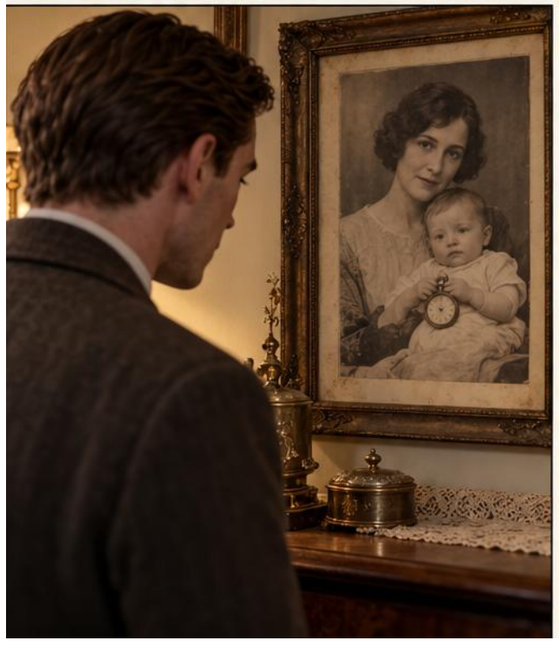







The House That Stayed

Arthur Bell was halfway down the garden path when he noticed that someone had stolen the elm tree.

He stopped with his hand in his coat pocket. The penny for the evening paper lay between his fingers. Behind him, the front door clicked shut.

The tree had stood opposite his house that morning, its roots lifting the pavement outside Mrs Finch's. Now there was a grey concrete post with a lamp at the top. Mrs Finch's house had gone too. In its place stood a block of square balconies, each with a glass railing, and beneath them a motorcar without a radiator grille was rolling silently towards the junction.

Arthur looked back.

Number fourteen was still there. The same red brick, the same chipped lion on the gatepost. But his climbing rose had become a thick, twisted thing, and the brass knocker had turned almost black.

He climbed the steps and tried his key. It entered the lock but would not turn.

He knocked.

Somewhere inside, a dog barked twice. A woman's voice said, "Yes, yes, I heard him."

The door opened on its chain.

An elderly woman regarded him through the gap. She wore trousers and a blue cardigan. Her white hair was cut close around her ears.

"Can I help you?"

"I live here."

She glanced at his shoes, then his hat. "I don't think so."

"My wife is inside. Edith. I only stepped out for the paper."

The woman stopped moving.

From the hall came the familiar ticking of his clock. Arthur had spent Sunday afternoon replacing a tooth in its escape wheel. Its beat was slightly uneven. He would have known it anywhere.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Arthur Bell."

She shut the door.

For a moment he thought she had gone to fetch Edith. Then he heard the chain slide, and the door opened wide.

The hall smelled of furniture polish and something warm cooking. His umbrella stand was gone. The wallpaper was wrong. Above the stairs hung a photograph of a smiling young woman holding a baby.

The young woman was Edith.

Arthur knew the photograph. He had paid the photographer four shillings for it that August. Margaret had cried until the man let her hold his watch.

But the photograph in this hall was yellow at the edges, its black frame rubbed pale at the corners.

"Tell me something," the old woman said. "Something nobody would know."

He looked from her to the photograph.

"The child is holding a watch. She broke its chain. I paid another sixpence."

The woman reached for the little table beside the door. Arthur caught her elbow before she fell.

"Good heavens. Shall I fetch somebody?"

She began to laugh. It was a dreadful sound, with no amusement in it.

"You'd better come in," she said. "I've rather a lot to tell you."



A hundred years

Her name was Ruth Mercer. She was seventy-five years old. The date, she told him, was the twenty-seventh of October, 2026.

Arthur listened with the courteous attention he gave customers who insisted that their clocks ran slowly only in winter.

Then she showed him the telephone.

It was a black rectangle without a wire. She touched its face, and a man appeared inside it, speaking from somewhere called a space station. Beyond his shoulder the earth curved blue and white against darkness.

Arthur stood up too quickly. The dog, a squat brown creature called Pip, retreated under the table.

"That could be a moving picture."

"It is a moving picture."

"Then it proves nothing."

Ruth nodded, as though that were a reasonable objection, and brought him the family Bible.

