

Shelf Life.

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May **1949**

If she closes her eyes she can see the front of the book shop clearly:

The building is beautiful blood red brick with stately pillars rising from the pavement to touch the edge of the sky. It has giant plate glass windows that at Christmas are dressed with piles of books laced up with red, green and gold bows beneath loops of ivy and spruce. The hand painted sign above the door is the emerald green of her favourite Sunday shoes. The door at its mouth sits on large brass hinges. It is so heavy that she needs to lean the whole weight of her shoulder against it to ease it open.

Briefly her fingers touch his. They step on to the red tongue of carpet at the entrance and are swallowed inside. He blushes and pulls his hand away. She feels crushed and elated. It is a meaningless thing that means so much.

They are teenagers with heads stuffed full of silly adventure. In the shop there is a sombre, studious calm. It takes willpower not to laugh out loud. Mannequins bow their heads deep in the creases of open books, fingers slide and ponder along the edges of spines. They stroke and massage leather and paper. Their expressions are knowing and proud. The couple slip like silent shadows along the edges of the bookshop walls. They curl and fold along the trim of shelves and disappear unheeded into 'Foreign Worlds'. They sit on the floor with their chins to their knees and thumb through annuals full of amazing pictures of glaciers and mountains, deserts and seas.

Flapping hands and hissed threats send the boy and girl running from the shop. They gasp for breath and steady themselves against the iron railings that trim the finely manicured town square. A light May day drizzle dampens the air and they find cover

beneath a rowan tree. He hands her a daisy head and she picks it apart. He takes a pen from one pocket and a book from the other. It is a slim paperback with orange bands top and bottom and a simple black and white woodcut illustration in its middle. 'Just borrowed it,' he says in response to her wide questioning eyes. She looks urgently about them, but nobody sees the young couple beneath the arms of the tree. He opens the cover of the book and for a moment considers the naked white page. At last he slowly writes on the waxy paper. He hands her the book and shows her what he has written.

They chase the double-decker heading north out of town and scramble on board just as it makes to pull away. The conductor is lost in deliberation about a return fare. He has broad black shoulders dusted with flakes of white skin like talcum powder. His fat hands twist the handle of his clipper and he thrusts little pink tickets into willing palms. The couple scurry up the stairs and crouch near the back of the bus. They can hear the click-clunk of his clipper getting closer. They hold their breath but it is not enough. The conductor points a stubby leather gloved finger in their direction. They spring to their feet and sidestep his windmill arms. Holding hands they leap like lovers from a cliff edge onto the pavement and in a laughing ball of arms and legs they watch as the bus grows smaller and smaller, the conductor's voice a tiny squeak on the wind. They have a long walk ahead, but they also have all the time in the world.

She notices the book has slipped from her pocket. The conductor picks the book up, gives the cover a brief glance and slips it inside the folds of his uniform.

February **1950**

The conductor's wife doesn't read. She likes the comfort of what she knows, not what others think. She lives in the here and now. She takes the book from the sideboard draw where it has gestated for the past nine months and hands it to her sister. She is the dreamer. She might make use of it, she scoffs. The conductor's wife's sister slips it into her bag absent-mildly. It doesn't look like her kind of thing. She likes romance and adventure and stories that take her somewhere she's never been, with people she'll never meet. She is in no rush to return home. Home is a humourless black hole of grey stone and stale air. She carefully turns the key in the front door. Her fingers move with the slight of a clockmaker. She bites her lip and the lock slides back. She pushes the door and holds her breath as she awakens its hinges. They are tired and worn and they screech in protest. She pauses and considers a retreat. But it is too late: The first punch catches the edge of her jaw. The second the side of her temple. Her head is full of glue and light. There is sticky liquid flowing from her lip. She can taste the iron. She falls against the door jamb, begging and contrite. But he's not interested in the why, just the what and he sends a swift metal-clad toe to her ribs that sends her and her bag skittering across the floor. The bag vomits bread, eggs, apples and the book. The book is like a pebble on the stone floor and slips beneath the pine settle against the wall.

