



The

DISAPPEARANCE
BOY

a novel

NEIL BARTLETT

BLOOMSBURY

THE DISAPPEARANCE BOY

Neil Bartlett

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Bishopstone Halt

Let me try this for an opening.

There's a boy, standing on a railway track. He's a little boy – he looks eight or nine years old at the very most – and he's rather small and slight for his age. He is standing with his hands held straight down by his sides, and his feet are clamped firmly together. Seen from behind, he seems to be staring defiantly straight ahead at something, but we shall see in a moment that his eyes are in fact screwed tightly shut. He has oddly muscular shoulders, clumsily cropped hair, and is almost naked; he is wearing a pair of worn linen underpants – nothing else – and just the one hastily laced-up leather shoe on his right foot. He's as brown as a berry, all over. The railway track stretches away in front of him as a long straight line, and its rails are hazed with the mist of a fine English mid-September morning, so that they disappear into the distance.

As if it had been ruled across a map, this track more or less exactly bisects the brown and overgrazed field it runs through, and immediately beyond the scrubby blackthorn hedge on this field's southern side, divided from it only by a half-dry ditch of dead reeds, is a beach, a great slow curve of shingle that looks as though it reaches along the shore for at least a mile in both directions, east towards the yellowing cliffs of Seaford and west (behind the boy) towards the mouth of the river Newhaven. There seems to be no sand at all on this beach – all you can see are black, grey and dark grey flints, going on for ever, with barely a pale stone among them. Almost exactly halfway along their two-mile curve the stones rise to their highest point, and there on the crest of the shingle is perched a strange and lost-looking collection of white-painted concrete and timber huts, lifted above the stones on squat brick bases. These huts look as if they might be a hospital, or perhaps a school – a sanatorium, even – but it's hard to say for sure; there are no signs up anywhere, and it looks as if there is no one about to ask on this particular morning. All the windows are shuttered closed, and across the stones beneath them the English Channel stretches away to France as flat and cold as a well-sharpened knife. There are no boats about to give scale to its horizon, and no gulls either. There is hardly any wind, and no waves to speak of. A soft swell lifts and clatters the grey stones right down at the water's edge – and because the wind is so light, and because there seems to be nobody about, the whole scene is very quiet. Not even the reeds in that half-dried ditch are whispering. It is so quiet, in fact, that you can hear that the little boy is not crying.

His chin is up, his shoulders are pushed back as far as they'll go and his eyes are as tightly closed as those apparently abandoned windows (you can see that, now). His mouth is clamped shut, too – and now, as if he were getting ready for something, the boy spreads his legs and crosses his fists in the small of his back. Near-naked as he is, he seems to be standing 'at ease', sticking his elbows out to the sides and pushing his bony little chest forward as if he were expecting a medal. Or perhaps as if he were trying to meet some dreadful blow halfway – as if his infant breastbone were the breastbone of some defiant and easily smashed little bird, one of those softly feathered species that explode in the air when the shot or hawk hits them ... Whatever he's doing, his feet are now spread slightly too far apart for comfort, and because of the way he's standing you can now see what you may not have noticed at first, which is that there is something not quite right about this little boy's legs. The left one is a fair bit shorter than the right, and thin enough to make his foot look several bones too large; the left foot itself is turned markedly inward, as if his ankle had been attached in not exactly the right place. He's holding this left heel – the naked one – a good two inches clear of the weeping tar of the railway sleeper, as if he'd just trodden on a nail. The foot is shaking slightly. He still isn't crying. There still isn't a train.

And now there is.

And now the shouting starts.

A Mr Bridges, who in the calm, sunlit autumn of 1939 was living alone in the cottage which the stood next to the tracks at Bishopstone Halt (an unmanned concrete platform on the Hastings to Lewes branch line which had recently been constructed in case it should ever be necessary to get troops to the beach in a hurry), has spotted the tiny figure through his kitchen window. Fortunately, Mr Bridges has a clock above his sink, and he doesn't need to waste any time calculating in order to know that the next train is due past his window in less than three minutes; they run so close that they rattle his chin and their noise divides his solitary day into such regular parcels of time that he always knows when the next one is on its way. He also knows that this particular train isn't scheduled to slow down or stop. First he shouts and bangs on his kitchen window; then he wipes his hands on his dishcloth and runs out of his front door, shouting as he goes.

The little boy doesn't move. He doesn't even seem to hear.

As Mr Bridges runs, the oncoming train is still so far away from the two of them that it doesn't seem to be moving at all – east of Bishopstone Halt, the track runs dead straight towards Seaford for nearly a mile, and the distant blurred dot of the engine is barely visible at the vanishing point of the converging rails. It seems to shake slightly, even to *hover* in the distance, but not to be getting any closer. Mr Bridges knows that this is just an illusion. He knows that pretty soon the rails will begin to sing, the dot to swell, and before you know where you are it will be upon them. That's why he keeps shouting as he runs, calling out at the top of his voice and cursing his middle-aged legs for not moving as fast as he needs them to in this emergency. The spacing of the tarred sleepers forces him to clip his stride, which makes him swear even more – they are placed just too close together to let him breathe into a full run, and he knows that if he misses one and hits the clinker then a turned ankle will more than likely bring him down. Best as he can, he half lopes and half hobbles towards the boy, and, of course, straight towards the train. The dot hovers, and shakes, and begins to swell.

And now, right on cue, the rails begin their dreadful song; that strange, silvered, high-pitched music that can seem sinister at the best of times, and which now makes Mr Bridges want to vomit as he hears it change key and grow louder. He sees that the little boy – still thirty sleepers away, and with his legs still locked and spread – can also apparently hear or sense this change of key, because as the train approaches the child stretches his puny arms up and out to make himself into its target, and his fists seem to clench themselves into even tighter balls. The pain is starting to tear at Mr Bridges's side now. His breath is drowned out by the rails. And now comes the whistle –

Cut.

