

THE BOOK THAT SIGHED

CLAUD
REGNARD



WILLOW OAK

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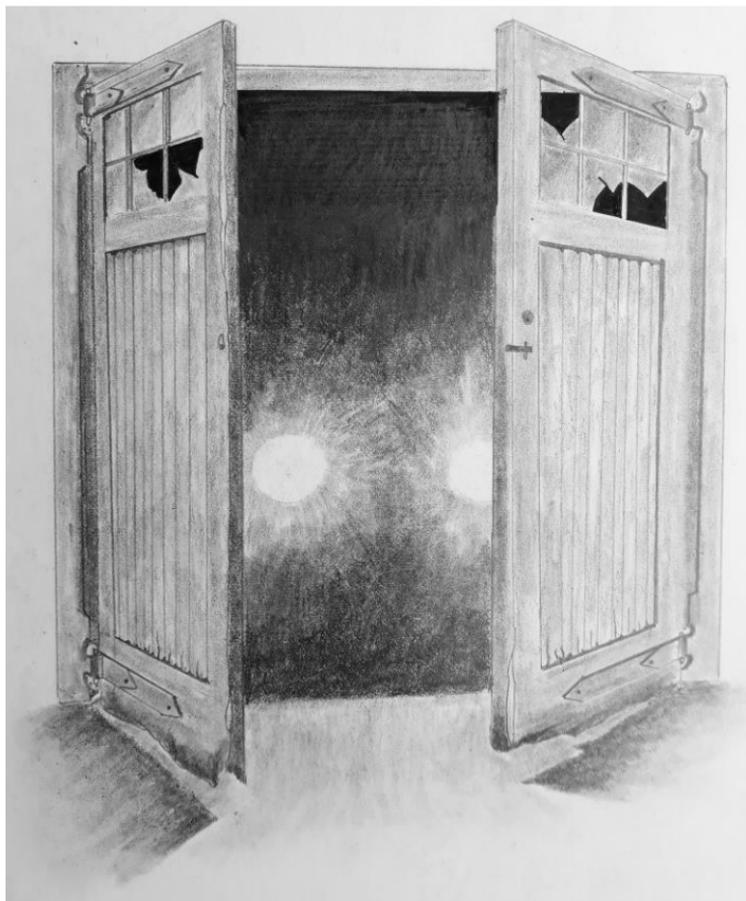
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BORROWED TIME

It had started about the time Bill's big end went. His dear old Morris 1100 engine had started making some unpleasant clonking noises. Naivety and debt drove him to fix it himself in the hope it would get him to work without any noises. Rebuilding the 1100's combined engine and gearbox turned out to be more challenging and expensive than he had expected. He lost count of the times he and his wife Lizzie had tried to fit a cogwheel by squeezing multiple ball bearings into sprung holes onto a shaft, only for them to fly out at all angles like rats escaping a flood.

But despite the odd leftover shim and ball bearing, the day arrived to start the engine. He had charged the battery, filled the engine with oil and water in the requisite holes, checked the connections and put on clean overalls. The attraction of having transport again eventually overcame the terror that a huge bang would

tell him that the left-over ball bearing had been vital after all. His delight at the sound of an engine starting and running smoothly meant he missed the shimmer in the lights. Looking underneath to exclude an oil or water leak he thought he spotted bright sunshine outside but by the time he had got up it was the usual wet tarmac outside. He switched off the engine, shut and locked the garage door with a satisfying smugness.

The next morning, he was looking forward to getting to work without waiting for a cold bus and trying to peer through misted and dribbling windows. He got up early to check the engine, but opening the garage was a shock. His 1100, over which he had sweated and grunted, was gone. In its place someone had thought it a great joke to replace it with what looked like a pile of blankets. He pulled out his phone and dialled 999 but nothing happened. What did happen is that the top of the pile turned its face to show the superior look of a camel patiently chewing. In shock, he stumbled backwards through a rough curtain straight onto hot sand. As he turned, it was not the camel or the oven heat that anchored him to the spot, but a desert rolling into a burning sun.

