

Room Zero

Martyn Bedford

One

We have no letter of our life, how long it shall last. – William Langland, *Piers Plowman*

I dwell among the last days, in the place where all things cease. My name is Maya and this is my story. It begins where it ends, ends where it begins. I release it into the ether for you to find after I'm gone. But there is no 'you'. No-one else is left. Soon, the echo of these words will be all that remains of me; I am the tree that falls – unseen, unheard – in the forest.

A summery May morning, the sun laid its light over the land like a golden cloth. I peeled off my fleece and spread it on the ground as a makeshift rug. The air was scented with cut grass from the mower that tracked across the Senior Turf. A sprinkler spun jets of water on to the square. Will and I unfolded the map of the school campus, the rash of annotations showing the extent of our search. No door remained unchecked. Not one.

“If you ask me,” Will said, “Room Zero doesn't exist.”

“What if I don't ask you?” I said, teasing.

“What?”

“Never mind. Anyway, Lewis found it.”

“He was a *fantasy* writer.”

“So?”

We studied the map as if it was a Magic Eye puzzle whose concealed image would reveal itself, if only we stared hard enough.

“I vote we give up,” Will said.

“It’s too late to do a different project.”

“What if we write about the *search* for Room Zero? You know, our failure to find it.”

He could be surprising like that. “The unfulfilled quest,” I said. “Actually, Will, that’s almost a good idea.”

“Almost. Thanks.”

Beyond the cricket pitch, boys from No.9 jogged in loose formation. The sightscreens were lined up there, like hurdles for giant athletes, creating the illusion that the boys were the size of insects. I stowed the image in that part of my mind marked ‘story ideas’.

“Buzzard,” Will said, pointing somewhere else.

A bird circled above the slopes beyond the main school building. “Not a kite?”

“Wrong tail-shape. Also, kites are made of brightly coloured fabric attached to a very long nylon cord.”

I couldn’t help laughing. He kissed me, then. Or I kissed him, I forget which.

Will said, “Did you know, those hills are more than 600 million years old?”

“Are we focusing, here?” I tapped the map with my pen.

“Makes you think, doesn’t it?”

“What does it make me think?”

“This whole school anniversary thing. I mean, 150 years isn’t that long, really.”

It’s tempting to portray this as the moment when a light-bulb lit up above my head, solving the riddle of Room Zero. The truth was less straightforward. Will’s remark did make me think, though. It made me imagine a time when none of this – the Senior Turf, those trees, those boys, these old buildings, this school, the two of us – existed. Like the palimpsests we’d studied in art: if you scraped away the surface of the scene, what picture would lie beneath? What if you kept on scraping, revealing an ever-changing sequence of landscapes stretching back hundreds, thousands, millions of years?

For dramatic purposes, it would be better if I'd grabbed Will's arm in excitement right there and then, my voice quivering as I said . . . But the light-bulb moment didn't come until many hours later, in my dormitory at No.4, so I had to share it with Will in a message:

What if Room Zero isn't called Room Zero anymore?

I should tell you (not that there is a 'you', but it helps if I pretend there might be) . . . I should tell you how we came to be looking for Room Zero. In History, we'd been set a project to mark the anniversary: The Mysteries of Malvern College. Our task, to delve into the school archives for what Mr Hardwick called "the forgotten curiosities" of the past century and a half. He issued a list of options. My eye alighted on 'Room Zero' and, not pausing to consult Will, my Project Partner, I raised a hand to lay first claim to that topic.

"How interesting you should pick that one," Mr Hardwick said, without saying why.

"It reminds me of a novel I read in FY, Sir. *Room Thirteen*. It was about a—"

"Do bear in mind, Maya," the teacher peered over his glasses at me, "that this is a *history* project – not one of your creative writing exercises. I'm expecting proper research."

Exercises. Mr Hardwick had never quite forgiven me for recasting Katniss Everdeen as a Spitfire pilot in my presentation on the Battle of Britain.

"Proper research," Will said, when we'd taken ourselves off to the library.

"That can only mean one thing," I said.

"Google?"

"Exactly."

'Room Zero' produced 63,700 results. So, I typed in 'Room Zero Malvern College'. One result. The reference took some finding, though. On page 13 of a 1992 PhD thesis on C.S. Lewis (*Forgive Us Our Trespasses: Portals and Penance in The Chronicles of Narnia*), we came across this:

“Lewis’s early fascination with doors (wardrobe or otherwise) as a source of mystery is evidenced by an entry in a diary he kept as a pupil at Malvern College, when he was 15. On April 15th, 1914, Lewis wrote: ‘Finally found Room Zero. Locked! Fetched janitor but none of the keys a-jangling at his waist would fit. Permission to borrow axe refused. Oh, what I would give to discover the secrets concealed behind that damnable door.’ His use of the word ‘damnable’ is worth noting, here; at this period in his adolescence, Lewis had renounced his childhood Christian faith and become interested in mythology and the occult.”

A footnote referenced the school archives, where the diary was held.

We went to see the archivist, who let us inspect it – although we had to wear cotton gloves and he almost literally hovered nearby, as if the notebook was a priceless vase which we might knock to the floor at any moment. Will and I read every page but found only two mentions of Room Zero, other than the one quoted in the PhD thesis. February 28th, 1914: ‘I hear tell of a Room Zero, which no man has ever discovered – or from which no man, having entered, has returned (my source is uncertain which it is). Intriguing, in either case. I shall go forth and explore!’ Then, March 21st: ‘Still no whiff of Room Zero. Nil desperandum.’

“What’s really odd,” I said, as we reached the end of the diary, “is that he never mentions Room Zero again after the entry where he says he’d found it.”

Will nodded. “It’s like he suddenly lost interest.”

“Or chose not to write about it, for some reason.”

Neither of us could think what that reason might have been.

I stretched, stiff from hunching over the desk for so long. Returning the diary, I asked if there were later ones; but Lewis was only at Malvern for that one year. He revisited many times as an adult, the archivist told us, on account of a friendship with one of the teachers. They used to walk the hills with Tolkien, apparently. However, there was no documented evidence of Lewis renewing, or succeeding in, his attempt to enter Room Zero.

It was only as we made to leave that I thought to ask if Room Zero cropped up anywhere else in the archives. It did. In a yellowed edition of the school newspaper, dated April 1989, a small article referred to a 'challenge to all boys to mark the 75th anniversary of C.S. Lewis's time as a pupil here by locating the door to the mysterious Room Zero, which he cites in his diary'. A prize of £75 was on offer. A later edition of the newspaper reported that the prize had gone unclaimed and the challenge was now closed.

Room Zero, it seemed, would not give up its secrets lightly.

Two

Will failed to grasp the point of my late-night message. *So Room Zero isn't called Room Zero anymore?* he replied. *How does that help us?*

I'll show you. Skip Chapel tomorrow and meet me outside English.

He turned up bleary eyed, bed-headed and comically furtive. With everyone at chapel, the corridor was deserted, but he looked like he expected to be arrested at any moment. When I produced a screwdriver from my blazer pocket, he raised an eyebrow at me.

“We’re going to break in to our English classroom?” he asked.

“Watch,” I said, “and prepare to be impressed.”

One by one, I removed the screws fixing the panel saying ‘MG 10’ to the door, then lowered the panel to reveal a rectangle of discoloured paint, in the centre of which was a faint outline of the number 17. The numerals were long gone but the screw-holes remained.

“Palimpsest,” I said.

“Sorry, I don’t do complicated words before 9am.”

“The face of the past, concealed beneath the mask of the present.” I grinned at him.

“You realise what this means, don’t you?”

“Yeah, of course.” Will nodded. Then, frowning, “What does it mean?”

“It means we’ve already found Room Zero – we just didn’t realize it.”

“Maya, please don’t tell me we have to go back to every door and unscrew all the room numbers until we find one with a zero underneath it.”

“Oh come on, it’ll be fun.”

“I’m going to have to look that word up,” Will said, “cos I think we’re working with different definitions here.”

I don't like the way I treated Will – bossing him around, expecting him to share my obsessions. I'm surprised he put up with me, to be honest. We'd been together eight months – from near the start of The Hundred. I'd noticed him the year before (he was too good-looking not to notice) but when we returned after the summer he was funnier and more interesting than I remembered. So, it happened. We happened. And we were golden. But I was bossy. Or, as Will put it: "Sometimes, going out with you, it's like we're making a film together – but you get to be the director." I was doing it, then, in 'our' search for Room Zero.

I would pay a price for that and so would he. God, how we've paid a price for it.

We started right away. In our free time, Will and I methodically revisited every door, in every corridor, in every building (the ones which pre-dated 1914, that is). At least we'd mapped them all in our first search, but it was so time-consuming having to detach and reattach each number panel – not helped by the interruptions of teachers and maintenance staff, or fellow pupils, demanding to know what we were up to. Eventually, we had to obtain a note from Mr Hardwick, confirming that we were 'engaged in legitimate research activity'.

After two days of failure, Will repeated his suggestion that we call it quits. "We've got plenty of material for our project."

"This isn't about the project anymore," I said.

"It isn't? I must've missed the meeting where we decided that."

"Don't you want to find it? To be the first people to discover the door to Room Zero in a hundred years. Imagine that. Imagine *going inside*."

If Will was imagining it, his expression gave no indication.

The following afternoon, we ticked off our hundredth door. I'd stupidly built up my hopes that it would be our lucky number; that we'd remove the panel and – hey presto! – door 100 would reveal a zero. It didn't. Nor did the 101st room or the 102nd. My spirits were

already low after eliminating the entire Music School from our inquiries (I'd convinced myself it was the most likely location for Room Zero, being the oldest building on the campus). Now, I had to drag the disappointment of the hundredth room around too.

