and did it. He stepped off the train and, opening his eyes again, stepped into City Hall and found himself surrounded by screams and music and chaos.

His spectral form seemed to be overlapping with four or five living, bouncing bodies at any one time.

The crowd was wild.

The Rolling Stones were doing a Chuck Berry song on stage, Mick Jagger in a white shirt with checkered trousers leaning into a long-fringed Brian Jones, who was jabbing away at his guitar. There was sweat and cigarette smoke and hysteria in the air. And then the Ghost felt it, even though he knew this was where he had been heading. He was swamped by the dread of what this was. Of what *night* this was: 27 July 1964. The summer before he was due to start Oxford.

Maybe, he muttered to himself, *it won't be the whole thing. Maybe it will just be the concert and end there.*

This was the first night that City Hall had decided to have a concert without seating on the main floor. The crowd was jostling and pushing and there were Wilbur and Dougie right in the middle.

Mods, rockers, and everything in between.

Dougie was already drunk and tilting like a tree in a storm. He was wearing rather elegant pleated trousers and a dubiously expensive-looking grey turtleneck. Wilbur was dressed in a shirt

done up to its top button. Unlike his brother, he looked a little tight and nervous. The Ghost remembered why. It was because he was already regretting talking Dougie into this. Wilbur had wanted to see the band and so had talked him into going with him. He thought it would be good, to buy him a ticket. He wanted to make more of an effort with his brother, after a short stretch in prison. But also he thought it would be a way to tell him that he had got into Oxford. He knew that wasn't going to go down well. And, in truth, it didn't.

When Wilbur had told him in the pub across the square he'd downed his pint and ordered another without saying anything. A stronger one. A Worthington's. Then one more of the same.

'Dougie? Dougie? Why aren't you talking?' Wilbur had asked.

Then, when he had drunk enough, Dougie's mood changed.

He turned and stared at his little brother with manic exuberance. 'Right, lad. Let's have it. Forget all that Oxford stuff,' he said. 'Let's just celebrate freedom. Let's get to this concert.'

Wilbur nodded. 'Yeah. That sounds good.'

After all, Dougie had just spent six weeks in prison – 'total horror show' – after being convicted of selling batches of stolen knives and forks while working at Viners' cutlery factory. He had been working in various jobs all through the last year. The carpet factory, steel works, gas works, liquorice factory, even a week at the Queen's Head until their mother caught him with his hand in the till. He had bought a second-hand Vauxhall Cresta. A few months after he'd started working at Viners it turned out that he had been selling cutlery for cheap all around Sheffield.

'This is it, lad,' Dougie was now shouting in his brother's ear as the concert got into full swing. His beer sloshing over the glass onto Wilbur's shoes. 'This is the world. Right here. You don't need that Oxford shite. You don't need your duffel coat and your Shakespeare. You don't need to become a southerner. Look! The Rolling Stones!'

'Dougie, they're from London.'

'Aye. But now they're right here, aren't they. And next week the Beatles are back here. We have it all. Right here.'

'Dougie! I'm not going to Oxford for the scene. I'm going to get a degree.'

'I've met southerners, Wilbo. They're not right in the head.'

The Ghost remembered silently thinking that maybe the inhabitants of Ford Open Prison might not be entirely representative of the inhabitants of Balliol College. And the thought was never spoken because someone was tapping on Wilbur's shoulder.

And not just any old someone.

Maggie.

She was there with two of her friends.

Doreen Taylor, looking very different now she had reached womanhood and discovered eyeliner. And Claudette Campbell, a person Wilbur hadn't met yet, but who had heard about that day in the park.

'Hello, stranger!' she shouted into his ear. 'I hear you're off to university.'

'Yeah! In September.'

Dougie leaned in between them, cradling his beer. 'Bloody everyone knows except me. We're not good enough for him!'

'Bugger off,' Wilbur said, pushing him playfully away. He then turned to Maggie. 'How've you been?'

Maggie strained to hear. Brian Jones and Keith Richards were in full force on the stage. 'What?'

'I was just asking, how have you been?'

'*What*?'

'I WAS ASKING HOW YOU HAVE BEEN.'

'Oh. Fair.' She smiled. Reassessed. 'Fair to good. Can't complain.'

'Are you still doing your drawing?'

'Not really.'

Maggie noticed Wilbur's face fall.

'I'm at college now.'

'College!' he said, pretending to look breezy again. 'Amazing! Which college?'

'Teacher-training. In Broomhall. I want to teach little ones.' She realised he hadn't heard. 'I WANT TO TEACH LITTLE ONES.' She pointed at herself. 'Glutton for punishment.'

'That's fantastic.'

'Says Mr Oxford University.'

'Well, I'm not a toff yet.'

It was quite something to watch this. It had been completely clouded in his memory by what was to come.

'I still work at the Palace too. Evenings. Not matinées.'

Dougie leaned in with more inappropriateness. 'Come on, treacle! Lad wants to know if you have a man. He wants to get his end away!'

Maggie's eyes flashed with an unfamiliar fusion of anger and embarrassment. Wilbur felt the familiar shame about Dougie. And then the inner shame about having the shame. And now there was an extra layer of shame, because the Ghost was ashamed as well. Both of Dougie and himself and of the entire situation that was about to erupt.

The song ended to wild applause and screams. They could speak, while instruments were being tuned on stage.

'Actually, yes. Yes. I am with someone.'

A man in a shirt and tie came up to her and put his arm around her. Wilbur recognised him. He had gone to school with him. He was in the year above. Tommy Hetherington. Tall. Brylcreemed black hair. More a wannabe Elvis than a Jagger. But with a harder, vacant edge.

'Him?' Dougie acted disgusted. 'Rocker-boy dickhead?'

Maggie looked disgusted. 'No bloody way.' And to Tommy: 'Get off.'

The Ghost noted it. The moment it all went wrong. The point

at which things pivoted towards chaos. He could have just said nothing. He could have just walked away. It was crazy to see it, to see the instinctive moment – a brief nothing, a second, a couple of drum beats at the start of a song.

'You heard her, Tommy,' Wilbur shouted, wild-eyed, over the music. 'Get off her or get a lamping.'

Wilbur's Ghost realised, looking at his young self, so ready for violence, that he wasn't so different to Dougie. He had the same switch, it was just a bit harder to reach. And then Tommy leaned in close to Maggie and planted a kiss on her cheek and Wilbur pulled him off.

Maggie also elbowed him away. Gave him a look so fierce he got the message. She said something neither the dead nor living Wilbur could hear. Tommy started walking away. Wilbur holding back. But then Tommy knocked Dougie. Slight but deliberate. Some bitter slopped onto Dougie's shirt.

The Ghost was already watching in dreaded anticipation as Dougie's face tightened into a gargoyle of hate, and he swung at Tommy. He was so fast he had probably thrown three blows before Wilbur had his arms around him, trying to hold him back.

The Comfort of Chaos

By the time Wilbur had restrained his brother, it was chaos.

Tommy was on the floor following Dougie's punches. His quiff was now a mess, and blood was coming out of his nose and onto his hand, a broken pint glass and a puddle of beer beside him.

'Jesus bloody Christ, Dougie! Leave it!' Wilbur was shouting in his brother's ear.

'Get off me, Wilbur. I swear. Get off me, lad, for fuck's sake!'

Tommy's mates were crowding round. One of them punched Wilbur hard on the jaw, causing him to lose hold of Dougie.

'It wasn't him!' shouted Maggie.

And as they started laying into Dougie, the Ghost noticed a kind of demonic smile on his brother's face for a second or two, even as a beer glass was thrown hard onto the back of his head. Which became almost a laugh, even as Dougie fell to the floor.

And just as Wilbur was hauling one of the lads off his brother, Dougie was up on his feet again, pulling a knife from his pocket and flicking the blade.

Dougie's eyes became those of a mad defender. He swiped at one of them, the tallest and drunkest, the blade ripping his shirt and flinging a button into the air. There was a moment of shock while the lad checked to see if he was wounded. And he was – the tip of the blade had cut him just enough to bleed.

This – the fight, the knife incident – had all happened within a few seconds. Much of the surrounding crowd was oblivious but some were noticing. And it was like a second show was happening right in the middle of the floor.

Dougie looked at Wilbur and nodded to the side exit near the bar at the back of the hall.

'Leg it!'

So Wilbur followed Dougie, who was holding the knife out to clear a path ahead of him. The Ghost knew where they were going to end up, so he just walked a more direct route through the dancing and bouncing and jerking bodies, and then through the wall of the hall itself. Out into the night.

The Chase

The Ghost had arrived outside, on the street running along one side of the large city square. It was so quiet out there, even though it was the centre of Sheffield. A brown paper bag drifted past on the breeze. A pigeon was looking curiously at a cigarette butt. Music was faintly throbbing through the wall, but there was hardly anyone out here.

Hardly.

Then the Ghost realised he was standing right next to a police car. The new type. Smaller than the old ones. Modern at the time.

The car seemed almost ridiculous now – quaint and old-fashioned to the Ghost's twenty-first-century eyes. Eggshell blue and milk white, and so small the policemen inside eating custard tarts looked like they could hardly fit.

They were there, of course, because of the concert, assured that there would be trouble at such a gathering of wild, young hedonists.

And trouble was coming their way sooner than expected.

The Ghost glanced left to see Dougie and himself burst out of the fire door and run with furious speed down the street away from the square, and towards him, the imperial vastness of City Hall towering beside them. Dougie, insanely, still had the knife in his hand, even as they passed the police car.

Someone who may or may not have worked at City Hall had followed them out onto the pavement. 'Police! Police! Stop that man! He's got a knife on 'im!'

Dougie and Wilbur were already at Holly Lane.

The Ghost knew this would be the last time on his journey that

he would see his brother, but he did not want to follow them. So he stayed standing there, in the middle of the street.

In doing so, he saw what he never had when he lived this evening the first time. He saw Maggie, on her own, stepping out into the street.

Her face was rendered gold under the street lamp, hair blowing across her face in the cold evening breeze. She didn't shout or call out or do anything at all except look on in fraught concern as she saw Wilbur disappear out of view.

There was a screech of tyres as Dougie's Vauxhall Cresta tilted back into the street – avoiding the dead-end roadworks of Holly Lane – with a mad-eyed Dougie and a panicked Wilbur in the front seats.

One of the police officers was out of the car, pastry crumbs still in his moustache. His face had always been pressed into Wilbur's memory as an open mouth, yelling what he was now yelling, with his hand raised in front of him.

'STOP! STOP NOW!'

But the car didn't stop.

The Ghost was also standing there, expecting the car to go straight through him and out the other side – but that's not what happened.

What happened instead was that the moment it met him he was suddenly on the back seat, behind himself and Dougie.

The past had its own gravity. It couldn't be escaped.

'I don't want to be here!' he shouted, and he had never meant anything more. 'Agnes! Someone! Anyone! I don't want to be here!'

But no one was listening. Certainly not his young self, staring at Dougie as he drove with fast recklessness uphill and away from the city centre.

'You've got to stop! They're following us!'

'Who?'

'The coppers! Who do you think?'

'Well, we're not bloody stopping! Are you mad? We're getting the hell out of here, lad!'

The police car switched its siren on. Dougie made a wild imitation of the sound.

'That!' he laughed manically. 'Listen to it. The siren.'

The Ghost remembered how new it felt in 1964 to hear a police car with a siren. Even one as old-fashioned as this.

'I miss the bell, to be honest. Do you miss the police bell, Wilbur? Ding-a-ling-a-ling!'

'You're off your rocker!' Wilbur tried to wrestle the steering wheel off his brother, who elbowed him in the face. Wilbur held his nose in shock.

They sped north out of town, passing the cathedral, then veering back south and west, through increasingly residential streets, trees on either side of the road going by in a blur. They reached the Ecclesall Road, hurtling by the community centre and a pub called the Dark Horse, where a cockle-man in a white coat was stepping outside with a basket full of shellfish.

'Slow down,' Wilbur begged.

Dougie ignored him. 'That knife at my feet. Look. By the pedals. Throw it out the window. Throw it hard!'

'Jesus, they're right there. Right behind us. They'll see us do it. Dougie, slow down!'

Things shot by.

It was busier here among the pubs than the closed shops of the city centre.

The Ghost stared out with mounting horror as they passed the giant Midland Bank, closed for the day. Men in flat caps, smoking. Women with freshly curled hair heading out of the bingo hall. Men playing dominoes in the glowing warmth of a pub. A fight brewing outside, the crowd now distracted by the speeding car and the police siren behind. Just an ordinary Saturday night in 1964.

The police car was inching closer.

They sped around the roundabout with a screech and a skid, the car leaning like a craned neck.

'They're going to be massive,' Dougie said, his frenzied eyes on the road ahead. Wilbur wondered what the hell he was talking about. 'Bigger than the Beatles. The crowd. It was amazing.'

This was Dougie. The creator of chaos who pretended things were normal, even as they had spiralled far beyond control.

'You waved your knife at half the crowd . . . Jesus, Dougie. Who cares if the band we just saw are going to be big or not? Just stop the car. They won't send you back down. You haven't hurt anyone. Well, Tommy. But he won't go to the law. Look . . . just pull over.'

'Too late now. Listen, Wilbur – listen, lad. Here's the plan. We keep going down here till we're out of county. Soon as we're in the Peak District there are no lights. No street lamps. No cars. Nowt. What we do . . . LISTEN TO ME . . . What we do is we drive off the road into the middle of nowhere. Just foot it over the moors as far as we can. No lights on the car. Then we make a fucking run for it. It will be pitch black . . . LISTEN . . . it'll be dark and we can just stay out there, ditch the car, then circle back to town on foot . . .'

He was looking at Wilbur with wide, wide eyes as if this was a genius idea. Desperation made you cling to the worst idea if it was the only one.

'Every second we stay in this car we are getting deeper into shit, Dougie—'

'You're leaving me in the lurch, lad.'

The Ghost tried to unpick what he had meant here – Oxford? Leaving him with their mother?

'Slow the hell down.'

'I know what you're thinking.'

'I'm thinking stop the fucking car.'

'You think you're above me.'

'Dougie—'

'Having a thick little thief as a brother.'

'You're not thick, Dougie, you just don't try . . . Jesus. Slow down.'

'But everything I know, I *know.* School of hard knocks. I was never a kid, Wilbo. Mam didn't understand things. I saw it how it was . . . with her and Parkin.'

'Mr Parkin?'

'Aye. Making eyes at him.'

The Ghost remembered how he had taken these words and fully signed up to Dougie's lifelong grudge against their old landlord.

'Dougie . . .'

'It's all right for you. I *have* to look after her.'

'*Oh, Dougie . . .*' The Ghost was realising what this was all about. Dougie felt abandoned. And by all of them. By their father for dying, by their mother for her retreating mind, and now by Wilbur himself.

Every mistake Dougie had made, right down to him wanting to fight the world, could be explained by having to take this on. Too much, too young. If you felt like everything was under threat, then everything was a fight. He wasn't *jealous* of Wilbur. Not wholly, anyway. He just wanted to keep everyone together, because all he had known since their dad died was a sense of pulling apart.

Maybe, thought the Ghost, the world was full of this. Chaos trying too hard to be order. Violence trying to be peace. Maybe sometimes bad actions were just good motives without a map. And now the pressure had built and broken through and Dougie was in this speeding car, with the young brother he had once looked after, and yakking ten words a second like he needed to get it all out, leaping from one thing to another while he kept his foot on the pedal. 'That siren sounds like a flying saucer! *Plan 9 from Outer Space*. Can you remember when we went to see that, Wilbo? With your pal Charlie? That was a good day. I'd just got the job at the furnaces. You remember?'

Wilbo. Hearing it now as a Ghost, even passing road signs in a blur, he heard the affection in it.

'Dougie, please, focus – this is dangerous.'

'Dad was like you. Wanted to bite off more than he could chew. Everyone else joined the army. But he wanted to be with the toffs up in the sky. You were meant to train for three years before they let you into air combat. They changed it to six months! You know that? Six bloomin' months! All to go and die for Churchill.'

'Dougie, stop your rattling and slow down. I don't want to die.'

'You're not going to.'

'Just slow the hell—'

'Them coppers are in a Triumph. This is a bloomin' Vauxhall. We can't slow down.'

The Ghost was petrified. When he was younger he had been scared of ghosts. He had been worried he would see his dad out on the landing. But he'd had it all wrong. The dead were nothing to fear. It was the living that contained unknown terrors.

'That girl liked you, lad,' Dougie told him, as Wilbur nursed his bleeding nose. He was slurring his words.

'You're drunk. You're so bloody drunk.'

'You never know what's in front of you. You always want more. Like Dad did. You've got it all, Wilbo. You've got it all. You just don't see it. Life just falls your way. That's how it is for some people. That's what's different about you and me. Things fall your way and you don't see them.'

Things fall your way.

'I work bloody hard, Dougie.'

Dougie turned away from the road and looked at his brother with a desperate kind of love. And the Ghost wished he could reach back through time to tell him how much he was loved.

The Threads of Time Were Frayed But Holding

Wilbur was almost crying as his eyes stayed on the road. He was holding it back with effort, as if to let out a single tear would be to end the world.

Dougie was six years older than Wilbur. He was twenty-five. But to the Ghost and maybe to the living Wilbur he looked like a child. He looked like someone to look after, because no one really had. He looked like the little boy who had handed him a train. The threads of time were frayed but holding.

Nothing ever just happened, realised the Ghost. Even the most reckless action was a consequence of what had gone before, just as every loud mistake in the world was the product of some quiet and secret pain.

'Oh, Dougie,' sighed the Ghost, while his living self was trying to grab the wheel again and being elbowed hard away.

It was a tragedy of life that you had to die before you could truly see the whole of someone.

The Ghost leaned forward in the back seat. 'I love you, Dougie. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry you didn't calm whatever demons were in your head. I'm sorry you didn't get the help you needed . . .'

The road was getting steeper. And this seemed to be the reason Dougie's car was struggling to stay ahead. The police car was now in the other lane, beginning to overtake.

Wilbur saw this and panicked.

The Ghost held whatever it was that felt so much like breath. Wilbur's leg was now reaching over Dougie's for the brake pedal. And that was when Dougie looked fully at him with mad desperation.

A lot could be felt in the smallest fraction of a second.

Wilbur loved his brother. He loved him more than he was infuriated by him, though the infuriation was so intertwined with the love, and was so often spun directly from it, that it was hard to know where one ended and the other began. Just as it was impossible for the Ghost to know how much of the love he was feeling in that second towards him had been felt then, and how much was overlaying it through the tragedy of time.

While Wilbur's foot was battling Dougie for control of the brake, Wilbur noticed a rabbit hopping out across the road from Endcliffe Park.

'Just don't say it!' implored the Ghost, pointlessly, through the barrier of time.

But, of course, it happened.

'Dougie! Look! Watch out!'

The Rabbit

He always wished he hadn't called attention to the rabbit. Because maybe in that version of events Dougie would have never seen it, and he would have continued to drive in a straight line, or Wilbur would have gained control of the brake and everything would have been – probably, possibly – okay. Not totally okay. There would have been consequences. Dougie had, unmistakably, broken the law at least three times that night. With the fight, the knife, and now the car. But then again, all those things stemmed from Wilbur talking him into going out, and dropping the news about Oxford at the most inopportune moment – the start of a night out.

Dougie looked up and saw the rabbit hopping across the tarmac.

And this man, who was so tough in so many of the wrong ways, was at his core just a soft kid who wouldn't hurt a rabbit.

He swerved wildly. Hands on the steering wheel passing over each other one, two, three times in succession.

It was all so fast and yet so beyond time.

As Wilbur had replayed it so many times, it had slowed with each silent evocation, but really it was just a moment.

The skid, the rough ride onto the verge, seeing the tree right there, front and centre on the pavement. The silent, oblivious terraced houses beyond. The sudden tightness in concentration like the air was solidifying around them. The terrible vulnerability of being flesh and bone, the deafening, fast crunch, and the impossibly violent whip and jerk as they smashed straight into the trunk of the tree.

In the lived version, Wilbur had no time to think, but the Ghost

saw now what had saved him. Unlike his brother, who was upright and facing the windscreen, Wilbur had been in a strange twisted position as he wrestled for control of the car. And this awkward contrapposto, with his leg trying to reach the brake pedal, meant that he was lower in his seat. So when he was thrown forward he hit the dashboard at such an angle that his arm and ribs took most of the force.

But still, his head took more of it than he ever realised. And now that the Ghost was watching it all happen, he could amend the memory of it, and also prolong it, as – unlike Wilbur himself – he wasn't falling fast into unconsciousness.

So the Ghost could properly witness the thump and smash of the window that led to Dougie's body suddenly being there, glittered with glass and contorted like a collapsed puppet, at the base of the sycamore tree. The kind of shape a body only makes if it has no life left in it.

The Magnetic Field

The Ghost saw the police car skid to a stop and the moustachioed policeman get out while his colleague called for help from the primitive two-way radio system in the car.

The outside police officer was now crouching beside Dougie, feeling his neck and wrist for a pulse. Residents were creeping out to watch the scene from the raised houses on the left side of the road, facing the park.

The tragedy was like a magnet. Even then, right at the start. It pulled everything into its field.

And that is how it stayed, throughout Wilbur's life.

Even when he thought he was getting away from the horror.

Especially then, in fact. It never quite let him go. There was a horrible stillness inside the car before Wilbur made a low moan. The Ghost felt the need to say something with his unheard mouth. Even if it was the most hollow thing of all.

'It will be all right. It will be all right. It will be all right . . .'

The Days

'Do you know what it's like,' the Ghost asked Agnes, once back on the train, 'to see the very worst moment of your life and be able to do nothing at all to stop it?'

Agnes was sitting beside him. He was closer to her than he had been, close enough to see the stitches in her hem. She held her hat and stared down at it. He thought she was going to get strict with him and tell him once more about the importance of not meddling. But she didn't. At least, not right then.

'I understand,' she said, delicately. 'I'm sorry.'

And the Ghost went quiet. He thought of Mr Bagdale – Arthur, her son – and wondered why he had been the way he was, and what had happened in Agnes's life, and imagined there were probably just as many regrets as in his own. And she had learned to accept all that, and hadn't tried to tinker with anything. But that was Agnes.

Part of Wilbur knew he had lived his life and must go with the journey and accept it all, even the most savage bits. But another, stubborn, part of him was forming. He had the crazed urge to break through to the world of the living and change the course of things.

On went the train. It was as though the landscape of his life became so difficult now it was harder for the engine to pull them through. And they seemed to be stopping more than ever.

There was the day of the funeral, where he had to watch himself as a pall-bearer, helping carry his brother's weight as he walked past their visibly shaking mother.

The day he watched his mother wash down her Valium with some sherry and Wilbur soothed her tears by telling her he wasn't going to university.

The day Wilbur had to tell his mother, over and over, that the police weren't waiting outside for her.

He got to see the shape of his misery, right at the points where he was most desperate. He got to see himself sitting in a pub, drinking his wages away. To see himself come back drunk to his spaced-out mother as she sat in the kitchen tearing off an advert in the *Daily Mirror* for a Philips cassette recorder that she would never buy.

'Why did you let it happen, Wilbur?'

'What, Mam?'

Edith looked down to her knees, shaking her head. 'Why did you tell him to go out with you? Why did you get the tickets?'

He knew he couldn't tell her the truth. That he wanted to soften the Oxford blow.

'Why did you let him keep driving? That's a thing I don't understand.'

'Oh, Mam, I'm sorry. I tried to grab the wheel. I tried to stop him . . . I didn't know what was going to happen . . . I should have never took him out . . . Not just after he was released . . . Something was going to happen . . . I'm sorry, Mam . . . It's my fault.'

'It was hard.'

'What was hard?'

'When your dad died. Having to split everything between the two of you. All the love, all the money. And I didn't have enough of either. Not at the time. I couldn't be a mam to him because it was all such a burden.'

'Me, Mam. You mean I was the burden.'

She looked at him and the truth was so strong she couldn't deny it. Wilbur felt his mind go numb from the intensity of that, a

creeping emptiness as his already claustrophobic world narrowed a little further.

And as the Ghost watched his own hurt, he understood himself in a way he'd never quite managed in life. He saw how much he'd been shaped and conducted by his youth. The striving for a success he thought he needed to justify his existence. And the struggle with a love he didn't think he deserved.

Edith turned away and stared into space. She started humming the title song from *Singin' in the Rain*, which she had taken Dougie and Wilbur to when they were young. Her voice had a faint and distant quality to it, as if she was singing not from pain but the place beyond that. A place beyond sense itself. And as the Ghost watched her he realised how Dougie's death had killed his mother too. How it had also killed him, or at least a part of him. One that would never truly return.

Standing on the Edge

Middlewood Hospital. An austere psychiatric hospital in the Sheffield suburbs that would one day become luxury apartments.

His mother spent six months there. In fact, she admitted herself. So that was one thing Wilbur didn't really need to feel guilty about, but he somehow did. The second of the Ghost's visits there was the day after the electroconvulsive therapy that triggered a seizure. He saw himself try not to cry as she sat there, empty. He was twenty-one now. Hair quite long and styleless. Eyes shrewd and intense, as if continually looking for something that wasn't there. Edith watched him as he sat in an uncomfortable wooden chair, and finally spoke. Her voice was unusually tender.

'*Little boy*.'

The train arrived as Wilbur wearily closed his eyes. He was on the verge of drifting to sleep as the train cab slid right by – through the walls – as immune to earthly physics as it always was. Agnes was there, and as ever she was urging him quickly onto the train.

'Quick! Before he falls asleep!'

It sounded very urgent.

'Why?'

'I told you. You must never see yourself sleeping.'

'I know. I remember. But you never told me why.'

'Your living self would end up seeing his own future in a dream. All of it . . .'

'And?'

'Well, your eternity would be gone. You may not like the life you lived, but if you had lived it any other way then you – this

ghost – would not be this ghost. Eternity is for ever. And no one wants to give that up.'

It was true. He didn't. He was feeling weary from seeing how much he had lost, and who he had lost. The idea of eternity – of being able to commune for ever with the souls of people he cared about most – was so comforting.

So he hurried onto the train. And the next stop was barely six weeks later.

The Ghost stepped out of the carriage into the night air. He was on the roof of Park Hill high-rise flats, where he found Wilbur, alone, contemplating the thirteen-storey drop below.

Wilbur had known, deep down, that he was never actually going to jump that night. He just wanted to feel close to death for a little while. That was why he had walked so far across town after drinking a whisky and six lonely pints of stout in the Dog and Partridge.

'You need to find a way to live,' his unheard ghost told him as he was standing there, looking out at the city.

The dark shapes of the cathedral and Bramall Lane football ground could just be seen amid the scattering of city lights, which seemed like fallen constellations, reflecting the night sky.

He turned away from the direction of Middlewood Hospital, then again from the direction of Ecclesall Road. There were whole areas of the city that leaked out a kind of pain for him now, and Ecclesall Road was obviously the worst. He had avoided it – completely – since the night of Dougie's death. At night he would sometimes wake up, having had a nightmare flashback of his brother's body crumpled like a concertina at the base of the large sycamore tree.

His home city was full of alarming reminders, and yet he couldn't leave. His work at Bagdale's occupied him but his life felt stuck. He felt a kind of soul paralysis.

They were planning to put men on a rocket to the moon, and yet he couldn't get a ticket out of Sheffield.

It was true that he needed to stay and be near his mother, but there was also something else enclosing him. A tight claustrophobia, as though he didn't aspire to anything any more. He would have swapped every dream to have Dougie back, so the dreams had lost their power. That night in the quiet and the dark, sobering up in the cold air and contemplating everything, he felt entirely alone. A loneliness that was physical. He felt pathetic.

He thought of himself in some alternate timeline, studying on the sunny quad at Balliol College. He knew, logically, that it probably rained as much in Oxford as it did in Sheffield – or almost – but in his imagination Oxford was always basking in sunshine.

'Listen,' the Ghost said, walking across the concrete to him in his soundless sandals. 'I know you can hear me. Even if you can't *actually* hear me I sense these words can get in. Over there is the Palace Cinema. And inside is Maggie. And your future. And you will one day marry her . . . And she is the very best thing that will ever happen to you. And for a little while, you will make each other happy.' The Ghost thought about what he was saying. And he also thought about the life that waited for his young self. Suddenly, it all became clear, where he had gone wrong. 'You aren't going to jump. But you have to listen to me. This darkness will chase you. You will race away from yourself . . . But it could have been different . . . You could *be* different . . .'

None of these words were heard, but the cold air was sobering and eventually Wilbur walked back down the fire escape.

