

# The Last of the Greenwoods

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# I

Zohra Dasgupta emerges from the narrow pathway into a field of scrubby, stunted grass and stops abruptly, staring at the two railway carriages parked (is that the right word?) at the far end. She glances down at the name on the envelope in her hand: Mr J. and Mr N. Greenwood. ‘Well,’ she says out loud. ‘The name is appropriate.’

The carriages, linked end to end on an old rusty track, are almost submerged by trees. Clearly, no one here is familiar with the concept of pruning, and the trees are spreading wildly, up, out, down, embracing the carriages with passion, wrapping them in vigorous greenery. Branches tumble on to the roofs, lean over the sides and take advantage of the light breeze to make their presence felt, tapping against the windows with a mischievous glee.

Zohra can’t identify the trees. Her parents, who arrived in England from northern India before she was born, have little knowledge of English nature. When she was growing up, their expectations were that she would become a doctor, which wouldn’t have required a familiarity with the distinguishing features of oaks, birches or horse chestnuts. Their infrequent talk of trees has been limited to mangos, banyans and the baboos that dominated the tropical, thorny forests of their childhood, and any information that could be interesting or useful to Zohra is tainted with nostalgia: laments for the sun; sighs for the parents who died in their absence; memories of the fruit and spices that they can now buy in England, but are somehow never quite as good as they were in the old country.

Zohra crosses the neglected field and approaches the railway carriages, astonished by their existence barely a mile from the

Wychington estate. In all the years she's been going up there to help with the restoration of the old railway line, these carriages have been sitting here, unknown, unseen, rotting quietly away. If only Nathan and Crispin could see them.

Zohra has always been interested in trains. It's the one topic of her parents' reminiscences that she can tolerate. She's absorbed their conversations, trying to sift fact from sentimentality, not wanting them to know that she sometimes finds them worth listening to. They talk of a land where railways drove the economy, where no one would contemplate closing a line. 'All people pour on trains in India, Zohra,' says her mother. 'Like hot bean sauce over shredded lamb. Not possible for English girls to understand. They climb on roofs, hold on outside of doors, hang from sides. They would never do such a thing here.'

'Too cold,' says her father.

'Not permitted,' says her mother.

Her father had arrived in Bromsgrove in the late seventies, a young man full of aspirations, joining his uncle and aunt who had been building up Dasgupta's Corner Shop for the previous seven years. But when all three returned to Lucknow for his wedding five years later, his uncle and aunt, defeated by the cold, wet weather of the Midlands, decided to remain in India and the newly married couple came back to take over the business.

As with all her parents' discussions about their almost mythical home, Zohra can never be certain if the situation remains the same as it was when they lived there, or if Uttar Pradesh has moved into the twenty-first century. She would like to investigate further, but it would involve the Internet, and she can't even think about that without the familiar panic rising up inside her. She can no longer see a keyboard without a hiatus in her breathing. The sound of her father clicking away in the corner fills her with nausea.

She studies the carriages in front of her. They're clearly old, but not quite falling apart. The paint, dark maroon at the bottom, cream at the top, around the windows, is blistered and

peeling, dappled green by moss, grey by mould, orange by streaks of rust that are bleeding down from the roof. In the centre of each carriage there's a nameplate, painted in large white letters, still decipherable. The left-hand one is Demeter, the right-hand one Aphrodite.

She can almost hear Crispin behind her, dancing with delight. She knows exactly what he would say: 'What's a bit of moss between friends? We can rebuild – no problem.'

And Nathan, unable to control his excitement: 'We've got to have them, we've got to have them, we've got to have them . . .'

The buffers between the two carriages are coupled with a chain and the corridors connected by an enclosed gangway. The door of the left carriage, next to the link, has been given the role of front door. There's a knocker – a large brass scroll, once grand, now dark and tarnished – screwed on just below the shuttered window, and an old railway lamp – the kind that signalmen would have once used – hanging from a nail beside the door, its glass almost completely obscured by cobwebs. There's no letter-box; no indication anywhere that either Mr J. or Mr N. Greenwood might be anticipating communication from the outside world.

All the windows along the side of the right carriage, Aphrodite, have blinds – horizontal, not all straight, and partially closed, so that someone could look out, but no one can see in. Demeter has closed curtains along its entire stretch. Zohra's mother would not approve. She spends a great deal of time and energy on curtains – perfect drape is very important to her, the only attainable Nirvana here in the middle of England, where the unreliability of British suppliers reduces curtain buying to a lottery of nail-biting uncertainty. These curtains have no drape. They're almost flat and a uniform cream, stained with grime and neglect, an exquisite match with the exterior of the carriage.