By this time, we were in the basement of the main school building. We'd reached an oddly shaped area between two corridors which looked as if they weren't originally meant to be connected. Filing cabinets stood against one wall, diagonally opposite a stack of lockers. Two doors, here: one labelled a ladies' toilet; the other, a boiler room.

It was Will's turn with the screwdriver. He removed the panel with the generic female figure from the door to the toilet, uncovering a faded 'WC', presumably from the days before the school admitted girls. Will reattached the panel; upside down, just for the hell of it.

"Nice one," I said.

He looked pleased with himself. It was the first time he'd smiled in about seventy doors. Will handed me the screwdriver.

'BOILER HOUSE' said the sign on the second door, with 'NO UNAUTHORISED ACCESS' underneath. Below were two black-and-yellow warnings – 'Gas Isolation Point' and 'Mains Water Shut Off' – each with an exclamation mark inside a triangle. Otherwise it was a regular door, painted white, set back from the passageway in a whitewashed brick arch.

I started with the main sign. The screws were stiff and the tip of the screwdriver kept slipping; the final screw wouldn't budge at all so, in the end, I swivelled the panel on this one axis. Nothing. Just a blank square of paint, whiter than the rest of the door. I rotated the panel back into place and reinserted the screws. The two warning signs looked even less promising but I unscrewed them anyway. There was nothing behind 'Gas Isolation Point'. By this stage I was on autopilot, unscrewing each panel in the full expectation of having to replace it again, then move on to the next corridor, the next door, the next failure. I'm not sure I was even looking at the boiler-room door as I pulled the 'Mains Water Shut Off' sign free.

If I was, I can't have registered what I saw there, because I'd already begun to reposition the panel when Will laid a hand on my arm to stop me.

"Maya."

I looked, then. I'd like to say I swore, or gave a whoop, or dropped the panel on the floor. But I just stood there, staring, as if waiting for a hypnotist to count me out of a trance.

"Try the handle," Will said.

Yeah, right. As if the door would be unlocked. As if it could be that easy.

I put down the sign and laid the screwdriver and screws beside it. Wiped my palms on my jumper. Took hold of the handle. Turned it.

The door to Room Zero opened.

Three

The first thing was the smell. Musty. Dampness and dust. The next thing was the biting cold. I fumbled for a light switch and snapped the room into brightness.

It reminded me of the cupboard under the basement stairs at home, only much bigger. All fuse boxes and meters, pipes and stopcocks, along with shelving and storage tubs filled with DIY paraphernalia. The walls and ceiling were whitewashed brick, stained and grimy, draped with cobwebs; the boiler dominated one wall, encased in white enamelled metal and thrumming with the burning of the gas jets inside.

“Not exactly Narnia, is it?” Will said.

We rummaged around all the same, and I took pictures with my phone for our project – shots of the interior of the room as well as the faded ‘0’ on the door. We had left the door ajar. Not deliberately, as I recall, but perhaps we’d been unconsciously aware of the entry in C.S. Lewis’s diary that no-one who entered Room Zero had ever returned. In a horror movie, the door would’ve creaked shut of its own accord, locking us in.

It didn’t do that. But it did waver slightly.

“Where’s that draught coming from?” I asked.

“Outside, probably.” Will gestured along the corridor.

“And why is a *boiler room* so cold?”

I went round the room once more, trying to detect the source of the draught – because I was pretty sure it had been nudging the door from the inside.

“Over here,” I said from the far corner, where a large chipboard panel stood propped against the wall, amidst a jumble of rags, collapsed cardboard boxes and other odds and ends.

I held my hand to the gap behind the chipboard and made Will do the same. “See?”

“We’re going to shift all this and take a look, aren’t we?” His voice was weighted with resignation.

“Oh, I was thinking we could just not bother,” I said.

He smiled (just about) and shook his head. “I must’ve done something really bad in a previous life to deserve you.”

“Perhaps this *is* your previous life.”

“What? That doesn’t even make sense.”

“Come on,” I said. “We’ve got Maths in sixteen point two-five minutes.”

We cleared the clutter easily enough but the chipboard was thick and heavy; it took both of us, and a lot of huffing and puffing, to manoeuvre it away from the wall. Except there was no wall behind it. Only a gaping hole.

Everyone knew about the tunnels. Some were Victorian, originally constructed to enable domestic staff to move from one part of the building to another without the pupils or staff having to encounter them. Others dated back to the Second World War, when the school was commandeered for the development of radio and radar for the RAF. These tunnels had served as air-raid shelters, or escape routes – so that high-ranking officials and top-secret documents and equipment could be smuggled out if a bunch of Germans turned up. All the underground passages had long-since been sealed off, allowing rumour to fill them with giant rodents, a hoard of gold, toxic waste from wartime weapons experiments and the ghosts of tortured pupils whose skeletons were still chained to the tunnel walls.

“Five minutes,” I said. “Then we turn back and go to Maths.”

Will didn’t respond. But he followed me through that hole in the wall.

For the first few metres we had to bend our knees and duck our heads – especially Will – but then the floor gradually sloped down until it was possible for both of us to walk

upright. The passage broadened, too, allowing us to progress along it side by side in the frail light from our phones. The walls and ceiling were brick while, beneath our feet, there were unevenly laid flagstones. All of the surfaces glistened with damp and our breaths whitened in the chill. An echoless silence settled around us; even our footsteps, our breathing, and the rustle of our clothes sounded muffled. Up ahead lay an impenetrable blackness.

“There’s no light at the end of the tunnel,” I said, attempting a feeble joke, my voice shushed to a whisper by the curious acoustics.

“Is it safe down here?” Will asked.

“I wouldn’t have thought so.”

“Oh, that’s all right, then.”

We pressed on. I was more excited and intrigued than afraid, although it’s easy to misremember my exact mood, with all that’s happened since. It was a long-disused tunnel, that was all. Although, if I’m honest, I was glad to have Will beside me, holding my hand.

I wish he still was. But, no, I wouldn’t wish this place on anyone, least of all him.

After a while, Will said, “It’s been five minutes. Nearly six, actually.”

“Just a bit further,” I said.

“Maya, it just goes on like this. There’s nothing down here.”

But it hadn’t just gone on like this. Without either of us noticing until now, the stone floor had given way to earth and the sides and roof were soil, too, supported by wooden props. Instead of a damp sheen, the walls were now streaked with tiny rivulets of water.

“Look.” I aimed my light to show him. “It’s changing.”

“I vote we go back.”

“Smells different, too.” The air current had strengthened, replacing the odour of compost and rotten vegetables with something sweeter. “How far d’you think we’ve come?”

Will didn’t know or seem to care all that much. He was cold and bored, he said.

As far as I could tell, the tunnel had been heading under the main school building in the direction of College Road. We might've reached the chaplain's house, I thought, or even the headmaster's. Maybe further.

“Don't you want to see where it comes up?” I asked.

“Not particularly.”

“Just two more minutes, Will. *Please.*”

“Nuh-uh.”

But I was already moving off down the tunnel again – walking backwards, away from Will; grinning, telling him he'd have to sling me over his shoulder and carry me out of there if he wanted to go to Maths that badly. He stayed where he was, his eyes on mine the whole time, features etched by the light from his phone.

We must've been about ten metres apart when the roof collapsed.

Four

Dirt. So much dirt. My mouth, nose, eyes, filled with it – each inward breath so clogged by the stuff it was closer to eating than inhaling. Coughing it all back up. Choking. Panicking. *Can't breathe must breathe . . . breathe breathe*. On some level, I must have been aware of the pain. But in those dazed seconds of regaining consciousness, it was all about the breathing.

Flat on my back in the pitch-black.

“Will? Will!”

Another choking fit. I thought I'd been buried alive – well, obviously alive – but there was only a thick layer of soil covering my legs and reaching as far as my chest. Like when Lyra and I had buried Dad in sand on the beach. I sat up, brushed myself down, felt around uselessly for my phone. My only source of light, lost. It wasn't until I tried to stand that I realised how groggy I was. How much my head hurt. Gingerly, I touched my scalp and my fingers came away sticky.

“Will? You okay?”

Not sure which direction I was facing, I took a few tentative steps, arms extended in front of me, zombie style. I stumbled. The tunnel floor was so strewn with debris I had to crawl on all fours, pawing blindly at the heaped-up soil and stones and broken props. Just a short distance from where I'd been knocked down, the tunnel was completely blocked.

Was Will under all of this? Or the other side of it?

I clawed and scooped and burrowed – unable to see what I was doing and with no way of knowing if the tunnel was blocked for two metres or twenty. In any case, my frantic excavations only triggered fresh slippages to replace what I'd managed to remove. There was a real danger that I'd cause another collapse and do a proper job of crushing myself this time.

Eventually, I stopped. Gave up. Knelt alone in the dark, weeping – wet and filthy, my fingers and palms sore as hell, the muscles in my arms trembling. A hundred times I must've shouted to Will; a hundred times, my calls had been met by silence. Had he been calling to me, as well, his cries unheard, unanswered? Had he been digging from the other end, trying and failing to reach me, just as I'd tried and failed to reach him?

How badly I wanted to believe it: that, in making Will look for Room Zero with me, in luring him along the tunnel, I hadn't led him to his death.

If going back wasn't an option, I had no choice but to continue. Find a way out. Fetch help.

I couldn't say how far I fumbled along that tunnel. The pain in my head had worsened and I longed to stop, to lie down right there and sleep. I knew better than to do that, though.

The current of sweet air drew me on like a thread through a labyrinth with its promise of escape. But, after a time, doubt crept in. The draught was imaginary: a product of wishful thinking or of my dazed state. There was no way out. The tunnel would simply reach a dead end, leaving me stranded underground. Trapped. Doomed.