There was a lot he wasn't letting himself feel. And he hadn't quite worked out the point of living. But at least he wasn't ruling out the possibility there was one, and in fact he went home that night and began to read a long book that would slowly help to save his life.

The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck.

Wilbur wasn't American. He wasn't from Oklahoma and never had to endure the Dust Bowl or the Great Depression. But that

tale of resilience and poverty and community was one he needed more than any other.

And the fact that he had chosen to take that book home, of all the books in the shop, made him eventually believe in some kind of higher power or cosmic order. No other book at that time would have been able to reach him, but that one did. It almost made him forgive himself.

'There ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do . . .'

The Evaporation of Youth

The Ghost gazed quietly at the portrait on the train as the face became puffy and a frown line on his forehead deepened into a permanent crease. He stared into his eyes and their shine dimmed, like a distant moon disappearing behind a cloud.

Clocks

The Ghost stood in the middle of Bagdale's Bookshop.

At first he wondered why the train had stopped here.

After all, he was just watching himself stock up a table full of Agatha Christie novels. In what way would this help him understand his life?

It was a Friday. Wilbur was still only employed on a part-time basis. Three days a week. Barely enough to cover his beer budget, let alone anything else.

He was looking hungover, noted his ghost.

And uptight, with a permanently clenched expression.

Mr Bagdale came over. He stared at him through his thick lenses for a while, saying nothing. Then, 'Did the clocks change, lad?'

'What?'

'Well, you must know something I don't, because I was in here at nine o'clock this morning and I looked around and there was no Master Budd, not anywhere at all.'

'I was a little late, I'm sorry. My mam wasn't well in the night. She's only just back from hospital.'

Mr Bagdale's wild bushy eyebrows raised with suspicion. 'You know what they say . . . Never ruin an apology with an excuse. Wise words indeed, Master Budd. Wise words indeed.'

'Yes, Mr Bagdale.'

Mr Bagdale sighed. 'I think it is time.'

'Time?'

'To say our farewells. Obviously you can work through this week, and right up till Tuesday next, but that's it. I'm sorry. I am not the

Salvation Army. I'm a business. Even my mother would be tired of you by now.'

The Ghost watched the panic on Wilbur's face. 'I'm making up for it. I won't have lunch. I'll just keep working. Look, please. I like it here.'

'No. No, you don't. Give it a rest, son. You keep wishing you were in Oxford. This is your consolation prize. And you hate it.'

'No. Please. I need this job.'

His voice was tight with desperation as he felt the weight of failure begin to press on him. He didn't want to let his mother down. He didn't want to work in the steel works. He knew this was the best opportunity he had to hand. He felt a sudden fire inside him, as though his future was being set alight. He felt vulnerable, and he wasn't good at that.

Mr Bagdale could clearly see his panic. 'Listen, they're giving plenty away at the steel works. And the cutlery factory are on the look out too. A load more jobs than folk seeking them. And did you hear it on the wireless? The Prime Minister is steering the ship into steady waters for manufacturing. You'll be fine, Master Budd.'

Just then, an old man came in. Older even than Mr Bagdale.

The man was tweedy and tall, with an arthritic lean to him, and walked with a stick. A retired professor of engineering at the University of Sheffield who was now trying to embrace art and poetry. He walked slowly over to Wilbur and Mr Bagdale, who stood there with curious anticipation.

'Thank you so much for recommending that book to me,' he told Wilbur when he reached him.

'That's all right, Gerald.'

'*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*,' Gerald informed Mr Bagdale. 'It's very good. Have you read it?'

'No,' muttered Mr Bagdale. 'No, I haven't read that one.'

'Well, it was very enjoyable. I like those American writers. Any others like that, Wilbur?'

Wilbur smiled, feeling Mr Bagdale's eyes on him. 'Well, not *exactly*

like that. But we have a brand new book in from Truman Capote called *In Cold Blood*, which I think will be up your street . . .'

He went to get a copy. Came back. 'It's a true story, this one. I'm reading it right now.'

'And *you* would recommend it?'

'Yes. It's a gripping tale of injustice.'

'Well, you haven't got me wrong so far.' Then, to Mr Bagdale: 'He's an asset, is this one. Knows his stuff.'

As he headed over to the till, Mr Bagdale rolled his eyes. 'All right, all right. One last chance. Don't muck it up. And from now on, nine o'clock means nine o'clock.'

'Thank you, Mr Bagdale. Thank you so much.'

'The proof will be in the pudding.'

Wilbur then decided to push his luck. 'I realise this is asking a lot,' Wibur said to Mr Bagdale sheepishly, 'and today's probably the worst time to ask. But hear me out.' Wilbur cleared his throat. 'Would you consider taking me on full time? I have all these empty days on my hands and that's not so good for me. I'm ready to throw myself into it. Seriously. I think it could really benefit the shop if I'm here every day. I think I could make this work if you give me more say in things . . . I *love* books. I love people who love books. And I have ideas for this place—'

'Ideas?'

Wilbur swallowed. This was his moment, and his heart became a samba drum in his chest. 'Yes. At the moment we are mainly catering to one type of reader. A middle-aged man interested in spy novels and history books about Napoleon and the world wars. No offence, Mr Bagdale, but someone like you. But this is a town full of working men and women of all ages, and children and teenagers, and we could source books for all of them. I could help us make this shop the way it was under Mrs Bagdale. A shop for everyone. I think that might increase our takings.' He paused and looked down. 'I admit, I've not always been very helpful to that end recently.'

'You can say that again.'

'But I could be. I promise you, I can do this. If you give me that break I won't disappoint you. I want to . . .'

He felt he had said too much. Especially the part about returning the shop to its glory days.

Mr Bagdale's nose whistled a little during what might have been a world-record sigh. 'Well, I have to be honest, lad, my purchasing decisions haven't been the best.' Eventually he came to a decision that would change Wilbur's life. 'You will be here six days a week. Front of the shop. If sales are up in a month, you'll have yourself a full-time job and I'll give you a say in the books we stock. Monday right through to Saturday. On time, every day. If not, you'll be out. Clear?'

'Yes, sir. As crystal, Mr Bagdale. Also . . .'

'*Yes?*'

'My mate Charlie is looking for work. He's very bright and he's good with people. I just wondered . . .'

Mr Bagdale's eyebrows grew closer, like feuding caterpillars. He gave Wilbur a grizzled look. He was altogether a rougher creature than his mother ever was. 'Jesus, Mary, Joseph and the donkey, don't push it, lad!'

'No. Of course, Mr Bagdale. Sorry, sir.'

'Right.'

Mr Bagdale gave a shorter, huffier sigh and then walked away.

'I won't let you down, sir,' Wilbur called after him. 'I promise.'

The Ghost gazed around the shop, with its quaint old tables full of books that looked like antiques. He looked outside and saw the mid-morning bustle of Commercial Street.

This was 1966.

A young couple stepping out of a brand new clothing shop called Gear Box were lighting cigarettes. The woman in a colourful kaftan dress, the man in a slim mod-style suit.

Some university students. Not quite hippies, but getting there.

A young smiling man in a yellow polo neck and a fisherman's

cap with the Beatles' *Rubber Soul* under his arm, walking past an old woman with her hair in curlers. An old, faded poster advertising Malcolm X's talk at Sheffield University Union. A bright sign in the council office window: '*Park Hill Flats – Say goodbye to outside lavatories and the slums of yesterday with modern, clean living!*'

A monochrome world was starting to leak colour.

He had never appreciated it really. The excitement and hope of that time. Sure, he had the excuse of grief. But the Ghost wondered: does any person in their youth truly appreciate the time they live through? Doesn't the mundane starch of reality always turn to sugar with memory? Wasn't that just what nostalgia was?

He turned back to himself. Still at the display table. Replacing Agatha Christie's *A Caribbean Mystery* with a book that he would soon read and relish called *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys. He was smiling, naturally, for the first time in about a year.

Sometimes you needed to nearly lose something in order to appreciate it. And Mr Bagdale's decision to fire then keep him, within the space of a minute, had been what he needed. This had been the day that something changed inside him. The moment he stepped off rock bottom and felt ambition kindle into life.

Outside, two young women were walking by. Claudette and Maggie. Claudette was busy in chatter, but Maggie turned towards Bagdale's. Not the display in the window, but beyond and into the shop. She was looking for someone. And then she saw him, and there was the smallest of smiles.

'Look at her,' whispered the Ghost. 'Turn around. She's smiling at you.'

Wilbur stopped. He did indeed turn around. He looked right through the Ghost to the street outside. But it was too late. She was gone.

And the Ghost stayed another moment before hearing the whistle of a train.

Why Sunsets Are Beautiful

The forwardness of life was a problem, thought the Ghost.

If days could be scattered all over, so on Monday you were forty and on Tuesday you were nine and on Wednesday you were eighty-one, that would be more helpful. You would know the fleeting nature of things, realise how many versions of ourselves a lifetime contained. It would make life's beauty so abundantly clear. The way a sunset was so beguiling because it tells us that every day eventually sinks into night.

The Possibilities That Life Contains

The Ghost stood over himself on the floor of a flat full of beanbags and incense.

Charlie Applewood was now a student of physics at Sheffield University.

It was Sunday tomorrow. So they had dropped acid, and were listening to the Doors as the patterned wallpaper started to shift.

'Reality is always moving,' said Charlie with an intense focus. He had long hair now. Far longer than Wilbur's. His mam always seemed to be upset when he grew it, so he didn't. But Charlie's was almost down to his waist. He wasn't the nervy, bullied kid any more. He had left his stutter behind. 'Everything is particles and particles aren't still. They move around in a wave. The quantum wave function.'

Wilbur stayed staring at the wallpaper. 'This is good acid.'

'This isn't the acid. This is physics.' He watched Charlie take a shilling from his pocket. 'See this. When it's in the air it could land either side up. So it is both heads and tails.' He flicked it and it landed on the stained purple carpet next to a packet of cigarettes with the Queen facing up.

'Heads,' Wilbur said from his beanbag.

Charlie stared at the coin with wide eyes, entranced by its shining beauty. He took a long drag of his cigarette.

'Yeah but listen, Wilbo, with life the coin is always spinning in the air in the present and it has always landed in the past. Like when I just put on the Doors I very nearly put on Jimi Hendrix . . .'

'Right.'

'We are the spinning coin, Wilbo.'

'I like that you call me Wilbo these days.'

'I got that from Dougie.'

Wilbur thought of his dead brother as he stared at the landed coin.

Charlie thought of another way to explain it. 'Like when the Beatles sing "Sergeant Pepper" they are the Beatles but they are also Sergeant Pepper. Like that is what they are telling us. They are telling us reality is a spinning coin. It contains many things.'

Charlie moved away from the chaos of records on the floor. 'What you need is to open your mind. You need to leave your little hobbit hole, Wilbo Baggins . . . The existence of tragedy in your life does not mean that your whole life has to be that way. You're the spinning coin . . .'

Charlie looked suddenly blank, now distant. Lost in thought. He said something he'd never said out loud but which had always been understood. 'My dad hit me and my mam.'

'I know. I'm sorry, Charlie.'

He didn't seem sad, or scarred, or anything at all. The psychedelic experience he was having allowed him to tell his best friend the truth, with no boundaries. And absolutely no trace of stutter. 'I thumped him back. Last year. And I couldn't stop. It was like it had been stored up by time. All that energy and anger. I just kept hitting until he was on the floor. That's why he left us. But Mam is happy now. Well, she's getting there. Got work at Cole Brothers. Shop floor. Selling make-up with the young lasses. They all love her. She says she's their Mother Hen . . .'

'I'm pleased for your mam. Always loved her.'

'And she you, lad . . . But my point is that the universe is change. That's the natural state of things. If you hold on long enough, something changes. Everything changes. Cassius Clay becomes Muhammad Ali. Dylan goes electric. Wednesday win the league. Change. That's all life is. You've got to have patience. Wait it out.

You've had a bad run and things are getting better, Wilbo. You've just got to hold on.'

Wilbur looked at his friend fondly. But the Ghost felt nothing but regret. He'd had a great friend in Charlie, and like everyone else, he had lost him further down the track. It seemed so ridiculous now. He should have made more effort. He should never have let him go.

Then Wilbur saw someone else. He saw the Ghost, standing there. The Ghost could see it. Wilbur was holding his gaze. Something he had only ever half remembered. Something he had put down to just another hallucinogenic experience.

'Wilbur? It's me . . .'

Wilbur gently slapped Charlie's thigh with the back of his hand. 'Do you see that?'

'What?'

'There's a man there. A strange man. He looks like me. But longer hair.'

'It's a sign from the future. I've been telling you. You need to grow your hair. You look like Frank Sinatra or something.'

'Wilbur?' said the Ghost. 'You need to be a good friend . . .'

But he wasn't heard. Or even seen.

'Oh,' sighed Wilbur. 'He's gone.'

The needle reached the end of the record. Charlie switched on his little black-and-white TV and moved the aerial about to get a good picture. He never really got one. Charlie started laughing, at nothing in particular, and the laughter didn't stop until the train came.

The Ghost heard Agnes. Her voice as clear as the whistle.

'Hop on board! No time to waste.'

And in all the confusion, those words rang inside him like a tolling bell.

No time to waste.

And he thought about it, as he headed towards the train.

All that time. All that waste.

And he wondered why he hadn't been better at it, at living in time, while he'd had the chance.

The Double

The Ghost felt frustrated. He thought of what Miss Graham had told him. *Ignore what is expected of you. Even if it means breaking the rules*. And as the life he was watching progressed he noticed an urge to derail the journey and try and change things.

He sat next to Agnes.

'It is possible for me to see myself,' he said, his voice flat but tense.

'What?'

'Not just when I was a baby.' His eyes fixed on the carriage floor. 'I think there have been times when my living non-baby self can see me . . . Once in a cinema when I was on a date with Alice. And in the bookshop when I asked myself to turn around to see Maggie and I turned around. And just then at Charlie's while we were taking acid . . .'

Agnes nodded, and sighed a little. They passed Wilbur, tired from work, watching footage of Neil Armstrong stepping out of the Apollo 11 Lunar Module and onto the moon. 'You were alive for eighty-one years. Did you ever see your own ghost?'

'I don't know . . . Maybe. Maybe not. But anyway, didn't you say this past isn't a memory – it's a living thing?'

Wilbur stared at his sandals. They sent him, mentally, back to his honeymoon. 'Actually, one time I did have a very odd thing happen. I was on honeymoon in Venice. It was otherwise a very happy day. Probably the happiest day I have ever known. But I felt for a moment like I saw my doppelganger in the crowd, on the Rialto Bridge. He was wearing identical clothes to me. *These* clothes.

I thought at the time that it was nothing. I imagined I was just hallucinating. I'd recently read *The Double* by Dostoevsky – because this was back when I actually *read* books rather than just sold them – and it had made a big impression on me, so I imagined I was just thinking I was seeing *my* double. I hadn't eaten for a while and I had drunk some wine. It was hot in Venice and I had never been abroad before. I thought it was all getting to my head. But now I think I was seeing *me*.'

Agnes seemed perturbed, momentarily. 'Well, perhaps you were, Old Bean, and perhaps you were not. But it really makes no difference because nothing actually happened.'

Wilbur studied her uncertain expression with interest. 'You say that as if there was another way it could have happened. As though I could have, somehow, changed things.'

'An interesting hypothesis, but what on earth would you have wanted to change? It was your honeymoon. You had just married the woman you loved . . .'

The train slowed. Wilbur looked out of the window, then back to Agnes, but she had gone. She probably realised he was about to ask a question too difficult even for her.

The Cemetery

Once, somewhere in 1969, the Midnight Train stopped at the cemetery.

It was a strange thing, being a ghost amid graves.

He wondered about all the names on the headstones. What had their experiences been like? Had their lives sped and stuttered in front of them in a similar fashion? Were any of them here now?

He reached Wilbur.

He was sitting on a bench staring at a grave.

DOUGLAS JAMES BUDD
1939–1964
A beloved son and brother
NOW AT REST

Wilbur was looking a bit different now. Though in the kind of relatively smart shirt and trousers he wore at Bagdale's, his hair was longer than it had been. He had a looser look. The shirt had two open buttons. He had a half-read book beside him, open face down on the green wooden bench.

The Society of the Spectacle because he was in his French Marxist philosophy phase.

He had just finished work. He was picking at a scab of paint on the bench that was annoying him.

The Ghost stood next to him. He knew this evening. He studied his young face to see the moment where he heard her voice.

'Wilbur? Is that you?'

Wilbur turned and saw her. His face brightened. She too had changed. She now had short hair and a heavy fringe, some striking eyeliner, and she was wearing a black polo neck beneath a red Mary Quant-style dress with white banding at the hem and on the sleeves. Sophistication with a dash of bohemia.

But the main thing he noticed was how natural she was in her skin. She had an ease that Wilbur lacked. An open, readable warmth. He felt like he could look at her smile for ever and never get bored. Simply to see her was like arriving home. And he never had that feeling, least of all at 77 Glossop Road.

The last time they saw one another their chat had been cut short. It was in the bookshop. She had come in for a copy of *Art and Illusion* by Gombrich. She'd told him then that she had given up teacher-training and switched over to the art college on Psalter Lane.

Wilbur congratulated her. He told her that his Oxford dream had died but he was happy. He doubted she believed him. He had been on the cusp of asking for her phone number but a cross-faced Mr Bagdale had walked over to him flapping a piece of paper and talking about customer orders. So the moment had passed.

In the graveyard there was no one – no one they could see – to interrupt them.

'Hello, trouble. How are you?'

'*Maggie*. Hello. It's good to see you. I'm doing well, thanks.'

She squinted, as if looking for a truth beyond the words. 'I'm not interrupting, am I?'

'No. I'm just sitting here. With my book. But it's a heavy read.'

'Unlike the cemetery, which is so light.'

'Ha. Exactly.'

'I only asked because I talk to my mam's grave. I look as mad as a hatter. And I thought you might do that to your brother. Talk to him.'

'No. No, I don't. That's just you, Maggie.'

She came and sat next to him. The Ghost remembered the magic

of that. And how he had been grateful Maggie hadn't been able to hear the sudden inopportune bounding of his heart. He'd never known that before, the strange electric force of longing for someone who was right there. He tried his hardest to seem entirely natural. He smiled at her and she smiled back and they sat a little while in soft silence.

'I often think about it,' she said eventually. 'That night, I mean. I'm sorry about all that happened.'

'It wasn't your fault. None of it. I'm sorry I tried to be your knight in shining armour and stirred it all up.'

She looked at him tenderly. Like an injured animal. 'I think it was all stirred up.'

Wilbur said nothing and they sat in silence for a while.

'My mam always said people go mad thinking they can change things. Sometimes things were meant to happen.'

He liked those words almost enough for them to sink in. 'Thanks, Maggie.'

She smiled, sensing his desire to move the conversation away from Dougie. 'Benches are our thing, aren't they? Do you remember that day at Endcliffe Park when we were still kids and you came over and caught me drawing?'

'It was a very good drawing, to be fair.'

She raised her eyebrows. 'You remember it?'

'I remember the drawing and the whole conversation. Not the words, exactly. But I remember it was nice to sit with you. And I had a couple of years which didn't have many nice moments. So I used to think of it. Just sitting on a bench in the park looking across the pond. Having a chat. Is that strange?'

'Yes, Wilbur. It probably is. But strange is fine. So long as you aren't a maniac.'

'I don't think I'm a maniac.'

'To be fair,' she said with a smirk, 'that is precisely what a maniac would say.'

'I suppose it is. Best stay away from me.'

'I talk to my dead mam in a cemetery so I'm no one to judge.'

'Yes. That's definitely weird.'

She laughed. Wilbur had no idea if they were flirting. He was always bad at reading the signs.

'What do you say? To your mam?'

Her face became serious for a moment. 'All sorts, actually. I think everyone you meet you end up losing in some way, but if you love someone they don't really leave. Obviously they do. But not entirely. They live in your mind. You keep them alive. You can lose everything but you can't lose love. Sorry. I'm sounding mad.'

'Not in the slightest,' he said tenderly.

'I was lucky I knew her well. And the way I see it, if you know someone well then you know how they would think about things. You can talk with them for ever because you know what they would say. You even know the face they would make. I sometimes even argue with her. She could be mardy as hell sometimes.'

'What do you argue about?'

She laughed at him.

'What's so funny?'

'Just the way you said it. Like I'd just said something totally normal. Like you didn't laugh.'

'Sorry.'

'Don't be sorry. I liked it. It means you're like me. My biggest argument with my mam's grave was when I quit teacher-training. But that was your fault.'

Wilbur felt his heart race at this. Either worry or excitement that he was a part of her life. 'What? How was that my fault?'

'Can you remember when I told you I wasn't drawing any more?'

'Um—'

'You made this disappointed face. You didn't mean to, but you did. And I kept thinking of that while I was at college and it helped me realise I didn't want to be a teacher. I wanted to do art. And

design. And create things. Not just drawings. I make posters and things now. I like it. To take something in your head and make it real. I'm doing what I really want.'

'I'm pleased, Maggie. Really pleased.'

'I think the trouble with life is we do things because we should. We act for outside eyes. I'm trying to live it the other way round. To do what feels right deep down even if it shouldn't be.'

'It sounds like a good philosophy.'

'And in a way the art thing . . . It was talking to you that helped me clarify something. Can you remember? The concert?'

He nodded. Did the tiniest involuntary flinch. She realised what she had said. She looked over at Dougie's headstone. 'Oh God. Sorry. I know that's when it happened. I'm sorry.'

'It's no bother, Maggie. I like what you said just now. About love. I just hate that when you lose someone when you're young you're going to have to spend more time missing them than with them.'

'Yeah.'

'I like that you were there that night.'

Her eyes shone. 'Why's that?'

'It puts something else in the memory. Does that make sense? It helps divert my mind away from the darkness. What was that word you told me about? The art word. You know, the one that explains light and dark in old paintings.'

'Chiaroscuro?'

'Yes. That was it. Chiaroscuro.' He inhaled deeply, steeling himself. 'See, that was what you were that night. You were the only shining thing.'

The Ghost looked beyond them as an elderly woman placed some carnations beside a grave. He felt the speed of time. Maybe right here, his young self had a moment of feeling it, of not wanting things to slip away without appreciating them.

Maggie looked down at Wilbur's hand. She gave it a little reassuring pat. 'I think it's incredible, to see you now. Doing so well. It's brave, you know. It feels brave just to live sometimes.'

'I know what you mean. But I don't feel brave.'

'Well, just imagine you are. What would you do right now if you had no fear?'

Wilbur studied her a moment. Then, without thinking, he blurted out an honest answer. 'I'd ask for your phone number.'

She sat back and laughed.

Wilbur felt the prickle of embarrassment rise through his body and settle as heat in his cheeks. He pushed through it. 'It's just sometimes it would be good to talk to someone who understands . . . you know . . . what it's like.' He gestured to his brother's grave.

Maggie gave an understanding smile. 'Sure. My dad always answers. Are you all right talking to my dad?'

'Aye. Sure.'

'He's suspicious of lads. Well, he's all right with Edward now. My boyfriend. We've been on and off, but we're on at the moment.'

The Ghost watched Wilbur trying to mask his crushing disappointment. Maybe Maggie noted it too.

'Ah. Your man. What's he like? What does he do?'

'He's an architect. Well, studying to be one. Seven-year course at the uni. He wants to build cities in the sky. Into all those new Sheffield tower blocks. He takes me on dates to the Park Hill estate just to look at the lifts. He's a nice lad and my mam would like him because he speaks proper and went to a posh boarding school

down south, and Mam was superficial, bless her. In fact that was one of the arguments I had with her grave. After we last broke up.'

'Why did you break up?' he asked, as flatly as he could manage.

Maggie shifted nervously and cast her eyes to the ground. 'I'd like to say there was something wrong with him but there wasn't really. I mean, he eyed up Claudette a couple of times but Claudette's beautiful and it can't be helped.'

The Ghost watched Wilbur say nothing, and remembered how much he wanted to tell her just how beautiful *she* was and that she should never doubt it.

'And he talks down to people without realising it sometimes.' She gave a guilty look. 'I shouldn't have said that. It's just my own insecurity over not knowing much about Le Corbusier. He's a good person, really. He cares about me.'

Wilbur nodded slowly, his response stuck in the air and never quite spoken. She seemed a little disappointed in him at that moment, as if wanting some kind of reaction.

'But what is happening in your world, Wilbur? What have you got to tell me?'

'I don't know. I'm a proper professional. I've just been made the manager of Bagdale's, now that Mr Bagdale is taking a back seat.'

'Oh wow. That's brilliant, Wilbur!'

'If you come in I'll recommend something just for you.' He blushed, realising that might have sounded a bit forward. 'Or your dad.'

'He can hardly read. Left school at fourteen. Mam was the clever one.'

'Ah, well, we have some Dr Seuss.'

She laughed. 'Not funny.'

'Not being funny. He's a clever man. A doctor, after all. *Green Eggs and Ham* is a surrealist masterpiece.'

She reached across and pulled out a pen from Wilbur's shirt pocket. The Ghost watched his awkward smile as she went into

her handbag and got out a leaflet she'd been given that read: *Day of Education Reform and International Solidarity Against the Slaughter in Vietnam. Sheffield College of Art. October 15th 1969.*

She wrote her number across it.

'And you should come to the protest.'

'I have work that day. I need to pay my mam's rent. She's behind by quite a bit. And I have to work. I'm working a lot. I'm a bore. But I'll see if I can come down afterwards.'

She smiled at him. She seemed concerned for him. For something in his expression. Or at least that was how the Ghost read it.

A minute later she said, 'Do you ever feel free? You know, like that starling over there . . . Do you see it? There on the branch.'

He looked at the bird, surveying the scene from high in a beech tree.

'Free? I don't know.' He thought about it. 'I think I sometimes feel like places can trap you. Especially Sheffield.'

'It's the hills.'

'Seven. Just like Rome.'

Maggie's eyes lit up. 'You can feel free anywhere though, I reckon.'

'But I don't know,' Wilbur was saying. 'I don't know if I ever feel free. I don't know if we are meant to feel free. What about you?'

'*I don't know if I ever feel free*,' mocked the Ghost. 'Ah, it must be so hard. Sitting on a bench next to the loveliest human being that ever lived, alive and warm inside your own skin. That *is* freedom, Wilbur, you idiot! You young cynic! Stop reading your French philosophers and wake up, lad! That is as free as it gets!'

Maggie stared at him a long time. 'I feel free when I draw. There's a moment, when you really get into it, and you aren't consciously *thinking* about it. You are just doing it.'

The elderly lady who had been laying flowers walked by.

She looked at them with kind, slightly mischievous eyes. 'Good evening, you two.'

'Evening.'

After she passed, Maggie said, 'She thought we were a couple.'

'Well, reality is perception. That's what my mate Charlie says when he's tripping on acid . . . He's working at Bagdale's now. I'm trying to straighten him out. I've got him a job. He does all the accounts.'

'You are waffling,' his ghost said. 'You always waffled when you were nervous. She doesn't want to know about Charlie being your accountant. She wants you to make a move because she's really not happy with Edward and he treats her terribly, that's the truth of it. He tries to control her and she wants out and craves an escape and she's hinting and you are just sitting there like a bloomin' lemon in a still-life painting. Tell her what you think of her!'

Wilbur turned, as if looking for someone.

'Are you all right, Wilbur?' Maggie had noticed that Wilbur looked distracted.

'Yes. Sorry. Just feel like I'm going a bit mad. I thought I heard something.'

'What did you hear?'

'Like someone talking. No. It's nothing.'

'Oh my God,' whispered the Ghost.

Wilbur shook it away. He may not have heard any of the Ghost's words but something of what was said seemed to get through.

'When I'm with you,' he said.

Maggie's confusion grew. 'What?'

'That's the answer to your question. I feel free when I am with you. I don't mean it in an odd way. I know you are courting. But I just need to tell you. I feel free with you. Sitting on a bench. Talking. It is the most free I ever feel.'

Maggie looked at him. At first there was nothing. And then she smiled and it was like a door opening.

She leaned in and kissed him. Just a small kiss, but on the lips.

'Oh,' he said. That was it. Just *oh*.

'I'm sorry,' said Maggie.

'No. I'm sorry.'

And at that moment the Ghost heard the whistle of the train. And he stood up, but stayed standing there until he heard Agnes, behind him, as harsh as a winter wind.

'Get on the train *now*, Wilbur Budd.'

All Shook Up

Agnes was looking worried. Her fingers were tapping against her leg. The train took a few moments to start moving again, and when it did she sighed and sat back in her seat, clearly relieved.

'Do you comprehend what just happened, Old Bean?' Even with the familiar 'Old Bean' her tone sounded cracked and desperate.