And now the boy is in his arms – under him, in fact; pinned down under him in the wet and stinking grass by the side of the track, because some instinct has made this middle-aged man cover the boy's body with his own as the train flashes by in a thunder of light and dark less than four feet from his head, wheel after wheel, rim on rail, metal on metal, less than four feet away from his wet, astonished, staring face (tears of relief, are they, or is that just sweat?) with his ragged breath still tearing at his chest and the pain in his side so sharp that he thinks he must have broken a rib. Did he really scoop up and then throw down this intransigent bundle of flesh so hard? And then, when the train has passed and the rails have spun out their song into its final dying whisper and the dot is getting smaller now and going away in the other direction, around a bend and away into the September haze as it heads for Southsea and Beddingham and Lewes and eventually Brighton, Mr Bridges gasps his breath back into his aching chest, and gathers himself. He gets up, and looks down at the bare-skinned creature lying half crushed in the broken grass between his feet, and he yanks the child upright with one big strong

hand. He's furious. He starts to slap the child, first on the back of the boy's knees and then right across his sunburnt face, ~~making a furious attempt to get him to open his eyes, or to speak – or something~~ Anything. And also to relieve his own feelings, I shouldn't wonder – yes, that's it; it is a mixture of shock and anger that is making Mr Bridges treat this little boy who he doesn't even know so badly, making him shout at the boy – making him bend right down so that their two very different faces are almost nose to nose, the big, red, wet, angry one and the little, screwed-shut, frightened and frightening one, making Mr Bridges roar right in the little boy's face between his great rib-tearing breaths, shout at him what the bloody, fucking, what the bloody fucking *hell*, and what if I hadn't been in my kitchen, eh? Eh? You little fucking. Well you can speak, can't you? Fuck.

No waves. No people. No boats.

Empty water.

Shattered windows. Screwed-shut eyes in a burnt brown face.

No wind.

And still no tears. None.

Not yet.

Wimbledon Broadway

The next time we see this dry-eyed little would-be suicide he will be hurling himself – as if risking welcoming collisions was somehow a constant in his life – down the wet, windy and about-to-get-crowded eastern pavement of Wimbledon Broadway, just before dinner time on a showery Thursday late March.

There are several important pieces of information I should probably pass on about him before we continue – that he's now grown up, for instance, but that you wouldn't necessarily know it to look at him; that the polio he had as a child has marked him out as different from other young men, but not so different that *everybody* stares; that, courtesy of a broken-down number 47 bus, he's rather late for work. There's much more I could say about him of course, but what I want you to concentrate on just now, as I introduce you to young Reggie, in this, the twenty-third year of his life – sorry, I should have said that earlier, that's his name; Reggie, Reggie (please don't laugh) Rainbow – as I introduce you to Reggie and encourage you to watch him closely as he makes his not-untroubled way down this particular strip of south London pavement, what I want you to notice most of all is how Reggie carries himself. It tells you a lot. I don't mean just his limp and his disproportionately strong shoulders or the built-up sole on his left boot – all of those are pretty obvious – but rather the whole impression Reggie makes as he levers himself through the thickening dinner-time traffic. He makes it look as if the slight and oddly proportioned body of his is some kind of badly wrapped parcel, and one which he seems fiercely determined to deliver on time – and without troubling anyone else for directions, thank you very much. Clearly, carrying it around is some kind of an effort, because even when he hits his stride on a clear patch of pavement he keeps his eyes down and his forehead furrowed; at times, the parcel seems to be about to slip clumsily from his grasp, and he'll pause for a moment, take stock, and reposition the two-sizes-too-large Harris tweed jacket he's wearing, wrapping the front of it protectively around his chest like a sheet of brown paper before continuing on his way.

Perhaps it's just the threat of a returning shower that makes him do that, but there is something about the way Reggie clutches and tugs at this unbuttoned jacket of his that has a very particular effect. It makes him look as if he's determined to protect whatever he's wrapping up so carefully from something more than just the chill March air. Of course, he *could* be doing this just because of the cold, as I say – that white shirt under the jacket looks thin, and worn – but the vehemency of the gesture combines with his short stature (Reggie is five foot three if he's an inch) to make him look oddly vulnerable. In fact, if you weren't able to catch the occasional flash of that downturned face – sharp-featured, bright-eyed and strikingly dark-skinned (weathered, I think would be the exact word) – then you might well be hard put to tell from your first impression if Reggie was an adult or still a child.

Whether he was a man of twenty-two or a boy of sixteen. Or even fourteen, at that height.

Not that I want you to feel sorry for him, not for a minute. He doesn't feel sorry for himself, and never has done, not since he was eight or nine – not since that morning with the train, in fact. He hates pity likes a dog hates cats, does our Reggie; hates it, in all its forms and sizes.

That's why, when he reaches the junction of the Broadway with Russell Road – where the shoe shop – young Reggie comes to a sudden and clumsy halt. Standing on a plinth just outside the entrance to the shop is a dummy made of painted and varnished papier mâché, and although Reggie has made the best job he can of ignoring the sight of this unpleasant object for several mornings in a row recently

on this particular morning he suddenly finds himself unable to keep up the effort any longer. The dummy depicts a four-foot-high little boy. His hair is an unlikely yellow, his lips a cheery cherry red and the whites of his turned-up eyes look like they've been slicked on straight from the tin. Dressed just a pair of shorts and a neat blue jumper, he's wearing a leg-brace – complete with carefully painted-on brown leather straps – and has a crutch jammed into his left armpit. With his right hand and this is the point of his whole existence – he is holding out a bright red loaf-sized collecting box whose slot is just the right size for a copper – or even, more optimistically, for a fat half-crown. If you're a passer-by then this little boy's blind stare is meant to make you smile sadly and fish in your pocket for some change, but that's not the effect it has on Reggie. In fact, if he thought he could get away with it, Reggie would have picked up a brick from a bomb site one morning this week and cheerfully smashed the face off the thing. Yesterday, he'd caught a shopper in the act of dropping her coin and then patting the boy's head with her gloved hand as if it belonged to a dog or well-behaved pony, murmuring a few well-chosen words of approval. This morning, there is no lady – thank God – otherwise I think there might have been some kind of a scene – but there are some raindrops caught in the boy's painted hair, and that, together with the memory of that murmuring, pale-gloved woman and her dropped coin – of the hollow noise it made – is what has stopped Reggie, late as he is. He knows exactly how it feels to be shivering in shorts and a piece of clumsily strapped-on aluminium on a cold March morning. He knows what it feels like to have wet hair, and to be small. He knows exactly how it feels to be looked down on.