December **1961**

The landlord shrugs his shoulders with indifference. He waves at the contents of the small terraced house. 'Matchwood as far as I can see. Do as you please.' The new tenants strip it to plaster and wood. It takes an age to clear the air of disappointment. The bonfire in the yard spits ember droplets all through the night and in the morning the couple and their two young sons drink milk-less tea next to the hot ashes. The settle is made of cheap hardboard and pine and splinters apart with a single kick. The book, they find beneath it, is given a cursory glance and slipped anonymously onto the thinly stocked bookshelf beside the fireplace, its spine exposed for the first time in years.

April **1964**

The youngest of the sons is the inquisitive one in the family. He digests books with the bug-eyed greed of a glutton: He reads stories of mystery and adventure and the shelf above his bed bends to the weight of Tolkien, Lewis and Carroll. Even some Orwell. When he's finished those, he scours the house for more. The book finds its way into his nighttime world, illuminated by Ever Ready torch under tented blankets. The diffused light creates a movie screen on the far wall and the branches of the tree by his window dance finger puppets of golems and ghouls across the wallpaper, filling his real world just as he fills his imaginary one. The book lies amongst a dozen others and is soon lost to the ephemera under his bed. He sits in his room and lets his childish cotton-wool world unravel and the time pass; his parents argue, his father leaves, they divorce, a strange man warms his mother's bed, a baby fills the house with screams. He reads college pamphlets, packs a bag of clothes, three boxes of books and travels as far from the house as he can.

August **1967**

The girl rolls on to her hip and carefully places her chin in her hand. Her skin is speckled with brown flecks like the top of a chocolate drink. She watches him write at his desk by the small crescent of a green angle poise lamp. It's the intensity that she loves, but it's the intensity that she knows will eventually drive them apart. She pulls the bedding around her and picks up the slim book on the table beside the bed. It has a yellow tinge to the edge of the pages. It makes a satisfying crack as she opens it wide, almost splitting it in two as she exposes its brittle cream stitching. Page 117: the first leaves of fall began to line the pathway to the house, Donald stepped... She flicks back and forth through the pages. He carries on writing. She stops at the inside cover and studies the hand written inscription. She feels the air stolen from her for a moment. She thinks it's the most beautiful thing she has ever read. 'This is so... wonderful,' she announces aloud. He doesn't hear her and she looks down and reads the words again. Wonderful. She will stay with him until the end of the summer term, then, after that,

there will be no reason for them to stay together: Guilt would drag him home, she would travel. She starts to dress. 'Can I keep this?' She says, slipping the book into the waistband of her jeans without waiting for his reply. He has plenty of books, he won't miss this one. She's still naked from the waist up but he doesn't notice. Maybe they wouldn't even last that long.

November 1971

When the tramp she meets in Los Angeles asks her why she carries the book with her all the time she's proud of her reply; 'It reminds me love exists.' The tramp takes a moment to gather his reply. He retches a ball of phlegm from deep in his diaphragm and spits it full in her face. 'Righteous bitch' he says. She won't answer his baiting. She lays the bread and soup she has brought by his feet. He scrapes his perfectly trimmed nails through the dirty coarse hairs on his face. Their cleanliness amazes her. He stares right into her soul and she turns away to hide the gathering tears.

March **1972**

The man finishes what he is doing to her, rolls off and pulls on his pants. He stands with his hands on the window sill and, with the window open, drags on one of her Marlboro Lights. She steps from the bed, gathers her clothes and leaves without a word. He watches her from the window as she walks down the tenement steps and crosses the road. 'You've a shit taste in smokes,' he yells, but she doesn't reward him with a turn of the head. It has begun to rain for the first time in weeks and the droplets make a pointillist abstract on the road. She pulls the bag full of all her worldly belongings closer to her chest and stumbles into a jog. The awning above a flower shop affords momentary cover and she leans against the glass. She recognises the bag of cloth and bones at her feet. It is a level playing field now, they are both without homes. She didn't notice his eyes before, they are piercing pinpricks of opal blue burning from within the dirty marked leather of his skin. She feels them carefully study her damp clothes and drenched hair. The little make up she is wearing she can feel start to run. The sky darkens above them. She puts her hand in the bag, pulls out the book and hands it to the tramp. 'I think you might make more use of this, than me,' she says.

