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THE CLOCKS IN THIS HOUSE ALL TELL DIFFERENT TIMES

Written by Xan Brooks

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XAN BROOKS

THE CLOCKS IN THIS HOUSE ALL TELL DIFFERENT TIMES

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THE CLOCKS IN THIS HOUSE ALL TELL DIFFERENT TIMES

THE FOREST

I

SUNDAY EVENING, AFTER tea, she travels out of town and through the woods to visit with the funny men. According to Nan, the trip has only just been arranged, which means there is not a moment to waste. Chop-chop, shake a leg and save your questions for later. Her grandparents are like that, they can rarely be doing with questions. Whether it's a treat or a chore, they want everything done right away. At least Nan can be nice. Grandad is the worst. When Grandad says jump, you only ask him how high.

It's obviously an honour, being invited to the woods. That much is plain even when nothing else is. She can tell by the painstaking way that Nan plaits her hair and by the sight of the floral-print dress from the camphor-wood chest.

"There now, you'll suffice. I dare say I've seen worse."

"You've seen worse every Friday night in the taproom."

The old woman laughs shortly. "Indeed I have," she says. "Some of those who come in, we ought to be putting straw down."

At first Lucy had hoped she might go to the woods in a painted charabanc, like the one they took up to Frinton-on-Sea, with parents and offspring lined up on wooden benches, everyone singing and passing around sandwiches. Instead the journeys are made inside Coach's rusting, decommissioned old Maudslay, which she quickly decides is just as good. She grows to love the retired army truck – its pitch and its rattle;

its constant clanging vibrations. She can sit in the back and watch the streets scooting by, or lie full-length to observe summer clouds overhead. The truck bed contains grit, soil and straw. But if her grandmother worries about the floral-print dress getting dirty, it seems she's much too kind to complain.

On the landing, in the dark. Hours beyond her regular bedtime. "Oh look, here she is, just when I was starting to worry. Did you behave yourself?"

"Yes thanks, Nan. They were all very nice."

"Well then, there we are." Nan's head bobs in relief. "What a nice thing to happen. What a stroke of good fortune." Behind the door at their backs, her grandfather is snoring.

The first visit is apparently deemed to have been a success because Lucy is invited again on the following Sunday – then again and again on the Sundays after that, through June and July and deep into August. After a spell she takes her inclusion for granted and clambers up eagerly to join Winifred, Edith and John. As befits her junior status, she is always the last to be gathered and the first to be dropped, but once on the road the children become equals. The girl feels happy, exalted; one of a band of unsecured bodies in the back of the truck.

The skies are clear and the air is warm. They ride out in daylight and are brought home after dark. She sees the squirt and spatter of stars, which the city keeps hidden. She can make out the Plough and Orion's Belt, too, but the rest of the spread is a mystery to her, like hieroglyphics from the time before Christ, or the Russian alphabet with its upside-down letters. Each star is a sun and each sun, Lucy thinks, must therefore be surrounded by invisible planets in perpetual rotation. Exactly how many stars can she see from her berth in Coach's

truck? Why, surely hundreds and hundreds and then a few hundred more. Looking at the stars, she feels impossibly small.

Winifred stirs, half-asleep at her side. "What were you saying again?"

"The stars. Up there. There are too many stars."

"What rubbish. You say silly things, Luce. It's not us that are small, it's the stars. I could reach out my hand and pick a thousand like daisies."

"Do it," says Edith. "Reach out and pick Lucy a big bunch of stars."

Galaxies joggle and reel above their heads. They only begin to fade out when the truck rolls under the street lamps of the city.

"My mum and dad might be there on one of those stars."

Winifred cackles. "Your old man's in the ground, don't get fancy ideas. Probably right next to mine. Probably right next to Edith's and John's, come to that."

"Her mum might be though," Edith allows, sleepily.

More often than not she is home by midnight. She carries a key in her sock and lets herself in to find the public bar empty and the cigarette haze hanging and the Labrador dozing on the floor. Her grandmother has retired for the night, although she keeps half an ear open to ensure all is well. The girl brushes her teeth and climbs the stairs. She douses the landing light and gropes to locate her bed in the eaves. Sleep steals quickly upon her and it is a good sleep, deep and replenishing, the kind that only innocent children are permitted to have. All the same, these late nights take a toll. No matter how deeply she sleeps, she falls into Monday feeling utterly spent.