He stares.

For a moment, his mouth works as if he wanted to spit, giving us a glimpse of some stained and pointed teeth – but then, without looking round to see if anyone is watching, Reggie takes a lurching step towards the sightless little effigy and reaches out and strokes the figure's hair himself, carefully chasing each and every one of the raindrops out from the grooves between the painted curls. When they've all gone, he steps back, and says out loud, *There, that's better.*

He stands a moment longer, staring at the boy some more, and at his crutch, and then, apparently remembering where he is – not to mention what time it is – he twists out a thin-lipped little grin – a grin with which you're going to become very familiar, I hope – and mutters *Sod it*, to himself this time, but loud enough to make a passing housewife grimace and tut as she tries to get past him and into the shoe shop. Ignoring her stare, Reggie wraps his parcel back up again with a quick one-two rearrangement of his jacket; a darting look at the black-and-white enamelled clock on the front of the Co-op opposite confirms that it's now gone twelve, so he lurches back off down the Broadway to deliver it at double time, pounding the pavement with that built-up boot of his as if he was angry with them both.

When he's up to speed, this young man can thread himself through a thickening lunchtime crowd as surely as a darning needle can pierce silk, and I have to say it's quite an act. Every human step is a fall from which we save ourselves, they say, but in Reggie's case that's even more true than normal; head down, he stabs the toe of that built-up left boot of his down into the paving stones in a kind of regular staccato *demi-pointe*, making it the pivot over which he then levers the rest of his top-heavy self, catching himself just in time. Only once does his technique falter, and that's when a puddle makes him misjudge his launch off the kerb at the corner of Southey Street – the kerbstone here is part of a botched-up repair to some bomb damage, and it tilts. He stumbles, and the two-sizes-too-big tweed jacket flaps open in the cold wind, revealing another underwing flash of white shirt. With the swiftness of habit he grabs it and rewraps himself, and the threat of an undignified tumble soon

passes. Once he's steadied himself, he taps himself on the chest, twice, right where the inside breast pocket of his jacket is, and then lurches on.

That breast pocket is where Reggie keeps his ration book – he's always on the lookout for anything sweet, is our Reg, and confectionery is still on points in the spring of 1953. It's also where, during the day, he keeps his knife. It's not a big or dangerous blade, being merely a two-inch penknife with a delicate mother-of-pearl handle – a lady's knife, really – but nonetheless, he never leaves his diary without it. He taps at his pocket like that quite often, without even realising he's doing it, just to make sure the knife's still there – either that, or for luck, I suppose.

Reggie's destination? A black-painted door with a black-and-white sign over it, hidden down a narrow alley just off Montague Road, which is only two more corners away. His employer? One Mr Edward Brookes Esquire, known in the profession as Ted or Teddy. His job?

Well, more of that later. It's all about timing, this business.

Timing, and –

Under the harsh glare of a single pair of floodlights, a dark-haired man in his late thirties is stepping out onto the stage of an empty theatre. The auditorium is silent, but the man strides on exactly as if he was cutting his entrance through an anticipatory swathe of applause. *His* jacket is an impeccably cut and close-fitting double-breasted wool-mixture dinner jacket, satin-lapelled. He is wearing white gloves with a single pearl button, and showing a full inch of starched cuff. His hair is carefully side-parted. His feet are accented in black patent, his trousers have a black ribbon side-stripe, and he is carrying a black top hat in his gloved right hand; in delicate contrast, the lighting is turning the thin coating of dust on the unswept boards of the stage into a soft, powdery silver. There's a fringed ivory silk evening scarf draped casually around his neck (the two horizontal lines of fringing are *perfect* level) and a snowy linen handkerchief juts in two crisp peaks from the appropriate pocket. Even his eyes are black and white. There's something very classic and even pre-war about the whole look – a touch of the Café Royal – and he's a handsome devil. The kind of man who looks as though he smiles for a living, if you know what I mean.

For now his face is pale, and deeply shadowed by the overhead floods, but you can easily imagine what the finished effect will be like when the warm glow of the footlights is doing its job and he is properly made up; you can just see how, when he shoots his cuffs and suddenly glances up at the house like that, the forbidding black glass of his eyes will shine and melt. I wouldn't be at all surprised if several women in the audience find themselves shifting slightly in their seats as his gaze brushes theirs – but then I would imagine that's the whole idea.

The man takes a pace forward, and stops. In the middle of the stage is a large object about the size and shape of a telephone box, draped in some kind of silver silk or satin-like fabric. He looks at it, and then at a wristwatch that he pulls out of his jacket. Then he walks offstage.

Then he walks on again.

He does this three times in a row.

From the way he walks, it would seem that there's some kind of imaginary music playing in the man's head. Something that he's trying to time his moves to, and that only he can hear.

The fourth time he makes his entrance he seems satisfied, and the frown that was beginning to collect on his forehead is ironed away. He hits a mark just down left of centre, about four strides away from the silver-draped box; then, still clearly timing each move to some imaginary music, he swings his top hat from his right hand smartly up onto his head and taps it into place. Turning sideways to show the stalls his profile, he raises first one hand and then the next, smoothly unbuttoning each of his gloves in turn. He removes them – all the while keeping his eyes moving along the rows of darkened seats in the stalls, one eyebrow ever so slightly raised – and then turns square to the audience again and cradles the gloves in his now-bare hands. He looks at them tenderly, as if they were a pair of innocent creatures that he was about to restore to their well-earned freedom. Then with a swift, jerking flourish, he brings his hands sharply down level with his crotch – and immediately flings them up and out to his right and left. Inexplicably, they are now empty, and the pair of white doves which ought to be circling high above his head in noisy bewilderment are nowhere to be seen.