He recognised the cracked leather cover. Edith kept it in the bottom drawer because she disliked dusting it. Inside were the names she had written herself: their marriage in 1922, Margaret's birth in 1924. Beneath them, in another hand, were a marriage in 1949 and Ruth's birth in 1951.

Margaret's death was recorded in 2013.

Arthur read the entry several times. His daughter had been two when he left the house. She had been wearing one stocking because the other was drying by the range.

"My mother," Ruth said.

He examined the old woman's face. He could find nothing of the baby he knew until she frowned. Then there was Edith, briefly and unmistakably, between her eyebrows.

"Where is my wife?"

Ruth closed the Bible.

"I'm sorry."

He went into the kitchen. There were white cupboards where his dresser should have been, a window looking onto an unfamiliar extension, a kettle with no place for a flame. He touched the wall beside the doorway. Beneath the paint he found the shallow dent his workbench had made when they moved in.

That was what persuaded him. Not the dates or the little pictures. The dent had been plastered over badly. Edith had said nobody would ever notice.

He sat down.

Ruth put tea before him. She had used the blue cup with the crooked handle, the one Edith bought as a second.

"You disappeared," she said. "That evening. She thought you'd had an accident. They searched the river."

"I was going to the newsagent."

"I know."

"Does she have a grave?"

"Yes."

He pressed his thumb against the cup's handle until it hurt.

"We'll go tomorrow," Ruth said.

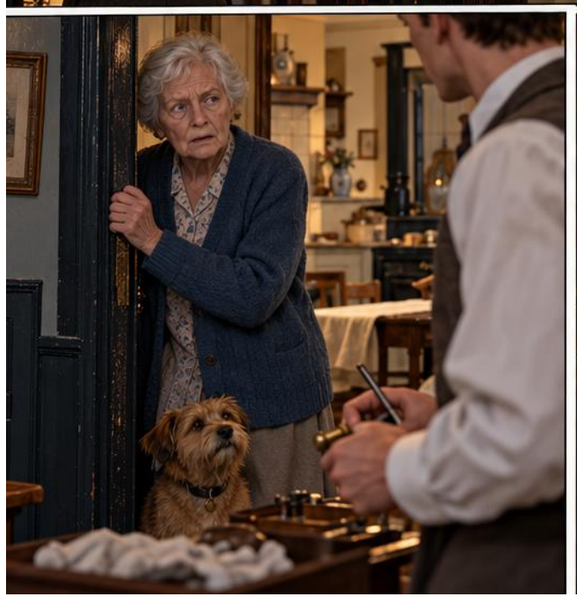
He shook his head. Tomorrow was not a thing he could consider yet.

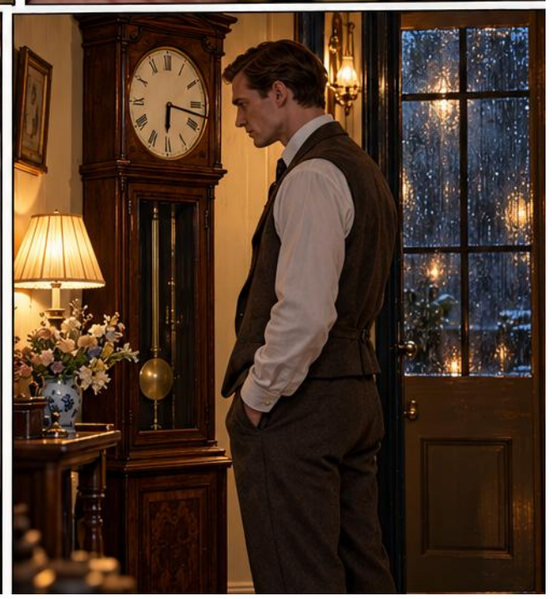












Seventeen minutes past six

He slept in a room that had been his workshop.

Sleep was the wrong word. He lay beneath a light quilt while motorcars whispered past outside, trying to remember whether he had kissed Edith before leaving. She had been peeling potatoes. Margaret was on the floor arranging wooden pegs inside his slipper.

He had said something about rain.

At three in the morning he went downstairs.

The hall clock stood where it always had, its walnut case shining in the light from a small lamp. His father had made the case; Arthur had built the movement. It was a three-day clock, an inconvenient thing, but Edith liked the ritual of winding it.

Its hands pointed to seventeen minutes past six.

He checked the little clock above Ruth's kitchen door. That said 3:04.