So the first, faint splinter of light in the distance, I dismissed as another illusion. Even when it became undeniable, I refused to let myself believe in it – even when I heard birdsong up ahead and the wind in the trees. By that point, the tunnel had progressively contracted so that I was forced to stoop, then crawl, then propel myself on my belly along a passage that was more like an animal's burrow than anything man-made. With one last thrust, I was out – sodden and covered in muck and exhausted and helpless, like a just-born baby.

I must have slipped into unconsciousness. Because, after what seemed like a minute or two but turned out to have been much longer, I found myself being awoken by a hand stroking the

fringe out of my eyes. I swear it had been broad daylight when I'd surfaced from that hole – the sun directly overhead, dazzling – but, now, the light had softened to the cidery glow of late afternoon. I squinted, even so, after being underground for so long. Tears blurred my vision, made a kaleidoscope of the fingers caressing my brow, the face looming over mine.

Had I dreamt? Was I dreaming, then? I don't know but, as I came to, the remnants of something nightmarish leaked from my mind like fragments of a half-remembered tune.

“You have woken?” a voice asked. Male. Not adult but not boyish.

“Wh-what?”

“Ah, good, you are sensible.”

His speech was odd: foreign-sounding yet somehow English, or close enough to be comprehensible. As he spoke, I had the impression that some part of my unconscious was simultaneously translating. *You are sensible*. It wasn't what he'd said, but it was what I'd understood him to mean.

With his help, I managed to sit up.

As my eyes adjusted to the light, I took in my surroundings. A grassy hollow. The ground banked up around us, slopes scattered with gorse and bracken and two hawthorn trees whose silvery-green leaves trembled in the stiff breeze. A 'dell', that was the word. We must have been in the hills above the school, although that was impossible – it was too far, surely, and I'd had no sense of the tunnel sloping upwards.

“Are you robbed – or have you fallen?” The guy displayed a smear of blood on his fingertips as if to explain his question.

He was squatting beside me. In fancy dress: a bright red jerkin over a white collarless shirt with the sleeves rolled up; bluey-grey tights, calf-high laced-up boots and a battered brown felt hat with a raised brim at the front. His hair was straw-coloured, longish, and his eyes were the palest blue. I would have said he was a year or two older than me.

I started to explain but broke off when I saw that he was struggling to take it in, either because I spoke too fast or made too little sense. He looked as puzzled by my speech as I'd been by his. But he looked kind. Concerned.

He touched his chest. "My name is Peter."

"Oh. I'm Maya."

He repeated my name, mouthing it like an unfamiliar sweet whose flavour he didn't recognise. A passing cloud cast the dell in shadow and I saw that the sun was low in the sky.

"My home is close by," he said. "My sister can tend to your head, if you will come."

"No. I have to get back – to fetch help."

"For your friend beneath the ground?"

"Will. Yeah."

"Can you stand?"

As he helped me to my feet his hat fell off and he bent to retrieve it. "Why are you dressed like that?" I asked. "Have you been to some kind of historical re-enactment thing?"

Peter smiled. "You find *my* dress funny when you are clothed entirely in mud?"

He had a point. I must've looked like some swamp-creature. I thought of Will, buried for however many hours. Even if we'd been reported missing, no-one would have a clue where to start searching. If Will was trapped and injured down there, I was his only hope.

"Which direction is Malvern College from here?" I asked.

"You have come from Malvern?"

"From the school, yeah."

"You attend school?"

I tried not to let my impatience show. "Please, Peter, can you just show me the way?"

He led me out of the dell to join a sheep track that skirted round a stand of trees. We walked in single file, in silence. The quiet was extraordinary, actually – although I was too

preoccupied to put my finger on the strangeness of it. My head ached and I was shaky and nauseous. I focused on placing one foot in front of the other, on keeping up with Peter. Will and I had often walked in these hills but this trail wasn't familiar. After a few minutes, we emerged on to an expanse of scrubby moorland which rose towards a ridge, pencil-straight on the skyline. This I *did* recognise: our favourite lookout point. From there, I knew, the land fell away dramatically, unfolding a spectacular view over the town and across the broad sweep of the Severn vale beyond. A steep 20-minute descent would bring us to the school.

Except that, as Peter and I reached the ridge, there was no school below us, and the town was a huddle of buildings around the priory (which was smaller than it ought to have been). There were no roads – just a few dirt tracks – and no cars. No railway line beyond the grounds where the school should have stood. Only fields. Fields, as far as the eye could see, broken up by pockets of woodland. Malvern College had ceased to exist. In its place, a gently sloping pasture dotted with sheep.

“Where is everything?” I asked.

As if my question was bizarre, Peter replied, “This is all there is.”

Five

I know what you're thinking. You (if there is a 'you', which there isn't) think I'm making it up, or that I dreamt the whole thing. Or that I'm crazy. Nevertheless, here I am – among the last days, in the place where all things cease – telling my tale while I still can. But portals are a device of the fantasist, you argue; they are the stuff of books and films. It's not possible, in real life, to travel between realms, or in time, by passing along a tunnel, or being swept up in a tornado, or following a rabbit down a hole, or entering a wardrobe. You're entitled to think this. I used to think so, too.

Believe it to be true or dismiss it as a leap of the imagination, it's all the same to me.

“What . . .” I began again, trying to keep the panic out of my voice. “What year is it?” I asked Peter, as we stood on that ridge above the ‘wrong’ Malvern, buffeted by the wind.

“How can you not know the year?”

“Please, just tell me.”

When he saw that I wasn't joking, he said, “We are in the third year of the reign of King Richard the Second.”

If only I'd paid more attention to Mr Hardwick. “What's that in Anno Domini?”

“Ah.” After some convoluted finger-counting, Peter said, “Thirteen-eighty.”

I let Peter take me to his home. What choice did I have?

If my distress – and my mutterings about portals – embarrassed him, he did a good job of concealing it. After hiking down from the hills, we followed a rutted track alongside the pasture where the school ought to have been. Would one day be. The field stretched into the distance with no sign of a hedge or fence. Odder still were the sheep – a dwarf breed, the

size of a poodle. A two-wheeled cart passed us in the opposite direction, heading towards Malvern, creaking under a load of turnips. The man leading the horse that pulled it was much older than Peter but similarly dressed. They reminded me of figures in an illustrated edition of *The Canterbury Tales* which we'd studied in one of our classes on Chaucer. It struck me just then that Peter wasn't *dressed up* as Medieval peasant – he *was* one.

They greeted one another, passing the time of day, but the cart-owner's eyes stayed on me. From his expression, I might have had two heads. Both ugly.

"Who is your companion?" he asked, his tone between nosy and suspicious.

"My second-cousin," Peter said. "Come up from London."

The other man laughed. "London must be even dirtier than I hear tell."

"An accident. She had a fall and has spent some time in a ditch."

The cart-owner's amusement turned to concern and the two of them discussed the state of the roads and the dangers of a badly shod pony. Peter had advised me to let him do the talking if we met anyone but I would have remained silent anyway, too stunned to speak. None of this could be real. Yet it was.

After we'd continued on our way and the cart had become a plume of dust behind us, I asked Peter why he had lied about me.

"You think I should have told him you crawled out of a hole in the ground?"

"Well, no, but—"

"A stranger cannot go unexplained," he said. "Especially one as strange as you."

I let that go. "Do you think he believed you?"

"No. I very much fear he did not."

Dusk was closing in, the last of the warmth leaching from the day. I shivered in my damp clothes. The grassland beside the track had given way to what looked like dozens of large allotments, separated by dirt paths and planted with crops. I spotted people making their

way along the paths. Up ahead lay an ugly cluster of buildings, curls of smoke rising above their thatched roofs like chalk marks against the darkening sky.

“My home,” Peter said, pointing to the first of the dwellings. “You will be safe here.”

Safe from what? But just then I was too worn out, too bewildered by everything that had taken place, to question his remark. I longed to rest, that was all. To stop. To think. To try to make sense of a situation that made no sense whatsoever.

The cottage resembled one you’d want to avoid if you were a lost child in a fairytale. Its roof, a bank of scruffy, moss-covered thatch, descended to below head height, jutting out well beyond thinly whitewashed walls that looked as if they were made of clay mixed with straw and . . . was that animal hair? The building looked top-heavy, as if the walls had sunk into the ground beneath the weight of a roof designed for a much bigger dwelling. A water butt stood beneath the lip of the thatch and firewood was stacked under the eaves.

“Come in, please,” Peter said. “Humble as our home might be, my mother and sister will make you most welcome.”

His ‘home’ was one large rectangular room – living, sleeping and cooking areas combined – that reeked of mould and fire-smoke, overlaid with a hot, soupy, porridgy smell. A young fair-haired woman stirred the contents of a pot which hung over a fire in a circular hearth in the centre of the room. An older woman, clearly unwell, lay on a truckle bed close to the fireplace, gaunt features daubed in oranges and yellows by the light from the flames. As if synchronised, they turned their heads to study me as Peter made the introductions. Mother and daughter were both Elizabeth, although the younger one was known as Lizzie.

“Hello,” I said, doing my best to be bright and cheery.

“Is that *shite*?” the older woman asked, waving a pointy finger at me.

“*Mother.*” This was Peter’s sister. She looked about twenty; skinny, as far as you could tell, beneath a shapeless green tunic that came down to her ankles. Her pale face

glistened with perspiration. Returning my smile – with her lips, if not her eyes – she said, “Maya. What an uncommon name.”

“She was the mother of Hermes,” I said. “Although mine is spelled–”

“Why is the boy covered in shite?” the mother said, from her sick-bed, her voice strong for someone who looked so feeble. “And why does he speak like that?”