He leaves his hands hanging in the air for a moment, and raises that black and questioning eyebrow ever so slightly higher. Then (without pause or explanation) he makes a pair of devil's horns with the pinkie and first finger of his left hand. He inserts these fingers into his full-lipped mouth, and mimes a loud, commanding wolf whistle.

This silence produces a sound.

~~A young woman enters, upstage right. She is wearing slacks, three-inch black *glacee* heels – the~~ source of the sound – a tight powder-blue sweater, and an even tighter smile. She's short – five foot two, I would say, if she took off those shoes. She ignores the large box and walks straight to her mark with exaggeratedly tiny and hip-swinging steps, as if her knees and ankles were tightly hobbled. She looks distinctly ill-at-ease under the heavy foundation she's wearing, and the harsh overhead lights aren't doing her scraped back bottle-blond hair any favours.

She waits.

Without looking round, the man pulls the silk scarf from his neck and prepares to throw it over his head. The woman gawkily prepares to catch it, clearly unsure of whether she'll be able to manage this simple task. The man's eyebrow goes up again – straight to the gods in the gods, this time – and with another quick flash of his hands he tosses the balled scarf high in the air, upstage right. His assistant's eager fingers splay and reach, but instead of gathering an arc of flying silk, they find only air; his hands, meanwhile, are once again elegantly empty. The young woman looks confused, but he doesn't wait; already his top hat is off and twirling in his hands, the oval of its scarlet lining a sudden and demanding mouth. As if he were playing with a favourite dog, he makes two slow swinging right-hand passes across the front of his body, clearly indicating that he is going to toss the hat stage left for the woman to retrieve. She anxiously totters across the stage behind him, readying herself for her task. He keeps his eyes on his audience – and then on the third swing turns his well-tailored back on them and converts the pass with the hat (which he now swaps deftly into his left hand) into a slow upward diagonal. He does this twice, moving very slowly and clearly for everybody's benefit – the dog included – and still exactly in time with his silent music. Neither he nor the woman has yet looked at the draped box. The hat is now down right of his body; suddenly, he double-times his gesture, flashing the hat up and down and up again, keeping strict time with three peremptory accents from an unheard snare drum – and as the girl stumbles forward to catch it on the expected third pass, both of his hands are suddenly up and to his left and empty again. The hat, of course, is nowhere to be seen; upstage, the girl gives a pantomime flinch of female failure to the sound of an accusing stroke from an imagined cymbal, and the man is already turning downstage again, with both eyebrows raised this time. He brings his empty hands slowly down, making a dismissive shrugging gesture that displays just how well cut that dinner jacket of his is across the shoulders. There is a momentary pause, in which he snaps the snowy linen handkerchief from his breast pocket, wipes the sweat from both his hands and then in three swift successive folds and one sudden landing swoop tucks it back whence it came, in two crisp peaks apparently – and inexplicably – as immaculate as they were before. All of this happens a bit faster than the eye can quite follow, but then his hands slow down again, as if they were considering what to do next. He shifts his attention back up to the gallery again, and then back down to the circle, and then finally to one particular seat in the middle of the stalls. His expression, though still officially deadpan, seems to shift; he flashes a look upstage at his assistant, and then back out at the empty seat. He is making, it would seem, a choice.

She, meanwhile, tries to look foolish and unconcerned at the same time.

In response to this slight shift in his expression – his brows furrow again, ever so slightly – it would seem that the silent music has just changed key. The man reaches slowly into his right trouser pocket and quite matter-of-factly produces a small coil of rope; soft, and scarlet. Snake-like. He looks down at it as if this prop were an old and valued friend, and gestures elegantly towards it with his other empty hand. Then, having now apparently decided what to do about his problem upstage, he once again shapes the relevant fingers into a pair of horns and inserts them into his mouth. Evidently the

wolf whistle is louder and even more commanding this time, because the problem springs nervous into action. She spins, and looks upstage. She doesn't do it that well, but you can see that she's pretending that the mystery object under the silken drapes is now being wheeled on from the wings. You can also see, from the way that the man now strides smartly across to downstage right, uncoiling and coiling the rope as he goes, that the music has changed tempo as well as key – something warmer and brighter seems to be suggested; something a bit more *promising*, if you know what I mean. The girl steps slightly to one side; clearly, whoever is wheeling the mystery object on from the wings is rotating it as it comes, and she needs to keep out of their way. As soon as it has come to a halt, and the man has coiled and recoiled his rope to his satisfaction, he beckons her over, indicating that she should hold out both her hands in front of her with her wrists pressed together. She hesitates, and looks a little worried, but then does what she is told, spreading her fingers out in a double fan. Without hesitating, the man swiftly and efficiently binds her wrists – twice round clockwise, once over and once through – and then –

Then, the music seems to falter.

The man stops, and stares straight into the girl's face. You can see straightaway that this gesture isn't part of the act; an imaginary drumstick clatters to the floor, and nobody in the pit dares to pick it up. An awkward silence installs itself on the stage, and the dust has time to settle across the boards like sifted flour.

Slowly and deliberately, the man in the dinner jacket removes the rope from the girl's wrists and starts to re-coil it. He takes his time, not giving either her or the empty seats out front any hint as to why he's stopped. Unsure of how to respond, she lets her body go slack; her hips push slightly to one side. Specifically, she seems unsure whether she ought to keep her wrists held out or not. She lets her eyes drop down to the floor and shifts from three-inch heel to three-inch heel, and for the first time the proceedings begins to look like an actual woman. She relaxes her face and attempts a smile, revealing that she's really quite pretty under all that make-up – but then she thinks better of it and snaps her mask back on, because the man is setting to work on her with the rope again now, looping it tightly round her wrists and quickly making her helpless. Again, he stops short of the final knot, and stares at her as if she ought to understand why.

This elaborate routine of threat and deferral happens four more times in a row. The silence intensifies.

If the seats out front are empty – and they undoubtedly are – then who is he doing all of this for? The stare before the missing knot gets stonier each time, and the repetition is beginning to look less like rehearsal and more like a punishment. Is it for something the young woman has done, or merely for something that she *is*? It is only when the man performs the move for the seventh time – the magic number, you might say – that the reason for this threatening hiatus in their routine emerges.