For the last twelve months, ever since she finished her training, Zohra has been driving along Long Meadow Road, often more

than once a day, entirely unaware of the existence of the railway carriages. Long Meadow Road is exactly what it claims to be. Long. How would anyone know this place existed? Maybe it was known to Zohra's predecessor, Ted, who kept the round for forty years until he had a heart attack and fell off his bike into the path of a milk float, but nothing else has ever turned up for a Mr Greenwood since Zohra took over the round. Not even junk mail – no local election manifestos, no catalogues of stair-lifts, no leaflets offering pizzas (although these tend to be hand delivered, so she doesn't actually know this), no adverts for cotton shirts. If nobody sends anything to a particular address in the country, if the house is hidden behind trees and at the end of a secret pathway, it seems that knowledge of its whereabouts will die out.

When the letter turned up yesterday at the sorting office – no postcode – she couldn't believe it was a genuine address. 'It must be a mistake,' she said, showing it to Bill, the manager. 'There aren't any railway carriages on Long Meadow Road.'

'You'd be surprised at what's hidden away round these parts,' said Bill, a large solid man with a bald head and eyes that crease easily into a smile. Now that the sorting office has to be open to the public for several hours every day to accommodate the ever-increasing number of parcels that can't be delivered and the resulting volume of complaints, he makes a good front man. Always unhurried, skilled at looking perplexed, he spends a great deal of time hunting for parcels that have gone missing, picking up anything visible on the shelves, even when it's clearly the wrong shape; opening and shutting drawers; eventually discovering them on the PO Box shelf when they should have been with the signed-for, or filed under C instead of Y. When people get angry, he just smiles. 'Might take some time,' he says. 'But I'd take it up with the senders anyway if I was you. Get a claim form from the Post Office.' For no obvious reason, he hates the staff at the Post Office and loves to complicate their lives. He's not as amiable as he looks.

‘But nothing else has ever turned up for this address,’ said Zohra.

‘Loads of people don’t do post any more,’ said Rohit, the failed student who always turns up half an hour late, looking up briefly from his frenetic sorting. ‘Cheaper online.’

‘But what about bills?’ asked Zohra. ‘Gas, electric, poll tax.’

‘Council tax,’ said Matt from the other side of the room. ‘It’s called council tax now. Poll tax brought down Thatcher. Same thing, but names matter.’ He likes to think he knows things. He does pub quizzes.

‘Online,’ said Rohit. ‘Like I said.’

‘Long Meadow Road’s definitely your round,’ said Bill accusingly, as if she was trying to avoid delivering it.

‘I never said it wasn’t,’ said Zohra. ‘But I’ve never seen any railway carriages.’

‘Check with Dougie,’ said Matt. ‘He knows everyone round these parts.’

Bill turned to glare at him. ‘Are you implying I don’t?’ ‘Come on, Dougie,’ called Rohit. ‘Time to wake up. Rise and shine. Zohra wants to know about the railway carriages.’

‘On Long Meadow Road?’ asked Dougie, finally taking an interest in the conversation. He’s an elderly man, due for retirement, who takes too long to sort and starts out on his round later than everyone else. I’m thorough, he says when challenged. (Lazy, says Bill, who doesn’t do empathy. Too confident of your impending pension.) ‘That’s the Greenwoods’ place. Last time I went there . . .’ He stopped working, sighed and scratched his head. ‘Thirty, forty years ago when I had to do Ted’s round for a while. Not like him to be off sick, but he broke his leg. Normally healthier than a marathon runner, he was. Till he dropped down dead. Never was much post for the Greenwoods – just the usual, circulars mainly. There’s two of them, brothers. One’s an accountant, works at Miller and Brownlee in town. I see him around, pass the time of day, that kind of thing. The other one, Johnny, he’s a bit of a recluse.’

‘Which side of Long Meadow?’ asked Zohra. ‘Which end?’ She drives up the road in her mind. There’s hardly anything there: hedgerows; ditches; gates leading to converted barns or directly on to fields; enormous farmhouses with generous block-paving drives and huge gardens. She knows them all. It can’t be one of them. She spends enough time outside their security gates, struggling to squeeze large packages into their neat little post-boxes, to be thoroughly familiar with every house. Sometimes she has to ring the bell and wait, knowing perfectly well there’ll be no one there except the occasional nanny if she’s lucky, so there’s time to examine the signed-for and speculate on the people behind the names. No Mr Greenwood ever features in any of these scenarios. Could The Railway Carriages be the previous name of one of these houses, a name that no one uses any more? Will she have to ring every bell, attempt to speak to every occupant (an exercise with little prospect of success) to ask if it’s them? But she knows the answer already. Mr Greenwood, J. or N., doesn’t live at any of these addresses.