Looking back, the camel blinked at him with long eyelashes and bored indifference. Its role was to go where it was told. It had already patiently put up with a cold hard floor and was only briefly puzzled as to why this man had appeared. Now it just wanted an instruction to move, but for some reason the human had no idea what he was doing. The camel's blank stare gave Bill no clue of its thoughts, and he realised he had no idea what he was doing. He shuffled back across the sand towards his garage, or what was now a mud brick stable containing the manure and urine aroma of a hot, bored camel. Since no-one was going to give it an order it decided to get up, a process that looked as if it was trying to work out how many legs it had and where they fitted. It then ambled out of the stable with disdain. Bill stepped inside and closed the rough curtain, trying to block out the impossible. In the shade it became suddenly cold and in place of the camel's stare was a pair of Morris 1100 headlights. The drive to work and the rest of the day were spent in distracted denial. He took the bus home so that Lizzie could use the car after her night shift, grateful that he did not have to be reminded of his car or garage.

Next morning's breakfast was eaten in silence.

'Are you listening?' said Lizzie.

'Sorry, distracted by the car.'

‘Not as distracted as I was when I came off my shift and found you’d left the lights on again. The hospital porters had to give me a push start.’

‘Sorry about that. You didn’t notice anything strange about the car, did you?’

‘Apart from the flat battery, no.’

He wanted to tell Lizzie about the garage, but the strangeness of the experience stopped him, if only because he was beginning to doubt it had ever happened. That doubt was quickly dispelled.

He told Lizzie he would go and check the car battery. He walked across to the line of garages and unlocked the door. All he could hear were drips of rain and distant thunder as he started to swing open the doors. He walked inside to see a pair of headlights, but his relief was short-lived as he entered a muddy tent containing two dirty motorcycles leaning against a tent pole. Despite the poor light Bill could see they were old. Wiping some mud off the tank revealed the maker, Triumph, on a long square petrol tank. He had seen pictures at the Imperial War Museum of one being used by dispatch riders in World War One. As if to make the point, the distant thunder became louder and was accompanied by orange flashes. Shells started exploding nearby. Bill quickly closed the tent flaps, and the sounds went back to quietly dripping

rain outside his garage. Lizzie expressed surprise that he was back so quickly.

‘Is the battery ok?’

‘Yes,’ lied Bill.

The whole situation was irritating. Partly this was because Bill wondered if he were hallucinating and needed help, but mainly because he could not be sure how he would get to work each morning. On most days it was a normal garage with a normal car that took him to work without any noises, problems, or camels. Bill decided that, if he was hallucinating, at least he could find out if it was predictable. So, late Saturday morning he decided to try the garage again, prepared to open the door as many times as it took to prove his sanity.

At the first attempt he found three sheep staring at him with eyes the colour of warm toast. He was in a small stone barn with a dilapidated thatched roof that allowed the fug to escape through blackened gaps. The rickety barn doors opened onto grassland leading to a meandering river. A small church sat quietly among some graves. The writing on one new gravestone was clear but made no sense apart from some Roman numerals. He took a photo of the grave with his phone, and then walked towards the wide muddy edge of a tidal

river. Along the shore, a vegetable garden was being tended by a robed figure.

‘Gréting,’ said the monk with a quizzical smile.

‘Hello,’ replied Bill.

On seeing the monk’s puzzlement, Bill responded in kind with a cheery ‘Greeting!’ The monk gave a beaming smile and beckoned Bill towards one of the buildings. They chatted as they walked, Bill nervous at the unexpected peace and the monk trying to put an obviously anxious traveller at ease. Neither could understand the other, although the monk giggled nervously when Bill pointed to himself and said his name. Bill waved his hands at the surroundings then shrugged, ‘What’s this place here?’

The monk replied, ‘Hêr?’ then mentioned a name that sounded strangely like ‘your way’.

They walked into a low hall with a table laid out with plates and mugs. Food was arriving with other monks. The monk made eating movements with his hand and mouth while saying, ‘Imete.’ As Bill sat down all the monks put their hands together to say grace and then ate in silence. Many looked across to Bill and smiled nervously in welcome. The food was simple but filling. After the meal Bill sat on a log overlooking the river while the monks went to church. He rested in the quiet

sunshine for a while before returning to the sheep. He closed the barn doors and was back in his own garage.