“It’s mud, mother. And Maya’s a girl.” Then, to me, “Please excuse her rudeness.”

She’d half-turned away to tend to the cooking pot. Her tone remained friendly enough but I had the impression that the older woman’s welcome was the more honest.

“Well, it *smells* like–”

“Warm yourself, Maya,” Peter said, talking over his mother. He pulled a bench closer to the fire. The floor, I noticed, was hard-packed earth strewn with rushes.

“Is it not enough that I lie here, waiting for the Lord to take me, but now I must keep a civil tongue to a shite-covered foreign vagrant?”

“Let all guests that come be received like Christ,” Peter said. “For He will say: I was a stranger and you took me in.”

“And if that’s not a boy, my arse is a pumpkin.”

This triggered a coughing fit so fierce I thought Elizabeth might tip right out of bed.

“Actually, I wouldn’t mind getting out of these clothes,” I said, when she’d finished.

“And a bath would be good.” I looked at each of them in turn. “What? What have I said?”

The ‘bath’ was a wooden basin the size of a fruit bowl, on a stand in one corner of the room, behind a cloth screen. The water was stone cold – one jugful, scooped out of the water butt outside. No soap. I washed as best I could then changed into the clothes Peter’s sister lent me: a plain white linen smock under a woollen tunic – like Lizzie’s, only brown instead of green – and a kind of snood which I arranged around my neck and shoulders as she wore hers. The clothes were scratchy but they were warm and dry.

As I bathed and dressed behind the screen, Peter and his sister talked about me, voices lowered but audible. Why did he keep bringing home “these pathetic waifs and strays?” she wanted to know. Who was I? Where had he found me? That sort of thing.

“She denies it,” Peter said, “but I believe she has been robbed. Assaulted.”

“Is she French?”

“I think not.”

“Thank God for that, at least.”

When I emerged, Lizzie seemed to like the look of me a little better in her clothes. Mine, she fetched from the corner of the room and placed straight in the fire without a word.

“What are you—?”

“You cannot wear such things,” she said.

Damp as it was, my school uniform soon began to smoulder, then burn, releasing an acrid smoke into the vents in the thatch above us.

We ate. A thick, herby vegetable stew, made with what looked like oats, along with peas, white beans, leek, cabbage and some other ingredients I couldn't identify. It was all right, actually, if too salty – and the veg had been over-boiled. There were hunks of oaty-tasting brown bread and strong cider that made my head swim after half a mugful. I hadn't realised how famished I was until I started eating. My scalp still stung from whatever herbal paste Peter's sister had dabbed on the wound before we sat down to supper. She'd treated my hands, too – bruised and grazed from where I'd tried to dig my way to Will.

Will. How could I help him now? For that matter, how could I hope to get back at all?

“How were you hurt?” Lizzie had asked, as she tended to my injuries.

So I told her about the tunnel. I could see she didn't trust a word of it. Now, as we ate together, the four of us, she asked other questions: my age, my home, my family. I answered

truthfully but my replies made no sense to her, or Peter. My surname was unfamiliar to them – it wasn't a Malvern name – and how could I have lived in these parts for two and a half years while my parents and sister remained in Oxford? As for a 16-year-old, and a girl at that, attending *school* . . . At no point did either of them accuse me of lying but that's what they were thinking. As for their mother, she drifted in and out of sleep – when she wasn't being spoon-fed by Lizzie, or demanding to know who I was and where the vagrant boy had gone.

As we talked, I found I could understand Peter and his sister more easily, and that their speech patterns – vocabulary, idiom, sentence construction – sounded more modern as I became accustomed to it. They appeared to find me more comprehensible, too. Less foreign. Mine was the English of 2015, theirs of the Middle Ages – yet, somehow, we communicated.

(I have no idea how this was possible. All I can say is that, if I was making this story up, I would deal with the language issue much more convincingly.)

“You don't believe me, do you?” I said, after Lizzie cleared the bowls and returned with helpings of baked apple.

She glanced at her brother but didn't answer.

He studied the dessert he'd been handed, his features illuminated by the firelight. The shutters at the unglazed windows had been closed and the perimeters of the room lay deep in shadow. “If others ask the same questions,” Peter said, “you must give different answers.”

“What others? Why would anyone ask me anything?”

Addressing his sister, he said, “We met John of Colwall on the road this afternoon.”

Lizzie pursed her lips. “Well, Maya, the whole of the parish will know of you by tomorrow. And none of it will be good.”

After supper, as Lizzie washed up (refusing my offers of help – “you are our guest”) and Elizabeth slept, Peter asked again about how I'd come to be in the hills. There were no tunnels thereabouts of the kind I described; no school where I said there should be one.

“Where is this place you say you come from?”

“The question is ‘when’, not ‘where’,” I said.

“I don’t understand.”

By the warmth of the fire, with a full belly, and squiffy from the cider, I’d become drowsy. If my senses had been sharper, I might have given more thought to the effect my explanation would have on my hosts. And what the consequences might be, for me.

“I know this will sound crazy, but I’ve travelled in time. From the future.”

Peter closed his eyes and let out a long, slow breath, as if I was a doctor giving him a diagnosis which he had been expecting but had hoped not to hear.

In the corner, the sounds of washing up ceased. Stepping out from behind the screen, Lizzie asked, “You are, in all seriousness, telling us that you hail from a future time?”

Her earlier friendliness, however forced, had evaporated.

“I know, I know.” I shrugged. “But, yeah, that’s what I’m telling you.”

If it had been up to her, I’m sure Lizzie would have ordered me to leave right away. But Peter stepped outside with her to speak privately and, when they returned, he told me I could stay until morning. He insisted I take his bed and made up another for himself.

I thanked him. Thanked them both, but his sister acted as if she hadn’t heard me or was even aware of my presence. She seemed upset more than angry.

“I’m sorry, Lizzie,” I said.

She ignored that, too. And I saw that, actually, she wasn’t upset – she was frightened.

Six

Bed was a thin, straw-filled mattress on planks that had been laid directly on to the floor. Linen sheets, a woollen blanket, a pillow stuffed with what smelled like heather. Insects scuffled around inside it but I was too exhausted to care. Within minutes of slipping under the covers – still dressed in the smock but minus the tunic and snood – I'd fallen into a sleep deeper than any I'd ever known. A dreamless, sensationless void that must've been as close to death as it's possible to be without actually dying.

My last conscious thought was the certainty that I would wake up in the morning to find myself back in 2015.

I didn't.

Nor did I wake up disoriented, as you sometimes do in an unfamiliar room. I knew instantly where I was. Grey threads of light seeped through cracks in the window-shutters. Outside, a cock crowed. Inside, beyond the wattle screen that divided off the sleeping area, my hosts bustled about their chores: I heard the fire being rekindled, the murmur of Peter's and Lizzie's voices – too low, this time, to make out what they said.

They would throw me out. Then what would I do? Where would I go? This thought would have set me off crying, if I'd let it, but I knew that – however incomprehensible my situation, however hopeless – I had to hold myself together. *You don't have to be strong – you just have to be stronger than your own weakness.* One of Dad's little sayings.

Mum and Dad. My sister, Lyra. They would have been told I was missing by now.

I closed that thought down, too. Slipped out of bed and put on my borrowed clothes. Peter and Lizzie must have heard me because they'd already stopped talking by the time I stepped out from behind the screen. Their mother lay snoring on the truckle bed.

“Morning,” I said quietly, for fear of waking her.

Peter returned my greeting; his sister didn't. I excused myself and headed outside to the privy behind the cottage, which he had shown me the previous evening. It smelled no less disgusting and looked a whole lot worse in daylight than it had done by the glow of a candle. The newly risen sun revealed the back garden, which last night's darkness had concealed. Rows of vegetables and herbs, fruit bushes, apple trees; half a dozen chickens and two geese roaming freely. A goat, tethered to a stake, chomped on lumps of turnip.

When I let myself out of the privy, Peter was standing by the hen-house, holding a basket of eggs. His smile was as fragile as the dawn.

“Your sister wants me to leave,” I said, saving him the trouble of reminding me.

“I told her you have been confused by the blow to your head. That your thoughts are like hens when a fox is amongst them.” Peter gestured at the chickens, scrabbling about, as if inviting them to agree with him. “But Lizzie is afraid you bring danger to our home.”

I spread my arms. *Look at me.* “How am I dangerous?”

Peter set the basket of eggs down. “Sit with me a moment, Maya.”

He indicated a bench and I picked my way between the vegetable plots to join him there. He got straight to the point.

“You are not known hereabouts. Your family is not known.” His eyes were full of apology, or sympathy, or something of the sort. “If your presence in our parish cannot be explained, you are a stranger. At best, a vagrant. At worst . . .” He trailed off. “I am only telling you what others will think.”

In the early light, the downy blond whiskers on Peter's cheeks glinted silver and gold. Despite the youthfulness of his face, his blue eyes were old and wise beyond his years. He reminded me of Jesus; the pale, fair-haired Western version. In fact, his complexion wasn't pale at all but sun-beaten, weathered. A ploughman, he'd called himself, when we spoke at

supper. His skin, his hair, his clothes, were the colours of sunshine and soil, as if he didn't just work the land but had grown from it, like the crops themselves.

"Strangers must pass through here from time to time," I said.

"Yes, of course. But they have come from somewhere, they are going somewhere, they have a reason to be here. They have a story."

"I have a story."

"You do. But I'm afraid your story—"

"Sucks. Yeah, I get that."

Sucks?, I could see him thinking. The geese had come over and one of them pecked at my feet, as if to see if I was edible. I still wore my school shoes; they'd escaped death by fire.

"It doesn't help that you look so odd," Peter said.