The hall clock was ticking. The pendulum was moving. The hands were not.

Arthur opened the case.

The winding square had snapped clean off. He found its broken end on the floor of the cabinet, bright metal without a trace of age. The spring was still driving the escapement, but the motion work that should advance the hands had jammed.

He had wound it at six that evening. His evening. A hundred years ago.

"It stopped when my husband died."

Ruth stood in the kitchen doorway with Pip beside her.

"That was four years ago," she said. "I've never had it repaired. Then tonight it started. Just before you knocked."

He turned the broken square between his fingers.

"Have you got any tools?"

"Arthur."

"A small screwdriver. Pliers. Anything."

"Please don't take it apart."

He looked at her. She was holding the doorframe with both hands.

"You think it brought me here."

"Don't you?"

Outside, rain began against the front window. Arthur returned the broken piece to the cabinet. He had repaired machines all his working life, and never once been afraid of what might happen if he stopped one.

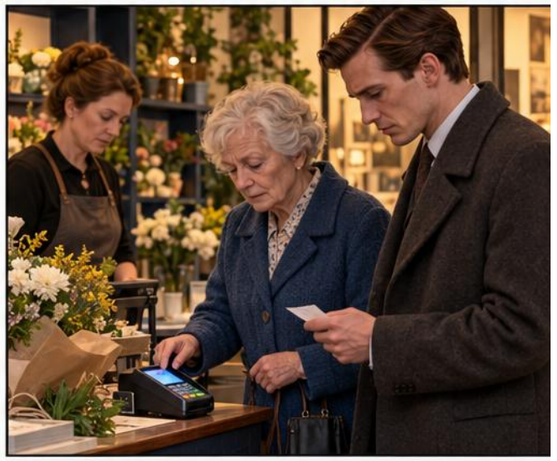
Ruth went to make more tea.

He stayed beside the clock, listening.













The year I left

In the morning Ruth lent him her husband's coat. His own was too thin, she said, although the day seemed mild.

They walked to the cemetery. Arthur stopped at every junction, unable to judge the speed of the traffic. Ruth took his arm without comment.

Edith's grave lay beneath a yew near the far wall.

EDITH BELL. BELOVED MOTHER OF MARGARET. 1901-1926.

He knelt before it.

For some time he could hear only a leaf scraping backwards and forwards across the gravel.

"This year," he said at last.

Ruth said nothing.

"The year I left."

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"There was a fire. At the house."

He stood, with a hand against the stone. "Margaret?"

"She was brought out. She went to Edith's sister. She had a good life, Arthur. She married a decent man. She was a teacher."

"What day?"

Ruth looked down at the dog.

"What day was the fire?"

"The thirtieth."

Three days after he had gone to buy a newspaper.

He walked away from the grave, then came back because leaving felt wrong. The stone was clean. Someone had put fresh flowers in the holder: small yellow chrysanthemums, still wet from the florist.

"You bought these."

"Yesterday morning."

"You knew the anniversary was coming."

"I come every year. Mum did, before me."

He had imagined, without examining the thought, that a hundred years would mean neglect. An unreadable stone under weeds. Instead his wife had been visited and tended by people she had never had the chance to meet.

"Thank you," he said.

On the way home he bought the chrysanthemums a companion, using a piece of plastic Ruth pressed against a machine. The woman behind the counter asked whether he wanted a receipt. Arthur said yes because he did not understand the question.

He kept the little slip. It was the first thing he had acquired in this century.

That afternoon Ruth showed him photographs of Margaret: school uniform, wedding dress, a bathing costume on a windy beach. At forty she had Edith's eyes and his unfortunate chin.

"Was she happy?"

"Often. Not all the time."

He liked Ruth better for that answer.

At seventeen minutes past six, someone called his name from the hall.

It was Edith's voice.








Two streets

He knocked over his chair.

The front door was closed. Through its narrow pane of glass he saw the outline of the elm tree against the evening sky.

"Arthur?"

He seized the handle. Ruth caught his sleeve.

"Wait."

He pulled the door open.

For a moment there were two streets occupying the same space. A white van stood inside the outline of a horse and cart. Rain fell through the dry air. Then the van vanished.

Across the road, Mrs Finch was standing beneath her porch light.

Arthur leaned forward.

The garden path stretched away from him, impossibly long. He could see his own gate but could not make his foot reach the step. The air resisted him like deep water.