Despite herself, the girl's stuck-on smile has started to fray, and the insides of her wrists have started to sweat. She always tries very hard to get everything right for rehearsals with this bastard; she even rinsed her rehearsal jumper out in the sink last night, thinking he might have noticed she was making an effort – but stupidly, today of all days, she has forgotten to powder her wrists before starting work. She could kick herself, but it's too late now, and as the man starts to repeat the rigmarole with the ropes for the seventh time she once again shifts her body weight nervously from one three-inch heel onto the other, and rather too abruptly. This makes her unpowdered wrists slip on against the other, just at that vulnerable spot where the pulse beats under her skin, and – *hey presto!* – the two inches of spare red silk which are the crux of the trick, the hidden two inches of scarlet slack which the man has tucked swiftly between her wrists under cover of her splayed fingers and which

need to be kept firmly pressed between in place if the trick knot is to work, slip, and are suddenly revealed, spilling out from their hiding place like blood from a wound. From the frozen expressions of both of their faces (one angry, one afraid) it feels as if the soundtrack at this point shouldn't be just the clatter of one dropped drumstick, but instead the brazen din of some awful enamelled dinner plate or silver-plated tray being dropped loudly in the wings.

The woman waits, squeezing hard between her legs (she has just realised that she urgently needs to pop backstage to the Ladies – her bladder never does behave itself, not at the best of times) and he, of course, makes her wait. He re-coils his rope with conspicuous slowness. His voice, when it finally comes, is in lots of ways just like his face: handsome, clean-cut and effortlessly threatening. Without apparently raising it at all, and concentrating the whole time on his hapless, wronged and now-flaccid little scarlet friend, he says:

‘Shall we try that move just the *once* more, Sandra?’

Of course, she daren't reply.

‘Just the once more ... and without one *iota* of fucking feeling – if you wouldn't mind, my darling

Sandra keeps her nerve, and for some odd reason remembers at that exact moment that high above her head there is another woman also trying to keep her poise under difficult circumstances. The dome that topped the New Wimbledon Theatre's facade was (and still is) crested with a great gilt angel, the woman whose job it was to herald the attractions of the place with blasts from a silent, golden trumpet. For just a moment, Sandra wonders if her employer's is really the kind of language the angel is supposed to be advertising to the passing shoppers, but she knows better than to express any such thought. She tells herself to concentrate. In particular, she tells herself not to think for even a second about the things which this man's hands can and have and undoubtedly will again do to her on other and less professional occasions. She readies the backs of her wrists by giving them each a drying wipe across the sides of her thighs, and gets ready to spread her fingers and hope for the best. The man in the dinner jacket coils the scarlet silk, lets it drop and coils it again. The next time he lets the rope fall he passes the fingers of his left hand across his forehead as if trying to iron out that recalcitrant frown and now he's biting his bottom lip, which Sandra knows from experience is *really* not a good sign. She wonders whether to try saying something, and once again decides against it.

Clearly, things are not going well.

Sandra is, in a way, the least of this smartly dressed man's worries. Time was when even a low billing at a respectable south London house like the New Wimbledon would have pretty much shoehorned you into a few more useful bookings; this time around, however, the usual week-before-closing phone calls to his agent have failed to produce anything except a possible two-from-the-bottom return visit to the Bradford Alhambra – and that not until the middle of May, would you mind, when this was still the week commencing March the twenty-third. Everybody knew the touring game wasn't what it used to be – but that was bloody ridiculous, and he'd said so. The houses at the New had been thin all week and then there'd been the old Queen dying, and then – just to depress things even further – there'd been that very unpleasant splash across the front page of the *Mirror* about the bodies found papered up in a cupboard in Notting Hill, which had sent all the girls backstage into a proper twitter, and more to the point was hardly designed to put any of his normally appreciative female punters in the right frame of mind to enjoy a second-half spot billed in scarlet letters as ‘The Missing Lady’.

To make matters worse – if that were possible, which he was beginning to doubt – at the end of the first house yesterday Sandra had tapped on his dressing-room door and enquired with a quiet

unnecessary edge to her voice if he was planning to take her out for a quick bite somewhere between the shows, an enquiry that came just when he was in the middle of brushing his teeth in expectation of a backstage visit from one of his regulars, a very well-put-together bank manager's wife from Tooting who quite often turned up when he played south of the river, and who was always good to be touched for a new pair of cufflinks or a small cheque after they'd done the business. This error in timing had led to strong words between himself and Sandra, and then to a quick over-the-chair dressing-room seeing-to that had been meant to get her off his back for the rest of the week but in fact only served to remind him of how terminally dissatisfied he was getting with this particular set-up. There were bones, quite frankly, in all the wrong places. Then – to *really* add insult to incompetence – in the second house, when she'd held out her wrists for the ropes on the key change and was supposed to be looking straight out front and pulling focus with her very best 'Innocence Wronged' impersonation, misdirecting the house away from the double finger-spread that masked the false tie, she'd looked straight across-stage instead and winked at him, would you mind, actually bloody *winked*, completely putting him off his stride and almost causing him to lose the knot. Unrehearsed business like that from a girl was not something he would tolerate at the best of times – hence this bad-tempered lunchtime rehearsal – but in a week of unresponsive houses and tricky phone calls it was almost the last straw. In fact – amazing how things can come to a head over one tiny little detail, isn't it, and all this over a faked rope tie which ought to be one of the absolute basics – it was making him think that the whole bloody situation was in need of an overhaul. What with all the forthcoming celebrations, he'd fancied a summer season somewhere, but the chances of something like that coming in looked like they were receding fast. What were they calling it in all the papers? *The New Elizabethan Age?* – well what was he supposed to do? Come on dressed as Sir Walter fucking Raleigh and drop his cloak for some bloody tart to walk all bloody over? Would that get him a booking somewhere decent before the end of the month?

