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summer when, almost by chance, he discovered magic. It was and the winds of war were dragging the world relentlessly towards the abyss. In the middle of June, on Max's thirteenth birthday, his father, an eccentric watchmaker and inventor of dazzling if completely impractical devices, gathered the family in the living room to announce that this would be their last day in the lofty apartment perched high above the oldest part of the city, a place that had been their home ever since he could remember. A deathly silence fell upon the members of the Carver family. They looked at each other, and then at the watchmaker. He had that smile on his face they all knew so well, the one that always meant

he had bad news or another of his crazy ideas.

‘We are moving,’ he announced, ‘to a beach house in a small town on the coast. We’re getting out of this city and away from the war.’

Max gulped then timidly raised his hand in protest. The other members of the family joined in, but the watchmaker waved away their concerns. He was on a roll now, and he laid out his plan with military precision. There would be no going back on the decision: they were leaving the next morning at dawn. Now they had to pack up their most prized possessions and prepare for the long journey to their new home.

In truth, the family was not entirely surprised by the news. They all suspected that the idea of leaving the city in search of a better place to live had been on Maximilian Carver’s mind for some time; everyone, that is, except his son Max. To him, the news felt like a mad steam train hurtling through a china shop. His mind went blank, his mouth sagged and his eyes glazed over. As he stood, transfixed, it occurred to him that his entire world – his friends at school, everyone he hung about with, even the corner shop where he bought his comics – was about to vanish forever.

While the rest of the family went on to pack up their belongings, finally resigned to their fate, Max remained staring at his father. The watchmaker knelt down and placed his hands gently on his son’s shoulders. The look on Max’s face spoke volumes.

‘It might seem like the end of the world to you now, Max, but I promise you’ll like the place we’re moving to. You’ll make new friends, you’ll see.’

‘Is it because of the war?’ asked Max. ‘Is that why we have to leave?’

A shadow of sadness fell across his father’s eyes. All the drive and conviction of the speech he had made to them earlier was gone, and it occurred to Max that perhaps his father was the one who was most afraid of leaving. If he had pretended to be excited about the move, then it was because it was the best thing for his family. It meant there was no other option.

‘It’s bad, isn’t it?’ Max asked.

‘Things’ll get better. We’ll be back. I promise.’

Maximilian Carver hugged his son and smiled mysteriously, then pulled an object out of his jacket pocket and put it in Max’s hands. It was a shiny oval that hung from a chain. A pocket watch.

‘I made it for you. Happy birthday, Max.’

Max opened the silver watch. The hours on the face were marked out by moons that waxed and waned to the rhythm of time, and the hands were rays of a sun radiating out from the centre of the dial. On the case, engraved in fine script, were the words ‘*Max’s time machine*’.

For a second Max wished his father’s latest invention really could stop time. Yet, when he raised his eyes and glanced through the window it already seemed to him

as if the light of day was receding and the endless city of spires and domes, of chimneys weaving cobwebs of smoke across the iron skies, had started to fade away.

Years later, as he remembered the scene, his family wandering to and fro with their bags while he sat in a corner clutching the watch his father had given him, Max knew that this was the day he left his childhood behind.



That night Max didn't sleep a wink. While the rest of the family slept he lay awake, dreading the dawn when he would have to say goodbye to the small universe he had built for himself over the years. The hours crept by silently as he lay stretched out on his bed, his eyes lost in the blue shadows that danced on the ceiling, as if he might find in them some oracle that could predict his destiny; in his hand, the watch his father had made for him. The moons glowed in the darkness of the night – perhaps they held the answer to all the questions he had begun to ask himself that afternoon.

Finally day began to break over the horizon in a streak of red light. Max jumped out of bed and went down to the living room. His father was sitting in an armchair, fully dressed, reading a book by the light of an oil lamp. Max was not the only one who had spent a sleepless night. The watchmaker smiled at him and closed his book.

‘What are you reading?’ asked Max, pointing at the thick volume.

‘It’s a book about Copernicus. I take it you know who he is?’ asked Mr Carver.

‘I do go to school, you know,’ said Max.

His father sometimes still treated him as if he were a child.

‘Well what do you know about him?’ his father insisted.

‘He discovered that the earth turns around the sun, not the other way round.’