He shouted Edith's name.

Behind him, the kitchen changed. For a moment he saw the old range, his slipper on the floor, a woman bent over the sink. Then Ruth's white cupboards returned.

The clock stumbled in its beat.

Arthur fell back against the hall table. The street was modern again.

He tried the door three times. On the fourth, Pip escaped onto the path and had to be retrieved.

Ruth stood beside the clock, crying silently.

"You heard her," Arthur said.

She nodded.

He fetched paper and a pencil. He recorded the time, the weather, the sound of the mechanism. Writing steadied his hand.

"It lasted perhaps twenty seconds."

"I didn't count."

"Tomorrow it may last longer."

Ruth sat on the bottom stair.

"Or it may never happen again."

He opened the clock cabinet. The spring had unwound by roughly a third. At its usual rate it would stop on the evening of the thirtieth.

He could not prove a connection. He told Ruth that. Nevertheless, he looked through her husband's toolbox for something that would fit the broken winding mechanism.

There was nothing.

"I'll need a workshop."

"And then what?"

"Repair it. Keep it running."

"You don't know that's what will happen."

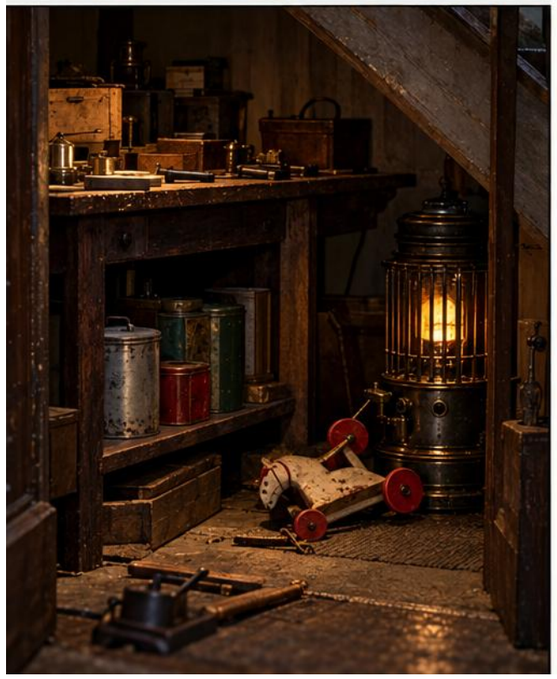
He had already reached the same objection. Extending the spring might extend the opening, or close it, or send the whole house somewhere neither of them could imagine.

He put down the pliers.

Ruth watched until his hands were empty.








Hands lifting her

The next day she took him to a clock repairer in the town centre.

Arthur had insisted. Ruth had insisted on coming.

The shop was small and comfortingly crowded. A woman younger than Arthur examined the broken square through a magnifier, then asked him three questions that made him stop worrying about her age.

She could make a replacement, she said. It would take a week.

"I haven't a week."

"Then you need somebody with fewer jobs waiting."

On the pavement outside, Arthur began to laugh. Ruth looked alarmed.

"I've said exactly that to people," he explained.

They went into a cafe. He accepted coffee from a machine that roared like a boiler, and Ruth told him about her husband, Daniel. He had been an architect, bad at gardening, good at apologising. They had no children.

"Did you always live in the house?"

"No. Mum bought it back in 1978. She'd wanted it all her life. I thought she was mad."

"After the fire?"

"The shell survived. They rebuilt the inside. She said it was the only place she remembered you."

"She remembered me?"

"Hands lifting her. That's what she said. She couldn't remember your face."

Arthur looked at his hands on the table.

Ruth continued, too quickly. "When she died I couldn't sell it. Daniel understood. After he went, I couldn't sell anything."

"And the clock?"

"One of the neighbours took it out before the fire brigade arrived. Mum had it all her life."

He tried to imagine the clock hanging in another house, ticking through his daughter's childhood without him.

"It's a lot of house for one person," he said.

"Yes."

She turned her coffee cup by its handle.

"I know how to get through a day," she said. "People imagine that's the hard part. But I've become very good at getting through them."

He could think of nothing useful to say. He asked her about the dog instead, and she told him how Pip had eaten a hearing aid belonging to a man she disliked.

For several minutes they were simply two people having coffee.

That evening the doorway opened again.

This time Arthur could put his hand through. Cold rain struck his fingers. On the other side a policeman walked past the gate carrying a lamp.