Instead of doing what he felt like doing, which was to forcibly remind Sandra that there were plenty of other girls in south London who'd be grateful to be got rid of twice nightly if she didn't fancy the job any longer – three times on Thursdays and Saturdays – the man in the dinner jacket re-coiled his rope, took a concealed deep breath and slapped his working face back on. *Every inch the gentleman*, that was what they all said about Teddy Brookes Esq., and who was he to disillusion anybody? His voice sharpened to match the smile.

'Wrists a bit higher this time please, Sandra. And our eyes are house front at this point in the act, and I'm sure you remember.'

'Certainly, Mr Brookes.'

He wished he could pull the rope tight, make it bite into her skin and remind her to get the misdirection fucking *right* this time, but you can't do that with a faked wrist loop; the hidden two inches of slack have to stay just that, otherwise the knot can't be dropped when she gets to her quick change. He compromised by flashing the rope round her wrists nearly twice as fast as he did in the actual act. Thank goodness, this time, it worked; her eyes stayed wide and the blood stayed hidden. He stepped away, apparently to admire his handiwork but also to check the time again on his watch.

'And where's our little limping wonder got to, do you reckon?' he snapped, baring his teeth in a snarl as stagy as a circus tiger's. 'Eh, Sandra, my roped-up lovely? What do you reckon's become of our little *Reggie*?'

Yes, that's right; there's my *reveal*, as they say in the business. Reggie is Mr Brookes's disappearance

boy. And what with being late because of the number 47 bus – not to mention the probable atmosphere he knows he's about to walk slap bang into, because Reggie's no fool when it comes to Mr Brook and his women – quite frankly, as he rounds his final corner into Montague Road, ignoring as he does so the patronising and golden gaze of the second sightless effigy of his day; as he swings left down side alley and thumps his way into work under the sign saying *Stage Door* with barely a nod through the window to Mr Gardiner, the door's keeper; as he heads, head down, into the labyrinth of white-tiled and white-walled corridors that will finally lead him onto the bright, dusty stage – quite frankly as he does all of that, *disappear* is just exactly what young Reggie Rainbow wishes he could sometimes bloody do.

It's a funny sort of job description, isn't it? Faintly disreputable. But then I suppose most ways of earning a living that don't begin until all the lights have gone down are, one way or another.

To explain; the disappearance boy is the member of the act who the public never sees. The one – the act is any good – that they will never even suspect is there. To qualify for the job the boy in question has to be small enough to hide in less space than anyone would think ordinarily possible; the muscles of his arms and shoulders must be strong enough to let him cling to the back of a swinging cabinet door, and his fingers must be deft enough to bring off a quick change in almost total darkness. He has to be sharp-minded enough to know *exactly* when to pull a hidden lever, and he has to have a taste for invisibility. For obvious reasons, the disappearance boy never – ever – takes a bow.

As it happens, Reggie has all of these qualities. You might even say he was born that way – or at the very least that his early life could almost have been designed to equip him for this particular and strange employment.

To explain:

You already know that it was a disease with a beautiful name that had made him so slight and short. *Poliomyelitis* – the word is striking, no matter how ugly its meaning, and on difficult days Reggie still finds himself repeating its musical syllables under his breath when he's out on one of his pavement-pounding walks, turning them over and over in his mouth, and still wondering why they had chosen him.

He'd once looked the word up in an encyclopedia, and read there that his story wasn't at all uncommon. According to the fine print of the relevant entry the virus had probably claimed him as its own courtesy of somebody's unwashed hands, and most likely entered his two-year-old body through the mucous lining of his throat. It had stopped short of its usual objective – destroying the motor neurons that connect the spinal cord to the muscles of the lungs, and murdering its host – and in his case contented itself with merely delivering what the entry called *Acute Flaccid Paralysis* to his legs. Then, he knew, he'd got lucky.

In the decade of Reg's childhood the accepted treatment of infant paralysis was something called *casting* – the immobilising of the afflicted limbs in heavy moulds of plaster of Paris. The process was thought to encourage recuperation, but often had the effect of wasting the very muscles it was meant to salvage, and sometimes even ended up condemning the child to life in a wheelchair. Reggie was spared this entombment by a simple accident of circumstance. He'd spent the first two years of his life in a ward on the third floor of the London County Council's National Children's Home up at Highbury Barn, and as luck would have it, it became official LCC policy at the end of that second year to favour out any child considered unlikely to ever become a suitable candidate for fostering to an independent charity. The now-twisted Reggie fell heavily into that class of unfortunates, and once he was out of immediate danger he was simply sent away. He'd already been given his new name – *Reggie* because by law every abandoned child the Home received on its wards had to be christened, and because Reginald was a popular name in the autumn of 1930; *Rainbow* because a sudden whim on the part of the Home's registrar made him hope that a little alliterative good luck might somehow rub off on such an optimistic surname's squalling new owner. Now he was given a new set of clothes for the journey, and the names were written out on a brown-paper label and tied to his wrist; then he was wrapped in a blanket and put on a train with a nurse. A taxi met them at Seaford Station and took them down the

bumpy unmetalled road that led past Mr Bridges's kitchen window, and then turned left along the timber track that led out across the shingle of Bishopstone beach itself. Reg made the entire journey in silence. He was one of the youngest children ever to have made it, and he lived out there on the stones for the next seven years.

It must have been a strange place. The Home for Poor Brave Things, it was called, and it cared for a small but constantly replenished community of orphaned or abandoned children with disabilities from wherever they arrived until they reached the age of sixteen. The most striking of the surviving images of how it looked in Reggie's day is a photograph showing nineteen little boys lined up in a row out on the black-and-grey pebbles in order of their height, seven of them on crutches and one in a wheelchair. All of them are scowling at the camera and all of them naked except for their institutional linen underpants. They are all shockingly dark-skinned, and seem to be about to be herded into the sea by a pair of nurses in gull-like headdresses and heavy overcoats – evidently, the morning when the photograph was taken was a cold one, despite the sunshine that defines every detail of the boys' bodies. Nobody looks as though they think there is anything odd about children being forcibly immersed in freezing water, neither the boys nor their guardians. They just look cross with the photographer for interrupting their routine.