‘Not bad. And do you know what that means?’

‘Problems,’ Max replied.

The watchmaker smiled and handed Max the hefty tome.

‘Here, it’s yours. Read it.’

Max inspected the mysterious leather-bound volume. It looked as if it was a thousand years old and might house the spirit of some age-old genie trapped in its pages by an ancient curse.

‘Well now,’ his father said abruptly, ‘who’s going to wake your sisters?’

Without looking up from the book, Max shook his head to indicate that he was granting his father the honour of dragging his two sisters – Alicia, aged fifteen, and Irina, aged eight – out of their beds.

While Maximilian Carver walked off to give the rest of the family their wake-up call, Max settled into the

armchair and began to read. He lost himself in the words and images conjured in his mind and for a while forgot that his family was going anywhere. He found himself flying among stars and planets, but then he looked up and saw his mother standing next to him with tears in her eyes.

‘You and your sisters were born in this house,’ she murmured.

‘We’ll be back,’ he said, echoing his father’s words. ‘You’ll see.’

His mother smiled at him and kissed him on the forehead.

‘As long as you’re with me, I don’t care where we go,’ she said.

His mother had a way of reading his thoughts. Half an hour later, the entire family passed through the front doorway for the last time, heading towards a new life. Summer had begun.



Max had once read in one of his father’s books that some childhood images become engraved in the mind like photographs, like scenes you can return to again and again and will always remember, no matter how much time goes by. He understood the meaning of those words the first time he saw the sea. The family had been travelling on the train for over three hours when, all of a sudden, they emerged from a dark tunnel and Max

found himself gazing at an endless expanse of ethereal light, the electric blue of the sea shimmering beneath the midday sun, imprinting itself on his retina like a supernatural apparition. The ashen light that perpetually drowned the old city already seemed like a distant memory. He felt as if he had spent his entire life looking at the world through a black and white lens and suddenly it had sprung into life, in full, luminous colour he could almost touch. As the train continued its journey only a few metres from the shore, Max leaned out of the window and, for the first time ever, felt the touch of salty wind on his skin. He turned to look at his father, who was watching him from the other end of the compartment with his mysterious smile, nodding in reply to a question Max hadn't even asked. At that moment Max promised himself that whatever their destination, whatever the name of the station this train was taking them to, from that day on he would never live anywhere he couldn't wake up every morning to see that same dazzling blue light that rose towards heaven like some magical essence.



While Max stood on the platform watching the train ride away through clouds of steam, Mr Carver left his family standing beside their suitcases outside the stationmaster's office and went off to negotiate a reasonable price for the transportation of luggage,

people and paraphernalia to their final destination. Max's first impression of the town, judging from the station and the few houses he could see, their roofs peeping timidly over the surrounding trees, was that it looked like one of those miniature villages, the sort you got with train sets, where the imaginary inhabitants were in danger of falling off a table if they wandered too far. Max was busy contemplating this variation on Copernicus's theory of the universe when his mother's voice wrestled him from his daydream.

'Well, Max. What's the verdict?'

'It's too soon to tell,' he answered. 'It looks like a model, like those ones you see in toy-shop windows.'

'Maybe it is.' His mother smiled. When she smiled, Max could see a vague resemblance to his sister Irina.

'But don't tell your father,' she went on. 'Here he comes now.'

Maximilian Carver was escorted by two burly porters whose clothes were splattered with grease stains, soot and other unidentifiable substances. Each had a thick moustache and wore a sailor's cap, as if this was their uniform.

'This is Robin and Philip,' the watchmaker explained. 'Robin will take the luggage and Philip will take us. Is that all right?'

Max wasn't clear which one was Philip and which one was Robin, and he wondered if they could even tell themselves, but he chose to keep his mouth shut.



Without waiting for the family's approval, the two men walked over to the mountain of trunks and hoisted up the largest one as if it weighed nothing. Max pulled out his watch and looked at the face with its curving moons. It was two o'clock. The old station clock said half past twelve.

'The station clock is slow,' muttered Max.

'You see?' his father replied excitedly. 'We've only just arrived and already there's work here for us.'