December **1986**

The coroner puts the dead man's sparse effects into a shoebox: a leather belt, a crucifix, two dollar notes and the book. He places it on the counter in front of the hostel warden. There are a dozen unlabelled boxes on the shelves behind him. The coroner had to peel the dead man's locked fingers from the cover of the book. He noted, with interest, that the nails were uncommonly tidy for a vagrant. He held the rigid hand and pondered mortality for the first time in years. The hostel warden looks lost and the coroner takes a moment to stay with him. Who'd have thought the tramp would be missed. It appears he has become a hero to the homeless seeking solace at the hostel. Seems he

has become a beacon of hope with his outlandish claims of love and stories of angels giving signs. The coroner shakes the warden's hand. It won't be long before they see each other again. The warden picks up the shoebox. These are the dark moments of his job: If life is measured by possessions, then another worthless soul has just passed by. But he knows that can't be right, that's not how he feels. The warden removes the book from the shoebox and places it with the other dollar books on a table outside the hostel. He rattles the tin hanging by its thread; nothing. In the morning the book has gone and the tin gives the distinctive rattle of a single coin. It lifts his heart.

February **1987**

As one life leaves another prepares to arrive. Three blocks away from the hostel the small apartment on the third floor is becoming fuller by the day. He smiles at the way she has lined the photo frames in order of size on the mantelpiece and collected books with matching spines to fill the shelves. 'The baby's not going to care - at least not for the first fifteen years.' She chooses not to answer him but shuffles him from one end of the sofa to the other as she straightens the throw. He puts his arms about her and pulls her to him. They fall in a bundle on the carpet until she sits up suddenly and holds her belly. His face crumbles, she laughs and swipes him with a glancing blow from one of the many cushions scattered around the room. He will wait another day to tell her his visa application has been rejected for a second time.

April **1987**

It's not difficult to make a three foot square packing crate disappear if you know how to. With Heathrow's dancing trolleys and helter-skelter conveyor belts its easy for luggage to be accidentally directed along the wrong passageway. In the back of a white transit the three young baggage handlers huddle over the crate. It's not the riches they'd hoped, but there are sellable items in there, at least. That is the downside of taking the least conspicuous cargo; a family's relocation haulage. Eight crates counted on, seven counted off. Take it up with the LAX handlers. Anyway, this is the reason insurance companies ply their nefarious trade. With unspoken haste they deal the goods between them. They fill a single black bin bag each with a kettle, tape deck, video cassettes, books and picture frames. The youngest of the three, a slight lad with short butchered hair and combat trousers knows the pecking order demands he gets the items of least value. He rattles with nerves. He hides his gains beneath the panelling at the foot of his wardrobe, away from his mother's scavenging gaze. He keeps the bag hidden for a week, but the worry chews at him all night and day and he resolves to dump the lot in the canal. His mother is at the foot of the stairs. She scowls at the bag he ridiculously tries to hide behind his legs. He might be taller than her but she's a formidable width and, regardless, the hallway is barely wide enough to turn around in. She wraps her arms about him like she hasn't done for years. They both pull at the bag as though it's a christmas cracker until it splits and the contents scatter across

the hallway carpet. His mother looks at the paraphernalia at their feet. He doesn't have to say a word, he's his father's son for sure. She sits at the kitchen table. If disappointment is a weight she will never be able to lift herself from her chair again. In the morning he is gone. She deals the books out on the table. They all have similar orange and white covers. She picks the polish on her nails and flakes of pink fleck her skirt. She's surprised at the sudden sense of relief that smothers her. She puts the books in a box and places it on the small shelf under the stairs next to the dust pan and brush and shoe polish.