The Ghost sat down on the green velvet seat of the front carriage, beneath his portrait. 'Nothing. He didn't hear me.'

'Something got through. And she kissed you years before she actually kissed you.'

She looked out of the window. They passed the protest at the art college, and students sitting on the concrete outside. They passed Wilbur running from work to that same protest.

The train started to shake and rattle like a tin can in an earthquake.

'Hold on, Wilbur, hold on.'

'What's happening?'

'We could be heading off-track . . . You created a difference in the timeline.'

'What happens if we go off-track?'

'Well, you disappear. The whole of the Midnight Train disappears. You don't get to eternity. Because you are the ghost of not just any Wilbur Budd anywhere, but this specific Wilbur Budd who lived this life and got married to Maggie Shaw at St Timothy's Church in 1974. The one who got a big loan from the Yorkshire Bank to set up another shop, which would lead to yet more shops. The one who changed the name from Bagdale's Bookshop to Budd Books,

after Charlie had convinced him that a shorter number of syllables worked for IBM and Bob Dylan. The one who won the Yorkshire Business Champion five times . . . who got invited to advise three separate UK governments . . . who had a profile piece in the *Sunday Times* and who owned six houses in three countries . . . There are no other paths. There are no other lines. There is no chance that you can reach another life because you are the Ghost of this life. Do you understand? You are heading to eternity. Your eternity. Not an alternate version of you. So, if something changes, you lose that.'

Wilbur felt weary.

But then the train stopped stuttering and wobbling.

'I see,' said Agnes to herself. 'There was some interference, some wobbling about, some slight differences, but it seems we have got back on track. The thing you said and the kiss didn't fundamentally change the direction of travel, Old Bean.'

'Maybe it should have. Maybe things would be better that way.'

'Well, there were only minor fluctuations. You hummed a different song on your way home. But Maggie stayed with Edward because she felt guilty and her life was busy with the demands from college and her work at the cinema. And you stayed on a similar path too because of your mother's recurrent mental illness – including a prolonged bout of agoraphobia – because you were as consumed as you had been, and because you were intrinsically shy at this point in your life. So the direction of travel remains the same. And that is good. And look outside the window: New Year's Eve, 1969. When Maggie got caught in the snowstorm on the way back from Edward's digs. When she knocked on your door and needed shelter. "Like Mary and Joseph," she'd said. Elvis's *Comeback Special* was being repeated on television. And, look, there you are, sitting with your mother as Mr Presley sings "All Shook Up". But fortunately things aren't especially "shook up" because this was *precisely* how you spent that New Year's Eve, wasn't it? Right down to that rather questionable knitwear . . .'

'Yes,' said Wilbur, remembering how lovely Maggie had been to his mother. Remembering how she had humoured her every insanity during those two hours until the snow subsided. And remembering the longing he'd felt for her after she'd left. 'But why is this good? There's probably a better direction my life could have taken.'

Agnes's expression folded into a frown, as if Wilbur was a particularly esoteric book for which she was not the target market. 'Wilbur, don't be so frustrating. This was a warning. Think about it. If you'd switched track your eternity wouldn't be there. You'd disappear. You would never get to eternity or have a chance of seeing Maggie again.'

Wilbur looked at her. He didn't know why she cared about him, but she did. Precisely as much as she had when he used to head into the bookshop as a boy without a penny in his pocket. He liked her caring, but it troubled him. And he needed to know something, because he cared for her too. 'Agnes, please tell me something . . . If the track switched, if I disappeared and the Midnight Train disappeared . . . what would happen to you? To the ghost of Agnes Bagdale. Would you disappear too?'

'Yes and also no. Once you are in eternity you can be everywhere all at once. I would stay being in eternity . . . But I wouldn't be on the train because the train would leave the tracks and disappear, as the life flashing before your eyes would no longer be the life you went through. And the Wilbur of the past would enter a different life that may well be worse than the one you lived.'

'Right,' said Wilbur, pleased to realise Agnes would be safe.

'Let this be a warning.'

In truth, Wilbur wasn't entirely satisfied. He felt there must be some kind of flaw with her logic. A way for him to reach eternal life, but also somehow get himself to love Maggie differently. But Agnes was a bookseller and also currently a universe, which made her quite hard to argue with. 'All right, Agnes. I understand.'

And for a short while, he really thought he did.

Trapezium

Out of the train window, Wilbur was walking to pick up the phone. The Ghost saw his smile and realised it was Maggie on the line. He remembered the scene. She was telling him that she had broken up with Edward the month before. He'd mocked her when she'd visited his parents' house and they had had a row. And she realised that she had never loved him.

Wilbur plucked up the courage to ask her out on a date and she agreed. The Ghost, at his next stop, followed Wilbur as he headed to the Palace to pick Maggie up.

She'd got changed in the back of the cinema and was wearing a beret and a polo neck and a slightly awkward smile.

The date didn't go the way he wanted it.

Maggie had a distance, that evening. A protective politeness that became clear over drinks at the Stone House pub, when she told him the news. Two days after he had asked her out she'd had an incredible offer. She was moving to London. She'd got a job that her tutor had told her to apply for with a design firm called Trapezium. 'I can't turn it down. They're the best in the country . . .'

So the date led nowhere. They were in limbo. There was no kiss in the rain. He never invited her dancing at the Penny Farthing nightclub, as he'd planned. It took Wilbur every single atom of strength he had not to tell her what he felt about her. Not to tell her that he needed her in his life. It was hard to fight for a relationship that didn't yet exist.

The closest he came was during their goodbyes.

'I'll miss you.'

'Aye. I'll miss you too.'

And the hug lasted a little longer than formality expected. And then they looked at each other in silence for a few seconds, and they both watched as all the possibilities they could share evaporated into the night.

Nineteen Months

Charlie in the pub after work telling Wilbur about the end of the Beatles . . . Wilbur on his bike making an unnecessary right turn to avoid going down Ecclesall Road . . . Launching a children's section with displays of Dr Seuss and A Wizard of Earthsea *. . . Working, working, working . . . On the distant horizon there was a World Cup in Mexico . . . a satellite in China . . . a cyclone in Pakistan . . . Then in the foreground Edith swallowing her pills down with her milky tea and a slice of cake . . . On his own on the bench at the cemetery . . . working in the back office with Charlie . . . lying in bed awake and alert and hearing the milk float drive down an empty morning street . . . packed crowds in the bookshop on a Saturday . . . passing the waterfall in Endcliffe Park . . . Wilbur getting a phone call from Maggie, saying she was unhappy in London and coming home . . . one thing rushing and fading into another. . . a whole life of ellipses . . . every arrival its own departure . . .*

Warm White Wine

The Ghost was standing in the lobby of the brand new Sheffield Crucible Theatre.

The place was full of people dressed in brown suits and kaftan dresses. It was a wine reception held for opening night. He saw his living self, in a jacket and mauve shirt, and with a new and short-lived moustache under his nose, chatting to a large red-faced man from the *Yorkshire Post*.

'Despite that monstrous moustache,' said the Ghost to no one, 'I scrubbed up all right.'

And then he remembered what this was. He was there for the precise moment when Wilbur realised that Maggie was in the room.

The Ghost watched his living face light up at the sight of her, like a window catching the light. He tried hard not to be too obvious, but kept stealing glances. And soon he was just gazing, hoping she would see him. He thought of *Anna Karenina*, how Levin's love for Kitty is confirmed when he sees her on the ice.

For Wilbur, seeing Maggie felt like relief, as though a part of him hadn't been breathing this last year.

But that relief he felt on seeing her was the terrifying moment he realised he loved her. It wasn't that he had been thinking of her night and day. He'd thrown himself into work and the shop was now thriving. But even as work became a kind of anaesthetic, she had never fully left his mind. Every time he was sitting near Dougie's grave he thought of her. Every time he was passing Endcliffe Park he thought of her. Every time he wanted to tell someone about the pain he felt inside he thought of her. He always hoped she was

doing well, and happy, but it was never a hope that he acted on. His assumption had been that she didn't need him complicating her new life in London.

So it was a kind of shock when she phoned to say she was coming home. She'd said she'd got a job at the Crucible as their in-house designer and wondered if he was going to the opening night.

He tried to pay attention to what the journalist was talking about but had lost the drift. He was just looking at Maggie, who was wearing a burgundy corduroy dress and chatting with ease and grace to some people he didn't know.

'It was a big mistake though, wasn't it?' the man from the *Yorkshire Post* was saying.

'Sorry,' said Wilbur. 'What was a mistake?'

'The decimalisation of our national currency! They'll be back to pounds, shillings and pence next year, mark my words. Bet it's bedlam right now running a shop . . .'

Wilbur's eyes met Maggie's across the room. 'Oh, we haven't found it too bad. Listen, Terry, I'm ever so sorry but I've just spotted an old friend . . .'

He weaved his way through the crowd until he was there.

'Hello, trouble,' she said, politely peeling herself away from the people she'd been talking with.

He recognised Claudette. 'Hi, Wilbur!' she said, raising her eyes at Maggie with an excited smile, as if he'd been the happy subject of a conversation he didn't know about.

'Oh, hi, Claudette! Hope you're well.'

Claudette couldn't hear him. He turned to Maggie. Felt a little rush of adrenaline.

'So this is your new workplace?'

She nodded. 'Graphic designer for the theatre. Claudette works here and knew I was unhappy in London and she got me some advance work.' She showed him a programme for Chekhov's *The*

Cherry Orchard, the play they were about to see. He noticed the name 'Maggie Shaw' in tiny letters beneath the strikingly simple, geometric cherry tree on the cover. He felt a surge of pride for her, but even more of joy that she was back in the city.

'That's fantastic, Maggie.'

'You must be a dignitary,' she told him with a smile. 'Because this reception is for – and I quote – "Yorkshire and England's finest dignitaries and journalists", and you are not a journalist.'

'I've never really known what a dignitary is.'

She gave a cheeky smile. 'It means, in ordinary parlance, that you are up yourself.'

He laughed. 'Well, in that case I am most definitely a dignitary.' Their eyes got lost in each other's gaze for a moment. 'So what exactly happened to London?' he asked after sipping his warm white wine. 'I didn't want to pry too much on the phone . . .'

'Pry away.'

'I'm prying, Maggie. This is me . . . prying.'

'The work was good. I just felt I was, you know, losing myself.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, there were thirty people and I was the only northerner and one of only three women. And Trevor Jacobs, the guy who runs Trapezium, stole my ideas when he couldn't get in my knickers.'

She said this without any slant or intonation. Just with the neutral flatness of truth.

'Oh. I'm sorry.'

'Don't worry. I've always felt I can say things to you, Wilbur. I know secrets are always safe.'

'I am the Secret Keeper.'

She smiled. Her eyes gave him her full attention. 'Anyway. What about you?'

He told her that Mr Bagdale was dying and had, quite literally, handed him the keys to the shop. He told her he had helped his

mother get her first house with its own little garden. He told her he lived there too, and had his own car to drive to work.

He felt uncomfortable. He felt like he was talking about an outline of a life. It gave him a sense that something was missing, and that she might be it. So he asked her more about London.

'Oh, I don't know. There's a type of small-mindedness you get in the trendy London set,' she explained, taking a stick of cheese and pineapple from a passing tray. 'They think they're worldly because they talk about Cambodia and Vietnam and get stoned to Pink Floyd and wear Mexican-style blouses, but scratch the surface and you find out they use their . . . you know . . . *cosmopolitan signifiers* . . . to shut people out as much as welcome them. They have more prejudices than the average steelworker downing pints in the Frog and Parrot over on Division Street . . . But that's just my own defences talking,' she said, getting serious for a moment. 'Maybe we all are just looking to belong anywhere that will have us. And I suppose, Wilbur, the sad thing about human beings is that, to belong, someone somewhere always needs to be shut out. And I think that was me.'

'I can't imagine wanting to shut you out,' Wilbur said.

His Ghost sighed, 'Oh . . . I miss those thoughts.'

Her eyes shone like a shared secret. 'Thanks, Wilbur. That means a lot.'

'I missed you.'

'I missed you too. It was quite surprising, actually.'

'Really?' Wilbur said, with humorous confidence. 'I'd say it's totally understandable. I'm quite magnetic. Look at me.' He stuck out his jaw. 'Robert Redford, eat your heart out, right?'

'It might be more that you're a little lost lamb and I came back like Bo Peep to find you.'

'Hey. I have a moustache now. I'm a tough guy. I caught my finger with a staple gun the other day and I didn't even cry.'

Maggie laughed but the laughter faded quickly. The look on her

face folded into serene contemplation amid the hubbub of the room.

'I'd always thought if I came back it would feel like a defeat, but it doesn't . . . I feel like it's the most natural thing in the world. I mean, look at this place. Look at these people. Look at you.' Her eyes were adding subtext and his heart was doing the rest. 'Sometimes everything you need isn't so far from where you start.'

The Courage It Takes to Love

They sat beside each other in the theatre. And then they went for another drink afterwards.

'Kiss me, Wilbur,' she told him, out on a quiet street. 'Just kiss me.' So he kissed her, and felt the relief of it, like she was air he needed to breathe. He wanted her that night more than he had wanted anyone.

The train arrived, and despite his sluggish reluctance to leave, the Ghost smiled as he climbed the metal steps and opened the blue door and stepped on board. He realised there were moments that weren't just appreciated in retrospect, but that he'd truly loved at the time. And this evening was one of them.

Out of the train window, he caught a glimpse of their silhouettes behind the glow of curtains.

They spent the night together in his bedroom at the house he'd bought for his mother. He remembered how the need to be quiet added to the innocence and excitement.

How they spent the night naked under the sheets and leaning over each other in euphoric and secret whispers and giggles. The clumsy clashing of limbs and the pulling at each other's clothes. Kisses of unending depth. Bodies melting into thoughts and thoughts melting into bodies. Friends becoming something deeper.

The fusion of worlds. The scent of skin and new carpet. The sudden stillness and silence when they thought they heard his mam.

He remembered the feel of her voice warm in his ear as she said his name. He remembered a shared cigarette outside the window,

their bodies wrapped in bedsheets. He remembered her head on his shoulder as she fell asleep. He remembered the happiness as he felt the soft slow tide of her breath. He missed it. He missed her. He missed her so much. He missed the adventures they had and the ones they never finished.

He watched time speed by as they started dating.

They went to pubs, restaurants, to the cinema where she no longer worked to watch *The Exorcist*. They walked around duck ponds and the local art gallery.

He made her laugh. He had forgotten that, but as he looked out of the window he was seeing it so much. One thing he did remember was how it made him feel so close to her.

Sometimes her laugh was affectionate in the right way and sometimes it was affectionate in a way that made him feel a little silly. It was, he told her once, the kind of laugh you give a dog when he had taken a shoe and put it somewhere. But he liked it.

They became their own island in the storm. And he felt lucky just to be with her. She was as warm as June and as tough as steel and as funny as hell.

He saw them chatting in pubs over beer and gin. He saw her meeting him as he closed up shop for the day. He saw them chatting on a walk through town one evening, when they decided to stroll through the concrete underpass, which still felt like the future.

They talked and talked, as though a relationship was really just a conversation that never wants to end. She taught him about things, he remembered. She taught him about nature. She knew the name of every tree and plant and flower, and she said their names as if they were old friends.

They were walking through Endcliffe Park and she was pointing out everything from the weeping beech tree to the hawthorn and cotoneaster.

He had understood what love really was, back then.

It was meaning.

It was that state of being where someone else was more important than himself, even though they were away from each other all day, even though he was working hard to make a success of Bagdale's Bookshop. He was ambitious – he wanted it to be the greatest bookshop in the north of England – but back then his ambition was matched by his love. He was somehow never alone. He was with her when he wasn't with her.

This had also been hard for him. His instinct was for self-reliance but somehow, in his late twenties, he was brave enough to truly love. For the world's centre to be outside his body. For his contentment to be dependent on someone else's. That was the gamble of it, but also the beauty of it. Love had made the world real and helped him move from internal woes to external cares.

Wilbur felt slower with her. His mind had always been racing since Dougie died, like a sentence without punctuation. Maggie gave him the commas and the full stops. And maybe that was why the train seemed to be going at a gentler pace for a little while, as he watched it all back.

This young self he was watching felt something real and dangerous and beautiful. A kind of shifting of gravity, a falling into the pull of her orbit. And the fact that she felt the same about him gave him a sense of responsibility, that if he was her world, then he needed to make sure it was a good one. It made him work harder at the shop. He wanted her to be proud.

They were fundamentally different people but it had worked.

Maggie could float through life, and be happy with whichever direction the wind took her, and somehow land where she needed to be. Wilbur needed a continual focus, a light to head to, a sense that he was working towards a shared future, knowing that he would lose himself into darkness otherwise.

He saw himself jump awake.

The Ghost suddenly remembered. It came back to him, vivid

and firm. He'd had a nightmare about Dougie and the accident. His body against the tree. The tree itself becoming a kind of monster. All dark and burnt-out, as if made of charcoal, its branches reaching towards him and wrapping around him like vines, stopping Wilbur from breathing. He'd had this precise nightmare before many times, but this was the first time it had happened with her.

Maggie placed her hand on his chest.

The Ghost couldn't hear the words through the train window but he remembered the conversation.

'I'm fine,' he'd said.

She studied him in the near-dark of the room with the eyes of an attentive artist.

'You don't always have to be.' She'd felt his pounding heart. 'Was it about Dougie?'

'No,' he lied. 'No, I don't remember what it was about.'

Over time, the nightmares stopped and he began to feel courageous in a way he never had. And through this courage he wasn't scared any more to give himself to her. The distraction of this new feeling felt like it would never end: the speed of his love swirled with the excitement of taking the bookshop from strength to strength, as if it was all part of the same rising force. Both gave him a self-esteem he had been lacking, and neither one ate into the other. He wasn't quite able to head down Ecclesall Road or pass the sycamore tree, and the wound was still there, but he was somehow preoccupied enough to never press it. He had made their love into a blanket and burrowed deep under it. And so, for a fleeting moment in time, from around 1972 to 1974, it seemed to Wilbur he had finally worked out how to live.

Love's Garden

The train dropped the Ghost off at a pub.

The Black Swan.

A cosy pub with an open fire.

Men fresh from the steel works sat at tables smoking cigarettes and playing dominoes and chatting about horses and football and the cold.

Then he saw himself.

He was talking to a man with thinning black and white hair and bushy sideburns and eyes that seemed to tilt away from each other. A man who had the air of a sad badger. Maggie's father, Alfred. He was still in his green uniform from a day in Endcliffe Park, tending to litter and flowerbeds.

They drank Guinness and ate pork scratchings. Alfred studied Wilbur as he sipped his pint, as if it were a test. To be fair, that was how Wilbur had felt for much of the night, like he was being rigorously assessed. Not that Alfred had many questions. Indeed, he didn't have much to say at all. He guarded his words as if they were money that would be spent once spoken. But the Ghost was there to hang around, and watched – and remembered – as Wilbur slowly managed to befriend him.

'Maggie is very talented,' Wilbur said. 'Her drawing is brilliant.'

'She doesn't get that from me, I'm afraid,' said Alfred, as he placed a pork scratching in his mouth.

'Not much of an art person, then?' Wilbur asked cheerfully. Too cheerfully, he felt, the moment he had asked it.

The older man shook his head. 'No.'

The silence yawned before them. A man at the next table slammed down a domino in victory. The Ghost thought of his mother, across town, serving pints in the Queen's Head. He remembered not wanting to meet there. And choosing here instead. A sign that he hadn't really become a proper man, thought the Ghost. A sign that he was still in the shadow of Dougie, and still ashamed – not of his mother, exactly, but of himself *around* his mother.

The Ghost studied his own living face as he started telling Arthur, unprompted, about his work and how sales of art books at the shop had picked up and they were expanding the illustrated books section. Animated conversation that masked the slight twitch of Wilbur's mouth. The strained eye contact with Arthur. The discomfort in his own skin. Yes. It was there. Even here in his happy years. That feeling of not being adequate, of not being able to bear what was really going on inside him.

'You were never quite right,' the Ghost said, unheard. 'Were you? You could imagine you were, with Maggie, but there was something inside you. That grief and insufficiency.'

The Ghost realised again that he may have misunderstood how to live. He always thought that to succeed in life you just had to keep spinning. Like a sycamore seed on the wind. And that the faster you span the further you'd reach. That, provided you kept accelerating, you could outrun scarcity, outrun your past, outrun your nightmares. Yet he saw now, watching his young self, the lengths he had gone to avoid what the tender part of his heart was really feeling. Would it have been impossible to stop moving forward for one moment and just sit, with his pain and shame and woe? To face it head on. It wouldn't have been impossible – for instance – to just hold on to Sheffield, and their life here. Or even to move away from the place, but not from all the feeling.

'Her mother,' Alfred said eventually after Wilbur's monologue ground to a halt. His words arriving almost as a sigh. 'She was the one into art and that. Not me.'

Wilbur didn't know quite what to say. He knew he was on delicate ground. 'I would have loved to meet her. The way Maggie talks about her I know she was a very special person.'

Alfred gave Wilbur a testing look. 'Aye. She was.' His face softened with sympathy and sadness. 'Maggie told me about you losing your dad and your brother. I'm sorry about that, son. That's a lot for a young man to carry. It's hard when you've known someone so well.'

Wilbur nodded. 'Actually, I never knew my dad. He died in the war.'

A considered pause. A scratch of his sideburns. 'I'm sorry, lad.'

'And my brother, he was a bit of a tearaway to be honest, Mr Shaw. You see, Dad was his hero and then he died really young and Dougie took it bad.'

There was another silence, but a more natural one. 'Gardening,' Alfred said eventually. 'That's what helps me. Looking after things. Even simple things.'

'Right.'

'Look after things, lad. That's my advice. Anything that comes your way.'

'Right. Yes. Good advice. Like the shop. I'm making a good go of it. I might expand. We're doing really well. Last month our turnover was double what it was for February.'

The Ghost rolled his eyes. 'Oh, Wilbur, I'm surprised you didn't bring your profit and loss account to show him. So needy. And so missing the point. He doesn't want you to prove you're going to be rich. He wants you to prove you are kind . . . He wants you to be a real person.'

Alfred studied him some more. 'Do you love her?'

And Wilbur could answer this one sincerely. 'As much as anything.'

Alfred nodded. He believed that.

There was a long pause. Much staring into pint glasses. Then:

‘Listen, Wilbur, lad, I think Maggie is really serious about you. And she is good at seeing things, so she must see something in you.’

The Ghost caught young Wilbur’s smile then, as he absorbed the warmth of that acceptance.

‘You’re a good lad, Wilbur. But don’t take it for granted. Love is a garden. You have to keep tending to it.’

‘Yes,’ said Wilbur, trying to look like he was taking it in, rather than actually doing so.

‘You should have listened to him,’ said the Ghost, unheard through the smoky room, as Alfred offered Wilbur his final pork scratching.

The Landscape of Life

The Midnight Train rolled by some of the best times he had known.

Wilbur and Maggie on a bench outside the theatre, spending a lunch break together . . . Wilbur working hard late at night in the back room of Bagdale's after Charlie clocked off . . .

Maggie designing an advert for the shop. A murmuration of flying paperbacks in the sky . . .

Wilbur and Maggie in the new house in leafy Broomhill, painting the bathroom walls avocado green . . .

Double-dating with Claudette and Charlie at a sit-down cabaret bar . . .

Maggie giving an evening talk at her old art college with Wilbur in the back row for support.

'I had time for her,' the Ghost said to himself, looking at his smile. 'I had time for life.'

The happy couple on a Sunday in Robin Hood's Bay, looking out to sea and eating fish and chips . . .

Maggie up a ladder Charlie and Wilbur were holding, painting the shop sign she'd said desperately needed a revamp . . .

Had he always acknowledged the hard work she had put in during those early days, even though she had a job of her own? The Ghost wondered if he had understood that the way the shop looked was a key part of its success.

He caught sight of himself in a jeweller's. *Mr Leslie Thomas Top Quality Fine Diamonds*. Wilbur was leaning over a glass cabinet and choosing a ring . . . Then he was down on one knee proposing

at the bench where they had once sat as teenagers. And he couldn't hear it from the ghostly train but he distinctly remembered how it sounded – 'Yes, oh, Wilbur, *yes* . . .'

Flower

He wanted it to slow down. Not then, but now, watching it back. He wanted those days to pass like centuries. No, he didn't want them to pass at all. He wanted the train to pull to a halt somewhere in that patch of life and for him to stay there. He just wanted to live inside a moment of that life with her for ever, to pluck it like a flower and press it in a book, and just stay on that page until the end of time.

Confetti

He got out to watch himself in a rare moment of relaxation in the bookshop.

Flicking through a guidebook to Venice at the back of his shop, thinking about their honeymoon, just as Charlie walked in holding a copy of the *Bookseller* magazine.

Inside, the Ghost remembered, next to a big piece on the author Graham Greene, was a small interview with himself that he had done over the telephone. The article had reported that Bagdale's had quadrupled its sales within a year, thanks to Wilbur. A few key decisions – such as letting people sit on chairs to read, stocking new and radical books, paying staff more and offering commission, as well as Maggie's aesthetic overhaul – had worked wonders.

Charlie slapped the magazine down excitedly on the desk.

'Look, Wilbur!' he beamed. 'You're famous! You're the Ziggy Stardust of books!'

The Ghost looked at Charlie. Still with his long hair, but now a short-sleeved shirt and tie too. He realised how lucky he had been. To have a friend like him. So genuinely happy to see his success.

And the train pulled up, right there into the back office, before the Ghost had time to linger on his response.

'That was one of the quickest stops so far,' Agnes told him. 'Faster than a scalded cat. But not as quick as the next one.'

'Is this how it's going to be from now on?'

'Oh no. Not always. It's just, well, the Midnight Train lingers for as long as it needs to, and sometimes happiness has the least to teach us . . .'

And so the train shunted to a stop at possibly its happiest location. A street full of stone-built semi-detached houses outside the small chapel of St Timothy's Church on the outskirts of the city.

He was there only for a minute or so – not much longer than if he was watching it through the window. But out in the air, it felt more real. Maybe that's why the stop was made. For him to actually feel the reality of a moment he had only seen as a photograph for so long.

He saw himself and Maggie walking out of the church into the blazing August sunshine. All the guests were lined on the grass beside the thin path. The confetti was thrown enthusiastically, especially by Charlie and Claudette.

'The happy couple!' beamed Claudette.

'To the Budds!' shouted Charlie, quite tipsy already in preparation for his best-man speech at the Queen's Head later.

Then Claudette added, with a Shakespearean flourish: 'The Darling Budds of August!'

Maggie laughed, slightly self-conscious but eyes shining as she caught sight of her dad, Alfred, clapping with pride. And Wilbur smiled out at the guests as the wedding photographer – Jim, the landlord at the Queen's Head who had decorated the pub with his own pictures – crouched to get a better angle.

'Oh what a day,' sighed the Ghost, smiling and lost in the memory, as Maggie turned to throw the bouquet behind her for Doreen to catch.

'By 'eck, I bloomin' got it. Now I just need to bump into Paul Newman!'

More laughter. Except in Doreen's eyes.

The Ghost caught sight of his mother. She was looking on with a smile. He hadn't spoken to her much that day, he remembered, not wanting her to say the wrong thing as she often did. But looking on now, it seemed unlikely she would have.

'Oh, Mam. I'm sorry. I should have tried harder . . .'

And he winced as he heard the rhythmic chugging behind him.

'No,' he said, as it stopped right there on the church grass. 'No, Agnes, this is too early. Can I just stay?'

'Don't worry,' she said. 'The next stop is your honeymoon.'

And so he returned to the train and caught quick flashes of the rest of the day. Charlie getting stoned in the Queen's Head toilets to calm himself down after his speech . . . Doreen hugging Maggie and crying on her shoulder . . . Claudette and Charlie dancing energetically to some unheard and long-forgotten song at the wedding disco . . . His mother talking to Alfred as she cut into a quiche . . .

The problem was this:

Everything that was once so slow in life, was now so fast. But while the time had shortened, the power of it all had strengthened in potency. So, if living normal life was like sipping water, experiencing it flashing by out of a train window was more like downing whisky after whisky.

He was drunk and battered from the blur.

'I wish it would slow down,' mumbled the Ghost as Agnes reappeared beside him. 'The good parts always go so fast . . . And then we're going to get into the other parts.'

'It's not about good or bad, Old Bean. You know this as well as you know your fingers. It's about what your memory tells you is representative, so at the end you get to say *So that was who I was*. That's what you linger on. That's where the stations are. Together they map who you are.'