Thalassotherapy, sea-bathing for invalids it is called now – another beautiful word for something so harsh – and though some commentators at the time labelled its pioneers barbaric, it has since been recognised as a perfectly legitimate therapy for wasting diseases like polio. There was much talk at the Home for Poor Brave Things of the light, air and salt water of the beach *cleansing* the Home's infant charges, of *stains being washed away* – as if disability, like being orphaned or illegitimate, was a sin rather than a fact – but that (I suppose) we must now forgive, as we must forgive the Board for choosing the Home's remote location so that the sight of its inhabitants shouldn't offend anybody. What matters now is that the doctors and nurses were at least to some degree right in their belief that self-help, fresh air, constant exposure to sunlight and above all repeated immersion in salt water could help repair their variously damaged and stigmatised charges. The regime certainly rescued Reggie. Being constantly half naked under the nurses' watchful eyes gave him the defiance he needed to survive; the painful daily slide down that bank of unforgiving flints and the screaming kicks against the beach's icy water strengthened his 'useless' leg, and the necessity for hauling himself across the floor of a chilly dormitory soon gave him a new and compensating set of muscles in his shoulders and arms. By the time he was seven, the metal brace that had been kept strapped to his leg for six hours a day as an infant was judged no longer necessary, and he swung and dragged himself from place to place using just a pair of crutches. He learnt how to live with bruises, and how to lie awake at night with no company except the moon slicing in through an open window, and no sound except the chatter of distant stones. Perhaps more importantly still, he learnt how to keep his head down, and to take care on his own the moment his nurses' backs were turned. Even before he could walk entirely unaided the young Reggie had learnt how to squeeze himself and his unusual body away in the gaps in other people's attention – and to be at home there.

Without meaning to, the Home even equipped him with the cabinet-clinging fingers that make him so invaluable to Mr Brookes, and the teeth that make him so reluctant to smile outright. The peculiar combination of strength and dexterity in his hands came not only from handling his crutches, but from the apprenticeship in metalwork that the boys were given three afternoons a week in the largest of the Home's huts. It was Reggie's allotted task to twist and trim wires which had been gripped in a vice, and it was a task he performed with grinning relish, nipping, jerking and clipping as if the bright metal deserved to be shown who was boss. The grin itself came about courtesy of the Home's kitchen suga-

cupboard. Once a week the ranges in the kitchen were used to manufacture boiled sweets which were then sent away for sale in a tea shop in Seaford; once a week, young Reggie would sneak in and wait for the cook's back to be turned. He loved the colours in their little stoppered bottles – bile green, rose pink – and the cyanide smell of the fake almond essence. He loved watching for the moment when the muscle-thick sugar threatened to blacken in the pan – and he loved to steal. Sugar quickly became his favourite food, and he still has the rotten teeth to prove it. His twenty-three-year-old self still keeps his lips sealed when he grins, lest they give away what he wants to keep hidden – and he still thinks of sweetness as something you have to steal when nobody's looking.

Every Sunday morning, the children were crocodyled over Mr Bridges's level crossing and onto a footpath that led over some fields to Bishopstone's tiny flint-walled church. Reggie didn't mind the walk – in fact, he always thought of the expedition as a treat. The windows of the church were full of stained glass, and on sunny days watching their colours come and go on the stone floor reminded him of the cellophane wrappers from his favourite sweets. One window was more brightly coloured than all the others, and he would always try and sit where he could see it. *Just like your name, Reg*, one of the nurses whispered, seeing him staring up at it. He grinned at her, lips closed, and looked back up. Sunday by Sunday, colour by colour, this window taught Reggie a lesson that wasn't directly stored in his body, but which nonetheless was planted so deep inside him that no surgeon's knife could ever have reached it.

He couldn't remember *when* the nurses had told him his mother was dead, but he was quite sure he had always known it as a fact. It never occurred to him to worry about the lack of detail in their story – the why and where and how – but instead he latched on to the good news in the tale, which was that she was now watching over him, and during his seventh summer, when every Sunday morning seemed to be sunny, and his favourite window always bright, this idea of being continually spied on and cared for began to take a very concrete form in Reggie's mind. The window featured a pair of bare-armed creatures swooping down from on high on outspread wings, all indigo and violet and parrot yellow – the source of the colours on the floor – and it was in exactly this gaudy and muscular shape that Reggie began to imagine his absent mother. The creatures in the window were smiling as they gazed down at the world, and as he stared up at them Sunday after Sunday it occurred to him that that was what she must be doing too. Admiring their muscular arms, he concluded that she would be well capable of turning up and carrying him away at a moment's notice should a dramatic rescue ever be required, and like a stolen sweet tucked in the roof of his mouth this secret thought would sometimes keep him grinning to himself all week. That thought was why, two years later, when at nine o'clock on a fine but hazy mid-September morning the staff and children were told by a flustered and scared-looking young doctor that instead of heading to the workshop for their metalwork training they were all going to be something called *evacuated*, young Reggie knew almost immediately what it was that he had to do.

The doctor – a junior – was in a state of shock. He'd only been given twenty-four hours to empty the buildings of the Home – Seaford Bay was thought to be a prime potential invasion site, and had been designated for immediate clearance and fortification by the Ministry of Defence – and had snapped out the phrase *or stay here and get shot* at one of the nurses when she had raised her hand and asked him if the Ministry really needed the children to leave quite so soon, making her cry. Although Reggie understood very little of the rest that was said, he knew he was in peril, and by the time the nurses had begun ushering their charges back to the dormitories to pack their cardboard suitcases he had already

hit on his idea. He waited for his supervising nurse to be distracted, and then – even though he was stripped to his underpants, because the children had been told to change into their Sunday best for the journey – he ducked under his metal cot, grabbed his crutches and shoes and dragged himself out of sight across the floor and out through a door.