March **1998**

She died hoping and dreading that she might see her son again. By the time he did return it was too late for reconciliation; she lay face up in a silk-lined wooden box, her skin the colour of writing paper. He loads up the van with anything he can sell from the house. Under the stairs he finds a box of books. They smell of dust and disappointment. He nearly leaves them at peace, but some vague memory teases him. He drops to his knees and pulls the box from its hiding place. For the first time in a long time he feels guilt. He picks a book from the top of the pile and studies its curled edges. He can't remember the last time he held a book in his hands. Probably as a child, he thinks: In this house. In that bedroom. The dark. His father. Sobbing. Mother's little fibber. Raping her home of its belongings feels like retribution. He throws the book into his rucksack and places the box back under the stairs.

June **1998**

A book is as good a surface as any for preparing an eight ball of crack. Out of respect he lays it face down. The back cover is smeared with stains. His eyes are circles of red. He spends his days on the floor counting the weeping patches of damp that map the ceiling above his head. He can make out India, the Americas and a fat Ireland. In a parallel life he could have used his fleet-footed skills to roam the world making money and screwing. A beach-house, a model girlfriend, a sixty foot yacht. He rues life's lottery with a snort. A couple are throwing things at each other beyond the plasterboard wall.

August **2001**

She scratches the scum from the window to let a small angle of light fight its way into the room. The cleaner tears the curtains from their rail. They, and whoever once slept in this room, are beyond salvation. The material bunches in a dirty blue pile at her feet, damp with mildew and smoke. The room has none of the considered charm of a home. The bed, for what it's worth, sits in the centre of the room covered in discarded clothes and food boxes. The sheets are stained and stiff like card. A single chair faces the wall, a spindle missing from its back. In the corner is a basin. The taps are sealed rigid with dirt, a tide line of old milk and scum welds hair to the bowl. The floor is a

patchwork of carpet, floorboard, panelling and holes. It's hard to tell whether a single colour once owned the walls. The cleaner pours bleach into a red plastic bucket, the acrid stench tickling her throat. There are only a few possessions; a battery radio, a side lamp without a bulb, some old jeans, split trainers, and quite unexpectedly, a thin paperback book. She peels it from the windowsill where it leaves a layer of print from the cover stuck to the paintwork. She flicks through the pages and they crisp to her touch. The text is incomprehensible to her and she regrets not having spent more time on the alien language. Inside the cover she notices the handwritten note. The lettering is full of big, passionate loops and she thinks it looks beautiful. Her boyfriend might be able to read it. She hands him the book across the cafe table where they meet. He indulges her by holding it with a great Shakespearian flourish in his right hand and reading from it aloud. There are titters amongst the other customers. She blushes and dips her eyes to the melamine check. She thinks the words are romantic and wishes her boyfriend really meant them. She tells him to keep it with him always; the words, she says, say everything she wants. He's more taken with the audience that share his amused frown. He shakes his head and puts the book in his jacket pocket.

January **2002**

He places the book in the glove compartment of his taxi. It's out of view and out of mind. He turns the car's ignition off and checks the mirror. There is barely a dusting of light beneath the street lamp. The girl beside him is all thighs and lipstick. Her hands are everywhere. So he lets her roam. Guilt is relative, he justifies, and anyway if pushed he could demonstrate clearly how his girlfriend's smothering ways have made her complicit in his actions. The girl wriggles to raise her skirt. Her legs, he sees for the first time, are mottled like the surface of cottage cheese.