On her first trip to the forest, Lucy had imagined the funny

men as something like a circus troupe, or a band of wild gypsies, given to dancing and tricks. But that isn't it; they are not that way at all. What they remind her of more than anything are her cousin Jo's dolls, which had been picked up second-hand or passed down from her mother. The dolls were delightful but each one had seen better days. You could play with them quite roughly because they'd all been broken before.

Coach heaves his truck off the main road and rides it up Turpentine Lane. Then he turns off the lane onto a lane that's smaller still, almost a track, with a long line of grass sprouting up its middle. Finally, after a jolting, bone-shaking five minutes of this, the vehicle veers to its left and completes the journey on a narrow bridleway, its steel sides scratched by brambles, its belly scraping the uneven ground. Lucy barks her knee and bites down on her tongue. When she clings on to the side, twigs stab at her hands.

The truck lurches to a halt. The birds are all singing. They have come to rest in a wide woodland clearing, roughly the size of a football pitch, which ends abruptly against a hard line of trees. "Here we are, bang on time. Here's my lorry-load of little helpers." For an instant, still getting her bearings, she assumes Coach is shouting behind him to the passengers in the bed. Then she realises that he is calling out to the funny men.

The funny men are a curious bunch. Nothing could have prepared her. She wants to stare but she doesn't mean to be rude, except that maybe staring is expected because what else can you do? The world is home to outlandish creatures. But she has never seen men as outlandish as these.

Coach steps out of the cab to help her climb down. Then he gives the girl's shoulder a squeeze and tips her a wink so

swift and conspiratorial it all but passes her by. “Tonight we’re extra blessed because we have ourselves a brand new helper. Her name’s Lucy Marsh and I can vouch for her manners. So please be sure to mind your Ps and Qs. We’ll have us no blue talk tonight.”

She turns to face them but it is all too much. They are too fabulous; she cannot hold her gaze steady. Is that a red-checked tablecloth laid out on the grass? A forest picnic has been run up in readiness. They have brought biscuits and cake and what appears to be a trifle inside a glass bowl. The girl had not reckoned on food but now she’s seen it her stomach is growling. Still staring at the trifle, she says, “Hello, pleased to meet you. My name’s Lucy Marsh. Pleased to meet you. Glad to make your acquaintance.”

“Charmed and delighted,” replies the man in the copper mask.

The funny men have each been named for Dorothy’s companions in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Either that or Dorothy’s companions have been named after them. When they emerge from the shade, she can study them more closely. She sees the bedraggled Scarecrow, who possesses a tanned, tangled head, and the hearty Tin Woodman with his immobile copper face. She catches sight of the handsome Cowardly Lion, who fears human contact and appears to trust only Fred. And sat bright-eyed among them is Toto the dwarf, who is not truly a dwarf but is simply missing both legs. Toto has enthroned himself in a wheeled wicker chair. He is the king of the group, the gathering’s grandstanding leader. Even Coach, it seems, is prepared to bend at the knee when the dwarf requires attention.

“Wotcha, cocks,” Toto says.

Edith isn't shy, she has been out here before. "Is that trifle in the bowl?"

The Tin Woodman says, "It is indeed. Made specially for you."

"I was going to eat it," says Toto. "You're very lucky I didn't."

Seen on a map, Epping Forest is not very large and quite close at hand. And yet each of these bouncing, clanging trips is like a journey back to the distant past. The truck pulls out from the kerb and trundles for a spell through the modern world of Edmonton, with its surging traffic of motorbikes and automobiles and horses and trams. These are the streets that the girl has lived on for years. They pass the twin-gabled school she will be departing soon. Over there is the park where she fell and chipped a tooth.

But with every passing mile, the world regresses, grows younger. Coach's truck runs out of her neighbourhood and into an industrial fringe of corroded factories, railway sidings and enormous brick warehouses. This is the landscape from a future that has already been and gone.

London slides away beneath the Maudslay's tyres. It protests its departure with a ringing percussion and is suddenly behind them: the children sit up in the bed and watch the city recede. Then here come the suburbs, which are still under construction, so that the buildings sit rude and raw on strips of freshly-laid turf. The suburbs are new but they have been designed to look old; the houses whitewashed and timbered in antique Tudor style. The suburbs annoy her. They make no sense at all.

Go faster. Coach stamps the pedal, defying the speed limit

because who's going to stop him? Out here the traffic turns lighter; the land is practically rural. At intervals Coach honks his horn and swerves to overtake a horse-and-cart, and when this occurs, the horse flinches and the farmer braces his shoulders as though anticipating a blow. The children wave merrily as the truck thunders by. But only once in all of their visits does a farmer wave back, at which point they are so astounded they don't know how to respond. Their hands drop in unison and they gawp at him like idiots.