"Have you found him?" Edith called from somewhere beyond the hall.

Arthur shouted until his throat hurt. The policeman did not turn.

Then, through the thin light, Arthur saw something else: his workbench standing beneath the stairs, tins of cleaning fluid on its lower shelf. Beside them a child's wooden horse lay tipped against a paraffin heater.

He had meant to move those tins. He remembered saying so.

The opening shut on his wrist without pain. His arm was suddenly back inside the house, his fingers wet.

Ruth brought a towel.

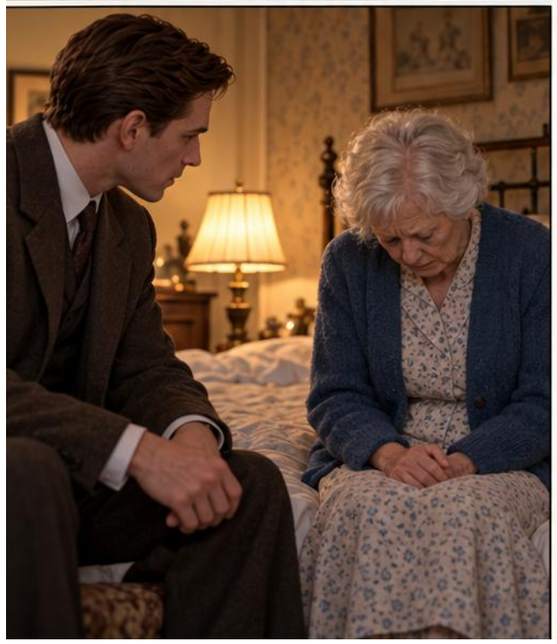
"Tomorrow," he said. "I think tomorrow I can go through."

She gripped the towel between them.

"Please don't go back."








The unknown man

He found the newspaper cutting after midnight.

Ruth had shown him how to enlarge photographs on her tablet. She had also shown him where she kept the family records. He did not think of opening the folder as an intrusion until he saw its name: Arthur research.

The cutting was dated the first of November, 1926.

WOMAN LOST IN HOUSE FIRE. CHILD SAVED BY UNKNOWN MAN.

He read slowly, enlarging each column with two uncertain fingers.

The fire had begun shortly after six on the thirtieth. A neighbour, Mrs Lillian Finch, reported seeing a man emerge from the burning house carrying a small child. Having passed the child to her, he re-entered the building. He was not seen again.

The child's mother was later found upstairs. No second body had been recovered, but the collapse of the staircase made a full search difficult.

Mrs Finch had described the man as young, bareheaded, wearing a dark coat. Smoke and darkness had prevented her from seeing his face clearly.

Arthur went upstairs and knocked on Ruth's door.

She took one look at the tablet and sat on the edge of the bed.

"You should have told me."

"I thought you would run straight back."

"I couldn't even open the door."

"I wasn't thinking sensibly."

"You let me stand at her grave without telling me there was a chance."

Ruth flinched.

"A chance of what? That you can put out a fire with your bare hands?"

"Of doing something."

He looked down at the cutting. Young. Dark coat. No body.

"You think that's me."

"I didn't until you came."

"Margaret was saved. If I don't go—"

"We don't know any of it. Perhaps another man goes in. Perhaps it's already happened and nothing can change."

"Then I ought to know what I'm deciding."

She bowed her head.

In the silence he heard Pip scratching his bedding in the next room.

"Mum waited for you," Ruth said. "Not literally. She knew you'd be dead. But every time somebody found an old record or sent a photograph, she hoped there'd be an answer. I watched her do it for sixty years. Then I started."

"And now you've found me."

"Yes."

He wanted to remain angry. It would have been easier than seeing how frightened she was.

"You're allowed to want me here," he said. "But you can't hide the way home."

She nodded. He left the tablet on her dressing table and went downstairs.

At the bottom he stopped. His workbench had once stood in that narrow space. He had brought it inside for winter, set the tins underneath, and thought nothing more about them.

He sat on the stair until morning.








The red wheels

Ruth found him there at seven.

She brought the family records in a cardboard box, including things she had not scanned. There were letters, photographs, a school exercise book. On top lay a cassette recorder.

"Mum made this in 1998. For a local history project. I haven't listened to it since the funeral."

She pressed a button.