‘Tennis players they were,’ said Dougie. ‘Not bad for a while, won a few matches. Me and my mates, we got it all worked out – we was going to book a box at Wimbledon, come the day, champagne, strawberries. But Nick and Johnny, they was like . . . well, they never really stuck at things. Got it from their old man – good-for-nothing, he was, couldn’t earn a decent penny to save his life. What he had he threw away on the ponies, dogs, anything that moved, as long as he could place a bet. If there was anything left over after that, he was down the pub. Don’t remember much about him, really. Died when we was kids. Bet the week’s housekeeping on a horse called First Class in the Cheltenham Gold Cup. Reckoned the link was too good to miss – trains, see – then watched him tumble at the second fence. He knew he couldn’t go home and face the missus, so he went and got drunk with his mates, usual thing. Fell into the canal. Not found till the next morning—’

‘But where exactly is it?’ interrupted Zohra. Dougie would go on forever if she didn’t stop him. It was already nearly six a.m. If



she didn't start soon, she wouldn't get home in time for a decent nap before helping her dad in the shop.

'Between Four Winds and The Woodpeckers.'

Zohra traced the lane again, walking rather than driving in her imagination, but still couldn't work it out.

Dougie resumed his sorting. 'You'll see it if you look. Best to park up in the lay-by, mind, and walk. You can't stop in the lane, nobody'd get past. Make sure the stream's at your back, then it's on your left, gap in the hedge, opposite side. Not far. Used to go there a lot once, but they stopped having us round after —'

'Okay, I'll give it a go,' said Zohra. She wasn't convinced, but she needed to get going.

'Might as well take that pile of Greenwood post in the corner,' said Bill. 'If you're going. Over by wrong addresses. Just circulars, adverts, that kind of thing.'

Zohra stared at him, exasperated.

'We gave up taking them ages ago,' said Bill. 'No letterbox. Nobody ever opened the door. We left cards, notices to collect, but they never came. Don't know how that one got through to you.' He glances at it again. 'Proper letter, I suppose. Got to do something about that, don't you?'

'So you knew where the railway carriages were all along,' said Zohra. 'Thanks a lot.'

'No,' said Bill. 'Knew the address, not the location.'

'A logical response would be nice occasionally,' said Zohra.

'I'm the most logical person I know,' said Bill. 'It's everybody else what's got the problem.'

'Well I'm not taking the junk,' said Zohra. 'You can recycle that.'

To the right of the carriages, a metal bridge crosses the tracks and disappears into dense bushes at the bottom of a steep hill that overshadows the field. Beyond the bridge, the rusty, weed-smothered track curves round a bend and out of sight, heading for a railway system from the past. Could it be connected to the

Wyckington line? She tries to create a map in her mind, link them up, but her sense of direction isn't good enough.

The track on the left of the carriages stops after a few yards, with an ancient metal barrier that looks too insubstantial to stop anything, backed up by some splitting sandbags. The sand has spilled out on to the surrounding ground, creating a bed for a mass of little white flowers, with fleshy leaves and pink stems. Clumps of plants with clusters of yellow daisies are scattered elsewhere through the grass, as if someone has thrown a packet of seeds to the wind and allowed them to settle wherever they fall. A few overgrown bushes bend and crack with the weight of neglect, supporting a handful of desiccated flowers and sad leaves.

Zohra studies the letter in her hand again. The address is handwritten, postmarked Toronto, Canada. The writing is elaborate, with curious sweeping marks cutting through each half of the *B* of Bromsgrove and an ornate treatment of the capital *G*, full of curls and swirly strokes. A bit of colour and it would resemble the opening of an ancient manuscript. This is a real letter from a real individual, not a faceless organisation. She climbs the wooden steps and reaches up. The knocker is stiff and difficult to move, so she has to use both hands to pull it up, then pushes it down hard. She can hear it echoing inside.

There's a long silence.

Dougie's got it wrong. Nobody lives here any more. Should she knock again? Maybe once more, just in case. She raises her hands, prepared for another go, when she hears something. A shuffle. The clearing of a throat? She listens intently. She hears herself breathing.

More shuffling. Some clicks, a grunt, and the door slowly starts to open outwards. Zohra jumps hurriedly down to the ground, realising that she'll be sent flying if she stays where she is. The door swings out and right back against the side of the carriage, which it hits with a bang. It rocks gently and settles. A man is standing inside, swaying slightly, peering down at Zohra

with a combination of irritation and fear on his face. He's tall, broad, perhaps a little older than Zohra's father. His wavy hair – greasy, unwashed – is a mix of grey and light brown, receding at the front, but creeping well past the collar of his red and black lumberjack shirt at the back, and his brown cords are held up over the widest part of his substantial waist by a narrow leather belt. He has a beard – shaggy and long – giving him the aura of a Maharishi or an ancient prospector for gold. His face is pale, the rims of his eyes red and the sockets dark and hollowed, as if he hasn't slept for days. He doesn't look like a tennis player – or even an ex-tennis player. But his eyes, staring at Zohra with an unnerving intensity below over-abundant eyebrows, are keen, blue and strong.

He frowns. 'Who are you?' His words are unexpectedly well-formed, clearly articulated.

Zohra holds out the letter without climbing the steps. 'Mr J. Greenwood? Or Mr N. Greenwood?' She feels she should check. She can't hand over a letter – a letter addressed by someone who cares about presentation, who has spent time crafting a miniature work of art – to an unknown person who might be a squatter.

The man grunts, but doesn't exactly acknowledge that he is a Mr Greenwood. He prepares to take the letter, looks down to examine it, then stops just before he takes it out of Zohra's hand. He freezes. An instant transformation, his whole body setting. Every part of him becomes motionless, as if he's just died and hasn't yet had time to fall over.

Zohra's arm is starting to ache. 'So are you Mr Greenwood?' she asks again, uncertain how to proceed.

The man finally moves – rigidly, like a puppet, dependent on someone else to manipulate his strings. He drops his hand. It returns to his side, still bent at the elbow, not loosening as it falls. 'Next door,' he says, in a dry, low voice.

'No,' says Zohra. 'The houses next door are Four Winds and The Woodpeckers. There are no Mr Greenwoods living in either of them.'

‘My brother,’ says the man. His voice sounds as if it lacks practice. He jerks a clumsy thumb towards the carriage on his left, Zohra’s right, the one with the blinds.

Zohra looks towards the carriage, Aphrodite, but it appears to be deserted. There’s something fascinating about the whole situation. An abandoned train, two elderly brothers living almost invisibly in separate carriages, one reclusive, the other absent, a mysterious letter from overseas – it’s hard to believe they’ve been able to live here as long as Dougie said ‘So could you give it . . .’ she begins.

The man doesn’t reply. He leans out to pull the door back.

‘Wait,’ says Zohra. ‘How do I—?’

The door slams into place and Zohra is left alone outside. She stares at the right carriage, wondering if she could try knocking on its door, but there’s no knocker, no steps, no indication that it’s still in use. What now? She can’t spend much longer here. She’ll be late for the rest of her round. People complain if you’re not regular.

But a stubborn streak refuses to let her leave. She wants to know what’s going on, she wants to deliver the letter, so she reaches up and knocks again. ‘Mr Greenwood!’ she calls. Maybe they take it in turns to answer the door. Maybe the other one will come.

Silence descends. A quick breeze rustles through the uncut grass, stirring the yellow daisies into a delicate dance. After another couple of minutes, it becomes clear that nothing is going to happen. She steps back reluctantly and surveys both carriages. She doesn’t like to give up, but what else can she do? She can’t wait forever.

She could mark the letter, ‘Addressee unknown’, and return it to the sender. But nothing is returned if it comes from abroad, so it’ll just end up in a recycling bin. She wonders if she could slip the letter under the door – at least she’s established that someone actually lives here – but a moment’s investigation makes it clear that it’s too well sealed. Maybe she could leave it outside, on the

top step where it would be seen. Or propped behind the railway light. She knows there's someone in, so she can't be accused of leaving it unattended. There's not much shelter, but it's not raining.

'Well, a postman. I haven't seen an example of your species in I don't know how long. Do you have something for me?'

Zohra swings round to confront a man approaching from the direction of the road. He's better presented than the first man, considerably slimmer, but still almost identical – the same fierce blue eyes. For a brief moment, she thinks it's the same person; that he's gone indoors and changed into this more respectable version of himself, then somehow dodged round the back to confuse her. But this edition has a shorter, neatly trimmed beard, smarter clothes and hair that's clearly been attended to by a professional. He's wearing a dark grey suit and a sober navy tie. This is unmistakably the brother.

'Ah,' he says. 'Postwoman. Should have realised that from the hair.' He sounds exactly like the other one.

'Are you Mr Greenwood?' asks Zohra.

'There are two of us,' says the man. 'I live in Aphrodite.' He points over Zohra's shoulder. 'And he lives in Demeter. Right, left.'

Zohra nods, wanting to appear in control of the situation. 'I've just met your brother,' she says.

'Really?' says the man. 'Well, good for you. Don't suppose he said much.' He almost smiles.

'He didn't stay,' says Zohra, wondering if she should smile with him. 'Out and back in a couple of seconds.'

This time the man roars with laughter. He's overreacting now, as if he's performing for an audience. Zohra holds out the letter. 'So I can leave you this?'

But the man doesn't respond and Zohra once again finds herself with her hand outstretched, unable to let go without the letter falling to the ground.

'I'm Nick, he's Johnny. Is it for me or him?'

‘It’s addressed to both of you. You could just sort it out between you.’

Nick Greenwood shakes his head. ‘I think not. We can’t sort anything out between us. We don’t talk to each other.’

‘Please take it,’ says Zohra. ‘I have to get on with my round.’

‘I suppose I’ll have to,’ says Nick after a pause, and finally removes the letter from her hand. He glances down at it, then reacts in the same way as his brother. Every trace of humour vanishes and he becomes still and rigid. A statue, alive but immobile.

Zohra waits for another few seconds in silence, embarrassed to leave him in this state, but eventually loses patience. ‘Well,’ she says. ‘Good.’ She starts to back away.

This Mr Greenwood recovers more quickly than his brother, moving slightly less awkwardly. ‘Thank you,’ he says in a voice barely above a whisper. He turns back to the carriages, still clutching the letter, climbs up the steps, yanks open the door and disappears inside. The door shuts with a bang.

Zohra stares at the closed door, worried that she could have managed the exchange better.

But her mission has been accomplished. She heads back towards the road.

## CHAPTER 2

Nick Greenwood peers through a gap in his blinds and watches the postwoman walk back across the field to the road. It's easier to watch her than to think. She stops for a moment and looks back, examining the railway carriages again. She's short and slim, almost childlike from this distance, with a cloud of black hair that reaches halfway down her back. It's tied into a ponytail, although not entirely successfully. Her head is surrounded by rebellious wisps that shift and sway as she walks, producing an impression of changeableness and unpredictability, like drifting shadows. When they were closer, he'd considered her face unremarkable, with flat cheekbones and pale scars from healed acne scattered randomly across the brown skin, but after a while he'd found his attention drawn to her large, very dark eyes. Her gaze was steady and earnest, as if she was compelling him to like her.

She turns and eases her way through the narrow, overgrown pathway back to the road, pushing away low-hanging branches with her hands, ducking to avoid an out-of-control hawthorn. He's embarrassed by her struggle, aware that it's his responsibility to clear the access properly. For decades, nature has been running riot, romping around like an unchecked child, deliriously asserting its right to roam, and he's barely noticed.

He must do something about it . . . tomorrow.

An image of his dad flashes into his memory. He's standing on a stepladder, chopping away at a towering cotoneaster, getting down occasionally to push his fork into the soil, jiggling it backwards and forwards between the tangled roots, forcing them loose, severing the smaller shoots with his secateurs and the

thicker ones with his saw, worrying away at the system until it gives in and surrenders to his will.

How ever did Ma persuade his dad to do it? He wasn't exactly a man who got on with things. It must have been important – maybe the bushes were in the path of their planned plumbing. Maybe Ma's nagging had overwhelmed him. And why think about this now? His dad's death happened long before Debs's.

The letter is burning in his hand.

He tries to be rational, to go through all possible explanations for the existence of the letter, but the speed of his thoughts is frightening.

Johnny is close by, but hidden, his presence a silent blockage somewhere in the opposite corridor, interfering with the flow of air. Nick swivels hurriedly to the side, opens the door into his own corridor, just past their shared bathroom, and lets the door slide shut behind him. He can hear Johnny now, coming out of Demeter, motionless in the central section, breathing, existing. Nick stands still, pretends he's not there and waits, his pulse pounding in his head, trying to order his thoughts.

There's a long pause, as if Johnny is thinking (unlikely – as far as Nick can tell, his brother rarely produces evidence of serious thought) then a grunt, *sotto voce*, a creak of clothing as he turns in the confined space and shuffles off in the opposite direction, the sound of his existence fading gradually into nothing.

Nick takes a deep breath without moving, still listening intently before padding carefully towards his living room. Unexpectedly, another memory jumps into his mind. The fun they all had when he and Johnny helped his father knock down a partition wall to turn two compartments into one, creating a larger room where they could all watch the new television together. A lounge, according to his father, who was yearning for the thick, companionable atmosphere of a pub. A parlour, said Ma. She had aspirations, but didn't realise – until she'd watched more television – that her terminology was rooted in the past.



Why does he keep slipping backwards? Why can't he concentrate on the letter?

It had been a glorious day; swinging on the bars of the luggage racks to loosen them from their fixings; hooking a crowbar down the side of the wood panelling that divided the compartments and yanking it away from the walls; running a Stanley knife across the centre of the seats, whooping with pleasure and satisfaction as the stuffing burst out like the innards of a dead animal, expanding into its new freedom. They pulled it out in handfuls and chucked it at each other, filling the air with fluff and breathing in the intoxicating fumes of wreckage, barely able to believe that they were allowed to indulge in such uncontrolled destruction.

Johnny spoiled it, of course, as always, suddenly bending over and starting to cough aggressively. 'I can't breathe. Stop it, stop it!'

'Okay,' said their dad. 'Time's up. Let's do the tidying now.'

Nick was infuriated by the way his brother always managed to turn everything into his own personal drama. Why should he be the one to decide when they'd had enough? He grabbed a clump of the stuffing and thrust it into Johnny's face. 'You don't fool me,' he hissed into his ear. 'I know you're just after hot chocolate.'

'Aargh!' gurgled Johnny, trying to push him aside. 'Dad, he's trying to kill me!'

'Cut it out now, lads,' said their dad, pulling Nick away. 'Your ma'll not be best pleased with this mess.' He was a calm, easy-going man who rarely asserted himself. He had brown, leathery skin and narrowed eyes that always seemed to be looking into the distance. He'd spent his early years on a fishing boat out in the North Sea, off the Suffolk coast, before the demise of the herring industry, and he still preferred to be outdoors, digging, planting; unable to relax if he couldn't feel the warmth of the sun on his face or hear the wind in his ears.

'Too right.' Ma's voice travels down through the decades and vibrates in Nick's ears, still crisp and affectionate, still sufficiently authoritative to freeze him into instant obedience.

The creation of the kitchen from the two compartments closest to the main door in the left carriage and the bathroom in the equivalent position in other one had been a more subdued affair, more urgent, more workmanlike and involving a great deal of digging. A mate of their dad's, a railway guard, had come every day for a fortnight to help install proper plumbing. He had to finish by early evening and get back for his late shift, so there was no time to waste. Everyone knew what was required of them and they got on with it, all of them desperate to make the connection with the mains water supply. No one wanted to continue the misery of trips to the standpipe in a neighbouring field, wading through mud, dodging between thirsty Hereford cattle on their way to the water trough. And the existing sanitary arrangements were unsuitable – the whole place was starting to smell.

Nick and Johnny still share the kitchen and bathroom. Nick rises early, Johnny doesn't. Nick can use the bathroom, shave, shower, make his breakfast and wash up before there are any sounds of life from next door. If he senses Johnny is on the move, he withdraws. There has been an occasional close encounter in the middle of night, but they've both become practised at strategic retreats, prepared to hover further down their corridors until the coast is clear.

He avoids looking at the letter. He can't look at it. The writing is as familiar as it was forty-eight years ago.

But it's impossible.

Johnny knows the writing too. He recognised it immediately.

When the postwoman stood in front of him, holding out the letter, there was nothing to indicate the significance of the moment. Johnny stared at her, surprised by the fact that she was a woman, surprised she was there at all.

'Mr J. Greenwood? Or Mr N. Greenwood?'

His eyes were drawn to the letter, the names, the address . . .

An arrow, venomously sharp, flew through the air at enormous speed and pierced him in the heart. The pain was instantly crippling.

He knew it wasn't a heart attack. This missile had hit him once before, a long time ago. The aftermath was prolonged then. It went on for months and months, its intensity waxing and waning until it eventually became a dull ache that has never entirely left him.

On that occasion, it had been a policeman, PC Banner, who came to the door, his voice deep and growling but oddly formal. 'Can I come in, Mrs Greenwood?'

And Ma, flustered, her face suddenly scarlet, the colour then fading abruptly and disappearing, until her skin became pale as paper, shiny like a pearl. 'Yes, yes, of course,' she said, holding out a hand as if she were a practised hostess, ushering her guest into her parlour.

As PC Banner passed through, bending awkwardly under the low ceiling and squeezing past Nick and Johnny, who were hovering in the corridor, equally panic-stricken by his presence, Ma went back to the outside door, leaned out, grabbed the handle and slammed it shut. They were locked into an interior silence now, an awkward group in the small living room. PC Banner took off his helmet and held it in his hand, but he was still much taller than the rest of them, his chest broad, his uniform dark, his buttons shining. He was familiar to all of them. He had a knack of appearing out of nowhere, his large hands unexpectedly grabbing the boys by the back of the neck as they climbed over forbidden walls with their pockets full of half-ripe apples, or tried to sneak into the cinema without paying, or hovered round the station, hoping for a free ride.

'Please sit down,' said Ma, gesturing at the bench-seat that was part of the original railway carriage, still red and blue, closely woven, but wearing thin on the edges. 'Can I offer you a cup of tea?' She knew. They all knew the news was going to be bad. It was the way PC Banner stood there, his head leaning forward slightly, his shoulders stooped and his mouth sagging at the corners, dragged downwards by the moustache, and the way he kept clearing his throat. Not a cough, not

quite, but a manifestation of impending disaster, a harbinger of bad news.

‘A glass of water, then? Or some orange squash?’ Ma didn’t want to hear what he had come to tell her. She was stalling, as if a delay would change the outcome.

PC Banner cleared his throat more loudly. ‘Perhaps we should all sit down.’

‘No,’ said Ma.

PC Banner, unaccustomed to outright disobedience, looked confused. He turned to the two boys, his eyes uncertain, searching their faces to see if they would be sensible enough to take responsibility.

Johnny, used to seeing Ma as a furious, fighting, protective force, stared at her, bewildered, not recognising her indecisiveness and threatened by the lack of normality. He was conscious of tears gathering in the corners of his eyes. He couldn’t speak.

‘Ma,’ said Nick, younger than Johnny, but always willing to take charge. ‘Just sit down. PC Banner wants to talk to you.’

‘Oh,’ she said. And she dropped down almost immediately, as if she knew the seat was right behind her all the time; as if she believed the boys were there to tell her what to do. The message to Johnny was that the situation had become out of hand. He could feel his legs trembling uncontrollably, with a jarring lack of rhythm, while a dingy gloom seemed to be closing in around them. In their family, she was the headmistress, the sergeant major, the pirate king. The idea that her offspring would one day usurp her position and give her instructions had never occurred to any of them.

The boys sat down on either side of her. PC Banner perched on the opposite bench, uncomfortable, too big for the seat, and fiddled with his helmet. ‘Mrs Greenwood – Doris . . .’ he said. There was an intake of breath from everyone at the use of her first name, which hardly anyone used. It was audible, it boomed around the compartment, echoing backwards and forwards. Johnny felt an urgent desire to say something, to change the

subject, to pretend everything was exactly the same as it was three weeks ago. He opened his mouth and tried to speak, but nothing came out.

‘They’ve found a body.’

The silence was so absolute it hurt Johnny’s ears.

‘Up in the woods – Bournheath.’

‘Oh?’ said Ma, her tone curiously loud.

A body? thought Johnny. The only dead person he knew was his father, who’d been fished out of the canal six years ago, and he hadn’t been allowed to see his body, not even at the funeral. The coffin had been nailed down.

‘We think it could be your girl, your Debs.’

And that was the moment: the loosing of the arrow; the instantaneous contact; the silent shriek of pain.

He could hear his ma’s voice from a vast distance. ‘Will we have to identify her?’

There was a long silence, then PC Banner cleared his throat. ‘Unlikely,’ he said. ‘The weather – it’s not been good – you won’t be wanting to see the body like that—’

‘It’ll be a mistake then,’ said Ma, her voice suddenly firm. ‘It’s not her.’

PC Banner’s words were slurring, running into each other, confused in Johnny’s ears. ‘. . . post mortem – clothes – personal effects . . .’

Decades later, with a postwoman in front of him instead of a policeman, Johnny experienced a shocked familiarity as the arrow pierced him for a second time, the point of entry identical to the first.

Why was there no arrow when his Dad died? Did they only fly if you were old enough to recognise them? Or when Ma died? When any sensation would have been welcome.

It’s not possible, he thinks, after shutting the door on the postwoman. He bends over, crippled by the intensity of the pain. He was fifteen when the body was found, and sixty-three now. The floor is vibrating under his feet, there’s a sensation of motion, as

if the train has started to move. What's happening? Is he slipping backwards, losing his place in the present and tumbling back to the past? How can this be?

He can hear the postwoman knocking again, her voice calling, and eventually silence. She's gone. Now he can move. But then he hears his brother's voice outside, his exchange with the postwoman. The corridor is darkening, although it's the middle of the morning.

He hears his brother's hand on the handle, the turning of the latch, the gradual opening of the door. He has to do something. He can't meet him now. He steps into his own compartment as his brother comes inside. He knows Nick is standing there with the letter in his hand, hears his uneven breathing. He was right. Something momentous is taking place.

His brother slams the outside door. Johnny can hear his footsteps as he goes past the kitchen into his own corridor.

Johnny doesn't know what to do. How can he speak to Nick, break a silence that has lasted for at least seven years? But he has to know. He should have taken the letter, he realises that now, but the arrow, the confusion, the disbelief – he wasn't thinking rationally. No one could make good decisions with that kind of pain pinching so tightly inside. He listens. He can't hear anything. He waits, a long time. There's nothing but silence.

He turns towards his living room. Best to get on. Best to ignore it all.

He stops, uncertain, then makes a decision. He slides open his door and realises, almost straight away, that Nick is doing the same thing. They're both standing there, their eyes making contact.

Nick examines Johnny. It's a long, long time since they've been face to face like this. He's older, he thinks, and he's deteriorating. His beard is untidy, out of control, and he clearly hasn't washed his hair for some time. Or his clothes – there are food stains on

his shirt. He really should make more effort. He looks like a tramp.

Johnny clears his throat. 'The letter—' he says.

'I haven't opened it,' says Nick.

'It looks just like—'

'I know.'

'It can't be.'

'I know.'

Nick lifts the letter in his hand and examines it more carefully. The elaborate *R*, the blue-black ink, the firm, strong downstroke of the *J* with a swirl on top *J*, the way the stroke across the middle of every *e* doesn't quite meet the curve on the left. It's a coincidence, it must be. But on the back of the envelope, on the sealed flap, there's a doodle. A tiny squirrel.

His head is spinning. A cloud seems to have found its way into the railway carriage and settled over them both, making it difficult to see clearly.

Johnny shuffles closer and Nick edges backwards. Johnny stops moving, as if he can sense Nick's discomfort. As if he cares about it. 'Open it,' he says.

'It's addressed to you as well,' says Nick.

'Give it to me then,' says Johnny. 'If you can't open it, I will.'

'No,' says Nick. 'I'll do it.' He puts a finger under the edge of the flap and tries to ease it up, as if he's hoping to avoid tearing the squirrel. But it's sealed too strongly and rips. Slowly, slowly, he pulls out the letter. A single sheet, folded, the writing on one side only.

They both study the sheet of paper, unwilling to believe in it, to accept its existence.

'Oh come on,' says Johnny, reaching to snatch it out of Nick's hand. 'What does it say?'

Nick swings it away from Johnny's reach and nearly drops it. 'Wait,' he says. 'Give me a second.' He swallows, opens the letter and starts to read out loud. He tries very hard not to look ahead, not to assume anything until he's read it properly. 'The address is

somewhere in Canada. Hamilton. Never heard of it. Oh, Toronto. The house is called Satisfaction.’ He looks up and meets Johnny’s eyes. He knows he must be thinking the same as him. ‘I Can’t Get No Satisfaction’. The Rolling Stones. Debs’s music.

He looks down again and starts to read.

*Dear Johnny and Nick,*

*Where do I start?*

*I’m not dead. That seems to be the most important thing to say. It wasn’t me.*

*I realise this will come as a shock to you both, but I’ve only recently discovered that everyone thought it was me. I came across a site online called Bromsgrove Memories. And there it all was. Nobody knew about DNA then, did they? There wasn’t a way of checking.*

*I’ve been in Canada for the last forty-five years. I couldn’t come back, but now I need to see you both and explain. I’m imagining you still there, in the railway carriages, but I realise that’s unlikely, so I don’t even know if this letter will find you. You’re probably both married with children, grandchildren, miles away from where we grew up, although neither of you seems to have an online footprint.*

*I’m dying. Lymphoma, too advanced when they found it, nothing to be done, and I want to tell you what really happened while I’ve still got time. So I’m setting off as soon as possible. By the time you get this, it will probably be too late to contact me, and I’ll be on my way. If you’re not there, I’ll ask around, see if I can find you. We have to talk.*

*No precedence intended by the order of your names – it’s alphabetical. I haven’t forgotten how you were.*

*Debs*

Johnny snatches the letter out of Nick’s hand and studies it. Nick watches him reading, unable to sort out the confusion of



his own thoughts. When Johnny's finished he looks up, straight at Nick, his eyes sharp and challenging, as if he's trying to say something, but can't find the words. Eventually, he throws the letter on the floor and turns away. He slides open the door, goes through. The door shuts behind him.