The back of the dormitory led out onto a concrete sun terrace, and then down onto the beach. After working his way round to the rear of the kitchen block on the stones – falling twice in the process, and hurting himself quite badly – Reggie squatted on a doorstep to lace on his right shoe, and threw the left one out onto the beach; then he slid his hands and forearms into the biting aluminium supports of his crutches and began to propel himself furiously down the concrete path that led out onto the timber road. When he reached it, he swerved right – not looking back once – and swung himself away from the Home, his bare foot alternately dangling and dragging on the tarred timbers. Fighting his way through a ragged gap in a blackthorn hedge (he fell again at this point), he climbed the slippery grass of the embankment, threw away the crutches, and picked his spot on the line. As he drew himself upright on his chosen sleeper, he closed his eyes, not because he was frightened, but to help him listen out for the next sound he was sure he would hear; the downward rush of his mother's rescuing rainbow-bright wings.

What actually happened next, you already know.

Being swept off the line into a pair of unknown arms just as the scream of the train was drowned out in the thunder of its wheels taught that desperate little boy a powerful but contradictory lesson. In that moment between being knocked off his feet by the force of Mr Bridges's final lunge and the shock of landing under him in the long rank grass by the side of the tracks, Reggie really did think that he was being carried up into the air by his mother. By the time he finally opened his eyes – by the time they had been forcibly smacked open by Mr Bridges – he knew that he was on his own. I'm not saying that his childish self knew it in the same conscious way that his twenty-two-year-old self now thinks he knows it – he could never, for instance, have been able to put the thought into an actual, word-by-word sentence – but that was undoubtedly why the nine-year-old Reggie kept his eyes screwed tightly shut as Mr Bridges roared right into his face, and why he didn't cry. He needed time to think, and time to scrawl a pledge to himself across the back of his blood-dark eyelids. A pledge that he would never ask for anybody's help ever again – time to write it, sign it and seal it shut.

That promise is the reason why everybody backstage in Wimbledon agrees that Reggie's a young man who *knows how to keep his head down*. It's the reason why – from the methodical way he lays out Mr Brookes's props to his own cheerfully and filthily tight-lipped way with words – everything about our Reggie is pretty much self-contained. It also explains why Reggie was keeping his eyes so firmly fixed down on the pavement as he ducked round the corner into Montague Street. He's still allergic to rainbows, and to people with unfurled wings, no matter how golden or high up or obviously ludicrous they are.

When Mr Brookes looked up and saw Reggie finally limping out onto the stage that morning – jacket flapping, face twisted into that odd little tooth-hiding grin of his – he completely forgot to be angry. Typical Reggie, he thought – slipping on like a fox through a letter box, jaunty as all get up and without a trace of apology on his face.

'Ah, Reggie,' he said, re-coiling his rope one more time. 'So good of you to join us.'

'Sorry, Mr Brookes,' replied Reggie, pulling his lips even tighter, surreptitiously tapping his breast pocket while he did it.

'That number 47 was being a right pain in the arse again. Where've we got to then? D'you want m

inside the apparatus?

Illusion acts are always rehearsed without witnesses; as with certain other bits of life, it all has happen behind locked doors. In order to describe how this particular rehearsal continued I'm obviously going to have to break with that convention, but I don't want anyone to accuse me of taking the magic out of the proceedings. So first I'm going to describe the act as it will be tonight when the lights are up on the six thirty house, and then I'll go back and show you how Mr Brookes does it. All I'd say by way of a warning is that you need to remember that a magician is not someone who deceives, but someone who keeps his promise. Which is to deceive.

All right?

Sandra is just about to be lifted up onto a chair to have her ankles secured as firmly as her wrists, and the band are already on their fourth chorus of Ray Noble's 'The Very Thought of You'. The lights are starting to get properly warm. As I promised you earlier, Mr Brookes is looking even more the handsome devil than ever – now that it's show time, he's wearing a strong foundation, surprising firmness, firmly pencilled eyebrows, pulpy red lips and enough mascara to make sure that that penetrating gaze of his reaches right up to the cheap seats. Sandra, in comparison, is still looking quite pale under the pulled-backed scrape of blonde hair of hers. She's smiling, of course, and doing her best to make the most of her costume – back-seamed stockings, matching black satin skirt and blouse, starched collar, cuffs, cap and apron – but after her afternoon ordeal it can't be said that she's looking quite as pert as a French Maid is usually paid to look. The satin of her skirt is so tight that it makes it difficult for her to move. When Mr Brookes walks round in front of her, however, squeezes his hands onto her hips and gives her a quick lift, she's suddenly up on the chair in one straight-from-standing jump – and if you think that's easy, just you try it in three-inch heels and with your wrists tied. She wobbles slightly, but Mr Brookes moves swiftly on; another coil of scarlet rope appears from nowhere, and this one is deftly looped and knotted around her ankles. Mr Brookes gestures dramatically to the flies, and to the sound of a smartly timed cymbal-crash a spotlight hits the exact centre of the stage, outlining in silver the mysteriously draped object that has been waiting so patiently for its moment in the limelight.

Now we seem to be getting down to the point of these elaborate proceedings.

Leaving Sandra stranded on her chair, Mr Brookes prowls around the drapes as if they concealed a familiar adversary. In the pit, the band vamps admirably. Mr Brookes stoops, and gathers a handful of silk. Up on her chair, Sandra – still smiling – shifts her weight nervously from hip to hip, and with (thank goodness) her wrists and ankles pressed firmly together. Then, preparing himself exactly as if he were about to execute that old chestnut whereby the conjuror pulls a tablecloth away without breaking a single plate, Mr Brookes whips the drapes away with a matador flourish, and sends the object flying – silver, suspended, gone-in-a-flash – into the wings.

What is revealed is exactly what you would expect under the circumstances.

It's looking pretty battered, but the harlequin paintwork on the cabinet still shines in the lights and at just short of ten feet tall, it's impressive. Mr Brookes's hands respectfully request that we inspect it closely while we still have the chance. The sides of the box are smooth, except for a strip of moulding about two feet off the floor; it has six small brass handles, one set just inside each of the four corners about five feet off the ground and two on a pair of wardrobe-like doors set in the front panel. For some reason, these doors don't reach down to the ground, but stop short just above the line of the moulding. Drawing our attention to this feature, Mr Brookes once again spreads his lips with two

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