"Thank you. I'm flattered."

He smiled when he caught on to my irony. "I meant the clothes you were wearing, the cut of your hair – you do not look as a young woman should."

"And I talk funny. Like a foreigner."

"Yes." He shooed the geese away with the toe of his boot. "If people find you strange they will be suspicious of you. You will be reported to the bailiff as a vagabond or runaway."

"And saying I've come from the future wouldn't be a good idea, I guess?"

Peter hesitated. "Not unless you wish to be hanged for witchcraft."

They gave me breakfast, at least. Bread and a wedge of tangy green cheese, washed down with goat's milk still warm from the udder. Lizzie made no effort to hide her impatience for me to finish and be gone. So long as I remained under their roof, they were responsible for me, Peter had explained, and for any crime of which I might be accused.

"Where can I go?" I asked him.

“I have been thinking about that.”

This was his plan, my ‘story’: I had travelled from London on a pilgrimage of atonement, bound for Worcester Cathedral and the blessing of the shrine of St Wulfstan. But, after becoming separated from my fellow pilgrims on the road, I was attacked and robbed. Peter, finding me injured, had sheltered me in his home and agreed to accompany me the rest of the way. Worcester was only ten miles away, Peter said. Less than half a day’s walk.

“What am I atoning for, if anyone asks?”

“The accidental death of a friend, for which you hold yourself responsible.”

Will, he meant. I searched Peter’s expression for signs that he believed me after all about the tunnel; but, no, I saw that Will was a device to lend my pilgrimage credibility.

“Peter, why are you helping me? Putting yourself at risk for my sake?”

“I am a palmer.”

“A what?”

“When I am not working the land, I make penitential pilgrimages on behalf of people who seek pardon for whatever sin or crime they have committed.” Smiling mischievously, he added, “Usually, they pay me – but perhaps you could reward me with tales from the future?”

So, I was a pilgrim. The school chaplain would have enjoyed that: the conversion of the *dogmatic atheist*, as he called me. I’d never so much as muttered a prayer or mumbled a hymn at chapel, or even opened and closed my mouth in pretence.

Chapel. School. Will. Home. All so unattainable as to be almost unimaginable.

“And when we reach Worcester?” I asked Peter. “What then?”

“There is a nunnery which will take you in until you have recovered your senses.”

Seven

On the track to Malvern, we passed workers heading into the fields, men leading packhorses, carts on their way to or from the town. Peter was drawn into neighbourly conversations; he knew them all, they knew him. I attracted less attention in his sister's clothes, which – for want of anything else – he had persuaded her to let me keep. I'd raised the snood over my head to conceal my hair and spoke as little as possible. Even so, I was a stranger and Peter had to relate the tale of my pilgrimage. If anyone saw through his explanation, or had already heard a different version, spread by John of Colwall, they said nothing. I could tell that they liked and trusted Peter enough to give me the benefit of the doubt. All the same, I felt like an escaped prisoner of war in enemy territory, expecting to be found out at any moment.

As we walked, we talked.

“So, the future?” Peter asked, gently teasing. “Which year is it you hail from, Maya?”

“Twenty-fifteen.”

He did the finger-calculation thing. “Six hundred and thirty-five years,” he said. “That must have been an exceedingly long tunnel.”

“Don't make fun of me. Okay?”

“No, you're right. I apologise.” We were quiet for a bit. Then, he asked, “Tell me, who is England's king in 2015?”

“It's a queen, actually. Elizabeth the Second.”

Of course, he had no idea there'd been an Elizabeth the First. But, once he'd overcome the concept of a female monarch, he seemed delighted by the idea that two future queens shared the name of his sister and mother.

“What is life like, six centuries from now?”

He did a good job of sounding genuinely curious. But I realised that my role was to entertain him with details from an imagined future which I would pretend were true and he would pretend to believe. As I spoke of cars and trains, planes and space rockets, of smart phones and iPads, of the Internet, of gay marriage and bombs which could destroy the entire planet, of Twitter and Skype, of e-books and television and music videos, of selfies, fridge-freezers and caramel lattes, of global warming, genetically modified food, cosmetic surgery, Lady Gaga and McDonald's, of cities filled with skyscrapers . . . as I spoke of these things, I might as well have told Peter I was a dragon disguised as a teenage girl.

He couldn't even grasp the concept of light appearing at the flick of a switch, or roads made of Tarmac, or how zips worked. Or that squirrels could be grey as well as red.

"What of your family?" he asked "How are their lives?"

My parents' separation didn't puzzle him too much, although their jobs took some explaining (hedge-fund manager; corporate hospitality consultant), and he struggled to get his head round the fact that my sister was at university, and that neither of us of us – Lyra, 20; me, 16 – was married. *Still maidens*, as he put it.

"Your sister is older than you and she still lives at home," I said.

"Lizzie is a widow," he replied. "Within this past year we have buried her husband and son. Our father, as well."

"Oh, God, Peter . . . I'm so sorry. I had no idea."

"We have suffered less than many families," he said. Then, gesturing along the road, "We are certainly more fortunate than those poor souls."

I'd been so absorbed in conversation, in watching my footing on the uneven surface, that I hadn't noticed what lay a short distance ahead. At a crossroads, a timber frame – like a football goal, without the netting – had been erected. Three men and a woman, naked except for loin cloths, hung by their necks from the crossbar.

Crows were feeding on their faces.

“It would be safer to avoid Malvern,” Peter said, after a moment. So we left the road and took to the fields and paths that skirted the town.

Neither of us spoke for a while.

“I must get back to my time,” I said, at last. “Back to where I belong.”

“It is best if we press on to Worcester.”

The nuns would provide me with food and a bed, he assured me; inside the walls of a nunnery, I could claim sanctuary. From those who might accuse me, I took that to mean.

But he could just as easily have meant from my own delusions.

“I still have two more years of school. The university. Then . . . life. My whole life to live.” All the stories I planned to write, the children I might have; all the countries I hoped to visit, the thousands of things I wanted to do. “Peter, you have to find a way for me to—”

“Please, Maya, don’t upset yourself.”

Until he said that, I hadn’t realised I was crying. “They’ll think I’m *dead*.” I was shouting by then. “My family. Will. Everyone at school. They’ll think I died in that—”

Peter shushed me, rubbing my back as I sobbed against his shoulder.

“I shouldn’t *be* here,” I managed to say.

“But ‘here’,” he replied simply, “is where you are.”

The crest of a slope brought our first glimpse of Worcester – a jumble of several hundred low buildings towered over by the cathedral. Even the city walls were dwarfed, although they looked imposing enough as we drew nearer. A hundred metres or so before a big arched gateway, the road crossed a wooden bridge over a stream, its banks strewn with rubbish, animal bones and entrails, rotting food, broken crockery and slicks of human sewage. A pig scavenged among the garbage. I covered my nose and mouth but, even so, the stench was

appalling. Peter seemed barely to register it. At the gate, a pack of rough-looking boys were hassling two men who entered the city on horseback – begging for coins, offering to guide the newcomers, or find them accommodation. Arriving on foot, dressed as peasants, we were too lowly to be worth bothering with, aside from a crude insult or two.

“Welcome to Worcester, Maya,” Peter said.

Inside the city walls, the first things to strike me were the noise and the bustle: so many people shouting and calling, so much to-ing and fro-ing, so much hammering and banging, the clatter of horses’ hooves and trundling cartwheels, the pealing of church bells, the jostling. The streets were so *alive*.

I stuck close to Peter as he steered me through the throng.

We turned into a maze of alleys, overhung by tight-packed wooden buildings – rows of shops with brightly painted signs (a knife, a bandaged arm), filling the air with smells of leather, sawdust, fresh-baked bread, beer and the metallic tang of raw meat. Boys scuttled by, carrying pails of coal and water, and a street vendor, calling the price of “hot sheep’s feet”.

“Are you hungry?” Peter asked.

“Yeah, but I’ll pass on the sheep’s feet, thanks.”

He bought two pies instead and we ate them as we walked.

“This is delicious,” I said, through a mouthful of food. “What’s in it?”

“Eel.”

I was dusting pastry crumbs from my hands as we entered a wider, less busy street with a stone church on one side and smart-looking houses on the other. A priest emerged from one of them, in his robes, with crucifixes and rosaries dangling from his waist. I recalled Mr Hardwick telling us that England was a Catholic country in the Middle Ages – and, if this was 1380, it would be, what?, another 150 years before Henry VIII broke from Rome. It was one thing to *learn* history but it was something else to *witness* it.

“This is amazing,” I whispered to Peter.

“What is?”

“This. All of it.” But I could see he had no idea what I was talking about.

“The nunnery is just around the corner,” he said, pointing along the street.

I was both relieved and apprehensive. Glad to have somewhere to stay that would keep me off the streets and out of danger; but suddenly and scarily aware that Peter was about to leave me. That, once he’d handed me into the care of the nuns, I would lose my only friend in that strange world.

My throat tight with emotion, I said, “Peter, I can’t ever thank you en—”

At that moment, he grabbed my hand to stop me walking any further. It was too late. One of the men outside the nunnery had spotted us and alerted the others. Within seconds, Peter had been barged aside and two of the men held me so roughly by the arms I thought the bones would snap. A third man, wearing some kind of uniform, stood before me.

“Are you the one who calls herself Maya?”

“*Peter!*”

“Sir, she is,” Peter said, his face bleached by shock. “But, please —”

The man silenced him with a raised hand. “Miss Maya, you are hereby arrested for the murder by witchcraft of Elizabeth of Wyche.”