And then, of course, he saw himself at the airport, wearing the same clothes as the Ghost. The same sandals, flared jeans, short-sleeved shirt. The scruffy hair and large sideburns too. Wilbur was looking up at a departure board, waiting to know when the flight to Venice was boarding. Maggie, beside him, was dressed in her orange jumpsuit and looked happy and keen and full of life. They were holding hands.

And then the train began, finally, to slow down.

There was nothing to see outside the window.

'Venice,' Agnes muttered to herself. 'The human city, as Patricia Highsmith said in *The Talented Mr Ripley*. No cars, you see. "The streets were like veins . . . and the people were the blood, circulating everywhere."'

'Did you ever go to Venice?' the Ghost asked.

She shook her head. 'No, actually, no, I didn't. I didn't really like to travel. Who needs travel when you have a mystery novel, eh? Now listen, Old Bean. Here, more than anywhere, it is important that you do not speak to your younger self. You said it was on your honeymoon that you saw yourself. As you know, just because nothing happened the last time doesn't mean that couldn't be changed. And if your past changes, there will be no afterlife, no ghost of you, no eternity. Do not dilly-dally when you hear the whistle. Do you understand?'

I do not understand, no, he nearly said. *All I understand is that I want the living versions of me and Maggie to be happy.*

But Wilbur looked at Agnes and wondered if he even needed to give an answer.

Eventually, he decided that silence was better than telling a lie.

Hotel Proserpina

The Midnight Train had arrived beside the Grand Canal in Venice.

The Ghost looked around him.

He saw gondolas on the water, and tourists and pigeons on the ground.

A water taxi was heading to shore.

Behind him he saw a ramshackle terracotta-fronted hotel. Above the door was a hand-painted, elegantly lettered navy and white sign: *Hotel Proserpina*.

So here he was.

Friday 9 August 1974.

He looked back at the canal. Of course, the couple in the back of the water taxi were himself and Maggie. It was the day he had been most truly himself, which was why he looked exactly like he did as a ghost. And even his first ever experience of air travel hadn't dented his smile. His expression was one of wild wonder and curiosity. And it was no surprise.

Maggie had an expression of wonder too as she stepped out of the water taxi, the heavy Pentax camera hanging around her neck.

For both of them, this was the furthest away from home they'd ever been. Wilbur had never even been to London. Arriving in Venice was like arriving on another planet.

'Oh, bloody hell, it's amazing,' said Maggie.

Wilbur agreed. 'It looks better than in the brochure.'

And the Ghost followed them as they walked under the chandeliers of the Proserpina's narrow lobby, passing old paintings and bookcases and marvelling at a vase bursting full of white roses.

Maggie gave Wilbur a look. The look said *I like this place*.

Oh, thought the Ghost, studying himself as he squeezed Maggie's hand. A thought that was as close to a sigh as a thought can be. *I miss you, Maggie*.

Seeing them, the receptionist rushed out from behind her desk with an eager smile.

'Benvenuto! Ciao! Hello! Is it Mr and Mrs Budd?'

Mr and Mrs Budd.

'It is,' said Maggie. 'Since last Saturday!'

'Ahh. Congratulations! I am Gabriella. Pleased to meet you. And this is your first time in Venice?'

'Yes, it is,' they said in unison.

'My first time anywhere,' added the Ghost.

Gabriella smiled. 'Have you got things you want to do? Doge's Palace? St Mark's? A gondola? Art?'

'Oh, all of that,' Wilbur said. 'Maggie – my wife – has made an itinerary.'

Gabriella was admiring the camera. Maggie explained it was a wedding present from her dad.

'Along with the salt and pepper shakers. Don't forget the salt and pepper shakers.' Wilbur turned back to Gabriella. 'But any recommendations would be welcome.'

'Actually, yes,' said Maggie. 'We don't have anywhere to eat tonight. Would you be able to suggest somewhere?'

Gabriella nodded, with the accentuated concern of someone who was committed to her job. 'Yes, of course. There is a lovely little place that we recommend called La Zucca. Beautiful food.'

'Sounds perfect.'

Back then, in 1974, Wilbur and Maggie had only ever eaten Italian food when they went to Mama's Restaurant in the centre of Sheffield. And then it had only been pizza or spaghetti. When it came to the world, they were still novices.

It was so strange, the past. How close and distant it was at the

same time. How the familiar was exotic and the exotic was familiar. And how the hardest thing to remember about the old was the sense of the new.

'I will reserve it for you,' said Gabriella. 'Tonight at eight.'

And as they headed over to the desk with Gabriella to check in, Wilbur took a quick look behind him. Maybe he was having another look at the flowers. Or maybe he was sensing the Ghost.

The Ghost that was standing looking back at him, not with nostalgia now, but a sense of emerging anger.

'You really didn't realise what you had,' he said.

But Wilbur heard nothing, and turned back to the reception desk without a second thought.

Time

Happiness squandered was painful to look at from the future. But the Ghost tried his best to feel gratitude that he had known happiness at all.

It was a blazing August day.

He was watching himself and Maggie on the terrace of D'Angelo Caffè, overlooking a cluster of moored gondolas, sipping the finest wine they had ever tasted. There was indistinct chatter all around them, softened and unified by the unlikely sound of John Denver singing a country song from a radio somewhere inside the café.

He missed everything he was seeing and hearing.

He missed drinking, he missed feeling the sunshine prickle his skin, the glow from hearing a beloved song.

Maggie leaned back in her chair. Leaned her face towards the sun. 'This is the life.'

He observed himself watching a vaporetto full of tourists sail by and listening to Maggie talk about Venetian art. She nudged him and pointed to something in the guidebook. They spoke a bit more, then she went back to reading and he turned his attention from the action of the Grand Canal just to look at her. He seemed genuinely mesmerised by her.

'Why didn't you stay like this?' his ghost asked. But really, he knew the answer.

He listened to them chat. He hardly remembered the conversation. They spoke about all sorts. The wedding. Wondering when Charlie would ask Claudette to marry him. How someone walking by looked like Hawkeye from the TV show *M*A*S*H*, which they

realised would be playing on the BBC right about then. How someone else looked like Björn Borg. How Maggie's dad was having trouble with his spondylosis. They talked about each other. They talked about the way Wilbur sat back in his chair like an emperor when he had a glass of wine and how Maggie studied everyone like a detective. They laughed and talked about everything and nothing at all. Their conversation flowed so naturally in the sunshine. They noticed each other with the devotion of astronomers mapping new planets. It was clear to anyone they were blissfully in love. To Maggie and Wilbur it felt this love was indestructible, that it ran deep and all around them, a moat against the armies of time.

Once they'd finished their wine they set off and wandered hand in hand, being the oldest they'd ever been and the youngest they'd ever felt.

They were certainly in childlike spirits.

Maggie began to sing, in a quiet and mock-serious fashion, 'Bridge Over Troubled Water'. The Ghost felt a mist clearing. He began to recall things from the day he died. Sitting at the piano, playing the first section of this tune. First with his teacher, then by himself. He felt it again. Music as a thread of time, stitching moments together across decades.

The Ghost tried to remember what was happening to Wilbur right there on his honeymoon.

Eventually it came to him.

Of course! Maggie had wanted to go to a church where there was a Titian altarpiece of St John the Almsgiver. The church was just beyond the bridge, so the plan was to head there and then back to the hotel and get ready for the evening.

The Ghost followed them.

It was busy.

They passed smart Italian couples. Open shirts and glamorous

dresses. A busker playing the accordion. An old American man smoking a pipe and talking to a companion about jazz.

They cut off the main thoroughfare and walked beside one of the smaller canals.

'It feels so different, doesn't it?' Maggie observed.

She looked up and around. Absorbing the colours. Terracotta and pink, a dash of yellow, the deep blue shutters, everything in the sunlight looking like it had been brushed with honey.

'Different to where?'

'To everything we've ever known.'

The Summit of Life

The Ghost listened as they talked about bellinis.

They debated visiting Harry's Bar at some point during their stay, the place where the cocktails had been invented.

'I don't know if I'd be smart enough,' Wilbur said, looking down at his sandals and flares.

'Maybe we should try something a little more gritty,' she said.

'I don't know if Venice does gritty. This whole place is a bellini. One big fizzing peach.'

'It's like that book you gave me by the Italian.'

'*Invisible Cities*?'

Maggie nodded.

Invisible Cities by Italo Calvino had been translated into English that year. It was proving a tough sell to customers on the basis that it had no story, and hardly any characters, or almost anything else a person might reasonably expect from a novel. But it was one of Wilbur's favourite books.

'Yeah,' said Maggie. 'When I read it I thought, if he is writing about Venice, why not write about Venice? Why write all these different imaginings of Venice? But that is what it's like, isn't it? It's like a hundred dreams in one.'

Wilbur looked at her.

His eyes were full of pure, undistracted love.

The Ghost knew that this was it, the summit of life's mountain. The very happiest he ever felt. Just walking along beside a canal, glancing at the woman he adored.

'I love you.'

'I love you too.'

Wilbur's smile seemed to take that in, and appreciate it, as if it had a taste he wanted to savour.

'My mam had always wanted to go to Venice with my dad,' Maggie said, after another moment. 'Ever since she saw that film with Katharine Hepburn in it. She never went abroad. She never got further than Blackpool in her whole life.'

'Well, next year we'll have to come back and bring your dad. We've got money now.'

'Not much. After the wedding.'

'Well, we'll have some more by then.'

'He's not such a romantic type. But maybe, actually, yes. He would like that. Maybe.'

'Never going to happen!' said the Ghost, unheard, behind them. 'You think you will, but you won't. Because – what is it they say? – *life gets in the way*.'

Wilbur stopped Maggie for a kiss as they were about to go up the steps of the Rialto Bridge.

'We could move here.' Then, a few minutes later, as they passed a bookstall on the bridge, 'I could sell the shop.'

He was joking. Still, the Ghost could see there was a degree of spontaneity in him back then. Excitement and hope and a desire to turn their love into an adventure. Back then he was open to everything. Back then – even after the grief he went through – he was still wanting to feel. To a degree.

Their wedding and honeymoon had obviously come at an interesting point in his life. Yes, he had been working hard. He had thrown himself into every business opportunity. Chatting to every customer and sales rep like they were the most important person in the world. Placing the week's new books out on the shelves himself before the shop opened. Stocking the books his customers didn't know they wanted yet but were always satisfied to read. It was a determination that had led him to be where he was: in charge

of a booming Bagdale's Bookshop. And one day it would be turned into a successful *chain* of bookshops under the name Budd Books.

But that was the future, just one of many. Nothing back then was written in stone. Yes, sure, he had an appointment with the Yorkshire Bank on his return. And, yes, within that appointment an offer would be finalised by the manager, a damp pork pie of a man called Geoffrey Baxter. The loan to set up a second shop would be his if he wanted.

Wilbur was now in two minds, and he liked it that way. The sense of open possibility. And right now, with enough wine and Venice inside him to feel quite bohemian, he felt the pull of a more adventurous life.

'What would we do?'

'You could be an artist . . . or do art tours.'

'And you could set up a little bookstall like that one back there on the bridge . . .'

The Ghost leaned in close to Wilbur and whispered in his ear: '*You need to keep hold of this.*'

This whisper seemed to cause Wilbur to brush his ear.

'You all right, love?' asked Maggie.

'Oh, aye. Just a mosquito or something.'

The Ghost kept talking as they walked. Ignoring every warning Agnes had given him.

'You need to keep hold of this feeling, Wilbur. Can you hear me? Because soon after you get home, it's all going to go to shit. Because you'll be scared again. Of scarcity, even though you already own a successful business. Of your nightmares starting again. You will become scared of loving Maggie with your whole heart. But you need to. Because she is the best thing that will ever happen to you . . .'

The Ghost was walking ahead of them now. He stopped outside a little shop on the bridge that was selling glass sculptures.

He knew this was the spot. He knew this was where he'd been seen. Or, rather, where he had seen himself.

The Ghost stayed there watching Wilbur. Not saying anything. Just watching.

And, of course, it happened.

Wilbur saw his ghost, wearing the exact same clothes he was wearing, with the same hair and sideburns. The Ghost smiled at him and waved. And Wilbur stared back, in shock.

It was then the Ghost heard the familiar whistle and chug of the Midnight Train. He turned and saw it pulling in, waiting for him on the other side of the bridge, beside the Grand Canal.

Agnes leaned out of the front cab, her face concerned. 'Come on, Old Bean. No time to dilly-dally.'

But the Ghost just stood there and realised something. He wasn't going to do as Agnes said. He wasn't going to get back on that train. In fact, he had something approaching a plan.

The Rialto Bridge and the Quantum Wave Function

The Ghost started walking back the way he had come.

Agnes, however, was following him. 'You can't do this, Old Bean.'

'I'm not getting back on the train. You can't make me get on the train. Everything after this moment in my life was a mistake. This day here. This was as close as I ever got in life to heaven. So this is where I want to spend my eternity.'

He was now overtaking Wilbur and Maggie, who were crossing the central portico of the bridge and about to start walking down the ramp towards the church they were wanting to visit. Maggie, mid-stroll, tilted her head and briefly rested it on her new husband's shoulder. She gave him a quick, concerned glance.

'You look like you've had a funny turn,' observed Maggie. 'Like you've seen a ghost.'

'I think I might have.'

The past wasn't set in stone. Life wasn't set in stone. And neither was death, thought the Ghost. He could change things.

Death was beyond time, so the past it had once left unaltered could also be altered.

He had never been good at physics, especially quantum physics, but death was helping with that. Now he saw the truth of things in a new way. He understood what Charlie had been telling him when he was high on LSD. That life was a kind of spinning coin.

It could be changed by death and also not changed by death *at the same time*.

The quantum wave function meant everything was eternally and infinitely variable. Death made things a bit wobbly. It made

different possibilities exist on top of each other. Miss Graham was trying to tell him this. Sometimes you had to break the rules in order to live.

Agnes had caught up with him. She peered at him, eyes wide beneath her cloche hat.

'Oh dear, Old Bean. Listen. You are at the end of your life and the start of your death. Your life flashes before your eyes. You linger where you are meant to linger. On scenes that provide, as a whole, a complete representation of your life. But then, when the time comes, you get on board the Midnight Train and keep on chugging along the track. You don't stick around. Because as I told you, you can't be there when your living self falls asleep. You get on the train and then you wait for eternity.'

'What happens?'

Agnes looked confused so he expanded.

'I mean, what happens if I am there and he sleeps?'

'Then the train comes for him too. Potentially . . . things are unpredictable . . .'

'Does he become a ghost?'

Agnes didn't want to answer this but she had to. Lying was against her principles. 'No. Not in the conventional sense. He would be there, but via his dreams not his death. So while at the end of the journey you would disappear into nothingness, he would' – she hesitated, knowing this would be an incentive – 'just wake up. The way dreamers always do. Potentially . . . Actually, Old Bean, that is rather unclear. I don't actually know for certain that would happen. It is probable but not certain.'

'And in the dream he sees his future, right?'

She gave a reluctant nod.

The Ghost smiled. He was so excited he almost felt alive.

Agnes shook her head. 'Exactly. And how can someone live if they know their future?'

'Look, I had a friend. Charlie.'

'I know Charlie, Old Bean.'

'Well, when he was high, Charlie always talked about time. About how it is never really the past. That it always allows the possibility of change. Like a book you can keep editing. He knew a lot about quantum physics. The wave function. Reality was always changeable even when you felt it had been lived. The past and the future could interfere with themselves.'

Agnes sighed. 'I know how it works. As I said, I was given a knowledge of the universe when I opted to help you.'

'I just think that is what is already happening. I think I am making a change. But to really do it . . . I need to stay until he sleeps. I need to guide him onto the train and tell him what I have learned by dying. And for the train to show him the future.'

'It's all so unpredictable, Old Bean. You are throwing away your eternity, and you will never know if that sacrifice was worth it. I wouldn't tinker if I was you.'

The Ghost looked back through the crowd but he could no longer see Maggie or himself. He didn't want to get closer to the train. He sensed it – and Agnes – had less power over him the further he moved away from their spectral magnetism.

He finally spotted Wilbur and Maggie, disappearing around the corner on their way to the church.

'Listen, Agnes, I'm not getting back on that train.'

A couple staring at a giant map walked through Wilbur.

'How can a life have meaning if the future is known?' Agnes asked. She knew the answer, because she knew everything, but the bookseller in her needed to know he was making the right decision.

'But that's the point, it would no longer be the same life. It's the observer effect. That's another thing Charlie talked about. The moment you witness something, it changes the thing you are observing . . .'

'Oh dear.'

'So, if the future is known, then the future becomes knowledge, and then things change.'

'Oh dear, oh dear,' said Agnes, shaking her head. 'I've told you about the rules. I've told you of their importance. It's not hard. You get on the train. You don't meddle. And you don't see yourself asleep. One, two, three. That's it.'

'Yes, I know, I know. But these rules are dependent on one thing. On me wanting to exist for ever in eternity more than I want to give myself a chance in life. And it is impossible to know everything ahead of you, because as soon as you know, it changes. He – me, Wilbur – would no longer be living with the knowledge of everything to come. Because as soon as you know what is to come you stop it coming. It's like what you said with Wilbur and Maggie at the cemetery. When the train nearly went off course. Well, his life will take an entirely different direction if he knows *everything*. So pretty soon he won't know his future at all. My past will stop being his future.'

Agnes looked at him with shrewd, studying eyes. 'But exactly' – a man with a folded copy of the *Corriere della Sera* walked right through her, Richard Nixon's troubled face on the front page staring out through her body – 'you will be gone.'

Wilbur started to run towards the Hotel Proserpina.

'There is no knowing he will survive all this', said Agnes, calling after him. 'There is no knowing he will ever wake up. There is no knowing anything!'

Wilbur kept running through the crowds, and tried to ignore Agnes as she called from the bridge. 'You are a fool, Old Bean. You are pushing your young self into a state of extreme unpredictability. I have to tell you that.'

Like life, he thought. *Like life*.

Titian

Maggie had always loved art. Her inspirations were the great living artists, but she had a thing for the Renaissance. At thirteen in the library she had found a book called *The Lives of the Artists*. And she even mentioned it in the first ever conversation she'd had with Wilbur, back on Glossop Road.

In that tome she had learned that Leonardo da Vinci had designed parachutes and diving suits, that Michelangelo never had a bath, and that Caravaggio killed a man over a game of tennis. In the book there had been a print of Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne* and she had been so mesmerised by its colours and composition it affected her breathing and made her skin prickle. Her dad had told her that art was for posh people, but she liked how she felt staring at art and wanted more of it. More of that feeling.

'Just standing in front of big old paintings calms me down,' she told Wilbur now, as they were about to enter the medieval church. 'That's why I used to go to the National Gallery, back when I was miserable in London. It's the closest thing to time travel.'

'How?'

'Well, you stand in front of a da Vinci from, I don't know, 1498, and it's powerful because the painting is as it was then. The emotions and feelings of it are fresh. It hasn't gone off. It is 1498 right there in front of you. The world grows old around art. But the art is still as powerful and fresh as it always was . . . if that makes any sense . . .'

The Ghost was right behind them as they entered the church. They found the painting of St John and stared up at it.

'It's a bit spooky,' said Wilbur.

Maggie raised an eyebrow. 'What's spooky about it?'

'It's a dark painting, in a sombre and empty church, by someone who died four hundred years ago.'

'Of the plague.'

'What?'

'Titian. Poor lad died of the plague. Then his son died of the plague.'

'This isn't making it less spooky.'

'There was a lot of plague back then. In Venice.'

She smiled, consoled by awe.

Wilbur turned away from the bald saint in the painting. Looked around, as if someone was standing there. But he couldn't see anyone. He thought of the hallucination he'd had in the heat, on the Rialto Bridge. The doppelganger. The words in his ear. The sound of a train.

He'd read Daphne du Maurier's and Thomas Mann's stories set in Venice, and knew it was a city that could conjure darkness. A city of labyrinths.

Yes, he told himself, it must have been hallucinations. But if so, the doppelganger was one he'd seen before, now he thought about it. He remembered tripping with Charlie and seeing him there in his flat. He remembered voices in his ear too. Not Venice, but Sheffield. And as far as he knew, Daphne du Maurier had never written a story set in Sheffield.

He looked at his watch. 'Mags, I think we should probably get back to the hotel . . .'

'All right, love. Are you okay?'

'It's just that we don't want to be in a rush for the meal.'

'No. You're right.'

He felt bad taking her away from her favourite painter, but at the same time he wanted to get out of the church and into the light because his unease was growing.

So the honeymooners walked out of the church and the Ghost went to follow.

They wove a different way back to the hotel, through the labyrinthine streets, crossing little bridges and turning down ever-narrower paths.

Maggie read out the name of a street sign. 'Calle . . . dei . . . Stagneri . . . o de la Fava.'

'That was a mouthful.'

'A very wide name for a very narrow street.'

They held hands.

The Ghost watched as he walked behind. How he missed that. Being able to just hold her hand. Back then he hardly even thought about it.

They came to a small bookshop with a table full of Italian paperbacks nearly blocking the path. A youngish man – about his own age – was inside the shop, casually reading a magazine as he sat behind the till.

Wilbur tutted when they'd passed. 'Well, he's not going to get much business lazing around like that, is he?'

'Maybe he doesn't want to get much business.'

They walked further along the street in silence until Wilbur stopped, quite dramatically, to announce something.

'I'm going to do it.'

Maggie gave him a curious look. 'Do what?'

'I'm going to ask Geoffrey Baxter for the loan.'

'Who's Geoffrey Baxter?'

'Manager at the Yorkshire Bank. The one I've got an appointment with a week Tuesday. Good bloke. No nonsense. I'm going to go for the loan. For the second shop. He's already offered a lot of money. I'm going to do it, Maggie. I'm going to phone him the day we get back and tell him I want to accept.'

He smiled broadly. It was a genuine smile with just a dash of uncertainty.

Maggie's face was expressionless for a little moment. 'It's a big undertaking.'

'It's a big *opportunity*. The opportunity of a lifetime, in fact.'

'Aye, it is. It is.' She seemed to be repeating herself in order to believe it. 'If it's what you really want to do . . .'

He detected her concern. 'What's the matter?'

'I mean, you were just talking about moving to Venice.'

'That was just a joke, Maggie. A flight of fancy.'

'I know. I know it was, love. I just, well, I just don't want it to take us away from each other.'

'It won't.'

The Ghost sighed. 'You are a fool and a liar, Wilbur.'

'If anything,' Wilbur went on, 'it'll be the opposite. At the moment, I'm working long hours at Bagdale's. If I accept this offer, we'll have financial resources.'

'Financial resources,' echoed the Ghost. 'Such a *romantic* phrase for your honeymoon.'

Wilbur looked around as if he had heard this mockery. But then he turned back to Maggie.

'We'll be able to grow, and hire more staff . . . and become a proper operation across two shops . . . Set up a template and let the shops run themselves . . . The same principle . . . Books for everyone . . . Children's section . . . More fiction than non- . . . White walls and big lights . . . Seats for people to sit and read . . . I can give a blueprint to other managers . . . I will end up doing *less* . . .'

The Ghost was confused for a moment. *Did I sincerely believe that?*

'Look, Maggie, most of my life I was poor. My entire childhood I was poor. I had holes in my shoes and I was hungry and I saw my mam counting out farthings on the kitchen table to pay Mr Parkin the rent . . . If I go for this, it means we'll never have to have those worries.'

The Ghost was despairing by this point. 'Jesus, Wilbur. You're

running the most successful bookshop in the country. You're paying off your own house. This is not a Mr Parkin situation.'

Wilbur stared towards where his ghost was, squinting a little. Had he heard him? It was hard to tell.

'Well,' said Maggie, with a doubtful tone Wilbur wasn't choosing to hear, 'if you think it's the right thing, then you have to do it.'

They walked back to the hotel to get ready for the evening. Behind them was a ghost, and in front of them was a future about to change.

The Tune She Was Humming

Maggie was having a bath. They had half an hour before they had to leave for the restaurant. Wilbur hadn't changed his clothes. He was lying on the bed, still in his sandals and the same flares and shirt as the Ghost. He felt suddenly quite tired. His eyes were dry from the flight, and he was feeling the consequences of the wine they had drunk earlier.

He picked up their guidebook. *The Companion Guide to Venice*.

A section on jazz bars. There were quite a few of them, and they were popular places to hang out, apparently, and one was close to the restaurant they were going to tonight.

Maggie liked jazz more than he did, so he thought he could surprise her by walking past there later on, after the meal. And then they could walk back to the hotel via the Piazza San Marco.

He heard Maggie gently humming to herself in the bath. He was sleepily trying to work out the tune she was humming, smiling to himself, no longer thinking about the ghostly doppelganger he had seen earlier. The one who was watching him now as he fell asleep in his clothes on the bed.

Death's Brother

As a thousand writers have observed a thousand times over, death and sleep are closely related. 'To die, to sleep; to sleep: perchance to dream' was how Shakespeare put it. But the line the Ghost was thinking of was from the novel that had found him when he had needed it, *The Grapes of Wrath*: 'Death was a friend, and sleep was Death's brother.'

And that was how he felt right then. A brother to himself.

He felt like his own protector. And that was a comforting feeling, given he had lost his protecting big brother. But now he realised what he was doing. He was protecting himself. Sacrificing one self to save the other.

Because sleep was where the world of ghosts and the living could meet.

The truth was that he was not really any different to the Wilbur lying asleep on the bed. He was Wilbur – he had always been Wilbur.

He wondered what was going to happen when Wilbur fell asleep. And he kept wondering, right until it was too late to stop.

The Dreamer

What happened was that things started disappearing around him, and it happened quite quickly. The wardrobe, the table lamp, the table itself. Then the carpet, the walls, the door, the open suitcase, the clothes, the window, the view, the camera, the bed. Everything was replaced by darkness. Everything apart from Wilbur himself. He was still in a lying position, right in front of him, hovering in space.

He thought of what Agnes had said. *There is no knowing anything.*

And then things really changed.

Slowly, the world around them was being made again. Instead of striped wallpaper, there was now a long wall of red brick. Instead of carpet there was tarmac. Instead of a bed, the sleeping Wilbur was now lying on a bench.

'So we are back here,' whispered his ghost tentatively, as he wondered what was going to happen next. He caught sight of the sign he had seen the first time. The one which said 'Wilbur'.

The dreaming Wilbur opened his eyes. He stared at his ghost.

'You,' he said. He wasn't scared. He had the kind of acceptance he would never have had if awake.

'Me,' said the Ghost, looking around anxiously and wondering whether the train was coming.

'Am I dreaming?'

It was a hard question to answer, especially as the Ghost was worried about what he had just done. He decided to say what he thought was true. The answer itself a spinning coin. 'Sort of. You are still Wilbur Budd. You are still asleep in the hotel bed in Venice.

But I am going to show you something I want you to see. Or try to. If the train comes.'

Wilbur didn't seem to be listening. He sat up. 'You're exactly the same as me. Even down to my clothes.'

'Yes,' he said, looking down the track towards the dark void beyond. 'I have lived your entire life and I am now the Ghost of you. Or, let's be technical: the Ghost of Wilbur.'

'The Ghost of Wilbur?'

The Ghost examined their surroundings. The station seemed pretty solid and predictable. Then, as he looked at his identical companion, he had a thought. 'If I am the Ghost, let's call you the Dreamer?'

'Um, all right. But, more pressingly, where am I? Where's Maggie? What on earth is going on here? It's like Sheffield train station.'

'It's not. Look at the sign. This station is for you.'

'Am I dead too?'

'No. You are sleeping.'

The Dreamer was noticing something. A sound. 'What the heck is that?'

The familiar chug of the steam engine. But this time there was a screech and rattle as well. Loud enough to hurt their ears. And all its other noises – the hiss and roar of the steam, the piercing whistle – seemed louder too. It was like the whole train was beyond control, as though it could fall apart at any moment.

'Get up, Dreamer. We've got a train to catch. And I don't think it's going to stop.'

'What? How can we get on a train that's moving?'

'I don't know. But we're going to have to.'

The Dreamer stood up as the Ghost saw the front of the locomotive. It arrived, shaking, on the tracks, struggling to stay upright, still speeding as it reached the platform's edge. He saw Agnes leaning out of the first carriage.

'What's happening?' the Ghost shouted to her.

'The unpredictability!' she shouted back as she passed. 'Like I told you! Quick! You've got to get on the train or you'll be stranded—'

He couldn't hear the word after that, as she had gone too far down the line and the metal wheels were grinding loud against the tracks.

The 1974 Wilbur – the Dreamer – stared at this gleaming blue and black three-cylinder express passenger engine with motionless wonder. 'Just like the one I had as a lad,' he said, barely heard above the noise. But the Ghost was dragging him as he started to run.