An old woman's voice filled the hall, hesitant at first, then clearer. Arthur heard his daughter describe the little wooden horse he had carved for her. She remembered its red wheels. He had forgotten painting them.

The interviewer asked about the fire.

"There's very little I trust," Margaret said. "People tell you a story often enough and you start remembering their version. But I remember a man carrying me. His collar scratched my cheek. He put my hand inside his coat because I kept reaching for the light."

Arthur looked towards the coat hanging by the door.

"Did you see his face?"

"No. I was crying for my mother. I always wondered if he thought I wasn't grateful."

Ruth stopped the machine.

Arthur had both hands over his mouth.

"There's something else," she said after a while. "The fire brigade report. The roof above the rear bedroom had already come down before the neighbours raised the alarm. That's where Edith was found."

She gave him the page. She did not soften it or turn it away.

He read it and handed it back.

"Thank you."

They spent the morning making preparations. Neither called it a plan to save Edith. Arthur could not bring himself to say what it was instead.

Ruth fetched the household fire extinguisher. He learned how to release the pin and aim it. She found leather gloves and a torch, and explained why a wet cloth would not make smoke safe to breathe.

They measured the distance from the front door to the old kitchen. Ruth's repairs had altered the rooms, but Arthur remembered the route.

"The opening lasted forty seconds yesterday," she said. "I timed it."

"It might last a minute tonight."

"Might."

He nodded.

She put a chair beside the clock and set the recorder on it.

"I'll count out loud. If you can hear me, you'll know."

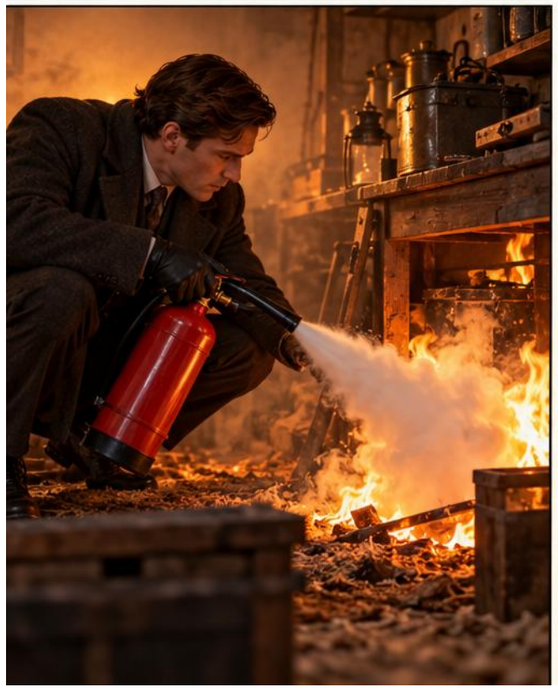
"And if I can't?"

Ruth pulled the heavy modern coat from its hook.

"Then don't wait for me to call you back."








Through the doorway

At six o'clock Arthur wrote Edith a letter.

He got as far as My dear girl and stopped. Everything he wanted to say assumed that she would be somewhere to read it.

He folded the sheet anyway and put it in his pocket.

Ruth was beside the front door. She had tied Pip in the kitchen and cleared the hall table out of the way.

"I used to think you ran off," she said. "When I was little. Mum never did, but I thought she was being kind."

"I know."

"No. I need to say it. I was angry with a man I'd never met, for leaving her."

He fastened the borrowed coat.

"So was I," he said.

The clock faltered.

Through the door's glass, the evening street darkened. Smoke slid beneath the frame. The hall filled with the smell of hot paint.

Arthur opened the door.

His garden lay before him, shining with rain. Across the road Mrs Finch stood on her step with both hands raised to her face.

Behind him, inside the outline of Ruth's hall, flames were climbing the underside of the stairs.

He turned sideways and passed through the doorway.

For a dreadful second he felt the two houses pull against him. Then his boots struck the old tiled floor, and the heat struck his face.

"One," Ruth called, very far away. "Two. Three."

He crouched. Smoke lay in a moving layer above his head. The extinguisher's white cloud drove back the flames at the foot of the stairs, revealing the spilled tins beneath his bench.

"Margaret!"

A cough answered from the kitchen.

He crawled towards it. His daughter was behind the open pantry door, sitting with her hands over her ears. One foot was bare.

For a moment he could only look at her.

Then something crashed overhead.