Eight

The cell was windowless, pitch black and bitterly cold. Fumbling in the dark, I found a wooden pail in a corner and a heap of stinking straw, which I guessed was my bed. Otherwise the cell was bare. Stone walls, stone floor. Three paces wide and five long. My wrists bled from the rope manacles by which they'd dragged me through the streets, and my body and face were bruised by the rotting fruit and other missiles that I'd been pelted with along the way. The manacles had been removed, at least; loosened and yanked off by the fat, wheezy jailer before he threw me (literally) into the cell and bolted the heavy oak door.

I curled up in a ball on the filthy straw and wept for what felt like forever.

It was Lizzie who reported me, I would discover. Sometime after Peter and I left, she came indoors with vegetables from the garden to find her mother dead. Distraught, she ran to the cottage of a village tithe-man, crying murder. The stranger, Maya – who claimed to be from the future – had cast a spell on the woman, or poisoned her, in revenge for being banished from their home. How else to explain her death in the very hour after the girl's departure? A posse was formed and horses saddled. They would have caught us on the road and lynched me there and then if we hadn't taken that detour through the fields around Malvern. As it was, they reached Worcester before we did and reported my crime to the constable, who made haste with them to the nunnery to lie in wait for us.

I lost sight of Peter in the confusion as they marched me off to jail, but I assumed he had been arrested as well, for helping me.

It was the thought that he might be in a neighbouring cell that eventually roused me from the straw. But the walls and door were so solid that no amount of thumping, or calling

his name, brought a response. Unless he was ignoring me. After all, he had just been told his mother was dead; perhaps he believed I'd killed her. That I *was* a witch. The strange one. The time-traveller. The girl who'd admitted luring her boyfriend to his death in a tunnel.

How long I languished in that cell, I couldn't tell. Alone in the relentless dark, petrified of being dragged off at any moment to the gallows, each minute lasted an hour, each hour a day. I was too cold, too scared to sleep. Burrowed in amongst the straw like an animal, I simply lay there, veering back and forth between despair and rage, between self-pity and the absolute certainty that I deserved to be punished for what I'd done to Will.

My headache returned. So bad it was as if my brain was about to burst my skull open.

I might die before they have the chance to hang me, I thought. As the measureless hours seeped away, there were moments when I almost wished I would.

At last, with no warning, the bolts clanked and the door banged open, the light from a lamp momentarily blinding me. The jailer. Bringing food. I went to speak but my throat was too dry. Before I could try again, he had slammed and bolted the door. I'd wanted to plead for a blanket, or a candle. I'd wanted to know what was happening: Would there be a trial? How long would they keep me there? After so many hours alone it would've been good just to *talk* to someone, even the jailer. But the chance had gone. All I could do was crawl across the cell, feeling for the hunk of stale bread and the beaker of water he'd set down on the floor.

The bringing of food and drink became my only way to count the passing of time; although I had no idea if the jailer's visits were regularly spaced or how long elapsed between each one. Did he come twice a day, three times?

Whatever, I remained in that cell for five meals.

The jailer never responded to my questions, never spoke. The first time, I wolfed the bread and water down but, after that, I rationed it, eking it out for as long as possible. Even

so, I was constantly hungry, constantly thirsty. Constantly cold. At least I grew exhausted enough to sleep, albeit fitfully – nightmarish snatches between long periods of shivering wakefulness. I'd started talking to myself, too, although I don't recall what I said. Just the sounds of my own muttering. At one point, I think I prayed to a God I didn't believe in.

Visit number six. The clank of the bolts, the opening of the door, the lamplit figure.

“Maya?”

I raised my head from the straw. “Peter?”

There was no time to explain, he whispered, helping me out of the cell. My legs were stiff from disuse as I hobbled beside him. The chamber at the end of the corridor was empty. It reeked of the jailer – a beery, sweaty stink – but the man himself was nowhere to be seen.

By the light from his lamp, Peter led me up two flights of stone steps, through a door, then another, and out into the street. After the foetid cell, the fresh air was fragrant as spring blossom. It was night-time, a three-quarter moon turning the road and the buildings to silver. No-one was about. Along from the doorway, a pony stood placidly, harnessed to a cart piled high with hay. The creature's ears twitched as we approached.

“Climb in,” Peter said, so quietly I barely heard him. “Bury yourself out of sight and be as still as you can until I give the all-clear. Say nothing, make no sound, no matter what.”

In the moonlight, his eyes glittered. I'd not known him to be so intense. It didn't need spelling out: my life, and his, depended on my doing exactly as he said.

“It's after curfew. We must leave the city before a watchman comes upon us.”

I tunnelled into the hay, aware of him repositioning the load to cover me. After my straw bed in the cell, the hay was wonderful: dry and warm and sweet-smelling. It reminded me of the grounds of Malvern College when the grass is being mown. That day when Will and I had been plotting our search for Room Zero might've been a lifetime ago.

Peter clicked his tongue and the cart lurched into motion as the pony plodded off down the street, each muffled hoofbeat like a beach-boule thudding on to sand.

We hadn't been travelling for many minutes when we were ordered to halt. A male voice, resonant in the hush of the night. I hardly dared breathe. Had the load shifted as we'd jolted along? Was I still concealed? There was nothing for it but to keep still and hope I was.

“Who leaves the city?”

“Peter ploughman. Peter of Wyche, beyond Malvern.”

“It is a half hour after the bell.”

“My load was shed. It has taken me an hour to reset it.”

Through the hay, I caught glimpses of lamplight and moving shadows. The other man sounded older than Peter, seemingly unimpressed by his excuse.

“What are you carrying?”

“Spun gold and bolts of the finest silk,” Peter said. Inside, I groaned.

The watchman laughed, though. He was much closer now. Suddenly, a wooden staff was thrust into the hay – hard, striking the floor of the cart near my left hand. Then a second thrust, missing my feet.

“Did you happen to purchase this gold and silk from a *hay* merchant?”

“I did.”

A third jab of the staff; a fraction closer and it would've taken out an eye. “Then I am afraid he has swindled you.” They were both laughing now. “Be off, Peter ploughman. Take your precious load through the gate before I remember why I stopped you.”

When the city was some distance behind us, Peter slowed the cart to a halt and spoke my name. Told me it was safe to come out.

“You look like a scarecrow,” he said, trying not to laugh as he helped me down.

“You say the nicest things.”

In the lamplight, I brushed off as much of the hay as I could. The pony turned his head to watch me, looking doleful. I gathered up a handful of hay from around my feet and fed it to him, stroking his neck as he ate. His lips were warm and damp, soft as mushrooms.

“I know I’ve asked you this before,” I said, keeping my attention on the pony. “But why *are* you helping me?”

“Am I to assume that ponies can hold a conversation in 2015?” Peter said.

“Not just ponies – all animals.” I turned towards him. “But none of them have anything interesting to say.”

He smiled. “It’s good to see you again, Maya.”

“You have no idea how good it is to see you.” I took hold of one of his hands.

“I thought I would be too late,” he said, returning the pressure on my fingers. “That I would find you swinging from the gallows before I reached Worcester.”

“How long was I in that jail?”

“Two days and one half.”

“Seriously? Jesus.” Yet, in some ways, it seemed longer.

He doused the lamp, briefly plunging us into darkness before the moonlight reasserted itself. We’d stopped at a bend in the road, flanked by woodland. The trees sighed in the wind.

“I’m sorry about your mother,” I said.

He lowered his gaze. “We buried her today. Beside my father.”

“You know I didn’t–”

“Do you think we would be here now if I believed you had killed her?”

“No, I guess not.”

“My mother had been very sick for some weeks. She might as easily have died in the hour before you entered our home as in the hour after you left.”

That was when he told me how Lizzie had found her and raised the alarm.

“I do not expect you to forgive her,” Peter said, “but she has lost a son, a husband and a father. Now, her mother. She needs someone to blame. Someone other than God.”

“But you don’t?”

“No.”

“So, you don’t think I’m a witch?”

“I didn’t say *that*.” He grinned and I saw that he was teasing me. Or pretending to. Then, serious again, “Lizzie told them you had put me under a spell or else why would I have helped you to escape?” He shrugged. “I am sorry but, if I hadn’t confirmed it, they would have hung us side by side.”

“What about the jailer?” I asked. “How did you—”

“Two hens, six sacks of oats and a flagon of cider.”

Bribery. Of course. I figured the jailer would claim to have been bewitched, as well, when he had to account for the empty cell. Or he would suggest that I must’ve magicked my way out of there. I started to thank Peter but he waved my gratitude away.

“You can carry this,” he said, retrieving a small shovel from the cart and handing it to me. “I’ll take the lamp.”

“Why do we need a shovel?”

He didn’t answer. We had to get going, he said instead. The road was unsafe at night, so we should steer the cart among the trees and tether the pony there, then continue on foot through the woods. “Are you able to walk far?” he asked.

My condition must’ve been obvious. I felt light-headed from the diet of bread and water, and my legs were weak with lack of exercise; even so, I told him I would be okay.

“But . . . where are we going?”

“You will know the place before we reach it.”

Nine

Even at night, the Malvern Hills were unmistakable. Embossed by moonlight, they swelled and dipped around us like great waves in a silent ocean. Peter was right: I knew where he was taking me. And why. It was so obvious that I wondered why I hadn't thought of it before.

If I'd been making all this up, it's how and where I would have ended it, too.

As we walked, I spoke of all the stories and poems which would be inspired by these hills in the centuries between his time and mine. The names of the writers meant nothing to him, of course. But, even though he admitted he couldn't read or write himself, he understood the effect of this landscape on those who trod its slopes.

"When I found you," he said, "I had come up here to tell my father the stories of my days since I'd last visited."

"Your father is buried here?"

"No. But we often walked these hills together. When I was a boy, he brought me here to teach me to trap rabbits, or to fly the kite he made for me." After a pause, he said, "He is not beneath this ground but his spirit is in these hills nonetheless."