His mother gave a faint smile, as she always did when Maximilian Carver had one of his bursts of radiant optimism, but Max could see a hint of sadness in her eyes, that peculiar light which, ever since he was a child, had led him to believe that his mother could foresee events in the future that the rest of them would not even dream of.

'Everything's going to be all right, Mum,' he said, feeling like an idiot the moment he'd spoken.

His mother stroked his cheek.

'Of course, Max. Everything's going to be fine.'

Suddenly, Max felt certain that someone was looking at him. He spun round and saw a large cat staring at him through the bars of one of the station windows. The cat blinked and, with a prodigiously agile leap for an animal of that size, jumped through the window, padded over to Irina and rubbed its back against her pale ankles, meowing softly. Max's sister knelt down to stroke it, then picked it up in her arms. The cat let itself be cuddled

and gently licked the little girl's fingers. Irina smiled, spellbound, and, still cradling the animal in her arms, walked over to where her family were waiting.

'We've only just got here and already you've picked up some disgusting beast. Goodness knows what it's infested with,' Alicia snapped.

'It's not a disgusting beast. It's a cat and it's been abandoned,' replied Irina. 'Mum?'

'Irina, we haven't even got to the house yet.'

Irina pulled a face to which the cat contributed a sweet, seductive meow.

'It can stay in the garden. Please . . .'

Alicia rolled her eyes. Max watched his older sister. She had not opened her mouth since they had left the city; her expression was impenetrable and her eyes seemed to be lost in the distance. If anyone in the family was not overjoyed by the promise of a new life it was Alicia. Max was tempted to make a joke about 'Her Highness the Ice Princess', but decided not to. Something told him that his sister had left behind much more in the city than he could possibly imagine.

'It's fat and it's ugly,' Alicia added. 'Are you really going to let her get her own way again?'

Irina threw a steely glare at her older sister, an open declaration of war unless the latter kept her mouth shut. Alicia held her gaze for a few moments and then turned round, sighing with frustration, and walked over to where the porters were loading the luggage into a van.

On the way she passed her father, who noticed her red face.

‘Quarrelling already?’ asked Maximilian Carver. ‘What’s the matter?’

Irina presented the cat to her father. The feline, to its credit, purred adoringly. Never one to falter in the face of authority, Irina proceeded to make her case with a determination she had inherited from her father.

‘It’s all alone in the world. Someone’s abandoned it. We can’t leave it here. Can we take it with us? It can live in the garden and I’ll look after it. I promise,’ Irina said, her words spilling over each other.

The watchmaker looked in astonishment at the cat, then at his wife.

‘You always said caring for an animal gives a person a sense of responsibility,’ Irina added.

‘Did I ever say that?’

‘Many times. Those exact words.’

Her father sighed.

‘I don’t know what your mother will say . . .’

‘And what do *you* say, Maximilian Carver?’ asked Mrs Carver, with a grin that showed her amusement at what had now become her husband’s dilemma.

‘Well . . . We’d have to take it to the vet and . . .’

‘Pleeease . . .’ whimpered Irina.

The watchmaker and his wife exchanged a look.

‘Why not?’ concluded Maximilian Carver, who could not bear the thought of starting the summer with a

family feud. ‘But you’ll have to look after it. Promise?’

Irina’s face lit up. The cat’s pupils narrowed to a slit until they looked like black needles against the luminous gold of its eyes.

‘Come on! Hurry up!’ said the watchmaker. ‘The luggage has been loaded.’

Holding the cat in her arms, Irina ran towards the vans. The creature, its head leaning on the girl’s shoulder, kept its eyes nailed on Max defiantly.

‘It was waiting for us,’ he muttered to himself.

‘Don’t just stand there in a daze, Max. Move it,’ his father insisted as he walked over to the vans, hand in hand with his wife.

Max followed, reluctantly.

Just then, something made him turn around and look again at the blackened face of the ancient station clock. He examined it carefully. Something about it didn’t add up. Max remembered perfectly well that when they reached the station the clock had said half past midday. Now, the hands pointed at ten minutes to twelve.

‘Max!’ his father’s voice called to him from the van. ‘We’re leaving!’

‘Coming,’ Max said to himself, his eyes still riveted to the clock.

The clock was not slow; it worked perfectly but with one peculiarity: it went backwards.