'*The Duke of Gloucester*,' said the Dreamer, remembering the train Dougie had given him as a kid.

'Quick!' shouted the Ghost. 'Jump onto the step and hold on to the handrail.'

So they both sprinted. The Ghost made the jump first. Landed. Held on with one hand and reached his other arm out for the Dreamer, dragging his equal weight for a while until he too made it onto the step. It was another effort to get the steel-plate door open, but they did it and burst inside. The Ghost was relieved to see the train looking as it always had.

'This isn't the *Duke of Gloucester*,' he told the Dreamer. 'This is the Midnight Train.'

Agnes appeared through the door at the end of the carriage as the train began to steady.

'Well, I suppose you are very lucky chaps. The train could hardly handle that much unpredictability, but now you are both on board and the transition is done, things should hopefully smooth out.'

'That's good,' said the Ghost. 'That means when this journey is over you will probably wake up.'

The Dreamer wasn't listening. Instead he was taking Agnes in for the first time. The young but old-fashioned woman, dressed in her long pencil skirt, prim blouse and cloche hat, which she was in the middle of straightening after her bumpy ride. He wondered if he would get the connection.

'I recognise you . . . The eyes . . . Hold on . . . Mrs Bagdale? . . . Lovely Mrs Bagdale!'

'Mrs Agnes Deborah Amaryllis Bagdale at your service,' she said, with a dry reluctance. 'Or ghost thereof. I looked very different then, of course.' She gave a sympathetic look and gestured for the two Wilburs to head to the seats.

'Yes!'

'Listen, Old Bean, or Young Bean, or whatever I should call you,' said Agnes to the Dreamer, 'I would like you to know that absolutely none of this was my idea and nor was it recommended. And while I hope you will wake up at the end, I can't promise. But here we are . . .'

'It's all right,' smiled the Dreamer. 'Don't fret. It's a dream. I'm dreaming. I'm asleep in a bed inside the Hotel Proserpina in Venice.'

Agnes tilted her head. 'Fifty per cent correct. You are definitely dreaming, but what you will be shown isn't a dream. It's your future.'

'I tried to explain,' said the Ghost.

Agnes raised her eyebrows. 'I think you should try just a little harder.'

The Ghost tried to think of how he could be more convincing. So he turned in his seat towards his dreaming self. 'Think of those times you sensed someone was watching you . . . Like in the cinema, when you were dating Alice, and you felt like someone was walking across your grave . . . It was me, standing right next to you. And think of today, in Venice, on the Rialto Bridge, when I whispered in your ear and you brushed it away like a mosquito, and then when you saw me . . . when you saw me on the bridge . . . dressed exactly as I am now, exactly as you are . . .'

This was where the doubt kicked in. The moment that the Dreamer understood the dream was no longer just that. 'I . . . that was just a . . .'

'And the cemetery. When you kissed Maggie years ago. When you heard my voice and thought you were going mad.'

The Dreamer puffed out his cheeks and exhaled deeply.

'There it is,' clarified Agnes. 'He believes. Now, I suppose this is what the train was waiting for.' And she pointed out of the window as Venice magically appeared. 'Right, it looks like we are getting this show back on the track.'

Mirage

They sat on the long green velvet seat as the train stuttered a little, as it would do every now and then from this point onwards.

'We won't be *entirely* out of the woods until the end,' said Agnes with a note of disapproval aimed at the Ghost. 'Because this was a train made for one Wilbur. But please don't meddle any further, and we might pull through.' The Ghost nodded, sheepishly.

The Venice beyond the window, like everything that had passed the train's windows, was a landscape of the mind and memory. A psychological collage. So the restaurant where they were eating that night – La Zucca – was right next to the Piazza San Marco, which was right next to the hotel's dining area.

'It's me and Maggie,' said the Dreamer, utterly confused. 'We're in both places at once. The restaurant and the hotel.'

He noted the restaurant, a charming little place, in a limestone corner building perched down an alleyway and backing right over a canal.

'Look,' said the Ghost. 'Look and remember what Maggie is eating. She's having the bigoli in salsa. It's like a really thick spaghetti. And look at what she's wearing, the long blue dress . . . And see, there, on the next table, the bald man with a birthmark on his scalp . . .'

His dreaming companion was confused. 'What?'

'Trust me,' the Ghost said. 'For if you wake up.'

Venice slid by in no time at all. And now they were back in Sheffield. The Ghost was watching his other self absorbing the view. Seeing his fixed gaze as he saw his future.

'It's going so fast,' said the Dreamer, fascinated.

'Life does that if we're not very careful.'

The Ghost sighed. This was the heart of it. He had used work to accelerate his existence, to soften life's jagged edges into a blur.

And he was good at it. It gave him meaning and he had loved it. But work – to the excesses he had done it – was also a way to live without living. A way to transfer emotions over to something less personal, something with lower stakes. By turning Bagdale's Bookshop into Budd Books he had attempted to reinvent himself. An attempt to *become* business. To *become* money. To *become* a sign above a shop. To *transcend* himself rather than just being the man he was. To race through time with no weight and substance, but with maximum velocity.

Ultimately even love was weak against the desire to avoid pain. Because what was love but another door into it. Better to keep those doors closed. Better to stay on the train of work. Better to aim for a stock-market flotation instead of happiness. Until, of course, you actually die and realise the mistake you made. Until you realise that most damage was caused by things escalating, things spinning out of control.

'We worked too hard,' the Ghost said, watching Wilbur, late at night, studying his account book, with Maggie asleep beside him.

'What's wrong with working hard?' the Dreamer wondered. 'We saw Mam struggle. We saw Dougie thieve to make money. What was wrong with earning an honest living?'

'Nothing. Nothing that society would see. But there are many ways to betray yourself in life. Some obvious – like thieving and fighting and getting chased by the police – and some subtle. Some betrayals look very much like success. But make no mistake – you'll see – we betrayed ourselves. Yes, sure, some couples aren't right for each other . . . But that wasn't us and Maggie. Maggie was perfect.'

'She is. I know.'

'We loved Maggie as much as anyone ever loved anyone, yet we

turned away from her. Eventually you won't hold her gaze. Not because you have fallen out of love, but because . . .'

'Because?'

'Because love slows you down. But slowing down is what you should have done.'

The Ghost sighed as it all became so clear. To look around, that was the best way to slow down. To live fully, that was the best way to die. And he had failed on both counts. But now he was going to make things better. He was going to give his young dreaming self a chance.

The Idea of Enough

They were looking inside a Bagdale's Bookshop. The first and original. Looking at Wilbur talking on the telephone with a champagne bottle in hand.

The Ghost pointed. 'You know what that is?'

'I got the loan?'

'That's right. More money than we ever dreamed of. Enough for two more shops.'

'It wasn't *my* money. It was to expand.'

'Yes. And make money. And make shops. And then get more money from the bank. And make more shops. And make more money to make more shops.'

The Dreamer felt a little hurt by this. 'And make a difference! And employ people. And get more people reading. By opening bookshops. Like that one.'

They were now passing the brand new bookshop in Manchester. Gleaming and white with wide front windows. Now under the name of Budd Books. They saw straight inside to the opening day, where Maggie was watching Wilbur make a speech.

'Wow. It looks *fantastic*.'

'Yes. It was. And there are more of them to come. This is 1975. By 1982 you will have twenty shops. By 1990 there will be a hundred. At the peak there will be 203 different stores.'

'*Two hundred and three?* That's . . . that's . . . almost as many shops as Woolworths.'

'You will be rich. You will be famous. You will win awards. And you will have worked hard for it. You will become an expert at

targets. You will set targets and when you reach them you will set a new target. You will be scared of the idea of enough. And you will no longer care about books or readers.'

The Ghost watched his dreaming self even more carefully now. Watched his mouth twitch at its corners with a nauseating excitement and pride. Still not getting it.

'You might be looking at this all the wrong way,' the Dreamer said. 'You're forgetting what it felt like to make money after having none.'

The Ghost sighed. 'I don't think it's about money. Come on. The train is slowing. Let me show you.'

The train stopped and they got out onto a quiet leafy road in the Sheffield suburbs.

'It's our house,' said the Dreamer. 'It's our new house. 38 Watson Road. The train just stopped right outside our house!'

He turned to see the train had disappeared. 'What the . . .?'

'Now follow me,' said the Ghost as he walked through the front wall and window of the house as easily as passing through an open curtain. And his dreaming associate looked around him and saw a boy at the end of his newspaper round with an empty satchel. The boy kept walking towards him, and just as the Dreamer was about to say, 'Hey, watch where you're going,' the boy walked right through him without noticing a thing.

'I'm in Venice, not Broomhill . . . This is not happening . . .' muttered the Dreamer.

And he stood there for far longer than a dream would allow and decided eventually to follow the Ghost into the house.

A Nice Sunday Roast

'I just walked through a brick wall ten inches thick and I didn't feel a thing.'

The Ghost nodded. He and his younger apprentice were standing in the living room as Wilbur and Maggie and Edith were eating a Sunday roast, complete with Yorkshire pudding and all the trimmings.

'That's because we aren't physically here and this is the physical world,' explained the Ghost. 'We are – for want of a better word – *spiritually* here. You via your dreaming self and me via my – how to put it – dead self.'

'Bloody hell.'

'An understandable thought.'

'This is weird,' muttered the Dreamer, so wide-eyed it was hard for him to remember that back in the past he was asleep. 'Can they see us?'

'Unlikely. Possible, but unlikely. So long as we don't want to be noticed, we tend not to be. You didn't see me that often. Even when I was trying to get your attention.'

The Dreamer threw the Ghost a hopeful glance. 'Mam looks happy.'

'Aye, she was. She was much better mentally. Well, for a few minutes she is, but you'll see.'

'Oh no. Jesus. Do I have to see it?'

'Yes. Yes, you do. There is nowhere else to go. Not until the train comes.'

'But I don't think I—'

'Shush now and let's listen.'

'All right . . .'

And so he listened. And gazed at Maggie's face, tentatively.

Edith chewed her food with some consideration. 'These carrots are good, Maggie. Lovely flavour. What's your secret?'

Maggie smiled, politely but warmly. *So beautiful*, both the unseen Wilburs thought. 'Actually, Edith, Wilbur did the carrots.'

Edith seemed a little disappointed with this development in her enquiry.

'A bit of nutmeg before we roast them,' the actual Wilbur in the room said.

The Ghost watched with interest. 'I forgot there was a time I helped with the cooking.'

'Really? But you – we – like cooking. It's relaxing.'

The Ghost gave a wry smile. 'The problem was that I gave up relaxing as well . . .'

Wilbur stared at his mother for a little while, waiting for his moment. 'Mam, we brought you round to tell you something.'

Her eyes lit with interest. 'Is there a little one on the way?'

Wilbur smiled. 'No, no . . . we're not in any big rush in that department.'

Maggie raised her eyebrows. 'Oh, that's good to know.'

Wilbur flashed her a *not now* glance. 'We're moving to London.'

There was a pause so strong his mother stopped chewing. 'London?' It might as well have been Neptune.

The Dreamer looked at the Ghost, as worried as a lost child. 'London? Really? Was Maggie okay with that?'

'She tried to be. But no. Not really. Or she might have been if we'd truly acknowledged the sacrifice she was making . . .'

Edith wasn't taking this well. 'But you're based in Sheffield . . . The shop's in Sheffield.'

'We have others though now. Manchester. Edinburgh. And we're opening one in Leeds and two in London. And many more to

come. The bank is on our side. I take a loan and pay it back with interest within twelve months so they give me another. I've employed the very best team of people and I am working every hour God sends.'

Maggie's nod was accompanied by a silent sigh.

'We're going from strength to strength,' Wilbur went on, 'but we need to be based most of the time in London. That's where the action is. We have a disadvantage being stuck up here.'

Maggie raised her eyebrows a little but the only Wilbur that noticed was the dead one.

His mother looked desperate. 'What about Maggie? What about her job at the Crucible? She loves her job at the Crucible . . .'

'There'll be opportunities in London,' Maggie said, sounding a little flat. 'I've worked there before. There are always exciting things happening there. They were sad about it, but they understand.'

Their mother looked lost. 'Well, if it makes you happy.'

'It's not about that, Mam.'

This was the moment Maggie felt obliged to express a little of her inner commentary. 'Well, what is it about, Wilbur? Why can't it be about happiness?'

'Maggie—'

'Aye,' added Edith, 'the lass has a point.'

'It's business. I have a real shot here of creating something truly special. Of changing the British high street for ever.'

His mother tutted. That was the trigger for Wilbur. 'Mam, just come out with it.'

'There are things more important than business, that's all.'

The Dreamer was only looking at himself a little over two years in the future but he was noticing a change. 'Why do I look so angry?'

'Yes, Mam, and there are things more important than going to Oxford and everything else I have ever wanted to do too . . .'

Maggie reached across the table and placed her hand on his

forearm. 'Wilbur,' she said sternly, 'please . . .' Then she turned to his mother. 'I'm sorry, Edith.'

'Ah, no. Don't be, pet. I know when I'm a burden.'

Wilbur was now trembling with a barely restrained fury.

'Mam. Just for once in my life, can I do what is right for me? Jesus, Mam, I'm thirty-one years old. I'm not a child any more. I can make my own decisions.'

His mother sat there, her face as tough as it could be, holding back an ocean. 'Aye. Aye. You can make your own decisions. Aye. And Dougie was right. He said you'd always run away from us.'

'Why do you have to bring Dougie into it? Bloody hell, Mam.'

Maggie, caught in the middle, just stared at the salt and pepper pots and pleaded: 'Wilbur, please, go easy. Your mam's upset.'

'Oh,' said Edith, 'I know how it is. I know he wants to be on every high street in England rather than the Ecclesall Road.'

'Edith, I think that's a bit far—'

'A bit far? Yes, it is. Two miles away and he still can't drive down it or see it or anything else. But it's still there, just as it was in sixty-four.'

Wilbur stared at the clock on the wall. The one with pointed rays sticking out from the circumference, designed to make it look like an exploding star, surrounded by the yellow, orange and brown striped wallpaper. His mother had only been there for fifty minutes and it already felt like a lifetime.

'Do we have to talk about Dougie right now?'

Edith sighed. 'No, no. No. We don't ever have to talk about him. What about that?'

'Mam,' Wilbur said through a clenched jaw, 'you have to move on.'

'Ah yes, move on. Move on. That's what the world is about nowadays. Moving on. It's like the council. Oh, they could have rebuilt the city after Hitler's destruction, but, no, no, they just fill it with concrete nonsense and those ugly underpasses. But it's no

better in London, lad. That's the home of it. All those ugly tower blocks.'

'Mam, I'm not moving for the architecture.'

'No, I know. Well, it's funny.'

Maggie tried to be a neutral voice amid the tension. 'What's funny?'

'Oh, well, love, I actually came round feeling a little bit awkward about *my* news.'

Wilbur raised his eyebrows. 'News?'

His dreaming, honeymoon self was also curious. 'News?'

The Ghost nodded. 'Oh yes. Just wait till you hear this . . .'

Edith's News

'At least I won't be so lonely, when you do go.'

'Oh dear,' said Maggie, in soft anticipation, while sawing at a slightly overdone roast potato.

'Yes, Mam,' said Wilbur, still agitated and full of tension. 'What is it? Come on, spill the beans.'

'Well, it's been thirty years since your dad died. And that is a very long time. I think I have respected his memory enough to come out of the shadows and not feel ashamed of having a companion.'

The Wilbur who was asleep in 1974 and the one who was awake in 1976 both said the same thing: 'What kind of companion?'

'A gentleman. A very nice man. Who I have known for a long time.'

Maggie made wide eyes. 'Ooh, Edith, you dark horse. Do we know him?'

'Aye. Well, Wilbur does. Or thinks he does. And I'm sure he'll have his opinions on the matter.'

'Who is it, Mam?'

'It's Cecil.'

'Cecil? I've never heard of a Cecil. Who on earth is Cecil?'

And then she said it. 'You know. Cecil Parkin.'

The Ghost looked at the shared confusion of the other Wilburs. The dreaming one just as furious as the living one.

'Mr Parkin? Our old landlord? But he's an awful man,' spat the living Wilbur. 'You always told us he was an awful man.'

'Bloody Parkin! Dougie was right about him,' said the Dreamer.

'Was he though?' wondered the Ghost.

'He's not an awful man,' continued Edith. 'I mean, I didn't like him much at first. I was quick to judge. He was doing a job. But he was always a gentleman really. He let me off payments from time to time.'

'I bet he did.'

'No. Nothing like that. He's kind. He looks after me, and he takes me out. And he is generous.'

'Aye, well, he's generous from raising every rent on Glossop Road. So he owes you that generosity. Dougie had his number.'

'Oh, you're bringing Dougie into it now, Wilbur?'

'Aye, well, why not?'

'He paid for Dougie's funeral. Did you ever know that? He donated to the hospital too after the fire.'

'How long have you been together?'

'Oh, an interrogation. Such interest for someone moving two hundred miles across the country.'

'How long, Mam?'

'I have liked him for many years. I just didn't want to confuse you about things. He's proposed—'

'Mam, it's ridiculous. You've made yourself look ridiculous.'

Maggie threw Wilbur a heated stare. 'Wilbur, don't talk to your mam like that. Can we all just try and be civil and have a nice Sunday meal?'

'A very good idea,' said the Ghost. 'And completely ignored. I was such a hot-tempered fool . . .'

'—and I accepted his proposal,' finished Edith.

The room hung with the news. Wilbur was clenching so hard they could see his jaw move.

'Don't worry, Maggie. I don't want to get in the way any longer. I think I should go now.'

'Jesus Christ, Mam.'

'I'm sorry, Mam,' said the Ghost, feeling something like tears in his eyes, while the Dreamer stood beside him, lost for words.

Maggie tapped his knee under the table. 'Well, if it makes you happy, it makes us happy, doesn't it, Wilbur? *Wilbur? Wilbur!*'

But Wilbur was standing up now, throwing his napkin down on the table, right next to the carrots. He stormed out of the room.

'I'm sorry about that,' said Maggie. 'He's just been a bit overworked recently.'

Edith sighed. 'It's all right, love. It's not your fault . . . I should have made him feel happier from the start.'

And just then the unseen observers heard the faint rhythmic chugging of the train, ready to take them further down the line.

Not Every Stop Is a Crash

'I heard a poll reported on the radio once,' said the Ghost, back on the train. 'About the most common regrets of the dying. One was wishing they hadn't worked so hard. And the others were about courage. The courage to be yourself, the courage to express your feelings. They all seem related to letting go of fear. I have lived a life in perpetual motion. I was stuck for ever in that car. Always racing. I needed to realise that not every stop is a crash.'

The Dreamer liked that, and echoed it. 'Not every stop is a crash. Yeah.'

They sat quiet for a moment of reflection.

The Ghost sighed after a little while, and said, 'I miss him so much.'

'Yeah. Me too.'

Dead Men Are Heavier Than Broken Hearts

A little later Agnes walked into the carriage holding a book. *The Big Sleep* by Raymond Chandler. One of her favourites. The train rattled and she fell awkwardly onto a seat, holding onto her hat with her free hand as she landed beside the Ghost and opposite the Dreamer.

'The ride has definitely become a little rockier since the rules were broken,' said Agnes, looking at the Ghost.

'Sorry, Agnes,' said the Ghost. 'My fault.'

'As I said to you before you staged your mini-rebellion, we are in a whole new world of uncertainty now.'

'Yes, I get that . . .' The reality of the situation was finally being felt by the Dreamer. 'At the end, I'll wake up, right?'

'Yes,' said the Ghost. 'Hopefully.'

Agnes tutted. 'He sacrificed eternity for a possibility that might not exist.'

The Dreamer looked genuinely scared.

'Listen,' soothed Agnes. 'The train is still on its tracks. So don't worry too much.'

'The thing is,' said the Ghost, 'I spent our whole life never really waking up. Now you'll get a chance to.'

Agnes sighed. 'He actually has a point I suppose.'

She started to read a bit of her book. And the Ghost caught a glimpse of the page over her shoulder and absorbed a line.

Dead men are heavier than broken hearts . . .

And he stopped at that, looked over at the Dreamer, and longed for him to keep his lightness.

Away

Outside the window their unlived life continued to speed by. Wilbur in his office, working. At an airport, staring up at a board. In a hotel in Edinburgh, ignoring a view of the castle as he scribbled business plans on a sheet of paper.

The Dreamer was trying not to think too deeply about his possible death at the end of the journey, so he focused hard on what he was seeing.

'I don't understand . . .' said the Dreamer. 'Why am I seeing myself on my own all the time?'

Agnes was reading her book. 'Oh, I think that's a question for your ghost. He has lived all this, after all.'

The Ghost considered. 'Because your work takes you away. I suppose, now I think about it, that was the whole point. Look, there we are in Edinburgh, at the first Scottish branch. And there on Concorde to New York . . .'

Days went by. Weeks. Months. Years. Faster and faster. Brief flashes of Maggie, but otherwise just prolonged stretches of offices and hotels. Never a sight of his mother, or Alfred, or any friends except Charlie, but only ever in the office. No cemetery visits any more. No reading anything but business reports and papers now. The dullest and most repetitive landscape of the whole journey was passing the windows. But then the sight of Wilbur on the phone, crying, as he heard his mother had been rushed to hospital.

The train slowed.

The view became darkness.

'What is happening?' wondered the Dreamer.

'The future,' said Agnes. 'The past. Both at once.'

The Ghost nodded mournfully. 'And I'm afraid it's going to get worse.'

In Her Own Way

They were at Edith's funeral. There weren't many people there.

Wilbur, at the pulpit, was giving a speech he had cobbled together on the train up from King's Cross while Maggie had compiled a list of things she planned to help her father with while they were in Sheffield.

Maggie, Alfred, Charlie, Claudette. A few red-faced regulars from the pub. Jim, the landlord, wearing a suit he'd had since the Queen's coronation. And, of course, Mr Parkin. He was sitting on a lonely front pew across the aisle from Wilbur, Maggie and Alfred. Wilbur had walked past him on his way to the pulpit without even a glance in his direction. He was now an old man with white hair and a stoop, today dressed in a smart new black suit. He had his long umbrella that he used as a walking stick.

The Ghost and the Dreamer were standing at the back of the church watching their thirty-four-year-old self give a speech from the pulpit. If anyone had seen them, they would have noted that they were not only wearing the same outfit, but that the clothes they were dressed in were not entirely appropriate attire for their mother's funeral. This hypothetical observer would also note how different their expressions were, despite their identical faces. The Dreamer was in shock, but the Ghost was squinting as if regret was a shard of glass that dug deep.

'She died of an aneurysm three years after we moved to London,' said the Ghost.

The Dreamer looked forlorn. 'Poor Mam.'

Then they stayed silent to listen to the Wilbur at the front of the church.

'My mother had a challenging life . . .' he said, staring at his scripted notes. He took a breath to compose himself. He hadn't had a proper conversation with her since the ill-fated Sunday dinner.

'She suffered more than most could bear, losing a husband, and a son,' he managed, speaking out to the church. 'She was tough. But when she was able to enjoy life, she enjoyed it well. She loved working in the pub. And even in the hard times she used to take me and my brother to the cinema. The Palace . . . It's where she and my dad had always gone when they were courting.'

He looked at Maggie on the front pew and smiled at her.

'Musicals. That was her thing. *South Pacific*. *White Christmas*. *The Sound of Music*. *An American in Paris*. She had a thing for Gene Kelly. But she liked all sorts . . . "Singin' in the Rain" was her unofficial anthem . . .'

'This,' commented the Ghost, as the Dreamer sobbed a little beside him, 'is a terrible, terrible speech . . . Isn't it bad? I was so used to public speaking by this point. I probably did more speaking in presentations and boardrooms and at crowded shops than I actually did normal conversations. But it was one thing talking about net profit projections and another talking about anything real. Anything emotional. Look at me. Look at us.'

The Dreamer wiped his eyes and allowed himself a smile of agreement. 'Yeah. We are pretty shit.'

The challenge for Wilbur had been: how do you sum up a person you loved but who was complicated? How do you get through a tribute when you had been a real pain to her and had hardly seen her since that argument about Mr Parkin? When you pretended to have food poisoning to not go to their wedding? How? Especially when Cecil Parkin was right there on the front row? And why wouldn't he be? He was her widower after all. How do you stand

there and not wish you had been softer with her, even though she could be a nightmare?

The Ghost sighed. 'How could I not see that underneath it all was a . . . a . . . sensitive woman who'd had more than most to deal with? I could. But I wasn't ready to release all that pain into a church.'

The Dreamer was hardly listening. He was, after all, at his mother's funeral for the first time and he was back to sobbing again.

'It's excruciating,' continued the Ghost. 'I just listed musicals she liked. A few of her favourite things. A Julie Andrews reference. An Irving Berlin quote. Look – here. It's coming . . .'

And it was. They watched on as Wilbur's voice cracked.

'"White Christmas" was written by Irving Berlin. And as the great man himself said, "The song is ended, but the melody lingers on."'

The Ghost looked at Maggie. Even from behind, from just the tilt of her skull, he could read her completely. And he saw it all, perhaps better than the Dreamer could. All the complexity of it. All the love and sympathy for Wilbur, and also the sadness and frustrations that weren't solely to do with that day in the church. Frustrations of a marriage that was dying the way things left untended do. She was standing beside Alfred. Alfred was holding her hand. He struggled with her being away, but it was chiefly expressed via gratitude at her being back.

A row behind and there was Charlie, in a brown suit but still with his long hair, fiddling with his Order of Service sheet and nodding his head in silent encouragement as Wilbur started to stumble a little. Beside him, Claudette was in a matching black skirt and jacket. The Ghost could see a bit of her face. She too was staring up with a warm sad smile of sympathy. They were good people. He missed them. He'd enjoyed working with Charlie during the seventies and eighties, and he and Maggie, at this point in their fraying relationship, still saw them most weekends. Charlie and Claudette had come up from London on a separate train just for this. To be there for Wilbur.

Meanwhile, Wilbur was concluding his speech: 'And I'm sure Mam's song will ring in our ears for a long time yet.'

Before leaving the pulpit he caught the gaze of Mr Parkin and looked quickly away. No look of recognition. No anything at all. Then he walked back to his seat where Maggie was waiting for him.

The Future Isn't Real

The wake was held in the back room at the Queen's Head. A barmaid had laid out some egg and cress sandwiches and there was a free bar.

The Ghost and the Dreamer didn't speak, but they hung around, floating in and out of conversations.

Claudette had been explaining a bit about funeral traditions in the Caribbean, and St Vincent in particular. 'The wake happens the day before the funeral – or something like a wake. And there is food, like this – not *like this*, but food. And prayers and stories that can last all night. And spontaneous singing.'

'Oh,' said Wilbur. 'You don't want to hear me singing.'

Maggie nodded and did her best to join the banter. 'True.'

Claudette laughed. 'He must have been having lessons from Charlie!'

Charlie opened his mouth in mock offence while picking up a sandwich. 'Look, it's hard to sing Bowie. But you have to try, don't you?'

Wilbur agreed. 'His new albums especially. But I love them. "Heroes" is a good one to sing in the bath. And it's all Charlie's fault.'

The Ghost smiled at this. He remembered Charlie on his lunch break going to a record shop in Pimlico, near the London office of what was now Budd Books, and getting Bowie albums and singles on the day they were released. Charlie had a record player in his office and did the accounts while listening to music. He said the mathematics of music and accounting went together. And they seemed to. Charlie was brilliant, and used years of profit-and-loss numbers to make increasingly accurate projections.

Maggie slipped away from the group to see her father, who was standing waiting at the bar and looking over at Wilbur with an expression that fused sympathy with disappointment.

'That's really interesting,' Wilbur was telling Claudette, 'about the wake before the funeral.'

The Ghost wondered if he had been thinking it sounded more time-efficient.

'Yes. And being the Caribbean, it's often a celebration.' She laughed. 'And in St Vincent that means a lot of spiritual music. It tries to weave everything together. The whole life.'

Charlie washed down the remainder of his sandwich with his beer. 'Speaking of weaving everything together, Wilbo, isn't this pub where your mam and dad met?'

'Aye. Yes. A long while back . . .'

'That's kind of nice, right? That the past is woven together like that . . .'

'Yes, I suppose it is now I think of it . . . It's hard to picture, given I only know my dad from stories and a couple of old photos.'

'I'm reading this book on time,' Charlie said. 'I found it in the flea market on Farringdon Road. It's by a Kenyan philosopher called John Mbiti.'

And Wilbur smiled, aware that his physicist-philosopher-accountant friend was about to give him one of his long theories on the nature of reality, as if they were still slouched on a beanbag in his flat.

'This idea we have that time is something linear and comes in set units that we *spend* is very western . . . in a lot of traditional African communities there is no abstract idea of the future. There is no future at all . . .'

'No future? How does that work?'

'Well, time is made of events. Seasons. Ceremonies. Funerals. And nothing has happened in the future so it doesn't exist, and when it happens it will become sasa, which is the Swahili for "present". And

then it will become zamani, the past. And that is what waits for us. Because one day we will be the past, but not the future. There is no future. Time travels backwards. And it is always on top of itself. Which fits with a lot of what we know about physics. So anyway, what this means is that the past is ahead of us and not the future.'

Claudette was rolling her eyes with a smile. 'Here he goes . . .'

'So everything is woven together. Your mum and dad meeting here is more real than anything in the future, because it happened. When we think of the future we are thinking ourselves out of life. It's like what Einstein said about time being a mode by which we think and not a condition in which we live. What I took from the book is that we need to focus on what is real, because that is how we make time. Not by forever thinking of this abstract nothing known as the future.'

He was, in his own deeply gentle Charlie way, offering Wilbur advice. Wilbur might not have realised it, but the Ghost did.

Wilbur wasn't really listening. He was staring across the room at Mr Parkin, who – after a brief chat with Jim the landlord – was standing on his own with a plate of food, umbrella hooked over his arm. Eventually he put the plate down and walked to the door. Maggie rushed back over to Wilbur.

'Shouldn't you go and speak to him?'

'No. I don't think there's anything to say.'

Maggie's mood shifted. She walked over to Mr Parkin with a sense of purpose. 'Are you all right?' she asked as he stood at the back door. 'Are you sure you don't want to stay?'

'No,' he said, without any bitterness. 'I think I'll go now. But thanks for thinking of me.'

'I think Edith would like it if you stayed. We all would.'

This seemed to tighten Mr Parkin's – Cecil's – face, as if holding back a sudden surge of emotion. He looked over at Wilbur. 'I'm not sure about that . . . but thanks for your kindness. It's very much appreciated.'

And with that he went outside.

The Ghost followed, beckoning the Dreamer to follow him.

'I'd seen him,' said the Ghost to the Dreamer as they walked through the pub wall. 'I'd seen him the day before in the street and I'd been rude.'

'Good.'

'No. No. Not good. It wasn't our business. Whatever we thought of it, Mam loved him.'

'She'd prostituted herself with him.'

'No. That's just something you embellished in your mind. Mam liked him for a long time and they weren't together, not official, until years after he stopped being her landlord.'

'But Dougie—'

'Exactly. We couldn't keep Dougie alive but we could keep his hate alive, and that was what we did. But who did it help? Not Dougie. Not Mam. Not us.'

'I just don't like him.'

Mr Parkin walked across the damp, drizzled car park, wondering if he should use his umbrella but deciding against it.

'And that's fine,' said the Ghost. 'I don't know if I do either. But Mam meant something to him and he meant something to Mam.'

They watched Cecil dabbing his eyes with a handkerchief as he reached his car. The Ghost clenched with some strange emotion. He called across the car park, 'I'm sorry,' as loud as a ghost could, which was to most ears a notch below silence. 'I should have made an effort with you. I should have seen you and Mam together. I should have come to the wedding. I'm sorry . . . And I'm sorry I didn't talk to my mam at the end. And . . . thank you for making her happy. By all accounts you made her happy in those last years, that's what the folks at the pub said. And happiness wasn't always easy for her. So, yes, thank you.'

Of course, Mr Parkin hadn't heard a thing. He stood there and fumbled with his car keys, then opened the door and drove away.

Out of the Window

They saw Wilbur putting down his novel in their London bedroom. He leaned over and kissed Maggie and she kissed him back and for a moment it was how it should always have been.

A short while away, down the track, Wilbur was in a grey suit in a phone box by the river in Newcastle. He could see his wide eyes and open mouth as he held the receiver and put in another coin. The Ghost remembered hearing the news. The news that knocked him off guard. That Maggie had missed her period and gone to the chemist for one of the new, expensive home tests. She hadn't said anything until she had gone to the clinic for another test, and that was today. Now it was official. They could start thinking of names for a baby.

'Oh, Maggie, I'm so happy,' Wilbur had said, and it was true. Yet strangely, as the view out of the window made clear, over the next few weeks he accepted every excuse or reason to not be at home.

The Death of John Lennon

When the train next stopped, Wilbur was in a hotel in Manhattan.

The Waldorf Astoria, according to the embroidered dressing gown. Skyscrapers shone impressively outside the window, like a galaxy made solely of squares and rectangles.

Wilbur was sitting on the end of the bed and looked quite different now to his honeymoon self. The last traces of boyish youth and hippyish optimism had waned. He had shorter hair. No sideburns. His face looked a little doughy around the jowls. His eyes were tired from jetlag and he had a typed-out speech on his knee that he was trying to learn for the next day for an audience filled with members of the American publishing industry.

The Ghost and his slumbering honeymoon self were there too, watching him.

'Look at me. How old am I here?'

'Thirty-five.'

'I'm in New York. In the fanciest hotel I have ever seen. Wow.'

'Oh no,' sighed the Ghost. 'I know what this is. I don't want to watch this.'

'Why?'

'It's just . . . Oh God.'

Wilbur had turned on the television and was watching it quite fixedly. *CBS Evening News* with Walter Cronkite, as the opening titles declared in bold, curled, early-eighties type.

Cronkite – grey hair, dark suit, sombre face – sat in front of a giant picture of John Lennon in his otherwise beige studio.

'Good evening,' he said, in the heaviest tones. 'The death of a man who sang and played the guitar overshadows the news from Poland, Iran and Washington this evening. The former Beatle John Lennon, who was forty, was shot and killed last night outside his luxury apartment in New York . . .'

The Dreamer stared at the screen, mouth agape. 'Blimey. Lennon. That's bloody dreadful. And in New York too.'

'I don't think that's why we're here.'

The Ghost pointed at the phone. It began to ring in long, low bleats. They watched their other self walk over in reluctant strides to get it.

'Hello?'

A pause. The hotel operator told him he was putting through an international call. And then it was her, Maggie, on the end of the line. Even the Dreamer could hear the heavy breath.

'Maggie? Maggie, what's wrong? It must be the middle of the night back home. Why are you crying? Is this about the news? They've caught the gunman . . . There's no danger . . .'

'*No! This is not about the news . . .*' Maggie was so loud and distraught her voice could be heard faintly, in the room.

'What's happened?'

Her voice was indistinct now. Even to the Wilbur who had the phone right next to his ear.

'Maggie, darling, I'm sorry, I can't hear you . . . did you say blood? You're bleeding? I don't understand what you're saying . . .'

As Maggie spoke Wilbur sat on the bed. Put the weight of his head on his hand. 'Oh no, oh, Maggie . . .'

The Dreamer stared anxiously at the scene. 'What's happening?'

'*I don't know what to do, Wilbur . . . I think we've lost it . . .*'

The Ghost was hardly paying attention. He was feeling the vertigo of that moment, the precise point one future closed down and another one began.

'What's happening?' repeated the Dreamer, his worry raw and real.

'Maggie lost the baby,' the Ghost said. The Dreamer's mouth fell open in shock.

'Where was I when she needed me?' said the Ghost.

'Are you saying it was my fault? Jesus. Was it my fault?'

'No. I'm saying that she has just spent the last hour on her own cleaning blood off her skin and the new bathroom floor, and I'm here four thousand miles away, preparing a speech I didn't need to give in a hotel room with a plush carpet and embroidered dressing gowns . . .'

'But I wouldn't have known. How could I have known?'

The Ghost shook his head, as if he was missing the point. 'It was just a pointless business trip. I didn't even need to go. I don't know. If this was isolated it would be silly to beat myself up, but I found it easier to head away than be home. We didn't have any Budd Books in America. Yes, I thought I might be able to expand there eventually, but that wasn't why I went. I went because I was flattered to be asked. The North American Book Business Convention 1980. All expenses paid. Maggie never told me she didn't want me to go – she would never have done that – but she hadn't had an evening with me for weeks. Maybe months. She wasn't against me being in New York, if that was all it had been. It was just yet another thing. An utterly pointless thing. And I knew it. She wanted me with her. It was like she knew . . . But I had a choice, I had a choice, and, look, here I am making the wrong one . . .'

Meanwhile, Wilbur was trying to reason with Maggie and was only making things worse. 'Look, Maggie, yes, I know. I know. I remember what we said about the elephant mural . . .' He began to cry. 'I'm sorry, Maggie. I wish I was there with you . . .' A long, considered pause. Then: 'I can't fly back till Thursday . . . I've committed . . . The speech is tomorrow . . . I can't not be there . . . I wish I could hug you too . . . I love you . . .'

The two unseen watchers looked on in silence. One staring at his future, the other at his past.

Love was the thing that hurt, and business was the opposite. It was an addiction. He had lost sight of Maggie. She was there, but at the periphery. Life was more bearable that way.

The Ghost sighed. 'I was a fool. I realise it now. You may well be one too . . .'

'I don't want to be.'

'Good,' said the Ghost. 'I suppose that's a start . . . At the time, you weren't being honest with her. You didn't know if you wanted children. Not really. You were scared. So you were unable to say the right thing. No matter what words you used, they couldn't ever sound right because you didn't feel the loss that she was feeling.'

'But that's not true,' said the Dreamer, scratching his sideburns.

'It is by 1980.'

'I want kids.'

'Now you do. Asleep on that bed in your honeymoon in Venice. But things change. *You* change. And the amount you are away, and the amount you are home late, it becomes increasingly improbable anyway . . .' The Ghost thought about this. 'Maybe, Dreamer, you are right. Maybe I still did want kids, deep down. But I was also terrified of being a dad. I mean, I'd had no template. And all I'd seen was Mam struggling with money and then me and Dougie fighting and then Dougie getting into trouble and dying. I mean, it wasn't the best advert for bringing children into the world. And as I said, I just didn't want more people to care about.'

The Ghost paced the room for a little while, trying to work out his own past. 'And I'm glad in a way it never happened.' He stopped and stared out of the window, at the yellow cabs shunting along Park Avenue. 'I mean, in my life. The life I lived. The person I became. I don't think I'd have been much more there than Dad was. And at least he had the excuse of being dead.'

Meanwhile, the Wilbur of 1980 was saying goodbye. 'Yes, I love you too.'

And he walked over to a cabinet beside the TV and picked up a decanter to pour himself a whisky.

He looked at the book beside his bed. One he had bought at the airport. One he never read. And then went and switched the channel to a quiz show, *The Price Is Right*. He sat on the edge of the bed and tried to concentrate on the screen as though there was nothing else in the world except three contestants guessing the price of a refrigerator and some reclining chairs.

He swigged back the whisky.

'I think I got quite drunk that night,' said the Ghost. 'If I remember correctly, I was hungover for my speech. I had a presentation involving slides and a projector and I got it all wrong. I remember eating a hot dog in Central Park and watching a dad with his kid and I was nearly crying, as though that deep true me who felt like Maggie was still there . . . I don't know. But I just tried to get on with things. So when I eventually flew back I never told Maggie any of these feelings. And that distance stayed, even when we had dinner together. The kitchen table became its own Atlantic Ocean.'

The Dreamer saw the golden windows of the Midnight Train in the distance, rising through the sky. A ribbon of shadow and light, heading towards them, defying physics as only dead things can.

'I think,' he said softly, 'it's time to go.'

And he placed a hand on the Ghost's shoulder, as though he was the elder and the Ghost in that moment was the one with the most to learn.

Once in a Lifetime

London. Three years later.

A flash pizza restaurant somewhere in Pimlico. The Italian Stallion. White and red décor. There was the scent of garlic and the sound of Lionel Richie and the feeling of fresh money. The place was full of men in suits, and women with big hair, and boozy chatter.

And there with the Ghost was the Dreamer, both standing in their flared trousers and sandals. The Dreamer was staring in disbelief at the sight of Charlie Applewood as he sat talking to Wilbur and eating lunch.

'Wow. Charlie's changed . . .'

Charlie *had* changed. Balding scalp, white shirt. He was looking a bit sunburnt and now wore glasses. He was thirty-eight years old.

'But *shh*.' The Ghost gestured over to Wilbur and Charlie at their table. 'I think you need to listen to this.'

And so the Dreamer listened. And at first, there was nothing disconcerting. The two lifelong friends chatted about Charlie and Claudette's recent holiday to the Costa Brava. Then they talked about Sheffield Wednesday's chances that season.

Charlie recommended that Wilbur watch a TV show that he and Claudette loved called *Cagney & Lacey* and read the 'really bloody powerful' Alice Walker novel *The Color Purple*. At which point Wilbur said he had no time to read or watch TV any more.

'Wilbur Budd has no time to read!' the Dreamer exclaimed. 'Never thought I would hear the day.'

'What about music?' Charlie was saying. 'Bowie's playing . . . The Serious Moonlight tour. His biggest ever. I know he's gone a bit

corporate but so have we. And it's still David bloody Bowie, so I was wondering if you'd like to get your glad rags on and go to Wembley Arena with me?'

'Sorry, Charlie. No can do. I've got no time right now.'

'I had time!' wailed the Ghost. 'I had all the time in the world!'

Charlie and Wilbur ate their pizzas in silence for a while.

'Okay, I had my priorities wrong. But I don't think I'm a bad person,' said the Dreamer, sticking his chin up in mild defiance. 'I think I'm pretty normal.'

'Yes. But then there's nothing more normal than to lose yourself.'

'I know. Okay, we struggled to get over Dougie . . . and Mam dying brought everything back . . . and there was a bit of working-class guilt going on . . . and I was probably more ambitious than I needed . . . but you're going on like I'm Scrooge.'

'No. We are a totally normal product of the time we lived in. But that doesn't mean we weren't badly lost. We probably belong in *Hard Times* more than *A Christmas Carol* if we're being Dickens about it. The cold-hearted industrialist who stops seeing people as people . . .'

The Dreamer had read *Hard Times* much more recently than the Ghost had. He remembered the moment when the industrialist Thomas Gradgrind realised he had never learned the 'wisdom of the heart'. '*The ground on which I stand has ceased to be solid beneath my feet. The only support on which I leaned, and the strength of which it seemed, and still does seem, impossible to question, has given way in an instant.*'

He very much didn't want to be Gradgrind.

'But that's not us, right? I care about people. I don't see them as units. I'm not just about gain, gain gain . . . Am I? Are we?'

'Well, it was the eighties. So no one would have noticed. But, *shh* . . . watch this.'

Charlie carefully tore off a piece of garlic bread and looked sad

for his friend. 'You know what they say. All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.'

'Well, these are busy times. We've had eight new openings in the last quarter. And add in all the inventory issues and supply chain headaches. And we've got more competition on the high street than ever . . . You know me. I need to be hands on.'

'"Time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river . . ."' said Charlie. 'That's Borges. Been reading him a bit. Like reading a scientist in Wonderland. You recommended him to me back at uni and I've finally got around to it. You were always so good at knowing what I should read. So anyway, remember, you are the river.'

Wilbur smiled fondly at his friend. 'I've always liked your philosophising, Charlie . . . And you're right, I should read more.'

'Just seems sad, that's all. You used to spend your life telling me to read something and now you run the most famous bookshops in the country and you don't get time to read . . . Just seems a bit topsy-turvy.'

'Well, it's only this phase of life. When I'm fifty I'm quitting. Then me and Maggie are going to travel the world. India, South America, Southeast Asia, you name it. I might write a book, Maggie will have her art. But that's it. This work life will be over. That's the plan . . . That seems a pretty good trade-off. Work like mad now. Build something meaningful that customers value. Then put our feet up and retire over a decade before everyone else.'

Charlie nodded. 'Yeah, so I hear. Maggie told Claudette about that at the party . . .'

At this point the Ghost leant in to his dreaming self to offer some context: 'Claudette's fortieth birthday party. She had it in their house in Clapham but lots of her Sheffield friends came down for it. Maggie went but I didn't. As always, I was too busy.'

'The thing is though, Wilbo, you won't be fifty until 1995. That's a long way off. They might be able to teleport you to India by then.'

'Well, it's good to think ahead.'

There was an awkward pause. After which he got to the meat of it: 'Listen, Charlie, we've had a good run, but I think from here on I'm going to need to overhaul the numbers side of things . . .'

Charlie looked confused. The mood shifted. 'Numbers side?'

'I've been recommended a very good finance guy. Someone very serious. American.'

It started to sink in. 'I thought I was your finance guy.'

'You are. And you've been invaluable to our growth. But we're entering a new phase now . . . Gone are the days of singing along to music in the accounts room.'

Charlie's jaw tightened as he listened. 'What? Has my performance ever slipped? I'll stop the music if you want but you've never had a problem before.'

Wilbur tore his own piece of garlic bread without thinking. 'We're going to be doubling our operations within two years. We're going into a new gear now and we need someone with a more *macro* approach.'

Charlie put down his knife and fork and stared at his old friend. 'I'm trying to get a grasp on this, Wilbur. I mean, I thought something was a bit off when you said you were taking me out for lunch. When was the last time we had lunch? The seventies? So this was our Last Supper, eh?'

'It's not like that, Charlie.'

'I've worked my arse off for you. What have I done wrong? Jesus, Wilbo, when have I been wrong? My projections have been dead-on every quarter. I've helped us trim down. I helped get us through the recession and now we're good to grow and grow. It's the boom time right now. You can feel it even in here. Growth, growth, growth. So things will be even—'

'It's not about anything you've done wrong, Charlie . . . Look, maybe this is a good thing for you. You've always been so much more than an accountant. You're a thinker. You're a scientist. A philosopher . . .'

Charlie shook his head and tightened his mouth. 'We'd have stayed in Yorkshire. You know that? I'd have a job at the university. We'd have paid off a house by now. Do you think we'd have chosen to come down south and have a massive mortgage around our necks? Claudette doesn't even want to be here. She never did . . .'

Wilbur raised his eyebrows and stared at his pizza. 'Well, this could be good then. You could be free to go back up north.'

Charlie grimaced. 'With all due respect, Wilbo, you are taking the piss. Ten years of my life I've devoted to this. To *you*. Because I'm your mate and I believed in you, even when no one else did. Even when you were at your lowest. After Dougie.'

'You don't have to bring Dougie into this,' mumbled Wilbur.

'But that's what it's all about, isn't it? You never stopped running. Always trying to put as much distance between who you are now and who you were then—'

'Please, Charlie.'

'Look, I've never asked for much. Never pushed for a raise. I've been with you all the way.'

'I gave you a job. I was doing you a favour. I let you play your records—'

'Name one other employee you've had that put in as many unpaid extra hours.'

'I never asked you to.'

'You never stopped me either. Jesus, Wilbur. I could be teaching physics somewhere.'

'You still could.'

'Not a single word of warning. And then this.' Charlie took a breath and brought himself back down. 'I can work even harder. I can be like you. No holidays, no books, no TV, no parties . . . I just need this job, Charlie. We've got a mortgage . . . and Sophie to look after . . .'

Beneath his hair, the Dreamer was frowning with concentration, straining to find his own redemption. Trying to find a justification

for what he was seeing. 'I suppose it was just business . . . I mean, they always say you shouldn't work with friends and family.'

'No,' said the Ghost adamantly. 'Charlie was literally the most loyal employee you ever had.'

'So why am I sacking him?'

'I don't know. I was told there was better out there. I wanted the best. But I didn't realise I already had it.'

Talking Heads came on. 'Once in a Lifetime'.

'I'm sorry,' Wilbur told Charlie. 'It's not personal. It's really not.'

Charlie nodded. Then stood up, headed for the door. 'That's your whole problem.'

Looking Without Seeing

While trying to flag a taxi, a homeless man came up to Wilbur asking for change. Wilbur was so fixated on the black cab he ignored the man completely. Then the man tapped him on the arm and Wilbur jerked away and scowled at him.

'Get off me.'

The Dreamer looked down at his sandals in shame.

'This world is full of folk who look but never see,' said the Ghost.

'I remember those words. But not who said them.'

'It was Victor. Victor Willows. You know, the homeless bloke in Sheffield who'd lost everything in the war. The one we used to chat to.'

'Ah, yes, I remember him.'

The Ghost nodded. 'It's a pity he doesn't,' he said as they watched the other Wilbur climbing into the taxi and telling the driver to head to the Budd Books offices on Haymarket.

And the two spectres stood there in the road as the taxi drove right through them.

'Okay,' the Dreamer said, 'I see it now.'

A Thought While Looking Out of the Window

The incredibly annoying thing about being dead was that you got all your priorities in order, just when it was too late to do anything about them.

Maximum Speed

The Dreamer was dumbfounded. 'You just carried on? You didn't slow down your life . . . even after all that?'

'I sped up, if anything. I had mistaken being caffeinated and adrenalised with being alive. I had mistaken an addiction for purpose. There was no balance. I got greedy. The old gain, gain, gain. Our strategy became one of takeovers . . . We went hard on the discounts . . . We got into trouble with local booksellers because we were moving next door to them and taking their customers. I felt a kind of calm when competitors closed down, never thinking of what that meant to people's lives. I wanted a world of no competition, no variety. Just Budd Books everywhere, my name on everything. I'd totally lost what I was in this for and it was as far away from Agnes Bagdale's original shop as it was possible to be. I was Thomas and Ebenezer together at times . . . But a new era had dawned. And there were no punishments for greed. Only rewards.'

Something caught his eye through the window: Wilbur – suited, with slicked-back hair – on stage at the Excellence in Business Awards at the Metropolitan Hotel on Park Lane in London, forgetting to mention Maggie in his speech, while she sat on a table next to his empty chair, trying not to worry about the lump she had found.

Live How the Dead Would If Only They Had the Chance

As the train continued along its track, the man who was dead explained himself to the man who was merely dreaming.

'It is ironic,' he told him, 'that it only takes a moment to die, but a whole lifetime to learn how to live. And it's been occurring to me, just as it's too late, that I may have lived in entirely the wrong fashion for who I was inside.'

'So you're telling me my future is a waste of time?'

The Ghost shook his head imploringly. 'You are still alive. Just asleep. It's not too late for you.'

'Not too late for what?'

'To live how the dead would if they only had the chance. But to do that, you need to see what happened . . . to you and Maggie.'

Empty Rooms

The train pulled up outside a large, intimidatingly grand house on Sumner Place in South Kensington on a sunny evening in August.

The house was set back from the street behind a wide front garden, laid with immaculate tiles, and home to three large square pots, each containing a laurel tree.

It was an impressive house.

The Dreamer looked at it with mouth agape. 'This is *ours*?'

'Uh huh. Oh yes. Six bedrooms. Five absolutely unnecessary.'

Wilbur, suited, wearily climbed the steps. He was talking into an old (new) Motorola mobile phone, with a little bulbous aerial sticking out of the top.

'Wow,' said the dreaming honeymooner of 1974, 'a portable phone!'

'Yes,' Wilbur was saying, 'we need the projection reports by Tuesday . . . Yes . . . Okay . . . Bye, Sheila.'

The Dreamer looked to the Ghost. 'Who's Sheila?'

'My PA.'

They followed forty-nine-year-old Wilbur inside the house. A wide hallway led into a vast living room with expansive bay windows, a large opulent sofa and framed art on the wall, including Maggie's poster for the Sheffield Crucible's production of *The Cherry Orchard*.

And there was Maggie herself on the sofa. She was as beautiful as she had ever been. She was exactly herself, so looking at her could only ever feel like looking at home. Yet there was a barrier

up. And now there was a sense of guilt as he looked at her. The way someone watches a wound that they inflicted.

The Ghost observed she was wearing a white T-shirt advertising a Kandinsky exhibition at the Hayward Gallery. She had done a little freelance design work for them, helping with a catalogue.

The Ghost thought about her in a way that he never properly did when he was alive, at least not during this time. He had the desire to be tuned in, calm, just focused entirely on her. Rather than his head lost in digital economic graphs.

'Oh, Maggie, I'm sorry. I missed you,' said the Ghost.

That was what was coming to mind now. Not just how much he didn't know about what happened to her *after* the divorce, but all those years before it. How much he *missed*.

He knew the basics. He knew she had been struggling, really, ever since she had left Sheffield. She hadn't worked full time in-house since she arrived in London nearly two decades before. She had initially said she enjoyed the freedom of being freelance, but he doubted that was still true. That was before the withering of her friends in the north, before the miscarriage, before Claudette snubbed her after Charlie was sacked, before they tried one more time for a baby, and before – not long after – she realised she was now only wanting a baby to reach a husband who didn't want to be reached. Before she swallowed her dreams, one morsel at a time, all while feeling enough guilt not to moan.

She had enjoyed doing graphics for Budd Books for a little while, but then Wilbur and the firm had decided they should take a more commercial direction. 'Your style is too subtle, too *brilliant*,' he remembered telling her. When really he wanted the separation of his work from her, indeed from anyone he cared about. He had been patronising to everyone, but to her especially. Dressing up every rejection as a compliment.

Little by little, by a series of barely detectable steps, she surrendered her sense of purpose. Or, living so in the shadows of Wilbur's

working life, and with her interests so unnoticed and untended by Wilbur, she surrendered to a role that always felt peripheral. Not to Wilbur, but to the person she thought she would become. She mourned that person, just as she mourned their marriage. Because the thing was, despite everything, she loved the man she married. She had always loved him. Just as he had always loved her.

The Ghost turned to the Dreamer, and saw him frowning at this Maggie from his future. A concerned, confused frown.

He sighed. 'We've not appreciated her, have we?'

'No. We've not appreciated anything.'

He pointed to a framed drawing on the wall. An illustration of the bandstand in Kensington Gardens surrounded by flowers.

'After we gave up on having children, she went to the park to draw. Like the old days. She did it quite a bit, I think. I don't know. But I remember seeing the drawings around the place.'

Maggie had a novel beside her but was blankly staring at *The X-Files* on TV, where a psychic was helping Mulder and Scully find a serial killer. For all its splendour, an air of sadness hung about the whole room. A London loneliness.

When Wilbur walked in she looked up. But the forty-nine-year-old Wilbur wasn't noticing. He walked straight through to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of red wine. A minute later he headed back into the large living room, slipped off his shoes, and slumped on a seat near the sofa, pressing his toes into the plush carpet. Only then did he finally notice Maggie. And he could see she was out of sorts and had no idea why. He stared at her the way you might stare at a mysterious cloud, wondering if it was going to rain.

He was, at this point in his life, quite the opposite of Maggie in at least one sense. In the sense that he couldn't read people very well. Where she could still read the book of someone from a single page, he could be presented with the entire novel and not follow its plot at all.

'You all right?' he asked, confused.

There was a pause. On the screen, Scully was frustrated with Mulder as he drove a car somewhere. Maggie pulled the remote control out from the gap between two cushions and switched the TV off. This made Wilbur a little more confused.

'Maggie?'

'They're knocking it down,' she said, her voice a little distant.

This did nothing to lessen his confusion. 'What are they knocking down?'

'The Palace Cinema.'

'In Sheffield?'

He said it like it was a foreign and irrelevant planet.

She sighed. 'Yeah. My dad called. You know. To ask about the doctor.'

A guilty look passed across Wilbur's face. He was bad at guilt. He had tried to shut it away. Because the trouble with guilt was that it was sticky. It joined all the other guilts. And he had quite a few. 'Doctor? Oh yes. I forgot it was today. How was it? How are you?'

'Don't worry. The results came back and it was benign. I'm fine.'

He smiled. 'I bet you feel relieved.'

She smiled too, but it was a sad kind of smile. 'It's strange. Aye, I am, yeah. But also, for a month now I've thought I might have cancer. The doctor said it looked very ominous and I should prepare for the worst.'

'You didn't tell me that. The very ominous part.'

'Oh, Wilbur, I did. I told you on the day but you had a lot on. And since then there's hardly been a chance. I tried to tell you two nights ago before you rushed out to that do in the City. You know, the night we were meant to be going out for our anniversary and I had to cancel the restaurant.'

He sighed. He had a vague recollection of a medical conversation he hadn't really had time to listen to. 'I'm sorry about that. But I told you, we can go another time.'

Maggie sighed too. Or maybe it was just a slow exhale, a steadying of emotion. 'The doctor had worried me. And so it made me think about things.'

'What kind of things?'

She didn't answer that. Not yet. She just stared at the unlit fireplace. At the bars of the empty grate like a tiny prison. 'Dad told me they're knocking it down to build a shopping centre on Union Street . . .'

'Oh. Yes. I knew about that.'

'It's like capitalism is a bomb, isn't it? One that creates cities then explodes them really slowly . . .'

He smiled. He wondered if she was depressed, and that thought troubled him, and he wanted to dismiss it by forcing himself and the atmosphere into an ill-fitting breeziness. 'I like that you've kept that political side. Like it's still 1968. Like we're off to a protest at the art college with flowers in our hair.'

'Don't patronise me, Wilbur,' she said quietly. 'I can't help it if I kept my compass.'

'Compass? What's that supposed to mean?'

'I don't know. I'm just tired. I'm just being unreasonable.'

'Yes. I can see that.'

The observer who watched this from a dream was confused. 'Why are we being like this?'

The Ghost sighed the kind of sad, defeated sigh that only the dead can manage. 'Well, Dreamer, because she was right. She was right. I had lost my compass.'

Something Changed

'I just think it's quite exciting. The plans for the shopping centre. It's good for the city. It's actually where the second Sheffield shop is going to be . . .'

Maggie smiled a distant smile. 'Isn't that strange, how the cinema is being knocked down and a Budd Books is going to be in its place.'

Wilbur was beginning, slowly, to realise he was in some kind of trouble.

His mind shifted away from thoughts of the initial public offering he was preparing towards his wife.

'I'm sorry I've been so busy recently.'

'Recently? You've been busy since the seventies.'

'Well, yes, I have. I underestimated how much it would take of me.'

The Dreamer noted the way Maggie was staring at her husband. Like she wanted to see more in him than was there.

'Something changed inside you when your mam died,' Maggie said. 'I should have recognised it, but I didn't. Obviously Dougie dying was the root of it all, and never knowing your dad, but I think there was still hope you could get through that. Even inside your ambition. But when your mam died the lights went out. Before that I liked you focusing on work because I believed you when you said it was about us. You were wanting to make a better future for us. We were going to retire young. And travel the world.'

'That can still happen.'

'My dad has Parkinson's.'

'Oh God, poor Alfred,' said the Dreamer.

But the Wilbur in the room said nothing.

'I found out a month ago but there was never the right moment to tell you. I want to be near him. I want to go to Sheffield. I want to move back.'

The Ghost told his younger dreaming self to watch closely. 'Look. Look at our first reaction. It isn't about Alfred. It isn't about Maggie. Look.'

And, indeed, it wasn't.

'I can't move back, Mags. I can't. I need to be in London to oversee the IPO. The company's going public. We're going to be on the stock market. After that I can take a back seat. But right now, I have to be in London . . . There's no way I can't be here.'

Maggie stared at him as tears glazed her eyes. 'There is a way. You just can't see it. We're nearly fifty. You always said you would quit at fifty.'

'Well, I'm nearly able to. I just have to make sure everything is handled right, and if the market flotation goes well—'

'You didn't used to talk like this.'

Wilbur looked around at their plush living room. 'Look what we've achieved, though. Look at this place.'

'This wasn't my dream, Wilbur.'

'It's a comfortable life. A dream life.'

Maggie laughed bitterly. 'Whose dream? I haven't worked for this. You know I never wanted this. To rattle around all day, in guilty luxury, with nothing to do apart from Tuesdays when I go to Newham and help out at the trust . . . That's it. I don't have any contact with old friends. I haven't seen Doreen in years, and have only met her Rosie once. Claudette won't speak to me because of the Charlie business. And everyone round here is a millionaire's wife . . .'

'*You* are a millionaire's wife. It doesn't define you.'

She stared at him as a tear fell. 'To be a wife you have to have

a husband. Someone who doesn't want to avoid you. Someone, you know, who looks out for the broken glass.'

'Broken glass? What are you talking about?'

The Ghost and the Dreamer knew what she was talking about. But the middle-aged Wilbur in the room was struggling.

'Remember when we were kids and I first met you? When I was with Doreen on Glossop Road.'

'When I denied I had a brother,' Wilbur said, full of self-loathing.

'No. I don't mean that part. I mean the part where you told me to look out for some broken glass on the street. I thought it was the most romantic thing ever. To have a boy think of me like that.'

'I can't remember. But, Maggie, you are still everything.'

She shook her head firmly. She shut away tears. 'No. I am just a woman who makes macaroni cheese for one till the rest of time. I just sit here reading and trying not to go insane.'

'You do tons. You have your art, you have the charity, you have the book club—'

'The book club?'

Of all the stupid and patronising things Wilbur was saying, the one he regretted most was bringing up the book club. She didn't like the book club. She had told him that. She wanted to get out but was too polite to leave.

'Do you ever feel this isn't our real life?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, this wasn't the plan. This wasn't what we got married for. To spend no time together. I feel like there is a real us, somewhere else . . . An us that was content with the world we had and didn't need the moon and the stars as well. An us that is happy at least some of the time. We left that couple somewhere else. We aren't *us* any more. We didn't need luxury once upon a time. We just needed a bench.'

'Maggie, this is just life. This is just midlife . . . stuff. We're not teenagers any more.'

'But why were we so much wiser as kids than we are now? Why could we not keep some of that? If I truly thought you were happy, I'd go with it. But you aren't happy, not really. You're not. You are always tense and somewhere else. And what if we die like this. What if you just keel over.' She had a lot to release. And it wasn't going to stop. 'I don't mind that you didn't remember the doctor or that you forgot our anniversary—'

'Please—'

'—I just don't feel I fit. I don't fit back home because I *have* money, and I don't fit round here because I'm not *from* money. They all laugh at my accent, think art is just something to buy but not actually do, think Thatcher was the greatest prime minister since Churchill, perpetually wonder why we don't have kids like that was my only function, like life is just a pre-designed plan and I haven't followed it, and they ask me if I feel *unsafe* working with AIDS patients . . . and they certainly don't like my stupid damn disaster of a fruitcake.' Her voice cracked on the word 'fruitcake'. 'I will never be accepted by them. It's not my world and it never was. None of it is real. They look down on both of us, deep down. However much you earn, we aren't ever *them*. Even you. Especially you. This all came from graft, and that is ugly to them and I didn't play lacrosse and the only Latin I know is carpe diem which is a bit ironic because the one thing I haven't done is carpe any diem and now I'm practically fifty with health scares and bad hips. I gave up a job I liked and a city I loved. They were my choices, I know, but choices I made for you. And I've just sat here in the . . . the . . . sidecar of your ambition . . .'

'Maggie.'

'And now I hate myself even more for being such a spoiled, whining person.'

'Maggie.'

She took a breath. Stared at the face on the cover of *Marie Claire* magazine on the coffee table. 'But maybe our life was meant to be improvised and maybe both of us were bad at that.'

'I have had so much on.'

She sighed. Not cross. Just tired. 'When does it stop, Wilbur? When do you realise you don't have holes in your shoes any more?'

'Maggie.'

'It sounds silly but sometimes I wish I was the stock market so you could pay me some attention.'

'Maggie.' He just kept saying her name, as if he had nothing else. *'Maggie.'*

She wiped a tear from her eye. Looked at him with a resolute face. 'I don't blame you. We were both trapped in our different ways. Both too wanting an order in the chaos. But I think we have to face where we are. If we had focused on us, just us two, then all the other things – work pressures, social pressures, family pressures – we could have stood it all. We could have improvised. Made it up. But that is not what we are now. And we haven't been that for a long, long time. So I am going to Sheffield. And you can come with me. Or not. I am just saying what's happening. What I have to do.'

Wilbur looked hurt, and still wasn't really able to understand. 'Is there someone else?'

She flinched at the question. Stared at a large cushion with too many tassels on it. 'No, Wilbur.'

'She's telling the truth,' the Ghost said. 'In two years she'll have a brief relationship with a sculptor called David up in Sheffield. She won't be happy, but also she won't miss being neglected by us. It will fizzle out and she will live alone, like you do. She'll be happier doing it than you. But she'll still wish it was different. She'll still miss the old you. The one she always wanted.'

Maggie clasped her hands together until her knuckles whitened. She stared at her husband for a long time, as if looking for him. 'There is no one else. But that's not the point. There isn't even us.'

And, as the Ghost told his dreaming companion, two days later it happened.

Maggie wrote a letter and caught a train north, with more bags than she could carry, and didn't come back again. Wilbur had done everything to try and make her stay, except provide an actual reason. And his two alternate selves, both the one who dreamed and the one who died, stood behind him as he read the letter.

Dear Wilbur,

It feels best to write this down. The silence of words aids the understanding of them. I have always valued that about silence. That is why after a horrible week at Trapezium, I would go and stand on my own in the National Gallery and just stare at the Virgin of the Rocks in the quiet. It was a way to absorb things.

So all I ask is that you take this letter somewhere quiet and read it and absorb it. I am not trying to be overly dramatic. I am technically leaving you, but I don't think the technicality of the situation really captures it fully.

Of the two of us, it feels like I am the only one fighting for this relationship. Although I have very little fight left in me, to be honest. I love you. I have loved you, in a way, since I first met you. Even if I didn't realise it was love at first.

When I went away to London, I missed you. I can never imagine myself with anyone else. I am – I think – a person quite fine with my own company, generally, as much as I like people. You were someone I could be with and not lose myself. Being with you let me be a truer version of me.

There were whole years where the balance was right. You know, it wasn't perfect. But I worked hard at the Crucible and you worked hard at the shop and we both supported each other. I felt like you were still there for me, as though the point of work wasn't the work, but a shared

future. We were still young enough to imagine the time ahead of us was for ever.

But things went off course and I saw less and less of you – it was always because of work. And all the time in those days you told me, and maybe told yourself, that by expanding the business you were setting up a life of less work. That we would have more time together. When we were young we both loved Around the World in Eighty Days. A silly book, full of all sorts of outdated things, but also just a wonderful idea of adventure. I thought we could both be Phileas Fogg in our lives. But I increasingly felt like your valet. And no one wants to be the valet.

I care about you. I will always love the man I married. But now I miss him. I want to sit on a bench with him and just pass the time away like we used to.

We used to face the same direction. Whether looking at a pond or a movie or a painting in a church in Venice. So it was easy to imagine we were facing the same future.

You wanted success but you were kind and cared about people. My dad. Strangers, even. That past tense seems harsh as I write. I think you still care about people. I think you are still a good person, but you have forgotten how to act like one because you are detached from our world. I don't know what happened and I've tried to find you but you are lost to me.

I can't just be that corporate wife any more, sitting at tables at business functions and being ignored by everyone, including my husband. I chose to leave many things of my life before you to have a life for us. And now I am essentially alone at fifty years old. And so, while I still have life and health inside me, I am going to return to Sheffield. I miss my best friend and I miss myself.

I think, in the end, I just want to travel the world and

see some paintings and do a bit of good where I can. I would have rather done that with you, but I realise that is never going to happen.

There are plenty of worse husbands out there. You have never been unfaithful. And you have never been violent or awful. But you are not the man I fell in love with and this breaks my heart.

It needs to be clearly understood that I am not leaving to get away from you. I'm leaving because staying with you makes me miss that man more.

It feels wrong that I am the one making the choice, because that isn't what it feels like to me. It feels like I chose you, and kept choosing you, but over the decades you stopped choosing me.

You are forever somewhere else, even when you are right next to me.

It is important for me not to succumb to fantasy. I doubt I will even travel the world. I imagine I will be consumed with looking after my dad's increasing needs back in Sheffield.

Anyway, this is not easy.

I know you think of me as strong, but I am not.

I feel as fragile as a leaf in the wind right now.

It seems like I have been holding my breath through this whole letter.

I feel if I exhale I will cry and never stop crying.

I know you went through a lot when you were younger, as did I. But we can't be trapped by that for ever. I can't fix you. I can't even fix myself.

This is heartbreaking. But sometimes you have to let your heart break in order to stay alive.

I want you to understand that.

I want you to understand too that our love is always still

there. Can you remember my silly theory of art? That people grow old around art but the art stays fresh? Well, I think in a way that is true for memory. I don't know how to explain it but I like to believe we are still, somehow, at the theatre when you walked over to me. Or on our wedding day. Or on our honeymoon. Or looking up at the stars one drunken evening. Or happy, pasting up wallpaper at Broomhill.

I love you, Wilbur.

But I am also leaving you.

I don't know where the past hides, but I will meet you there.

Maggie
x

The Light in the Window

The Ghost stared at the Dreamer as the train rode on. 'Since I met you I have acted like I was in charge, like I have the answers . . . when really there is only ever one question after another. It's a paradox.'

The Dreamer looked uncertain. 'What are you saying?'

'I suppose I wanted you to see what lies ahead so that you had the chance to embrace the questions more.' He stared out at Wilbur staring at a whiteboard full of projections for the next quarter. 'Always numbers. I was always looking at numbers . . .'

Maybe the whole of business is one big coping strategy, thought the Ghost to himself. If you can turn money into meaning, it takes all the mess and fear away. But it's not living. 'Just try and live life like—'

The Dreamer smiled sadly. 'Like it can't be measured?'

'Exactly!'

They arrived on another London street in the dark. Not quite as fancy as the last one, but still lovely and tree-lined. A red-brick terrace in Clapham. They watched Wilbur, drunk, in a slightly dishevelled suit, standing on a doorstep.

Eventually, the door opened and a confused fifty-year-old Claudette stood there. She was tying her dressing gown and stifling a yawn and looking at him with wide eyes. She hadn't seen Wilbur for over a decade.

'Hi, Claudette.'

'Um, Wilbur, what are you doing?'

'I wasn't sure if you still lived here. I was nearby and just took a guess.'

'What's going on?'

'There was a thing on. In Clapham. I'd agreed to go and I was in the area and there was a very nice pub and I was onto my third or fourth or maybe seventh glass of Scotch and I thought I would really like to see a friend right now. And so I thought of the best friend there ever was. Charlie Applewood.'

'Wilbur, it's after midnight.'

He wobbled just a little as he contemplated this. 'I know. But when you think about it in terms of the whole world, Claudette, then really it's mainly daytime right now. It's' – he counted on his fingers – 'nine a.m. in Sydney . . . and four in the afternoon in San Francisco.'

'But this isn't San Francisco. This is South London.'

He thought of something. 'Charlie used to dream of going to San Francisco. Has he been yet?'

The Dreamer could hardly believe it. 'What am I doing? Why am I bothering them? This is painful to watch.'

Claudette sighed. 'Our daughter is asleep. She has school tomorrow. She's a light sleeper. I think it would be better if you go home.'

Wilbur smiled wistfully. 'What's her name again?'

'It's Sophie. But, please, Wilbur, I think it would be best if you go home. I don't know if Charlie—'

'Sophie is a beautiful name.'

Then Charlie was there in his pyjama bottoms and faded Bowie T-shirt. 'Wilbur? Bloody hell. What are you doing here?'

'Maggie left me. And I had no one to talk to.'

It looked like the least surprising news Charlie had ever heard. 'I'm sorry, Wilbur.'

'I just wondered if I could . . .' He paused for a moment, as if the sentence was a feat of endurance. 'I just wondered if I could come in and chat.'

Charlie and Claudette shared a look. The subtle language of truly close people.

'All right,' said Charlie. 'But we have to be quiet.'

Wilbur saw a light go on upstairs. He realised he had woken their daughter up and hated himself for it, remembered the Ghost. He also seemed to have sobered up just enough now to realise how ridiculous it was for him to be there.

'No. Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you. It's good to see you. I should be going to bed too, I'm flying to Dublin tomorrow . . . We're setting up a shop there.'

Charlie didn't know what to do with that information. 'Right.'

Wilbur began walking away towards the main road.

Charlie, concerned, stepped out onto the pavement. 'Mate, you will be all right, won't you?'

Wilbur stopped. 'Did you go in the end?'

'What?'

He pointed to his T-shirt. 'The concert. David Bowie. The last time I saw you you'd talked about going.'

Charlie, standing on the pavement in his slippers, gave a look of total perplexity. 'That was nearly thirteen years ago.'

'I know. But did you go?'

'Yes. Yes, I did, actually. Went with someone from work. I got a new job pretty quick after, you know . . .'

'I'm sorry about all that.'

'Water under the bridge.'

The Ghost sighed to himself. 'Water under the bridge. It's always water under the bridge . . . There is a lot of water under that bridge.'

Wilbur, yellow under the street lamp, looked mournfully at his old friend. 'Was it a good concert?' he asked.

Charlie nodded. 'Really good. One of the best . . . Listen, will you be all right, Wilbur?'

'Of course! I'll be grand. Business is booming.'

'That's not what I asked.'

'No. I will be fine, I will be fine . . .'

'Listen, call me if you need anything.'

'Thanks. See you later, Charlie.'

And Charlie stayed out on the pavement watching his old friend walk away, into the night, with an expression between confusion and sympathy. 'Yes. Maybe. See you.'

And Charlie went back inside. The two unseen observers saw him stroke Claudette's arm. 'Well, that was weird.'

The Thing With Love

They were back on the train.

The view outside was speeding up. A blur of offices and speeches and rolling over in bed and feeling for a presence that wasn't there.

'The thing with love,' the Ghost said, 'is that it can feel so eternal that it can be mistaken for something that will be around for ever. Like a rock formation. Or the sky. But love is like every other human thing – it withers without attention. It's like what Alfred told us. About it being a garden . . .'

This annoyed the younger, living, dreaming Wilbur on the train. 'Oh shut up,' he said, staring out of the window at his future self as he cried himself to sleep. 'Just, *please*, for once, shut up . . . You said yourself you don't have all the answers. You seem to have screwed up your entire life, yet here you are acting like some phantom Prospero who knows everything.'

The Ghost shrugged beside him on the velvet seat. 'I'm just trying to help you.'

'Yes, well, I don't always need the commentary. Sometimes I can work things out for myself. Sometimes you can come across a little, I don't know, *pompous*.'

'I'm dead. It's impossible *not* to be pompous when you are dead. Being dead is an incredibly pompous thing because after you die you know better. And I do know better.'

'There you go again.'

'Look, I know I don't have all the answers. I just know what I got wrong. And I don't want you to get it wrong. I'm here to help you. I am a ghost. You are not. You are simply dreaming, and you

get to wake up. And I don't. You are innocence and I am experience. And I am doing all this *for you*. So, you know, a little bit of gratitude wouldn't go amiss.'

Now they could see Wilbur working at night in the office. His eyes were heavy, he was close to falling asleep, but he stayed at his desk. He didn't want to go home.

'All right,' said the Dreamer. 'I'm sorry. I just don't like it. I don't like seeing it. I don't like seeing the end of us. I love her and I thought I was going to love her for ever.'

The Ghost slapped his hands together. 'But that's just it, Dreamer. I still loved her, but it had become a useless kind of love. A love as separate from reality as a stock market is from the people. The trouble was that I was timid. I won't say *we* were timid. Because *you* don't have to be. Your future is ahead. The thing you have to think about is what she put in the letter. *Sometimes you have to let your heart break in order to stay alive*. She wasn't just talking about herself. She was talking about us. You have to accept what happened with Dougie. You have to accept that you weren't the perfect brother, and you weren't the perfect son, but that you did the best with what you had. You have to accept the grief inside your bones. And that, yes, things could have been different. Yes, you were held back. You could have gone to university, you could have done X and Y and Z, but in trying to prove yourself you forgot to be yourself. Maggie was right. You lost yourself.'

The Dreamer's eyes beneath his shaggy hair were back to their default setting of wide confusion. 'What were you scared of?'

'Losing her. I'd lost everyone I'd ever loved. And after Mam I thought I was going to lose her too. And what is the opposite of love . . . Not hate. Because hate is still emotion. It's *pointless ambition*. The abstractions of physics and mathematics. The corporate world where everything can be quantified. I was addicted to it. The false sense of importance you get from being at the top of a ladder. They say power is an aphrodisiac but to me it was an

anaesthetic. I could almost stop being a sentient, vulnerable human.'

The Dreamer shook his head and stared out at Wilbur in a board meeting. 'No. There must be more to it.'

'Maybe. There was always the idea that our real life was ahead of us. That we would get to fifty and I'd quit . . .'

'But it was 1995. You were fifty and not quitting.'

'I know, I know. The promises you make when young are the easiest to break.'

And outside, flashing by, there was more proof. Wilbur heading deeper into his fifties, then sixties, into another millennium, and still there, still in his office, still collecting awards, appearing on TV, attending functions, climbing into bed alone, drinking cough medicine just to sleep.

On and on and on.

Agnes came into the carriage. She sat down between them, straightened her hat, and spoke primarily to the Wilbur who was dreaming rather than the one who was dead. 'You will notice that as the journey goes on, the ride becomes faster . . . The days speed by, flickering like sunlight through foliage . . .'

The variety of what could be seen became less and less. Just Wilbur at work. Locations changed. But he was always at work. Always on his phone. Always with the same frown. Wilbur's expression lines deepening in the portrait.

The train slowed.

They got out to see Wilbur at his home desk. There wasn't anything terrible to witness. But nor was there anything happy or interesting to see either. Just a moderately old man trying to set up a new computer and swearing to himself.

A little later, he went over to his old record player and put on *Imagination*, an album by Gladys Knight and the Pips that Maggie used to love. He walked around, aware suddenly of all the empty space.

'I remember this,' said the Ghost. 'The next day I'm going to tell the board that I want to step down.'

On the train once again, the Dreamer leaned back on the velvet seat and stared bleakly out of the window. 'I don't want to end up like this. I don't want to be miserable. I don't want all this pain.'

The Ghost sighed. 'A life without pain is not on the menu, lad. A life of avoiding pain becomes a life defined by pain. Pain and regret. And you have already lived through pain. You lived through Dougie dying . . . You will survive everything life throws at you. You've just got to get out from that bomb-shelter mindset, lad.'

They were passing the 2010s now.

Wilbur was nominally retired but still did some consulting and speaking work. They passed a large function room in Canary Wharf where he was an old man on stage with a banner behind him that read: *Gulliver Research – Inspiring Success – Spring Conference*.

They passed him having a blood test.

They passed him walking around his future house in Bedfordshire with an estate agent.

They passed him grumpily flicking through Netflix.

'It doesn't matter how much knowledge hindsight gives me,' said the Ghost wearily, 'because I have no future left to play with. I am a dead man. But you – you are young and you are a dreamer. And the thing with dreamers is they get to wake up.'

It wasn't that everything they whizzed past in his last two decades was oppressively bleak. He had after all enjoyed country walks. He became friends with the neighbours. He had conversations with the landlord of the Hare in Clophill.

He even, at the age of sixty-eight, acquired a playful, problematic beagle – Ringo – from a nice man called Dylan at Bedford Animal Rescue Centre.

But there was no contact with anyone he had known from his working years. The ones he had been close to, like Charlie, had been pushed aside or died.

He occasionally hired a baffled chauffeur to take him into Bedford in order to sit in an Italian restaurant by himself. Then he discovered a Mexican restaurant and went there too. Again by himself, only this time eating enchiladas. He liked enchiladas and wondered if Maggie had ever tried them.

He sat there, looking at her Facebook page. But she had never posted.

String Theory

The Midnight Train stopped on a street in Bedford.

Wilbur was standing outside a music shop. It had a faded painted sign, decorated with a treble clef and five-line staff, and the name 'String Theory' written on it, a different colour for every letter.

Wilbur was staring at a card that had been stuck with Blu Tack onto the window. The sign said:

PIANO LESSONS!
A pain-free way to learn the piano
All ages, all styles
Lessons from my home (Bancroft Avenue, Bedford)
Or can travel within 10 mile radius
Contact: Nora Seed
mob: 07780039251
Insta: noraseedpiano

'I was on my way to the car,' explained the Ghost. 'The driver was parked a few streets away . . . I'd gone the long way round and taken a peek at how awful the little Budd Books branch was looking, and now I was here . . .'

'Piano lessons?' said the Dreamer, with that youthful, positive lilt to his voice.

'Yes. The doctor told me learning a musical instrument could ward off dementia.'

A man came out of the shop. He was wearing a Fleetwood Mac T-shirt. Early sixties. Pot belly. Cheeky smile. He recognised him.

'Hello, sir. You're Wilbur Budd, aren't you?'

'Um. Yes. Yes.'

'Thought I recognised you. Saw you on *Dragon's Den* a while back and I thought, I know that face.'

'Ah. Yes. I just did one episode.'

'I'm Neil. This is my shop. Not quite Budd Books but we tick over. Anyway, the Bedford Budd Books over on the High Street – before your company got it – that was our place. We got priced out and had to come here. A bit off the beaten track but the rates are better.'

'Oh, I'm sorry about that.'

'Not your fault,' Neil said breezily. 'Just the way of the world.'

'Yes.' Wilbur pointed at the card. 'Do you know this person?'

'Nora? Oh yeah. She used to work here . . . Nora's great. Especially these days. She had some *issues* but seems to have really turned her life around.'

Wilbur pulled out his phone to take a photo of the sign. 'I think I'll give her a chance then . . . But first I'll probably need a piano.'

Neil laughed. 'That's what I'm here for!' He escorted Wilbur inside, telling him to mind the step.

'We had a long chat,' sighed the Ghost, still standing with his dreaming honeymoon self out on the pavement. 'He sensed my loneliness. He talked to me about Bob Dylan. I decided on a nice baby grand electric piano because he told me it was easy to learn on.'

'And were you?' asked the Dreamer.

'Was I what?'

'Were you lonely?'

'Yes. That was the foundational feeling. There for ever like a lapping tide. I suppose that was why I got piano lessons. I wanted someone to talk to.'

Not Quite Despair

'I missed people,' the Ghost explained as they looked out at the last two years. 'Not *just* Maggie, but Dougie and Charlie and even my mother. I missed Sheffield. I missed a cinema that didn't even exist any more.'

Wilbur's dog died. His neck and hands, in particular, became stiffer, which led to slow progress with the piano. He walked slower. He swore at the news.

But he wasn't a totally miserable person. He had found a kindness that he had lost during his career. Remembering Victor, the old man he used to chat with in Sheffield, he gave money to homeless charities. On warm summer evenings, he sat in the garden and watched the sun sieve its golden light through the sycamore.

'It wasn't quite happiness,' the Ghost explained. 'But it was at least not quite despair. And I had the gardener and piano teacher to chat with every Saturday.'

Then the train slowed again.

'Oh,' said the Ghost with dread as he realised where – when – they were.

Nora Seed

Wilbur was having a piano lesson, beneath the wedding photo on the alcove shelf.

He and his piano teacher had their backs to them as Wilbur tried to play the first section of 'Bridge Over Troubled Water', his stiff fingers loosening a little as they moved along the keys. Even though this was the 'easy' version of the song – well, it was in the *Beginner's Piano Simon and Garfunkel Songbook* – it didn't feel easy.

Once he had finished, his piano teacher – Nora – gave a little clap. 'That was really good,' she lied, almost convincingly, as she smoothed a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

'I really don't think so,' he said. He was eighty-one years old now, and his voice had a slight croak to it.

'Ah, come on, Wilbur, it was a lot better than last week. You've been practising!'

'Yes. A little. I have a lot of time. But I am still so clumsy. I struggle to keep pace with all those flats.'

'I get that. And I saw you had a few . . . issues there.'

'I certainly did. With that blasted chord. Reaching that E flat . . .'

'But, Wilbur, just remember it isn't a race. Keep it slow. Get the feel of it gently. Breathe into it. Take your time.'

Wilbur laughed a little at that point. The kind of laugh that lives next to tears. 'I have always had the same problem. My wife used to say I was scared of stillness. And even now I'm old, even now my brain and fingers work against me, I still have a tendency to gallop.'

Nora looked at him a little tentatively. 'You said your wife liked this song.'

'She loved it. It was probably her favourite.' He felt some more explanation was needed. 'I'm speaking in the past tense but she's still alive. It's just I haven't seen her since, well, since the last century, actually.'

Nora smiled at him as if she had something to say, something maybe a little intrusive, but she thought better of it. 'I like it too. I love it, in fact. I was in a band once and we played a lot of covers and that was always my choice.'

'Oh, really? What were you called?'

'The Labyrinths.'

'Good name. Were you a success?' He regretted saying this. It was silly. If the band had been a success, then why on earth would she be teaching piano to an eighty-one-year-old who was really just lonely? She would have been touring Asia or something.

'In one lifetime, yes. But not this one.'

'Ah. Right.'

She played the section for him.

He was, as ever, in awe at the ease with which she played. She sang the first verse while her fingers moved across the keys.

He was thinking of Maggie singing the song, years ago, on their honeymoon in Venice. Then, suddenly, and quietly, and for the first time in decades, he began to cry.

'I'm sorry,' he said, dabbing his eyes with his sleeve. He stood up. Walked away, towards the open-plan kitchen at the other side of the room. 'That was embarrassing.'

Nora stood up too. A bit confused but determined not to make him feel any worse. 'Don't be silly, Wilbur. It's not embarrassing at all. It's good to cry when we feel it.'

He stared at a bottle of red wine he had put out for this evening. 'You don't mind if I have a glass of wine?'

'Not at all. It's a Saturday. Totally allowed.'

He struggled with the corkscrew so she went over and helped him as he navigated himself to the cupboard where the wine glasses were kept.

'Would you like one?' he asked her.

'Sure. I'm not driving. My brother, Joe, is picking me up. He's playing at the Corn Exchange in Cambridge tonight. His band is really good.'

She poured the wine into two glasses and didn't comment on the blood-pressure monitor he had left out from that morning. Nor did he tell her that he had been feeling quite ill. They sat down at the large table in the living area.

'It's just . . .' Wilbur began. 'We've been separated for a long time. Sorry. Don't mean to burden you with that.'

Nora shook her head. 'Don't apologise, please. That's the danger of music. It can stir up all kinds of things.'

'It can, it really can. And it . . . I don't know. I'm ridiculous.'

'You are not ridiculous, Wilbur. You're a success story.'

'I just wish I had managed to keep the person I loved happy.'

There was a moment of quiet. Nora frowned. She seemed to be making a decision to say something.

'By the way, I don't know what you believe, but there is probably a life where you are together . . .' She took a breath. 'I hope you don't think I'm insensitive saying this, but today is quite an emotional day for me too.'

'I see. In what way?'

'Well, seven years ago to the day I did something stupid.'

'I can't imagine that. You seem so together.'

Nora gave a dry smile. 'Life had got on top of me. Situational depression, they call it. Not the clinical type. Just the can't-see-the-wood-for-the-trees kind.' She laughed darkly. 'There had just been a sort of traffic jam of, well, *situations*.'

Wilbur sipped his wine. 'Ah. Yes. Situations.'

'I felt like a failure. Like I'd made a lot of bad decisions. Let

people down. Guilt. Regret. And one night I didn't think I could go on, so I tried to take my life. And I came very close, you know, to doing it . . .'

Wilbur was genuinely upset. 'I had no idea.'

'It's okay. It was actually good, in the end. On the edge of death, I . . . had an experience that made me see things differently.' She took a breath. 'I realised that somewhere out there I was all the things I wasn't. And I realised that if you aim to be something you are not, you will fail. So I had to be who I was. The only way to learn is to live, it's as simple as that.'

'*The only way to learn is to live,*' echoed Wilbur, almost in a whisper.

The Dreamer looked at the Ghost as if he had solved a riddle. 'That was our problem,' he told him, looking into the Wilbur-on-honeymoon face so like his own. '*Your* problem. Trying to be someone that wasn't really you.'

The Ghost realised he should have felt sad at this. After all, he had lived a life without being able to appreciate it. He had lost love and friendship along the way, but the bigger tragedy would have been to never have known those things at all. Life was about moments as much as it was about decades. And there had been some exceptional ones. Yes, he felt sad that he had squandered so many things, but there was no point running away from that sadness. Running away from sadness had been his whole problem. That was how he had shrunk a life while pretending to expand it. That was how he became a failure pretending it was success. So, yes, the Ghost was sad now. But he had once kissed Maggie under a Venetian moon. And just knowing that was a match for eternity.

He watched his eighty-one-year-old self looking out of his window.

The gardener, Josh, had arrived and was unpacking some equipment. Wilbur felt a twinge of pain in his chest, and winced a little.

'Are you okay?' Nora asked. Her face was pure concern. The purest he had seen in decades.

'Yes,' he smiled, trying to ease her worry. 'And listen, Nora, I'm very proud of you. That you already know that life is not a race to be won.' He stared out at Josh, pulling up weeds from a flowerbed. 'I let Maggie down. I neglected her.'

Nora held his hand across the table. 'But don't be hard on yourself. You don't know anything would have been better.'

'That's true. And you're right. There is no perfect life. *You* though are in the centre of yourself. I feel I lived at the far reaches. I should have been closer. I was the luckiest man alive. I just couldn't see it . . .'

Nora smiled kindly. 'Well, maybe somewhere out there Maggie lived a million happy lives. With you. Without you. And you too. Those other lives are all real too. They're all happening at once. And who knows what is after all this? Who knows what chances we get?'

Wilbur smiled a small but honest smile. 'Thank you, Nora.'

A car pulled up outside. A minute later, the doorbell rang.

Nora laughed as she stared over at the piano. 'Sorry about that. We haven't had much of a lesson today.'

'I beg to differ,' said Wilbur. 'I really think we have.'

For a short moment, the Wilbur who had died stood beside the Wilbur who was dreaming. The Ghost looked over at his younger self. 'Please, be a little braver than I was. Dare to live life as it happens. Dare to love fully.'

The Dreamer nodded. He looked at his own wedding photo above the ridiculously futuristic piano. 'I will. I promise.'

And they waited for the Midnight Train, but it didn't come.

There was a little more for them to see.

Infinite Space

They watched Wilbur standing on the driveway. Well, the Ghost was watching Wilbur on the driveway as he waved goodbye to Nora. His dreaming consort, on the other hand, was looking saucer-eyed over at Josh on the tractor-mower in the distance.

'Bloody hell, this place is massive.'

'It is. The whole garden is five acres. That includes the lawn, the drive, the woodland, the tennis court . . .'

'Tennis court? But you had no one to play tennis with.'

'I know. Exactly.'

'And you live here? What about London?'

'I'd had enough of London.'

'"When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life."'

'Don't Samuel Johnson me, Dreamer,' he said, as cross as an old dead man tends to be with his younger self. 'When a man is tired of London, he is tired of London. London wasn't the answer for us either. It's never about the place. It's about the reason that drives you to the place. My reason for London was work and ambition. Both of which had become a drug to soothe the pain . . . Then, after Maggie left me, London itself had become a place of pain, so I ran away again.'

The unseen watchers now turned their attention to Nora as she opened the door to her brother's Vauxhall Corsa, parked on the gravel driveway at the rear of the large manor house. They saw Joe Seed and his partner Ewan in the car, looking in wonder at the vast garden.

The old living Wilbur had, of course, walked out of the house

to see her off. And gave a little wave to Joe in the driver's seat. 'Have a good time tonight in Cambridge.'

Nora smiled in the sunshine. 'I will. And thanks for the conversation. Remember what I said, don't try and rush it when you play. Take your time . . . Slow and steady. You'll get there in the end.'

'Yes,' said Wilbur. 'I suppose I will.'

Slow and steady, thought the Ghost. If only he had lived like that. If only he had been able to live with the understanding death had given him. He would now give eternity just for a year, a month, a day alive with this knowledge. Stopping that perpetual rush. Reaching out to those he loved. Making amends. Not scared of falling into the nettles of emotion.

He was, he supposed, the intervention. He'd helped show the Dreamer his possible path and now he could wake up and change. He'd been a book to leave on the shelf. And that other Wilbur – the living one – could still prove to be as wise as Nora Seed.

'It was lovely talking to you today. It meant a lot.'

'Likewise,' said Wilbur. 'Likewise . . .' He knew he was repeating himself, but couldn't seem to help it.

'Thanks for not thinking I was insane.'

'Likewise!'

The Ghost pointed at him. The mist of memory had evaporated. He could remember it all now. 'I was starting to feel really ill. Can you see it?'

'Not really. We're a good bluffer.'

'See you next Saturday,' Nora was saying, clearly thinking nothing was wrong.

'Yes. See you then.'

Nora climbed into the cramped back seat, looking remarkably happy.

'She seems like a lovely woman,' said the Dreamer.

The Ghost sighed in agreement. 'She understands herself. At

forty-two years of age. Whereas at double that, and with the help of my own death, I am still only just getting there.'

They watched as Wilbur got the remote control from his pocket and clicked the gates open. After the car drove away, he walked the short distance back to the house and they followed. He stopped once, and turned towards them.

'Does he see us?'

'No. Senses, maybe. But not sees.' And then he remembered. 'Not yet.'

The Unexplained Knowledge

Wilbur closed the door before they reached the house but they walked straight through the wall, then over the flagstone floor and across the living room to the piano, where Wilbur sat down to play the easy version of 'Bridge Over Troubled Water'.

Wilbur strained to reach the E flat with his little finger, and the phone duly rang.

'Oh yes,' said the Ghost. 'I remember this. Here we go.'

They watched their twenty-first-century self answer the phone. Watched his face shift from frustration to confusion to shock.

'Maggie. Oh lord. Maggie, is that you?'

The two unseen witnesses followed Wilbur as he took the receiver and went to sit in the other room. The one with the wedding photograph and the trophies.

'How did you get the number? . . . Oh. Oh yes. Oh yes, I did. I did. I thought you never saw that message . . . Where are you? . . . Yes. Clophill. It's a lovely little village . . . Maggie, it is good to hear from you . . . I have things I have been wanting to say. To ask you. To make amends for . . .'

The Dreamer looked even more confused than he had done. 'Why are we talking like that? It's like I don't even know her.'

'We haven't spoken to her for *nearly thirty years*. That's the length of your whole lifetime up to 1974. This is now the year 2026 and you haven't spoken to her since the nineties. That's a long time. And time turns houses into museums and lovers into strangers and songs into sadness.'

'What does that—?'

'Shh. I think we're about to witness our own death.'

Wilbur was looking at his old, time-weathered hands and telling Maggie he had started to learn the piano. 'I have lessons every Saturday. And I've just been playing "Bridge Over Troubled Water" and remembering how you loved it. It did rather take me back. Yes. The good old days . . . I'm sorry, Maggie. How are you? It's been so long. I saw on the internet that you had an exhibition for your art in— What's silly? . . . It's nice to hear from you . . .'

The Dreamer leaned towards the phone to try and hear Maggie. 'Why was she calling?'

'She'd had a dream. She had a dream of her and us, happy. Then she had felt a need to call us. It's like she knew we were about to die.'

The Dreamer followed his old self's stare towards the wedding photo.

Maggie and Wilbur stepping out of St Timothy's Church, into that cloud of confetti. Charlie, Claudette, Doreen also in shot. Wilbur smiling and glancing over at Maggie, soaking in her happiness.

'I would like to speak to you again. Would that be all right?'

The Ghost and the Dreamer looked at each other with identical expressions of pain. After the phone call Wilbur went to get Maggie's letter, then came back downstairs to read the one page he had found. The final one. He mumbled some of it aloud to himself.

'"*I don't know where the past hides, but I will meet you there . . .*"'

This was the moment that his pain became visible, if not audible.

He grimaced and clasped his hand to his neck.

'Oh no. This looks bad,' said the Dreamer.

'Yes, Dreamer. I'm pretty sure this is it.'

The old man was becoming pale and sweaty as he headed outside to try and get the attention of Josh the gardener.

'You wanted to feel powerful enough not to be hurt,' said the Ghost to Wilbur, to himself, to the world. 'But you couldn't stop that . . .'

It seemed like Wilbur heard him, but it was difficult to tell for

sure, as he was so preoccupied with the pain and the pressure in his neck and his shoulder.

'Oh yes, oh my goodness,' said the Ghost. 'I remember now. This is when I saw us. I saw us standing there.'

Then they saw Josh turn the tractor-mower around and catch sight of Wilbur lying there.

He jumped off and ran, arrow-straight through a flowerbed, to crouch beside him. 'Wilbur? Wilbur? Mr Budd? Can you hear me?'

He checked his pulse. It was still there. He called for an ambulance. One came. The Ghost and the Dreamer went in the ambulance all the way to the chaos of Accident and Emergency at Bedford Hospital.

The dreaming Wilbur was especially disturbed by events that night, staring at the ECG machine and listening to doctors and nurses mutter things about atrial depolarisation and T-waves over the unconscious body. But even more so when the signals sent from Wilbur's heart via the electrodes started to stutter and swing wildly, rising to a final crescendo, before falling into ominous stillness as the clock reached a minute after midnight.

The Last Exit

There were two doors at the end of the front carriage.

The Ghost held the handle of one of them, while the Dreamer held the other. Agnes, standing between them, straightened her hat and pulled at her sleeves as if she needed to meet the moment with a sense of smart decorum.

'You need to go first,' she told the Ghost, fighting to keep emotion from her face. 'You have to be gone so he can wake up without you.'

'But what happens then? The moment I leave?'

'Well, as I told you before, everything is unpredictable. This was the gamble. We don't know for sure.'

The Ghost turned to the Dreamer. 'Listen, I'm sorry. You know, if something goes wrong . . . I gambled with your future. But, listen, if you – *when* you – wake up, please try to remember all this. And live by what you have learned. And, please, make Maggie happy.'

The Dreamer swallowed his fear and nodded. He knew, if he was given the chance, what he had to do. He knew also that he had potentially been given a great gift. The gift of being able to live life from the perspective of the dead.

'Thank you. I owe you everything.'

'Or nothing,' said the Ghost as he waited a moment. Nerves were getting the better of him. It was one thing to die with the agnostic idea that there might be something else, but quite another to know there was a *something else* and you decided to forego it completely. He felt the strange ache of knowing he was leaving, and the strain of time about to snap.

Agnes sniffed. A tear was dangerously close to forming. 'As Raymond Chandler himself put it, "To say goodbye is to die a little." Possibly not the most apposite quote at this time, given everything.' She smiled a sad little smile. 'I always knew. Ever since you turned down a free book in the bookshop, I knew you had your own mind.'

'For better or worse. This time I hope for better . . . And you . . . you will be okay?'

'Oh yes. One thing I do know with some certainty is I will be safely there in eternity. Don't worry. Part of me has been there all this time.'

The Ghost braved a smile. 'Good. You can think me a fool for ever!'

'Oh, I will.' Her eyes looked into the distance, as if to her own living past and all the regrets that lay there, as some long-buried emotion returned to her. But then she snapped out of it and inhaled herself back into an upright posture. Straightened her hat again. And gave him a little hug. A warm one, by ghostly standards. And then she let him go.

The Ghost opened the door. Outside, nothing awaited him. Nothing at all. Darkness of a singular kind. No shadows, shapes, lines or gradations. Nothing but nothing. Not pain, not happiness, not hope or memory. A place with no sense of future or the past or the present. A place with no sense of anything. A place with no place.

Just before he took the step he looked behind him. His portrait was now just a blank square.

And then the Ghost took a breath and stepped into the void with something close to a smile on his face.

There was a moment of stillness, once he had gone, but very soon the Midnight Train began to move. It started to shake and judder with extreme violence.

'Oh no,' said Agnes as she collided with the wood-panelled wall of the train. 'You'd better hold on for your life.'

Holding On

The train was bouncing over some kind of rough terrain. It did so with occasional shakes and jolts, one of which caused the carriage they were in to snap entirely in two, the larger part shooting back into darkness.

Agnes and the Dreamer remained, holding onto the brass rail. A second later, Agnes's hat fell off and she instinctively reached out for it just as her side of the brass rail became detached from the varnished wood panelling. The train tilted at an almost forty-five-degree angle. She fell towards the wildly swinging open door, but the dreaming Wilbur caught her, his hand grabbing her forearm as the train kept speeding and whistling forward on its jagged path.

'I've got you!' he said, as he held onto her with one hand and, with the other, a brass rail that was also starting to buckle.

'You've got to let go!' she shouted above the noise.

'But—'

'I'm fine! Remember. If you don't let go, there is no chance for you. The train is trying to save you – it just wants you! It wants rid of me! It has no power for anything else.'

Her hand slowly slipped through his fingers. He heard the train buckling and breaking all around him.

'Let go of me, Wilbur! I am safe! I will see you in eternity one day. But you have to live. Don't let it all be for nothing. YOU MUST LIVE!'

She gave him an imploring look.

'Good luck!' he told her. 'And goodbye!'

'Au revoir, Young Bean.'

He let go of her hand and watched her fall back, then deliberately roll herself out of the door. He held on tight to the last brass rail at the top of the carriage as what remained of the train sped further and further, its whistle louder and louder.

'Hold steady!' he told himself, thinking of nothing but Maggie's smile. 'Hold steady!'

And, just at the moment one screw of the handrail flew away, causing the rail to loosen and twist wildly with his weight, the void began to lighten. The sky beyond began to burn and shift with yellows and blues. Brighter and brighter. He clenched his eyes shut against the glare. And now, just as the light began to soften, he realised that he was entirely still, and lying on something soft.

He had a feeling of mild confusion. The confusion, it seemed, of waking up.

The Miracle

Wilbur opened his eyes. He was lying on the bed in the hotel room in Venice. He was in sandals and flares and a summer shirt. His eyes were dry from the flight and the wine they'd drunk earlier by the Grand Canal. His mouth tasted a little sour.

He looked to see the guidebook had slid off his chest and onto the bedsheets. *The Companion Guide to Venice*.

Despite the sour mouth and dry eyes he felt mentally lighter. Like some weight had been lifted. His mind was refreshed.

Maggie was still in the bathroom. He could hear her splashing in the water. He could hear her singing to herself. It felt like ages since he'd heard her voice, even though it must have only been minutes since he closed his eyes.

'Maggie?'

'Yes?'

'I just want to say I love you.'

'Well, I hope so! I'd want my money back for the wedding dress if you didn't.'

'And I always will. I'm going to appreciate you for ever.'

'That's . . . er . . . good to hear,' she said with a slight giggle from the bathtub.

He checked his watch. It was twenty-five past seven. He'd fallen asleep at twenty past. He knew that because he had remembered thinking they still had half an hour before leaving for the restaurant, and the place – La Zucca – was only a ten-minute walk away.

Five minutes. It seemed ridiculous that he could have fallen into such a deep, long and intense dream in just five or so minutes.

Unless it really hadn't been a dream. Unless he really had travelled through time and arrived back exactly where he started. Unless the Midnight Train had been real.

Trying to wake up a bit, he went over to the window. He looked out at moored gondolas and narrow buildings of varying shades of pink, the soft evening sun amplifying their beauty.

It was then that Maggie came out of the bathroom.

Wilbur turned and saw her in her underwear choosing her clothes for the evening. He couldn't keep his eyes off her. In a couple of minutes she was taking out a large white paper bag from the suitcase.

'It's the dress from Coles. The one I bought yesterday. The one Claudette helped me pick. You haven't seen it yet, have you?'

'No. No, I haven't.'

Except, he soon realised, he *had* seen it. It was the long blue dress she had been wearing when the Midnight Train had gone past La Zucca.

'How do I look?'

Wilbur was in shock. But it wasn't a terrible feeling. It was like, somehow, a shock of relief. 'Like a miracle.'

She smiled, but then seemed a little concerned. 'You all right, Wilbur? You seem a little dazed.'

'I'm fine. I was on the bed and drifted off for a little while. I'm back now.'

He quickly got changed into his checked trousers and a polyester wide-collared shirt which he suddenly considered to be a little old-fashioned.

They walked to the restaurant through happy clusters of tourists and locals.

'You in a rush?' Maggie asked him with a little giggle as she struggled to keep up. 'I don't think we're late.'

'Sorry, Maggie . . . I'm just really excited to see the restaurant.'

When they were nearly there he told Maggie to go ahead and

turn the last corner. He needed to test something out loud, to confirm he wasn't going mad.

'Can you see it?' he asked her.

'Ye-es.'

'Is it limestone?'

'I think so.'

'With a plant growing up the walls? Does it have a wooden sign and is it perched at the bottom of the alleyway backing right over a little canal?'

'Er . . . yes. How did you know that?'

'There was just a very good description of it in the guidebook,' he lied, knowing there was no description of it at all in there.

The Art of Belief

They entered the place.

There was noise and warmth and garlic.

Opera music could be heard softly in the background. An old mechanical fan whirred away on a reception desk. A smiling, moustachioed maître d' in a black shirt greeted them both.

'Buonasera.'

'Buonasera,' responded Wilbur, smiling apprehensively. 'We have a reservation for eight p.m. The name is Wilbur Budd.'

The man checked inside the large leather-bound book and shook his head. But then: 'Ah yes. Here you are.'

And they were led a little way into the dim-lit restaurant.

'I like this place,' Maggie told Wilbur with a small nod of approval as they sat down at a table beside the window.

He agreed. 'Isn't it amazing?'

It was a large menu. Probably about eighty dishes in total.

'What is the bigoli?' Maggie asked as the waiter returned to take their order, and Wilbur's heart skipped a beat.

'It is like spaghetti . . . but bigger than spaghetti.'

'That sounds interesting. I'll have that.'

Wilbur was taking this in. Turning to the next table, he saw the bald man his ghost had pointed out, the one with the birthmark on his scalp. He had seen this precise scene. This precise restaurant and its décor. This was way beyond déjà vu. But these growing signs and tells were merely confirmation that he had seen this before. It was impossible. But, at some point, you had to trust your

own feelings over logic, if logic had nothing to add to the argument except incomprehension.

And so, as they ate their food and drank delicious Italian wine, he decided to believe.

The Good Old Days

Wilbur put down his wine glass. He needed to put something straight.

'Ignore what I said earlier,' he told her.

'What about?'

'The meeting with the bank manager.'

'The loan?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'I'm not going to bother. We don't need that kind of pressure. We don't need to expand. We have a perfectly good bookshop. And it doesn't need to change its name. Agnes – Mrs Bagdale – the original owner was a legend of sorts and she did things differently. She planted the seed and I think it's right she is remembered. She ran it for over thirty years and never once set up another shop. Maybe she knew what she was doing. I just want to run a really good bookshop and keep it that way and have a nice time. Do it the Mrs Bagdale way.'

Maggie was so surprised she put down her cutlery. 'But you were adamant. You said it was the opportunity of a lifetime.'

'I know, I know . . .'

'Is this because I sounded worried? Because I asked if it would take us away from each other?'

'No. It was nothing you said. Not at all. But the thing is, it will. It will take us away from each other, Maggie.'

'But you said it—'

'I know what I said. But I was lying to myself. Look, I don't want more than this.'

'More than what?'

'More than *us*. More than our life.'

'Wilbur—'

'Look, we are having our honeymoon in *Venice*. We are literally *abroad*. The shop is doing well and could stay that way. We need to find some balance. It's not my dream to have shops on every corner. And I know it isn't yours. If I take this offer, years from now you'll be sat on a sofa in a very expensive and magnificent house on Sumner Place in South Kensington and you'll be deeply, deeply unhappy and want to leave me. And you'll be right to want that. Because I'll already have left myself.'

'Your imagination, Wilbur, honestly! South Kensington, for heaven's sake? We have no idea it would be like that.'

'I do, actually. And I don't want it.'

Her eyes shone with a smile and a memory.

'What?' he asked her.

'You haven't changed.'

'Since when?'

'Since I first met you on Glossop Road. Remember? Telling me to mind the glass. You're still that boy. And that's good. I don't want to lose him.'

His eyes glazed. 'No. I'm right here.'

He looked at her. He thought of the person she had been and the woman she was yet to become. He loved her completely, through all time. Through the trials they had known and the unknown mess and grief and joys yet to come. And he realised what he should have always known. It was her. She was the whole point.

'Yes,' she said. 'I can see him.'

After the meal they walked the long way back to the hotel, through labyrinthine streets and alleyways, taking wrong turns and finding themselves in tiny squares.

'I miss Dougie,' he said. 'I miss him every day.' He was saying it out loud, not to upset her, but to show her and himself that

he was acknowledging something. That he couldn't wash that away.

'I know, love. You don't have to pretend any more.'

He thought of her words. The ones she had written him in the letter. *Sometimes you have to let your heart break in order to stay alive*.

They walked on a little further.

'It's marvellous, isn't it, Wilbur?'

He felt happy. But it was a different kind of happiness to what he had known before. This time it felt less fragile, as though it could survive other things alongside it. Like a tenacious flower that would bloom every year.

'Yes! Yes, it is. Life is marvellous. You are marvellous. Venice is marvellous . . . *Sheffield* is marvellous.'

Maggie looked at him with fond eyes. 'You pudding. You sound like Charlie used to when he was on a trip!'

But Wilbur kept going. '*Charlie Applewood* is marvellous. And Claudette Campbell is marvellous. And I can't wait for their wedding. I'm going to be there this time.'

'Eh? Are they getting married?'

'Oh yes. Not that they know it yet.' He paused. Then carried on, making Maggie laugh in the process. 'Doreen Taylor is marvellous . . . Dear old Victor Willows – you know, the man I talk to in Endcliffe Park – he is marvellous . . . Italian food is marvellous . . . My wife's art is marvellous . . . Reading books is marvellous . . .' He thought about that. 'I'm not going to stop reading,' he said adamantly.

'I never said you would.'

'I know. But I'm just saying. I'm always going to have time for it. And for you.' He remembered the telephone conversation that he saw himself having on the eve of his death. 'This is it. These are the good old days. We are living them. They aren't always going to be easy, but one day we will look back and know them as that.

So I'm going to try and live them as that . . . to be nostalgic about the present.'

Maggie smiled and felt a subtle shift, as if some barely recognised worry had lifted and the air was clear.

The Violin

It was ringing midnight as they eventually reached the open vastness of the Piazza San Marco, street lamps on every side, the square in the middle enveloped in golden light, the bell in the basilica throwing its dancing vibrations all the way to the stars.

Wilbur wondered if he had reached the pinnacle of human emotion, experiencing what he was feeling right there, in that moment in the centre of Venice in 1974.

'Listen, Maggie, I want you to tell me if I start to lose this me. This one right here. Make sure I never sack poor old Charlie.'

'Why would you sack Charlie? He's been brilliant. And he loves you.'

'I know. I know. But the future can do things.' He thought of something else. 'And Mam . . . I know she's not always easy. But you are right, I should be gentler with her. We should probably have her round on Sundays. Not just once in a blue moon.'

Maggie smiled and squeezed his arm. 'Well, she's always lovely to me. So that sounds like a good plan.'

And Wilbur nodded, as if realising it for the first time. 'She *is* lovely to you. Yes.'

Just a short walk away, a busker was playing Verdi on a violin outside the Caffè Florian. Wilbur and Maggie joined the small late-night crowd at the back. Maggie took a photograph, then grinned and nestled into Wilbur's shoulder.

'Aren't you worried?' she asked. 'About turning all that money down?'

'No,' said Wilbur.

'But what if you regret it?'

'I won't. I promise.'

'You don't know the future.'

And she was right. He had known one future, of course. But that was just one in a whole infinite multiverse of them. Now he was heading into a different future. A different version of the world. One which, like all of them, would contain pain and happiness. But he wasn't going to run away from any of it.

He smiled because he had an answer for her. 'The only way to learn is to live.'

'Where did you get that from?'

'From someone who isn't even born yet.'

She laughed, more in love with him than she had ever been.

'But let's just live,' he said, and then he had a different thought. Or maybe the same thought, widening out. He remembered seeing an older version of himself staring wearily at projected growth forecasts. 'Right now it's warm. And it's Venice. And we've just drunk the most *wonderful* white wine and eaten food we'd never heard of before tonight. And we are listening to a violin.'

'This is true. This is almost as good as a bench in Endcliffe Park.'

'Almost.'

'*Almost*.'

He found a hundred lira coin in his pocket and went over and gladly flipped it into the air and into the violin case.

'Grazie mille,' said the musician.

It felt good to pay his respect. To attend to the wonder of the world around him. He was never going to stop being this man, he decided, as the coin landed face-side up.

'So,' he asked her after the music stopped, 'what shall we do tomorrow?'

'I don't know,' she said, her voice as calm as the benign night sky above them. 'Shall we just make it up as we go along?'

They held hands and started walking back to the hotel. And as

they walked Wilbur had a sense of the true nature of time. Of strands of life plaiting over each other, past and present and future, keeping everything that had ever happened as fresh and real as everything that ever will.

'Yes,' he said softly, as if it was the wisest philosophy he had ever heard. One that could guide them through their entire lives. 'Let's make it up as we go along.'

Acknowledgements

Thank you for reading *The Midnight Train*.

It's been great to have you on board. Is that 'on board' too much? As soon as you start writing about trains you realise our whole lives are filled with railway metaphors. We are either on the right track or off the rails. We follow a train of thought and go full-steam ahead with our one-track mind until we reach the end of the line. Sorry, I'm getting side-tracked – see – but I am fascinated with how and why we increasingly have seen our lives this way, as things headed perpetually forward, rigid in their path, never to be derailed. No wonder Wilbur wanted to break free and give himself another chance.

And, in terms of *The Midnight Train*, it's not only been quite a journey but one which I haven't travelled alone.

I have a lot of people to thank.

Firstly, there are all the people who read my other Midnight book, *The Midnight Library*. The response to that story led me to thinking of its concept and themes more than ever before. So thanks to those readers for keeping it alive, because without that story this novel wouldn't exist.

Obviously this isn't a sequel to *The Midnight Library*, in any traditional sense. But conceptually, it follows on. *The Midnight Library* was a library between life and death. This is a train through life after death. And now I feel both novels are having a heated debate with each other about how best to live. Either way, its existence is a result of people reading the first one.

So thank you if that was you.

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