The people out here lead primitive lives. Coach ploughs past tumbledown cottages, Norman churches blotchy with lichen, and overgrown cemeteries filled with drunken headstones. Now faster, still faster. The engine is screaming, the day draws to an end and the towering trees come crowding in all around. Then finally, with a grind of gears and a left-turn so violent it feels more akin to a leap, they leave civilisation and enter the fantastical forest, where anything can happen.

And maybe this, beyond obedience and politeness, is the real reason she goes. Maybe this, were she ever called upon to explain her actions, would be her chief line of defence. Your honour, she would say, I went back because the forest is fantastic, which is another way of saying that anything can happen. This is why she climbs into the truck every Sunday. And this is why, as long as she lives, she will never completely regret her trips to the forest, in spite of the trouble they cause and the horrors that follow. Try as she might, she will never forget the thrill that she feels on turning off Turpentine Lane and into the trees.

The forest is ancient. It exists outside time. It sprang up when the planet was freshly cooked and still cooling. It remains, even today, a place of possibilities. Under the trees it

is easy to believe that the deer might talk and that owls might fly backwards and that an ordinary fourteen-year-old girl – the kind of girl people rarely pay much attention to – could sit down on the grass and picnic among beasts. She might shake hands with a ghost or dance alongside a lion or spoon trifle into the mouth of a storybook dwarf.

Toto is as uncoordinated as a baby. His hands have a palsy. The condensed milk and tinned fruit have got all over his front and it doesn't help that he is laughing so hard. Coach claims that if John eats any more trifle he'll wind up looking like trifle and this has reminded Toto of a little tree up the path that is the spitting-image of Edith; how none of them could believe it the first time they saw it. The Tin Man says Toto wants his eyes tested, the tree looks like a tree, same as all the rest. But the dwarf is adamant. He insists that it's Edith in profile, the resemblance is uncanny. The new girl, he adds, will vouch for him as an expert witness. "What did you say your name was again?"

"Lucy Marsh, sir."

"Lucy Marsh, so it is. One way to settle this. Come and have a look for yourself."

"Toto, for God's sake, give it a rest."

Edith rolls her eyes. "Lucy, I've seen it. It's really doesn't look a bit like me." And now everybody appears to be at least laughing a little.

"Nothing else for it, I'm going to show you this tree." The glass bowl has been emptied but the dwarf does not mind. He peers at the girl and his smile is lovely, like the last ray of daylight. It shows how his face would have looked before it was scarred, before anything happened. He says, "Miss Marsh, come along, our adventure together starts here."

2

GIVE HIM HALF a chance and Grandad will tell his favourite story again – about the mighty old Griffin that first flourished then failed on the western side of Ermine Street. What a sight it once was and just look at it now: its cream trim all blistered and its net curtains gone yellow. Then again the whole street is failing, so there's nobody to see it, aside from the other stragglers who are all failing too. Grandad says it's the council's fault: the council picked up a pen and caused all of this ruin. They should have brought in the caterpillars and put us out of our misery. Why not flatten the buildings while you're about it? No point starting a job if you're going to leave it half-done.

The tragedy is that it was a decent business, the Griffin, or he would never have said yes to the lease in the first place. The pub was well placed on a thoroughfare, providing for merchants, travellers and local tradesmen. There was a long stone trough where a man could water his horses, and a cobbled yard with stalls to board them. Upstairs were arranged six good guest rooms, and guess how many were occupied on a Friday night before market and then have a guess at the number filled on a Friday night now. The saloon bar used to take restaurant orders but there's no call for that anymore; he laid the cook off last year and has the girl work the taps for whoever drops in. The passing trade has gone trading elsewhere. Were it not for the drunks he would have no custom at all.

A curse on the council and its so-called arterial road. Because what would you call Ermine Street if not an arterial road? It earned itself the title before the title existed. You can't invent a new classification and say this one but not that. You don't pin a map on a board and start redrawing London. These are the arguments she hears again and again. Sat at the table, he plays pat-a-cake with his hands, constructing a tower that never extends beyond two floors. He blames the council. He blames the brewery. He blames the licensing hours. He blames the war and the Spanish flu and never you mind that the war and the flu are now several years in the past. He says that when so many have died it rips the heart from a country. "If it weren't for the drunks we'd have no custom at all."