He took her up. She struggled, reaching beyond him towards the stairs. He tucked her hand inside his coat and held her against his shoulder.

"I've got you, Peg."

At the front door, Ruth's hall appeared as a pale second room behind the smoke. He could hear counting, but not the numbers.








The choice

He carried Margaret out onto the path.

Mrs Finch came through the gate. He pushed the child into her arms.

"Take her away. Don't let her come back."

"Sir! Where are you—"

He was already turning.

Inside, the stairs had begun to sag. Above them was the passage to the rear bedroom. Edith had gone up there. Perhaps for a blanket, perhaps because she thought Margaret was in her cot. An ordinary decision. He would never know which.

He put one boot on the bottom step.

The banister tore away from the wall.

"Edith!"

There was no answer.

He climbed another step. Burning plaster struck his sleeve. Through a break in the ceiling he saw rain falling directly into the bedroom.

The report had been right.

He had known it was right before he came. Knowing did nothing to help him take his foot off the stair.

"Fifty-four!"

Ruth's voice came clearly through the doorway.

He turned. Her hall was narrowing, its edges shivering inside the fire. She stood beyond it with one hand extended, as though he were merely crossing a busy road.

Arthur looked up once more.

Then he went to his granddaughter.








The clock falls silent

He fell through onto the modern tiles. Ruth dragged him clear.

Behind them the clock gave a small metallic click. The pendulum moved to the left and stayed there.

Cold air entered through the open door. A bicycle passed the gate. There was no smoke outside.

Arthur tried to rise.

"Stay down," Ruth said.

"I left her."

Ruth knelt beside him. She was speaking into her telephone, giving the address. Then she put it down and took his hand.

"I heard you call her."

"I left her there."

She did not say it was all right. She sat with him until the ambulance came.

Later there were questions he could not answer, a bright room, oxygen through a mask. Ruth told people that he was family. Nobody seemed satisfied, but they treated his burns and let her stay.

When they returned to the house, the borrowed coat lay across the hall chair. Its collar was blackened. Inside the pocket, his unfinished letter had browned at the edges.

Ruth took out her tablet. Together they looked at the newspaper cutting.

It had not changed. Unknown man. Child saved. No second body recovered.

"They never found you," she said.

Arthur touched the bandage on his hand.

"No."

He looked at the clock. The hands still pointed to seventeen minutes past six.

For the first time since arriving, he was glad it had stopped.








Taking his key

November was difficult.

There were forms, and explanations Ruth gave more than once, and long periods when Arthur sat in the kitchen unable to decide what to do with an hour. Sometimes he woke convinced he had heard Margaret downstairs. Once he bought potatoes and stood holding them in the shop because he could remember Edith's hands peeling them more clearly than her face.

Ruth learned to ask whether he wanted company. He learned that she sometimes wanted it too.

They went to the cemetery on Sundays. He told Edith about their daughter, borrowing the details from Ruth: the teaching, the beach holidays, the husband who made her laugh. He disliked speaking before Ruth at first. Then he found she often remembered something he had left out.

The clock repairer offered him a few hours' work after he corrected her description of a French carriage movement. She paid him properly and ignored him when he called her miss. Within a fortnight they had their first disagreement about a repair.

He came home cheerful and felt guilty for it until Ruth asked what had happened.

In December he repaired the kitchen drawer that had been sticking for years. Ruth complained that she had grown accustomed to it. He moved the hall clock into the workshop and left its spring unwound.

One evening she found him making a small wooden horse. He had ordered red paint, with considerable assistance, from a shop he had never visited.

"Who's that for?"

"Nobody yet."

She picked it up carefully. "Mum would have liked it."

"I know."

They were quiet for a while. Pip snored beneath the bench.

"You could sell these," Ruth said.

"Let me finish one first."

After supper he put on his coat and reached for the front-door handle. Then he stopped.

Ruth looked up from her book.

"Where are you going?"

"Shop. We need milk."

"You've got your telephone?"

He patted the wrong pocket, then the right one.

She smiled and went back to reading.

Arthur opened the door. The street beyond was lit by the grey concrete lamp. Across the road, behind glass balconies, people were eating their dinners.

He stood there long enough for the cold to reach Ruth.

"Arthur?"

He looked back. His granddaughter was watching him over the top of her book.

"I'll be ten minutes," he said.

Then he went out, taking his key.