Back home Bill checked the numerals on the gravestone, DCCXXX. Assuming the dead person was not aged 730, it must have been the year of death. On the internet he looked up ‘imete’ and found it meant ‘food to eat’ in Anglo Saxon, while the monk’s ‘gréting’ unsurprisingly meant ‘greeting’. All that fitted with the date.

Researching ‘your way’ was more difficult. He tried different spelling combinations from ‘year weigh’ to ‘yor wa’. Eventually he found that ‘yeerweh’ was the pronunciation for Gyrwe, the Old English name for Jarrow in the north-east of England. That fitted with the monastery there at that time. Another search explained why the monks seemed nervous on mentioning his name since ‘bill’ was the Anglo-Saxon for ‘battle axe’. He was mulling over his new nickname when Lizzie asked what he wanted for lunch. He had assumed that it was now mid-afternoon and realised with a shock that his near 1300-year journey had taken no time at all.

‘Sorry, love, shouldn’t have taken those crisp packets with me.’

Lizzie shrugged and went off to have her lunch and coffee, leaving Bill to do some thinking.

The next morning Bill tried again. The Morris headlights were replaced by a pair of red eyes that followed him around like a painting in a horror film. The walls were rough rock and as his eyes adjusted, he could make out handprints on them. The eyes belonged to a dog cowering at the back of a cave. Outside, a grassy plain stretched to a seashore. The sun was shining but the air was cold. In the distance two people were walking towards the cave, one dragging two poles with something stretched in between. They froze when they saw him. The dog trotted out of the cave. In the light it looked like a small tame wolf, which proceeded to lie down, resting its head on Bill's foot. This seemed to reassure the couple, who continued up to the cave.

Both were dressed in animal skins and fur boots. Both looked worried. In the bundle of furs between the two poles was a small girl, her face stained with tears. Every bump made her whimper. The man gently picked her up and Bill could see her left leg was bloodied. The woman cried as the man carried the child into the cave. He laid her down softly on furs and turned to light the fire. Whether because of his distress or the damp, the lichen refused to catch. Bill reached into his pocket, took out a lighter and bent down to light the lichen which fired up

the kindling. He turned to the man, but they were both flattened against the rock wall with a look of frightened wonder. He pointed to the stored wood and they nodded briefly.

As the flames took hold Bill turned his attention to the girl. Again, he indicated if he could look at the girl's leg. They looked at each other and nodded more definitely this time, presumably impressed by his ability to conjure fire. The girl's leg was covered with blood-soaked lichen. Removing the covering, he saw a deep gash that had stopped bleeding, but the calf was swollen. Any movement caused her to cry out. It was a likely fracture and she needed help. Bill stepped outside, hoping to find some way of getting assistance. He saw movement below him and the unmistakable shape of a woolly mammoth told him it would be another 150 centuries before he could call anyone.

Bill was unsure what to do. He could go home to ask Lizzie for advice, but there was no certainty he could return to help the girl. He would have to make do. Back in the cave he looked at the wood for the fire. One was straight and narrow. He placed it next to her leg and pointed to the parents that he needed another one the same size. They spoke to each other and ran outside. In less than 10 minutes they were back with an almost

identical piece. He found a short piece of split wood to act as a support for her foot. Bill looked at the structure they had used to carry the girl. It was held together with leather thongs and fur straps. He pointed to these and in minutes they were handed to Bill. Using the fur to pad the wood, he tied the leather straps to the wood splints. The girl cried when they were tightened but when he was finished, she was able to move more comfortably. A nervous smile appeared on her face, matched by beaming smiles from her parents.

The mother prepared some food while the father carried the girl outside to enjoy the early afternoon sunshine. Bill joined them and felt the father's hand on his shoulder accompanied by a grateful smile. The mother came out with meat seared on the fire. Bill had no idea what it was, especially as he could see all sorts of animals below including antelope and what looked like bison. But it tasted good, although vegetarian Lizzie would not have approved. He imagined himself explaining, 'Well it was woolly mammoth or nothing.'

With the three outside, Bill returned to the cave intending to return home. That was when he realised there were no doors or curtains to close. They had always been the trigger to returning and he stood facing the entrance, wondering if he would get home. The thought

of a lifetime of woolly mammoth fry ups was not appealing. The mother saw his frowning face, assuming it to be tiredness. She showed him the furs and with a grateful smile pulled some woven reed fences across the entrance to give him some peace. Immediately he was back home in time for lunch.

There was no sense to the type or order of places he visited, let alone why. It seemed random, with no connection between the sites, time or people and no way of controlling the visits. Although the haphazard choices were oddly exciting, he had noticed one characteristic. When his mind was on getting to work by car, the doors opened to the usual Morris. But when he was trying to fix the car, or he simply wanted an adventure he was more likely to open the doors to new sights and sounds. Two days later he was back early from work. He packed a rucksack with a torch, compass, water, first-aid kit, and some food and trekked off to the garage.

He was back in the tent but this time it was night and any artillery were far away. In the dull light of an oil lamp there was only one motorcycle. The tent flap opposite flew open and a weary dispatch rider struggled in, pushing the missing bike, both glistening with sticky mud. A cut on his forehead was painting blood over the

brown clay smeared over this face and trickling down one corner of his moustache.

‘Useless pile of junk!’ he said to Bill. ‘Magneto packed in just as I was overtaking an ambulance. Skidded and came that close to going under the wheels.’

‘Does that happen often?’ Bill asked.

‘The contraption dying or me being squashed by an ambulance and dying?’

‘Well...’ started Bill.

‘Never knew Flanders could be so flipping wet. Magneto’s always getting soaked around the high-tension lead. I’m beginning to wonder if the odds of a dispatch rider surviving are about the same as going over the top. Jonas slid under a lorry last week, broke both legs and got shipped off to Blighty. Lucky bastard.’

‘Can’t you seal off the lead?’ asked Bill.

‘What do you think the plasticine is for?’ the man replied, clearly assuming Bill should know.

Bill had an idea. ‘Where does it get wet?’

The dispatch rider took a rag and cleared away some mud around the high-tension lead. He handed Bill a dirty ball of plasticine.

‘See what you can do. I need to get cleaned up and have some dinner. You coming?’

‘I’ll see if I can fix this first.’

As soon as the man was gone, Bill closed the tent flaps. In his garage he picked up absorbent paper towels and a tube of silicone sealant. Although he assumed these would travel with him, he could not be sure if he would return to the same place. But on opening the garage doors he was back in the tent. He was about to start work when the dispatch rider returned looking cleaner and with his head bandaged.

‘Missed you in the canteen. Good bit of steak and kidney. Managed a bit of kip. What’s that?’ He pointed to the silicone.

‘A new sealant,’ lied Bill

It did not take long to clear the mud, dry the area around the lead and apply the silicone with its distinctive vinegar smell.

‘Reminds me of fish n’ chips and pretty girls at New Brighton. Well, if it works it might save my life. Ta.’

‘Happy to help.’

He left Bill to seal the other motorcycle.

The following weekend Lizzie went into town to meet a friend. Bill picked up his rucksack and headed to the garage. As the doors opened Bill’s nostrils were welcomed by the smell of warm manure. The previous day he had driven front end first into the garage so should

not have been surprised when he was faced with the rear end of an ox. Whatever it looked like at the front, it was unpleasantly worse at the rear. Outside, the heat told him he was back in the desert, but the empty sand was now replaced by a large temple gate under construction. Crowds of workers were carrying or hauling stones and mud bricks. They looked thin and exhausted. As they got closer Bill realised with a shock that many were children, some little more than seven. Their sweat streaked the dust on their bodies, and some were limping. A tall overseer with a whip made sure there was no slacking. One young boy was struggling with a hod full of mud bricks. He fell and scattered the contents. The overseer heard the noise and started towards the boy who got up and ran in erratic hops towards Bill.

He fell inside the stable, looking at Bill with terrified eyes. Bill closed the stable doors to keep the man out, but that triggered a return home. The boy was still with him, looking terrified at the sight of a Morris 1100 and a sudden drop in temperature. Bill's initial satisfaction of knowing the chasing man would only find a grumpy ox was tempered by the problem he faced of someone in the wrong future. The boy was thin and covered in cuts, bruises, and scars. Keeping him here was impossible but perhaps he could help a little. He lifted the boy onto the

back seat of the Morris and covered him with a blanket. As he shut the car door the boy cried out, terrified of being shut in. Bill opened the garage doors and got into the driver's seat to start the car, putting the heater on full. In 10 minutes, the warmth stopped the boy's shivering. From his rucksack he pulled out some chocolate and biscuits and showed the boy he could eat these. They disappeared rapidly into the boy's hungry mouth. He indicated with his hand that the boy should stay put. He switched off the engine and went to the house to clear out the cupboards of biscuits, nuts, crisps, pasta and bread. He put them all into a sack and collected some juice and water in a large glass. On returning the boy was gone.

At the end of the garages Bill spotted the boy looking wide-eyed at the buildings in the distance and the cars roaring past on the road beyond. But when a plane thundered overhead on approach to the airport, he must have thought he was being chased by a monster. He ran back to the warm car, huddling under the blanket. Bill enticed him out with juice and more biscuits. He dressed his cuts with antiseptic cream and plasters from his rucksack and waited. After 20 minutes the boy looked much brighter and Bill decided he could risk returning. He picked up the boy and went outside, closing the

garage doors. On opening them again the familiar ox was back but it was now late at night with no-one around. Despite his working conditions the boy was pleased to be somewhere familiar with no flying monsters. He smiled, bowed on receiving the sack of food, and was gone into the night.

Bill walked slowly home from the garage, but any thoughts about what would happen to the boy were interrupted by how he was going to explain to Lizzie why all their biscuits had gone.

On his next trip Bill found himself back in Jarrow next to the abbey. It was one of those winter days when the smoke freezes in the still air and the lazy light softens every shadow. No-one was outside. In the empty refectory, shapes danced on the walls from the oil lamps. At the far end he could hear singing echoing from a corridor, accompanied by coughing. A light flickered through a doorway and inside a young, attendant monk was mopping the brow of an old man lying in bed. Red-rimmed eyes opened and, on seeing Bill, he smiled and managed a weak ‘Gréting, Bill.’ before sinking back on the bed. Bill recognised him as the monk he had met many years earlier. The attending monk looked anxious at the mention of Bill’s name but was reassured when Bill

took the old man's hand. The hand was hot and moist, and the laboured breathing was scattered with moist coughing. He looked like a dying man. To the young monk's surprise Bill smiled and left the room.

When Bill returned the young monk was relieved to see bottles in his hand rather than a battle axe. Bill had raided the bathroom at home, picking up paracetamol tablets and some antibiotic syrup one of the boys had never needed. In the monk's cell he found a chalk and slate and drew a rising sun, a midday sun, a setting sun, and a moon with a line representing time. Below the line he drew two tablets and a spoon, repeating these three more times. He showed the young monk how to put the tablets and syrup in water and give this four times a day. Bill waited until late to watch the young monk repeat the medication, which he did carefully and correctly. He suspected it would not work.

Bill had hoped to return to see if the old man had survived or a new gravestone had appeared, but the next trip made him forget about the monk. He had decided it was time to adjust the tappets on the car one evening, a job he probably did too often. He put on his overalls and picked up his rucksack just in case, but as he opened the garage doors, he was surprised to find that was

unnecessary. There was the Morris 1100, bonnet open, ready for work. He placed his torch next to the engine and was about to undo a bolt on the cylinder head cover when he heard boots outside. Turning around he realised it was not his garage. Two soldiers stopped in front of him. They were dressed in grey-green winter coats and fur hats and carried rifles slung over their shoulders. To his surprise they smiled.

‘Guten Abend, Wilhelm. Es ist kalt!’

Clearly, they expected Wilhelm to be working on his car. Perhaps the darkness prevented them recognising him, but to help his disguise he stroked his face, smearing it with some oily dirt from the engine. He smiled, returned to the engine and, remembering a little German from school, said ‘Warm halten.’ He hoped his entreaty to keep warm would reassure them and that any accent would be muffled by the engine compartment.

The soldiers laughed and moved on.

As their steps echoed down the road Bill looked around. A single bare bulb in the ceiling washed a little light on a plain 1964 calendar. All the months were crossed off until October, where the ‘3’ was ringed heavily several times. At the back there was a door with a key in the lock, but little else. Bill ventured outside. To his left was a guard post and beyond that was the

unmistakable silhouette of the Berlin wall. The uniforms were beginning to make sense, as was the fact that the front of his Morris 1100 was similar to the front of the ubiquitous East German Trabant that was now in the garage.

At school Bill had been intrigued by stories of escapes and had been in awe of the courage of those who tried and often died trying. He was about to return to safer times when a couple approached the open garage. Just then a soldier walked out of the guard post. The couple ran into the garage to hide and stared wide-eyed at Bill, unsure if he would give them away. Bill put a finger to his mouth. He pulled out the dental mirror he used to look at hidden corners in the engine. He held it so he could see the guard post and waited until the soldier had finished his cigarette. He indicated the couple could leave. 'Danke,' said the man. The couple gently knocked on number 55 next door. Someone inside spoke to them and he heard the man reply 'Tokyo'. They disappeared inside.

One of the stories of escape Bill still remembered was Tunnel Fifty-Seven, named because 57 people made their escape through a tunnel dug right under the wall. He remembered the password they used because it seemed so out of place, Tokyo. More people arrived, repeating the password to be admitted next door. There were

regular patrols, so some ran into the back of the garage hidden by the open bonnet. If the soldiers spoke, Bill would do his usual muffled reply. He had no idea how many escapees had gone through already, but he counted at least 20 that evening. Later, in a lull between patrols he heard the front door of number 55 open and a man came into the garage. He was covered in sand and mud and was holding a gun pointed at Bill.

‘Passwort,’ he demanded.

‘Tokyo,’ Bill replied.

The man relaxed and lowered the gun. ‘Danke für Ihre Hilfe.’ said the man.

Bill decided it was time to speak English. ‘Happy to help.’

‘You English spy? You must come back with us to West.’

‘Thank you, but I have another way of getting home. I’ll wait here and see if I can help others.’

The man laid a thankful hand on Bill’s shoulder, checked if all was clear and went back next door.

Bill waited another hour and was about to return home when a group of five people approached. This time they were not quick enough, and the border post spotted them. Bill told them to hide at the back of the garage while he looked with his mirror. Two plain-clothed men were

marching quickly towards the garage. Shutting the garage doors would keep the group safe, but with no certainty of returning to their time. He ran to the back, unlocked the door, and pushed them through. It led to a courtyard, in the middle of which was an outhouse. The man with the gun was waving at them to follow and they ran across to the tunnel shaft. Bill went to close the garage doors and was about to shut them when he heard banging and shouting next door. He grabbed a spanner, stuck his head out, saying 'Auf Wiedersehen,' and slammed the door shut. To his surprise he was still in the East German garage. The banging shifted to the garage doors and he realised a boot was blocking one door. This was followed by a pair of hands pulling the door open and the nozzle of a gun pushing through. He gave the boot a hefty kick and hammered a spanner down on the fingers holding the gun. There was a shout and the gun went off, the bullet embedding itself in the wall. But the garage door shut, and he found himself back in his own garage. That evening he was grateful for a warm bath and was even happy to clean the oily ring from the bathtub.

For a few weeks Bill was reluctant to travel. Whenever he noticed strange lights, smells or sounds he

rapidly shut the garage doors and only opened them again when they looked, smelled, or sounded normal.

One warm evening Bill decided to have yet another go at the tappets. He tentatively opened the doors, but all was normal and he walked up to the Morris, patting it to make sure it was not a camel, ox or old motorcycle. It was only when he realised the traffic noise had stopped that he looked around. Outside it was a muggy evening and he stepped out of an old stable into a small side street marked *Via dei Servi*. To his left was a confectionery of a building rising to a huge orange dome looking like the cathedral he had seen in pictures of Florence. In the distance some oxen trundled past, pulling carts. There were no cars, streetlights or trappings of modern life. It seemed late and the street was deserted except for a young man staring at him. He was about Bill's age with a dark beard that was well trimmed but covered in coloured paint and plaster. The long sleeves and leggings all spattered with stains suggested either a lost stag night participant or a medieval painter and decorator. The man's sharp eyes were fixed on the Morris. For once, Bill wished it had been an ox, cart, or donkey as they would have fitted into the surroundings. A shiny piece of metal with two bright eyes was going to attract attention.

The man was fascinated, caressing the smooth metal and glass windows with a beaming smile. He had started prodding the tyres when his smile changed to fear. Approaching the garage were two men dressed in black and carrying knives. The man moved to the back of the stable. Bill opened the driver's door to block the assailants' approach, then opened the car's back door and pointed to the man to get in. He did not hesitate. Bill slammed the door shut, jumped in the driver's seat, and started the engine. The assailants stopped as the engine raced and the headlights glared. Bill accelerated out, scattering the men, and turned into the cathedral piazza. He had no time to think why his Morris 1100 had followed him or what it would look like in old Florence, but the man in the back seat did. He was beaming and shouting like an excited 10-year-old on a roller coaster. The only words Bill could make out were 'che', 'cosa' and 'come' repeated multiple times at varying volumes of excitement. All Bill could see were his headlights throwing huge shadows across the buildings like a demented *son et lumière* as they circled the cathedral. Some windows opened to match the open mouths of the few onlookers. Before long they were back at the stable and Bill screeched to a stop inside. To his surprise the assailants were heading towards them again. Bill leapt

out of the car and closed the stable doors. The sudden cold told him he was back home.

From the car came a banging on the window. Bill opened the door and out came a smiling man.

‘Meraviglioso, stupendo, fantastico!’ he kept repeating.

Even if his words had made only partial sense, the look of wonder on his face needed no translation. His clothes and response to an old car suggested his Florence was well before modern technology. Bill was tempted to take him home to meet Lizzie and the children, but he suspected that television, radio, computers, mobile phones, and microwave ovens would send him into overdrive, let alone planes flying overhead. Instead Bill pointed to himself and said ‘Bill.’

The man was still talking excitedly, waving his arms around and pointing to himself. Bill thought he had caught at least the first part of his name and decided that would have to do. ‘I’ll call you Len.’

Len shrugged and smiled.

He needed to get Len back to his home, but the garage had other ideas.

The trip to Jarrow was pleasant since the old monk had survived and he met Bill like a long-lost friend,

comfortable with someone called 'battle axe'. Len was fascinated by a beautiful gospel that the old monk showed him while the monk in turn was entranced by some drawings that Len drew for him.

In Flanders, the tent opened to a scene of devastation. In front was a destroyed trench against a backdrop of mud and tree stumps to the horizon. Injured and weary soldiers trudged past and haggard-looking horses limped to firmer ground. A motorcycle roared making one of the horses rear up. The dispatch rider saw Bill and went to shake his hand.

'Thanks for having a dekko at the bike. That fix was cushy! Despite the drizzle I managed to get the news of the armistice through. Can't thank you enough.' He then pointed to Len, saying, 'See you're ready for tonight's review then.' Bill knew he would be disappointed.

In the desert Len was fascinated by a camel resting on the desert sand. He walked around it, studying every detail. In return, the camel paid him no attention whatsoever. In the meantime, Bill waved to a young man and a child who both ran across to him. The man knelt, resting his head on Bill's feet. Bill gently lifted the head and realised he had been the bruised and battered young boy he had helped. He reached into his rucksack for food, but the young man shook his head indicating he was full

and proudly motioned to Bill that the boy was his child. Behind him the city was deserted. Whatever had happened he had made another life that suited him well.

Len was gently touching the wall paintings in the cave, tracing the outlines of bison and mammoths. A young woman limped outside carrying some food for an elderly couple sitting in the sun. Seeing their smiles, she turned, and her face beamed at seeing Bill. She hugged him so tight he found it hard to breathe. This was the girl he had helped, and his smile was matched by that of Len who was transfixed by a group of woolly mammoths below.

Bill recognised Strelitzer Strasse in Berlin where Tunnel Fifty-Seven had started. But the street was now full of people shouting and dancing, heading for the wall. Len slipped into the crowd and Bill followed. At the wall they proceeded to hammer and bang at the concrete which started to come down in sections. He spotted Len who had picked up a hammer and was joining in the mayhem with a huge grin. No-one found his long sleeves and leggings odd – they matched the carnival atmosphere. But they were not designed for the cold November chill, and after a while he spotted Bill, glad to be making a shivery return.

Finally, the doors opened into a warm Florentine evening. By the cathedral Bill could see a busy throng of

people dressed like Len. In turn, Len checked they were alone in the street and spread out his arms to welcome the air of home. He invited Bill back to his studio nearby. It was full of drawings, paintings and, in the darkness, what looked like wooden models of birds hanging from the ceiling. On an easel was a drawing with perspective lines ready for more work. Len lit some candles, picked up a pen, dipped it into an inkwell and started drawing. With remarkable speed he created people, animals, shapes, and scenes without stopping, totally absorbed. After an hour Len was still engrossed in his drawing. Bill crept out gently and went home.

Over the years Bill's garage no longer took him on travels. He changed cars and came to accept that his adventures had ended. He decided to write about his extraordinary journeys – 'For the children,' he told Lizzie. She thought they were rather far-fetched but was sure the boys would enjoy them, and she sometimes read the stories to them at bedtime. For Bill, the words reminded him of the people and places he had met. He was unsure why he had been given time with each of them except to share a kindness in that borrowed time. It seemed that each small act had created an impact far

beyond the action itself. Help had a habit of spreading and growing, no matter how small the initial action.

After the children left home, Bill and Lizzie moved houses. During one move, Lizzie had been sorting out the attic and came across books and toys belonging to the children when they were young. She spotted Bill's stories and took them down to Bill.

'I'd forgotten about these,' she said to Bill. 'I'm going to read them again.'

She was intrigued by the story of the artist in Florence. Searching online she came across a drawing from 1481. It was in preparation for a painting that the artist never finished and was one of his strangest.

'Have you looked at this drawing by Leonardo da Vinci?' Lizzie asked Bill.

'Not really,' Bill lied.

'Well, it's got a camel in it.'

'So?' Bill replied.

'It's the only time he drew a camel. And there's a trench, walls, a camel lying down, a rearing horse and what looks like an elephant. But do you know the weirdest thing?'

Bill feigned disinterest, 'What's that?'

‘Apart from the fact that it looks like they’re all in a large garage, something odd has shown up in recent ultraviolet images of the drawing.’

‘What?’

‘Look on the right,’ pointed Lizzie

Bill saw what looked like a square object with eyes.

‘Looks like a tram. Leonardo was ahead of his time.’

Lizzie looked at him strangely, ‘Or a Morris 1100?’

Bill smiled, ‘Now that would be far-fetched’

Notes: Borrowed Time

- Jarrow in the north-east of England was a centre of learning in the 8th century. At the time it was called Gyrwe and pronounced ‘yeerweh’. The abbey was next to the River Wear and was where the Venerable Bede wrote many texts including *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. In 734 Bede describes being too ill to visit Bishop Egbert in York who had been a scholar of Bede. However, he recovered and lived long enough to write a letter to Egbert and finish the last of his writings. He died on Easter day the following year.

- Fifteen thousand years ago sea levels were low enough to allow *Homo sapiens* to travel to many areas of the globe. Large grass savannas were home to antelope, bison and woolly mammoths.

- Motorcycle dispatch riders played an important role in WW1. The Triumph model H 500cc motorcycle was used by dispatch riders initially. It was notorious for stopping

suddenly because its magneto got wet. Riders often used plasticine (invented in 1897) to seal the area around the high-tension lead.

- The weather on the morning of Armistice Day was light rain and drizzle.

<https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/research/library-and-archive/archive-hidden-treasures/end-of-world-war-one>

- The pharaoh Akhenaten, father of Tutankhamun, built a new city called Amarna. It had been hurriedly built but 15 years later was abandoned soon after his death in 1332BC. Recent excavations have found tombs in which the bodies of mostly children, teenagers and young adults were laid. Many had injuries caused by hard manual work, suggesting child labour had been used to build the city.

- The Berlin Wall was built in 1961 to divide East and West Germany. Tunnels were one method used to cross and of those dug, one was ready on October 3, 1964 after 5 months of digging. Joachim Neumann had previously crossed to the West on a stolen Swiss passport and was determined to enable his girlfriend and family to escape. The tunnel was named because 57 people escaped to the West.

- Leonardo da Vinci's preparatory drawing for the Adoration of the Magi from 1481 is one of his strangest. It contains the only camel and elephant he ever drew. It is an odd mix of people, rearing horses, walls, and a trench, all in a building. Recent photographs taken in ultraviolet light have shown new features.* To the extreme right is a shape that could be mistaken for a tram (or even a Morris 1100). Leonardo left Florence for Milan soon after completing the drawing.

*See <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/leonardo/images/b-large.jpg> .