When she first arrived, clutching her brother's hand, their worldly goods crushed inside two packing cases, the place had struck her as splendid. It no longer strikes her as anything much. The Griffin is too massive to manage on a skeleton staff. The cornices fill with cobwebs that cannot be reached without fetching the ladder. The linoleum is so greasy that the squares attach to the sole of a shoe. A plane of glass that was shattered has been replaced with plywood. The public toilets are so bad even the drunks will not use them.

The thought comes eventually that Ermine Street has been dammed. Not damned like a sinner but dammed like a stream. In diverting the traffic, the council dropped the gate and cut off the supply. See how swiftly the riverbed dries. Observe the mounting panic of its stranded inhabitants: the shoppers that hop here and there in a frantic search for cool puddles; the businesses gulping and flapping on either side of the road.

The small tradesmen might just endure if they can keep their overheads low. However hard the times, people still need

bread and milk, or cheap cuts from the butcher, or even a second-hand dining set from Mick's Bric-a-Brac. But the Griffin, that colossus, is too big to survive. It is smothered by rental demands and the recent hikes in excise duty. It requires a deep, steady flow to account for its bulk and its costs. It will be the first to go down. The butcher knows it and old Mick knows it and Grandad knows that they know, which makes his temper worse.

Poor Ermine Street. It does not feel very splendid. The place has grown sad. Weekday mornings at eight, a bent old man leads his blind shire horse past the pub, headed out of town. Late afternoons, the pair pass by the opposite way. Every morning she spies them, Lucy fears that the man is taking his horse to be slaughtered and rendered for glue and her breath hitches with relief when she sees it brought back.

It turns out her grandfather has also noticed this ritual. He says, "One day, mark my words, Dobbin's not coming home."

But listen. That sound outside the window is the world going by. It moves at speed, with a rattle and rumble. It spatters the hem of the pedestrian's skirt. Away in the world it's 1923, very nearly midsummer. At her scratched and stained school desk, the girl hears that the British Empire has never been greater. It grows by the day, it covers half the globe, and this is undeniably good news: it only goes to show that all things are possible. At large in the saloon bar, she thrills to newspaper reports of dance crazes and labour disputes and Bolshevik revolution and fabulous discoveries inside the tomb of a pharaoh. She reads about the angry, unwashed rabble that threw tomatoes at King George. His Majesty was not used to such treatment. He did not know where to turn, he looked completely aghast. She reads of a pilot who flew across the

Irish Sea and of another, more incredibly still, who flew clear over the United States and did not put his wheels down until he could see the Pacific. And she concludes that her grandfather is wrong, that it is not true what he says; that the world is expanding. Everywhere you look, people are being asked to go further, to delve deeper and to plant British flags in far-flung fields. More than anything, she longs for adventures of her own. She hopes that one day she might visit the sky in a plane.

Outside it's bright, it's modern times. The war and the flu are several years in the past and good riddance to both, because the world has moved on. It is a time of fresh starts and clean slates and unblemished sheets of paper. Pin them on a wall and set about redrawing the nation. A man can map out the future using Indian ink.

The saloon door is heavy. The youth has to lean hard with his shoulder until it abruptly swings out and spills him unceremoniously inside.

"We're not open yet and I can't serve you anyway. So it doesn't even matter that we're not open."

"Why not?"

"You know very well why not," Lucy says. "Unless you've had a few extra birthdays you haven't told me about."

She knows Brinley Roberts from her classroom at St Stephen's and allows that he ranks among the least objectionable boys there. He's as lean as a greyhound, with an oversized Adam's apple and a preternaturally deep voice which seems to startle him more than anyone. Ostensibly he visits the Griffin in the hope of obtaining ale and cigarettes, although Lucy has started to wonder whether this is merely a ruse. More likely, Brinley comes in search of human company. Specifically, she thinks, he wants to see her.

The boy arranges himself at a table and proceeds to excavate his fingernails. “Why weren’t you in school today?”

“Working, wasn’t I?”

He says, “Doesn’t look like much work. Staring out of the window.”

“Well, did I miss anything special? At school, I mean.”

“No,” Brinley sighs. “I can’t say you did.”

In a moment she will relent and let him purchase a stout or a Porter, and then this pale, gawky youth will feel impossibly accomplished and manly. But for the time being she remains at the window, vaguely engaged with wiping out ashtrays yet with her eyes constantly trained on the bright street beyond. She saw the shire horse set out, but it is late getting back from wherever it goes.

“The Magna Carta.”

“How’s that?”

“The Magna Carta,” says Brinley. “That’s what you’ve been missing when you steer clear of school.”

She stands at the glass and watches Ermine Street. She fears for the horse and she hopes it still lives. She knows she won’t settle until she sees it go by.