I liked the idea of Peter sitting on some rock or grassy bank, telling tales to his dead father. Releasing the words into the air. I pictured them drifting across the hillside like the filaments of a thousand dandelion clocks, snagging on the gorse and heather, the trees and bracken, or settling on the grass, the soil, the rocks, or on the surfaces of the streams and brooks, or simply floating away until they were lost from view. Not one word written down, yet each of them absorbed into this place; indelible and everlasting, even as they dissolved.

"If my mind worked like my sister's, I might have mistaken you for a sign from my father. Or that you had been placed there for me to find."

“A sign of what?”

“Perhaps I mean a test. He used to say: *Try your best, Peter. But always do good.*”

“That’s the sort of thing my dad says. Although he doesn’t call me Peter.” That made him laugh. “Anyway, you have done good. You’ve done more for me than I deserve.”

He shook his head. “Who’s to say what another person does or doesn’t deserve? All you can do is help them.”

We walked on in silence, each of us caught up in our own thoughts. Our destination couldn’t have been far off and, although we hadn’t spoken of it, we were weighted down by what awaited us. At least, I was. I had no idea what he was thinking. Given the trouble I’d brought him, maybe he was relieved that I would soon disappear from his life, his world.

We were standing at the top of a slope, overlooking the dell where Peter had come across me that time, just days before. The depths of the hollow were black as ink, untouched by the moonlight. He began to explain why he’d brought me there but I told him I’d already figured it out. We find the hole I emerged from. I crawl in. I follow it to the point where the roof collapsed. I hope that a rescue party has broken through by now. Or I dig my way out with the shovel Peter has given me to carry. I return to Malvern College. To 2015.

I lead the life that awaits me.

“It won’t work,” I said.

“Probably not, no.”

“Or I’ll die in there.”

“You will die here, if you stay.”

I didn’t ask him to wait, in case I had to crawl back out. He’d already done more for me than I had any right to expect. Besides, I wouldn’t be coming back. I know that now, of course, but I sensed it even then. Whether you believe me or not, it makes no difference.

“You think there is a tunnel, then?” I asked.

“What matters is that you do,” Peter said. He rested a hand on my shoulder. “Come on, let’s go down.”

He lit the lamp and we picked our way into the dell. The temperature dropped, or I imagined it did. My breath became laboured, as if we were ascending rather than descending, and my feet suddenly grew too big, too heavy.

At night, illuminated in sections by the frail light of the lamp, the dell looked different to how I remembered it. Longer, wider. More complicated – really, a series of small hollows within a larger one. It took some time to locate the approximate place where I’d been lying; not that either of us was entirely confident of it even then. The banks of grass and bare earth were scarred just there with not one hole but several. The entrances to fox lairs, badger setts – I don’t know, but that part of the dell was riddled with animal holes, any one of which might have been the one I’d scrambled out of.

As best we could, we inspected those nearest the spot where (we thought) Peter had found me. Were there signs of recent disturbance? Yes, but it was impossible to tell whether I’d been the cause. *All* the entrances were scuffed and scraped and scattered with loose soil.

“Which is it, do you think?” Peter asked.

After a moment, I pointed and said, “That one.”

“Are you sure?”

“No. To be honest, I don’t have a Scooby.”

I could see him struggling to translate ‘Scooby’. “I shall miss your funny way of speaking,” he said.

“Actually, you’re the one who speaks funny. Didn’t we agree on that?”

“I don’t believe we did.”

“We could agree it now, if you like.”

Peter looked at me and, for a moment, I thought we might kiss. Instead, he bent down, holding the lamp over the entrance, as if the hole might own up – *All right, it was me!* – or as if the light might guide me all the way back to Room Zero. At which point the lamp died.

“Well, then.” I heard him straighten up beside me.

“I’m not great with goodbyes,” I said.

We hugged awkwardly in the darkness, encumbered by the lamp, in his case, and the shovel, in mine. The thank-yous and wishes of good luck were just as clumsy. Above us, the Milky Way blazed across the sky, brighter and more spectacular than I’d ever seen it. Close enough for me to reach up and touch, it seemed.

“If you live to be 650 years old,” I told him, “be sure to look me up.”

And that was it.

His last words of farewell followed me into the hole. “Wherever you come to rest, Maya, I hope you find peace.”

Am I at peace, here? In a way, I suppose I am – although I have no other choice, in this place where everything ends. Where I will end. When your time has come, you should make peace with yourself. You can no more fight your death than you could have resisted your birth.

I entered the wrong hole, by the way. (Or the right one, if we accept that, in a random world, all things turn out as they should do.)

It took some time to realise my mistake. The tunnel felt the same. Smelled the same. But it went on and on. No collapsed roof or even the remnants of one. A rescue party couldn’t have broken through and, so soon, removed all traces of damage. I told myself I hadn’t gone far enough. But I knew in my heart that I had.

Even so, I carried on.

The tunnel had to lead *somewhere*. Somewhere I wasn’t condemned to die as a witch.

By the time I surfaced, I'd been underground for many hours. A whole day, possibly. Peter would've been at home by then, with his sister. Would he ever speak of me in front of her? When he returned to the hills above Malvern, would he sometimes think of the strange girl from the future? Would he tell his tales to me, as well as to his father?

You can torment yourself with unanswerable questions.

One thing's for sure: I eventually crawled out of there. The moment I did, I heard an almighty rumble as the tunnel collapsed, ejecting a plume of dust and particles of soil that covered me like snow. I'd barely stumbled away when there was a second tremor and the ground where I'd been standing imploded. Somewhere under that landslip was my shovel.

No food, in this place. No water; none that's safe to drink, anyway. The streams and brooks are dried up (long since, by the look of them) and, whenever I've come across any standing water, it tastes vile and my stomach rejects it. It rained briefly this morning but I had no means of capturing it other than to tilt my head back and open my mouth wide. It was barely enough to wet my tongue.

At first, I thought I had travelled deeper into the past – to a time before humans. But, in the three days since I surfaced, I have found traces of us: the fragments of what once were buildings and roads, shards of glass, bits of metal and coloured plastic. No people, though; alive or dead. No animals. No birds. No insects. Not hereabouts, at least, and I am too weak, too dehydrated to go exploring any more.

From my vantage point, the landscape looks similarly barren in all directions. All the vegetation is stripped away – even the trees are gone – to leave a moon-like, blackened desert. The heat is astonishing. It must be fifty degrees – the air so dry, so searing, it hurts to breathe. By day, I shelter among the rocks, moving from one patch of shade to another as a sun the colour of blood crosses the sky. At night, now that I can no longer walk more than a

few paces, I sit on my high ridge and look out over the desolate land and watch the moonlight paint it in shades of white, blue and grey.

These are the Malvern Hills of the far future. I am as sure of it as I can be.

Down there, on that wasted plain, is where the school once stood. Thousands of years ago, for all I know. There's no trace of it now. I have been down. Yesterday? The day before? Whatever, I can't even be sure whether the scattering of rubble is the remnants of Malvern College or some other, more recent building. How long did it last beyond 2015? Fifty years, a hundred, five hundred? All I know is: there was a time before the school came into existence, a time when it existed, and a time after it ceased to exist. In that respect, it is no different to anything else – even these rocks where I'm sitting, which have been here for at least 600 million years and might be here for 600 million more. They, too, will one day turn to dust.

My own lifespan – sixteen years, four months and eleven days (twelve, if I'm lucky) – is so insignificant by comparison as to seem utterly pointless.

But I have lived. I have *lived*. I live, still. And if I am the last person on earth, these words, or the echoes of them down the ages, will outlive me.

So, at night, I speak my story. This story. My throat and tongue swollen by the lack of moisture, my lips cracked and sore, I push the words out as best I can, releasing them into the toxic air to settle where they will. Even though there's no-one to hear it, except you (and even though there is no 'you'), I tell my tale.

In the telling, it becomes independent of me.

When my body has closed down – tonight, tomorrow – my story, which is no longer *my* story, will merge with this place, to be absorbed into the greater consciousness of human existence. So do not mourn for me. Or you might as well mourn the passing of time itself.

Ten

From the head of the nave, he watches them file in. Some flick a glance in his direction. No-one speaks. A few are in tears already, or on the verge. The scent of lilies is overwhelming. A track from the iPod he found by her bedside plays in the background: Peace. He tries not to think about seeing them at the NEC with her just two months ago. On the screen, her images appear on a loop. Some still, some moving. They're at the periphery of his vision but he can't bring himself to look, even though he was involved in choosing and arranging them.

Eventually, the chapel is full. Every student, every member of staff. Her parents, her sister, her two remaining grandparents. He can't look at her family, either, although he met them outside just now and spoke to the mother and father in the days after the accident. The sister worked with him on the images, the music. They let him know he wasn't to blame. All the same, he avoids their gaze.

Everyone remains standing for the prayer. Then they sit for the chaplain's address. When he has finished, the headmaster says a few words. Next, the sister speaks on behalf of the family but chokes up part-way through and returns to her seat, sobbing.

Now it's Will's turn.

You're lucky to be alive, several people told him.

Was he? As long as he lived he would be unable to erase those final moments. Maya, backing away from him – teasing, grinning, beckoning him to follow her, her eyes glittering in the light from her phone. “If you want to go to Maths that badly, you'll have to sling me over your shoulder and carry me out of here.”

Her last words. *Carry me out of here.*

Then the noise. Obliteration. Darkness. If he hadn't stopped – if he'd just followed her – they wouldn't have been standing where they were when the roof caved in.

They'd dug him out. His right tibia was fractured, two or three ribs were cracked, his lungs had been damaged by the inhalation of debris.

