

## WHERE THE ART IS by Judy McVey

Toby Stone, thirty-five and in his prime, shouldered his small back-pack and stepped of the train at Totnes Station. It was his first train journey since the pandemic had all but closed down public transport six months earlier, and, to his surprise, he had enjoyed it. Nevertheless, it was a relief to peel off his face-mask and take a couple of sweet-deep breaths as he looked up the empty platform. No welcome-back banners, then. No-one to run to for a hail-fellow hug. Of course not: there was only one Totnes person who would remember him from his short stay here twenty-one years ago.

The station was familiar; the Children's Home, where he had briefly lived, just a short walk away. But Toby resisted a sudden urge to have a look at the old house, and took, instead, the path into Borough Park. Little had changed. The bowling green and tennis courts, the spacious playing field, the small skate-park where he had tried, and failed, to forge friendships with the local youngsters. He had been too loud, too brash, too altogether scary then to fit in. The park, now, was quiet; a few gulls and crows picked at the grass.

Toby chose a bench with a view towards the town, sat and looked. In his memory the Castle stood proud on its hill; now the sight was almost obscured by two decades of tree growth. To the left of the Castle, the Church tower was visible, its bell chiming eleven o'clock. Toby was early; he would have time to walk the long way round.

On the other side of town, with her own view of Totnes Castle, Celia Dart, sixty-seven and possibly past her prime, sat on her front-garden bench, book in hand.

Although there were days when she was gripped by a horrible sadness, lock-down had not been too difficult for Celia. She had good health and her garden, she still painted when the mood took her, and, once she had realised it wasn't imperative to listen to the news every day, she had settled into a contented rhythm of early morning walks and afternoon pottering. Today would be different. For the first time in six months, Celia would have a visitor.

There had been a solar eclipse back in 1999. Toby Stone, fifteen at the time, thought it would be a good day for a spot of burglary.

"Daylight robbery under the cover of darkness", he had chuckled to himself.

He had been living in the Children's Home for three weeks by then. The other kids tended to steer clear of him: he had a way of making sarcastic comments that could be quite cutting. Of all the residents, Toby was the oldest and probably the strongest but nobody really wanted to test that out. If he engaged with anyone it was with members of staff. He joined Celia Dart's history trails around Totnes, to the Museum, the Castle, the Brutus Stone. Not that Toby was interested in history, but he liked the stories Celia told and the art projects she set up alongside them. Toby was into art. He had drawn a comic strip in which the legendary King Brutus, whose first step onto British soil was said to have been in Totnes, took over the town, booted out the land-lords and the merchants, and gave the keys of his castle to the minstrels, the jugglers and jesters.

"It's basically power to the street people. In olden times", he explained to Celia.

Toby asked to be excused from the walk along the river to watch the eclipse. He volunteered to tidy up the back yard. