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The Museum of You

Written by Carys Bray

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THE MUSEUM OF YOU

CARYS BRAY



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Hutchinson
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA

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This is happiness, Clover thinks as she hefts the watering can and an old bucket. The clear arc of sky. The melty sun. The hum of insects. The smell of growing. The reds and browns of the fences dividing the Tetris pattern of plots. Every shade of green. The warm air. Her heaving effort. The way the stones crunch under her trainers and the dust rises, coating her bare legs.

She moves with deliberate, tightrope concentration, shoulder blades cresting like sails as water laps the containers' edges and she tenses to avoid spillage. No one else is here, because it's the hottest part of the day. Dad would prefer her to wait until the evenings when it's cool and the water doesn't evaporate. But mosquitoes descend as the temperature drops, and their bites weal and burn, even when she manages not to scratch. Once, she had to go to the walk-in centre because her ankle went all balloony, and Dad had kittens, literally. So she will water in the day, when the allotments are empty and the sun toasts the topsoil into a dense crust. This is work, she thinks. This is *doing*. Her face is slick and buttery in the heat. She licks her lips and tastes salt. School is finished and the summer is hers. All of it.

She uses the can first, and when it is empty she refills it with water from the bucket. She waters the onions, already big enough to fill the palm of one of Dad's hands, and then

the carrots. She gives the peas, their curly stalks yellow and crispy, an extra helping, by way of apology for coming at this time of day. Although something got to the cabbages and they looked like skeletons within days of being planted out, they have, to an extent, recovered and are growing sparsely, three or four leaves to each plant. She sprinkles the last of the water over them and then scuffs back down the dusty track to the tap, empty can and bucket swinging.

She listens to the tumble of the water as it fills the can. Little spits splash her legs, damping the dust to dirt. Just before the water spills over, she twists the tap shut. Then she lifts the can aside, replaces it with the bucket and lets the water go again. When the bucket is full and the tap is tight, all is quiet. It's only as she walks back down the path that her ears rediscover the whisper and throb of the living things.

She waters the pumpkin plants. Her idea, for Halloween. Their leaves are rhubarb-ish and furry, the papery petal fingers of the remaining yellow flowers still clenched, like fists. She waters the potatoes and the different types of broccoli, and when she has finished, she hides the empty can under the corner of a large square of carpet that Dad has placed over a spare weeded bed to blind the new shoots of stinging nettles.

She unwraps one of the carrier bags tied to the handlebars of her bike and fills it with runner beans, careful to select only those that are tender and smooth, leaving the thick, stringy pods to dry in the sun for next spring's seeds. She picks six enormous onions and a few carrots, just to see. The carrots are fat at the top, near the leaves, then they taper into wispy, pencil-thin roots. 'Waste of

time,' Dad will say. 'I don't know why I bother.' But he'll change his mind, and next year they'll try again.

Along the back wall, in between thickets of stinging nettles and the flowers she and Dad planted last spring for Mr Ashworth's bees – crocus and bluebell bulbs, rosemary and pussy willow cuttings – there are raspberries. Clover picks a handful and sits on the carpet, legs crossed. The berries are fat and dusty. She places them on her fingers where they sit like thimbles, and, one by one, she pops the fruits into her mouth and sucks them like sweets.

Afterwards, she lies on the carpet, eyes closed, and summer curls around her like a yellow cat. She has plans, but she will wait. Sometimes it's the wait that's the best bit; knowing something's coming, enjoying the feeling of it being about to happen – like Christmas Eve, which is always better than Christmas Day.

And there's the happiness, again. Flickering, moth-like, just under her sternum. She presses a hand up to the place. If she could leave the embered blackness behind her eyelids and travel to the spot where feelings are made, perhaps she could farm the right ones. She has recently become attuned to the way Dad takes the temperature of her mood and attempts to chart it. He'll stop once she smiles – a small smile isn't enough, it takes all her teeth to convince him, and even then he sometimes inspects her expression like a worried dentist. Every night, before bed, he says, 'Three happy things?' It's pretty easy. There's always weather of some sort: sun, snow, rain, wind. There's food – her favourite cereal or a nice pudding. And one other bit of happiness, which can be absolutely anything: clean sheets, a book, one of Dad's ideas – it doesn't matter

whether the idea will actually happen, the optimism dominoes from him to her, regardless.

She would like to ask about this constant gauging of her mood, but Dad's answers are frequently lacking. She remembers, years ago, asking where babies come from. 'Between your legs,' he explained, and afterwards, as she eyed her legs from foot to thigh, she determined that the space *between* each – the soft, veiny plane of skin behind her knees – was *incredible*.

Grinning, she extends her arms and legs and spreads her fingers and toes, filling the full stretch of herself as she makes a shape on the carpet like a snow angel – an offering to the sun. Basking, that's it. Basking while the birds chatter and a slight breeze tickles the trees into motion. 'Shush,' they whisper, 'shush.' Dad doesn't realise that people aren't happy a lot of the time. But it's okay; they're daydreaming, or thinking, or planning, or waiting. That's all.

When she has enjoyed a long wait, she opens her eyes and sits up. Her skin is toasty and there are new freckles on her arms and legs. She retrieves the carrier bag of vegetables and puts it in the empty bucket, which she loops over one of the bike's handlebars. She unfastens the helmet that she had clipped around the seat post, pops it on her head and wheels the bike down the track to the big gate, which has to be closed properly, it's one of the rules. After a hard tug confirms it's fastened tight, she climbs on the bike and cycles towards the road. Past the beech hedge on one side and the neat rows of the orchard on the other, across the track that bridges the sluice, and out on to Moss Lane, bucket swinging. Her mouth still tastes of raspberries and the happiness is swelling like a

gum bubble – something will burst it later, but for now it is the loveliest feeling.

When she reaches the end of Moss Lane she smells sun against tarmac and hears the sounds of real life: traffic, a pneumatic drill, and the fart of a bus as it stops at the roundabout. She slips on to the pavement and peddles past Bargain Booze, the post office and Jo Kelly's News. Up the hill that's actually a railway bridge, climbing alongside the blue railings that shield the drop to Jewson's, which remains stubbornly at ground level, refusing to rise with the slope of the bridge. Past the entrance to Meols Cop station, across the junction and then down, coasting, hands poised over the brakes as the sway of the bucket wobbles her front wheel. Past the sycamores and the tall leylandii trees that grow behind more blue railings, wheels skipping over helicopter seeds and dropped needles, reminders that autumn is already chasing summer.

At the bottom of the hill she swerves and slips into The Grove. She pedals slowly now, the grassy bank of the bridge on one side and a row of semi-detached houses on the other. At the dead end of The Grove she dismounts and wheels her bike down the driveway of the very last house. It sits in the right-angled dip between the roads that cross on the railway bridge, one road climbing parallel to its front, the other along its side. The house has been waiting for her to come back, she can tell. There's something patient in the squat of it – the shuttered eyes of the sash windows, the long-suffering sag of the rusty metal gutters – a sense that there's no point in hurrying. It has sat in the same spot for more than a hundred years, rumbled by the vibrations of traffic and trains, occasionally by

events, but, apart from the hairline cracks in the plaster, remaining unmoved.

Clover dodges stacks of empty plant pots and yogurt tubs and the severed milk cartons and plastic cola bottles that will hold next year's seedlings. She unhooks the bucket and unfastens her helmet before leaning her bike against the house and feeling in the pocket of her shorts. The key is newly cut and still bright, hers because in turning twelve she has crossed an unaccountable boundary. As she unlocks the door she hears a train crawl up to the station, its wheels squealing as they slip on the curve of the tracks. She glances back over her shoulder at the grassy crook where the banks meet, at the blue railings that top the banks and the tall trees that grow beside them. Cul-de-sac – it means bottom of a bag, dead end; it means no one ever passes the house on their way to somewhere else. Dad can't decide whether this is a good or a bad thing, whether she is more or less safe because of it. She steps over the mail that he will want to sort, and locks the door behind her.

The hall walls have been scraped bare and an unfastened radiator leans against the door of the understairs cupboard. There are watermarks on the carpet beside the capped-off pipe. The stairs are littered with things Dad will move or make use of one day. Several stacks of books that were twenty pence each when the library closed last year, a pile of her old clothes he's planning to give away, a couple of motorbike helmets, a pile of free newspapers for burning with the allotment rubbish in the autumn, and six tins of Dulux, Black Satin paint from the pound shop which might come in handy. Since he bought the cheap paint he has started doing the vees when they pass the new sign on the

gate of the Jewson's, DULUX TRADE COLOURS MIXED HERE, as if he has got one over on them.

She dodges spare bicycle parts and a heap of folded dust sheets as she steps down the corridor, past the door to the lounge and into the dining room, where no one dines and Dad's things line a variety of shelves; some are free-standing, some are attached to the walls, and others are improvisations – slices of MDF and, in one instance, an old door, balanced on empty baby formula tins.

The kitchen leads straight off the dining room. She puts the carrier bag of vegetables on the worktop and divides the runner beans into three piles; one for the fridge and one each for Mrs Mackerel and Grandad. She adds two onions to each pile, but she keeps the carrots – they aren't worth sharing. There's a tiger loaf in the bread bin. She cuts a doorstep slice, slathers it in Biscoff spread and makes a cup of tea, one sugar – a big one since Dad's not looking, and she doesn't bother with a plate, either. She carries the tea and bread back through the dining room and into the lounge, where she settles on the leather-look PVC recliner that fell off the back of Colin's van. By the time she has finished the bread and tea, the backs of her legs are stuck to the chair, and as she attempts to unpeel herself the temperamental mechanism activates and the footrest bursts open. She clammers off and slams the footrest back until it locks.

Now it's time.

She climbs the stairs, careful not to trip on the books, clothes and newspapers. Hers is the front bedroom, the biggest of the three. Its sash windows are level with the top of the bank, and the traffic on the bridge – cars, buses

and lorries – is visible between the trees and through gaps in the railings. There's plenty of space here, room for lots of stuff. A skateboard she doesn't ride, a guitar she can't play, a record player Dad is going to fix. Several shelves of children's books, mainly library rejects from the Bargain Bookcase Dad hadn't been able to resist over the years – 'You might read these, one day.' Her knitting: the five-foot Doctor Who scarf she worked on with Mrs Mackerel last summer and the beginning of the blue and white football scarf she hopes to complete this summer, for Dad. A novelty beanbag shaped like a pair of lips, Dad's music CDs from the nineties, her wardrobe and dozens of soft toys. She flips the lid of the old-fashioned school desk Colin was supposed to take to the tip, and grabs her new notebook and a black biro. The blue gloves are hiding under the bed. She kneels on the floor and feels for them, face pressed against the side of the mattress.

Somewhere between here and Liverpool, Dad is driving his bus, window open, right arm resting in the sunlight. Next door, Mrs Mackerel will be napping in her conservatory. Clover remembers other holidays, sitting in that greenhouse of a room, waiting for the sand of six weeks to pass through the hourglass of summer as Mrs Mackerel relaxed in her wicker chair and fell asleep mid-sentence, head back, possibly dead, until the breath began whistling out of her nose.

Her fingers brush polythene. There. She pulls the gloves out from under the bed. They are the kind you wear if you're putting diesel in your car. She stands and waits a little longer, extending the moment. Three happy things: the sunshine, the Biscoff on her bread and *this*, this

waiting for what comes next – she can't tell Dad, she'll have to find something else to say, but, oh, *this!*

When it feels like bedtime on Christmas Eve and she is fizzing with anticipation, she slips her hands into the blue gloves and, clasping the notebook and pen, steps out on to the landing.

Museums

Museums I have visited (in alphabetical order)

Botanic Gardens Museum – with Dad, before it closed, every time we went to the park.

International Slavery Museum – with school.

Lawnmower Museum – with Grandad: 'Very informative. Let's give them a five-star review.'

Merseyside Maritime Museum – with school.

Museum of Liverpool – with Dad after doing some Christmas shopping at Liverpool One.

National Football Museum – last summer with Colin: 'Fit men in shorts, Clo, what's not to like?'

World Museum – with Dad, Kelly and the boys. There's a giant spider on the ceiling. Yikes!

My top three museums

Botanic Gardens Museum

They had a 1,500-year-old canoe, a shrimping cart and a big collection of stuffed animals. There was an ice-cream shop next door. The council closed it to save money.

World Museum

Good, despite the giant spider. There's an aquarium and there are drawers of moths and butterflies and beautiful rocks. Upstairs, there's a planetarium.

Merseyside Maritime Museum

A museum about the sea that's right next to the docks, literally. I liked 'Titanic and Liverpool – the Untold Story'. It's where I got the idea.