He was lucky. A maintenance man had returned to Room Zero to check whether he'd locked the door after fixing a fault with the boiler; he'd found the door ajar and gone inside to investigate when the whoomph of the tunnel's collapse sent a spray of dust through the hole in the wall. But for that, who knows how long Will might have lain there? He was being trundled out of the back of an ambulance and into the A&E department by the time the rescue team recovered Maya's body. It was several more hours before they broke the news to him.

Instantaneous . . . massive head trauma . . . wouldn't have felt a thing.

Maya's death made no more sense to him, then, than it did when they discharged him from hospital two days later. Or after the police had finished questioning him. Or when he talked it through with the counsellor. It would never make sense if he lived to be a hundred.

The thought of his own life continuing for decades when Maya's was over. Would always be over. How could someone so young, so bursting with life, be dead?

Why hadn't that roof killed him instead of her?

Or both of them? Or neither of them?

And yet her death was nowhere near the most incomprehensible part of it.

“Would you help me choose the pictures and the music?” her sister, Lyra, asked.

Which was how he came to be in Maya's dormitory in No.4, trawling through her iPod, her iPad, her laptop. Her parents would arrive later that day to collect the rest of their daughter's possessions but, for the time being, Will and Lyra had the place to themselves.

She was four years older than Maya and looked nothing like her, which Will was glad about. She kept it brisk, efficient; she clearly didn't want to talk about her sister. Will was glad about that, too. They created two files – 'music' and 'images' – and worked methodically through the various devices, selecting and transferring the ones they wished to use. The few words which Will and Lyra exchanged were confined to the task in hand.

“What about her writing?” Will asked, when they were done.

“Her writing?”

“Maya wrote short stories.”

“Oh. I didn't know that.” Lyra turned her head towards the window.

After a moment, he said, “That's what she wanted to be. A writer.” She didn't reply. To not know something so important about your own sister. He almost wished he hadn't mentioned it. “Her stories will be on here somewhere,” he said, patting the laptop. “I could read one at the service. I mean, if you want me to.”

She nodded several times, as if trying to convince herself rather than him. The effort she was making not to break down was so potent it seemed to alter the air pressure. “Yes, I think Mum and Dad would like that.”

“Okay. Shall we-?”

“You choose one.” She pushed her chair back from Maya's desk and stood up. “I . . . sorry, Will, I need some fresh air.”

After she'd gone, he sat with the laptop open for several minutes, doing nothing. This was his last chance to be in her dorm by himself, among her things. Soon this corner of the room would be another girl's.

Eventually, all traces of Maya would be removed or overlaid.

At last, he navigated from Pictures to Documents and clicked the 'stories' folder. Twenty-seven, in alphabetical order by title. Glancing randomly down the list, he recognised

some she'd given him to read but most were unfamiliar. A few dated back to autumn 2012, when Maya was starting out in FY; before they were properly aware of one another. But which story did she regard as her best, or the one that best represented her writing – the piece, above all others, that she'd have wished to be read out in front of the entire school?

Will didn't know. Couldn't know. Couldn't begin to guess.

Then it came to him: it ought to be Maya's most recent story – the last thing she'd written, or would ever write. Yes. *Yes*. The memorial service would end with her final words.

He began to scan down the dates beside the titles, then realised it would be simpler to click the tab to reorder the stories by date. Except that, when he did so, the one at the top of the list had a blank date-box. It had to be the most recent, though – the title told him that:

Room Zero.

“How do you explain it?” Will asked, as the school chaplain sat back in his chair and removed his reading glasses. On the screen, the cursor blinked beside the final full-stop.

“I don't.”

“Her mum reckons the entire story is a premonition.”

They were in the chaplain's study, Mozart playing and the walls flickering with the light from the candles dotted about. The room smelled of smoke and wax and peppermint tea.

“That would be one explanation,” the chaplain said, massaging the bridge of his nose.

“Okay, so the first part of the story actually happened, *exactly* as she wrote it,” Will said. “But everything after the tunnel collapsed . . .” He doesn't need to finish the sentence.

“Then perhaps the story was written posthumously.”

“By Maya? But how could she possibly—?”

“Not Maya, no.” The chaplain's face looked weary in the candlelight. “It would have to be someone with access to her laptop. Someone who witnessed the events at first hand – at

least, until the accident.” He shrugged. “The rest of the story, he’d have to have invented. A leap of the imagination, you might call it.”

Will glared at him. “I was in hospital for two days,” he said. “I’ve been at home all week since then. And, yesterday, I was alone in Maya’s dorm for . . .” He tried to steady his voice, his breathing. “I hadn’t even finished *reading* the story when Lyra came back.”

The chaplain took a sip of tea. He said nothing.

“You can’t seriously think—”

“No, Will. Of course you couldn’t have written the story. But nor could Maya. She couldn’t have written it before she entered Room Zero and certainly not after she died. And no-one else could have done: not you, nor anyone.”

“I don’t even understand how the text got on to her laptop. I mean, if you open the file and click ‘properties’ it comes up totally blank.” Will showed him – *Type of file: unknown; open with: unknown; location: unknown; size: unknown; date created: unknown.*

“Yes, you’re right. It’s an impossibility.”

Will frowned. “So . . . what, then? There must be some kind of explanation.”

“The story can’t have been written, yet it was. It can’t exist, yet it does.” The chaplain spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. “That would be my definition of a miracle.”

“A miracle. Right.” Will reached forward to close down the document and switch off Maya’s laptop. “I guess it’s your job to believe in miracles, isn’t it?”

“Oh, no.” He smiled. “It’s my job to encourage other people to believe in them.”

Will laughed despite himself. He folded the laptop shut and slipped it back in its case.

“Maya’s family are happy for you to read this story at the service?” the chaplain asked, serious again.

“Yeah, they are. It’s her story, even if it can’t be.” Will held his gaze. “You only have to compare it to her other stories to know Maya wrote every word of it.”

“Then, yes, it should be read out.”

Will thanked him. Then he excused himself; he had to rehearse the reading.

At the front door, as they said goodnight, the chaplain said, “You know, there is an alternative explanation for how *Room Zero* came to be written.” Before Will could ask what it was, the man dismissed the idea with an odd kind of laugh. “But if it’s the right one, then the implications for all of us don’t bear thinking about.”

“What do you mean?”

The chaplain looked as if he might close the door without responding. But, softly, resting a hand on Will’s shoulder, he said, “Read well, tomorrow. Give Maya her voice.”

The chapel falls silent. It doesn’t seem possible for so many people to be so quiet. Will approaches the lectern awkwardly, hampered by the cast on his leg. He should look up – *address your audience, own your performance space* – but, if he sees those rows of faces staring at him, he will lose his nerve altogether. His throat is dry. But his hands shake so much he leaves the glass of water untouched for fear of spilling it.

He steadies himself. Raises his eyes as far as the feet of those sitting at the front.

“I’m going to read one of Maya’s stories.” Too quiet. Then, too loud, “It’s the last one she wrote.” He pauses. “It’s called *Room Zero*.”

Will lowers his gaze to the laptop, in position on the lectern. He set it up before the service, leaving the document open at the first page. Since then, the laptop has switched to ‘idle’ and is displaying the screensaver: a photo of Malvern College from the Senior Turf, with the hills in the background. It disorientates him. Her choice of screensaver doesn’t altogether surprise him – Maya loved this place. Even so, the picture’s association with that morning on the grass, back at the start of all this – and with the story itself – is so startling, so uncanny, he can’t help wondering if it has been placed there deliberately.

He composes himself once more. Touches the mouse pad to bring the text back up.

There is no text.

Just a blank screen with a toothpick cursor in the top left corner.

A thud of panic in his chest. Will taps the pad again. Nothing. Acutely conscious of hundreds of pairs of eyes watching him, he scrolls down, only there's nowhere to scroll to. All fingers and thumbs, he tries to close the document so he can go into the file-list and reopen it. But Maya's laptop is frozen on the blank page.

Somehow, he has wiped her story. Or the text has corrupted and deleted itself. Is that even possible? He taps the mouse pad again. Tries Ctrl-Alt-Delete. Nothing. Or someone has tampered with it. But he's been sitting at the front of the nave, three metres away, the whole time. The disappearance of *Room Zero* is as inexplicable as its appearance in the first place.

Around the chapel, the whispers have started. The restless creaks and shuffles.

Will's eyes brim with tears. He will have to look up from the blank screen – face everyone and tell them he's very sorry, he really doesn't know what's happened, but . . .

He can't take his eyes off the cursor. Blink. Blink. Blink.

The quotation from *Piers Plowman* – he knows it by heart. If he only says that, it will be better than nothing. He can stop, then. Apologise. Everyone will understand; after all, Lyra couldn't say her piece, either. Still staring at the laptop, Will swallows and begins speaking.

“We have–”

The instant he says ‘We’, it appears on the screen, as if typed by invisible fingers. Then, ‘have’. The same. Will stops in shock. The cursor blinks after the ‘e’ of ‘have’.

“We have no letter of our life, how long it shall last,” he says.

The sentence unfurls on the screen, character by character, as he speaks it. He almost bursts out laughing but checks himself. This *cannot* be happening. Yet here's the epigraph, as if the text was present all along, like a message inscribed in magic ink.

The first line of the story itself. He remembers that, too.

“I dwell among the last days, in the place where all things cease.”

I dwell among the last days, in the place where all things cease.

“My name is Maya and this is my story.”

My name is Maya and this is my story.

The cursor blinks, awaiting the next word. Will finds that word in his mind, inviting him to reveal it. He understands, in that moment, that all of her words are there, whether he remembers them or not. The entire story, ready to be told: beginning where it ends, ending where it begins. It will not go unseen, unheard.