November **2007**

After a dry, warm autumn the dark nights have swept in unnoticed. There is snow in the air and the scrapyards are charmless workplaces. There is barely time to process the cars that come in through the gates in the few daylight hours. It is standard practice to scour the vehicles of their contents before they are moulded unceremoniously into four foot square cubes of metal. Money, phones, shoes, drugs, prosthetics, a decaying cat carcass in the boot. The taxi had given up £3.17 in loose change, a plastic ballpoint, several parking tickets and a book. The owner shivers, locks the cashbox, places it on the book on the desk and switches off the lights in the Portakabin. It begins to snow as he goes to lock the door. His collar is dotted with iced confetti. He holds the padlock in his palm and fumbles to insert the key. All at once he is watching his fingers go limp and the key fall from his grasp and spear the snow like a dart as though it is someone else's hand in front of him. The last feeling he would remember, if death gave such a choice, is of a great weight cracking its way through the fragile shell of his skull from above. He crumbles like a dropped string puppet. The contents of the desk - laptop,

cashbox and book - are skimmed like curd off milk into a black holdall. The next morning a dog walker finds the discarded book sprouting from a chunk of slush, blackened by exhaust fumes, by the side of the road and plucks it sodden from the snow. It amuses him to find a book discarded like this. It looks of little value; a fifty pence charity shop discard. His wife, an avid digester of anything printed might make use of it. His dog folds its knees under itself like a concertina and shits in the middle of the path.

December **2007**

Some of the pages need coercing apart. But she likes the charm of a book with a history. There's a mystery missing from the virgin pages of a new book. She starts to read the first page, but it is a little contrary for her mood and she puts it on the floor by her chair and returns to her serial crime novel.

February **2008**

She has forgotten all about it; but there it is again on the bottom shelf. In the wrong place. Her husband must have put it there. She puts it with the smaller books on the shelf above, next to a Lonely Planet Guide to The Pyramids. Whatever came of that holiday?

November **2008**

Whatever came of travelling altogether?

June **2010**

She wants to redecorate the room. So she and her husband pack everything up and days later unpack it all again. The book now sits on a shelf on the other side of the room.

January **2013**

Her chiropractor is hardly the romantic lead she imagined for a torrid affair. He claims to be unmarried. She doesn't believe him, not that it matters in the throws of a clinch that is high on guilty excitement but disappointingly low on sensual reward. He grunts to conclusion and she notices the thick black curls of hair on his fat shoulders. Her husband has smooth strong shoulders. The damage has been done and she feels her world opening up beneath her. She pushes him from the room, but his eggshell ego is shattered and he swings out at her glass cabinet of figurines, mantelpiece ornaments and book shelf. When her husband returns home she is sorting the remnants for jumble.

The book trolley has a wheel at the front that lets out a shriek every time it negotiates a corner. It's a job for new volunteers. They quickly learn to place a steadying hand on the books. Today's recruit has already chipped the hallway plaster and notched a groove in the skirting. He regrets his bravado in adding the tower of new donations he found on the reception desk. He wheels the trolley to the middle of the room where the more agile residents descend upon it like pack wolves on fresh meat. He lets them feed. He notices the lady by the window, with her chair facing the garden, hasn't moved. He pushes the trolley beside her chair. She looks up at him and he's sure recognition briefly registers on her face. It's not much of a job being a volunteer carer in an old people's home, but to him it's the most important job in the world: It means he can be with his wife all day, every day. Just as they have been since they were teenagers. He places his hand on hers and ignores the flinch. He wishes his touch might hot wire her memory and that she would say his name out loud. He chooses her a book about Egypt. They loved seeing the world together; glaciers and mountains, deserts and seas. She doesn't take it. Instead, she reaches for a slim paperback on the trolley. She holds it like it is made of porcelain and runs a finger along the orange and white bands on the cover.

If she closes her eyes she can see the front of the book shop clearly:

The building is beautiful blood red brick with stately pillars rising from the pavement to touch the edge of the sky. She opens the cover and reads the inscription. She is in the shop, in the park, on the bus. She rests one hand on the open pages of the book, the other she places on her husband's arm and smiles at him.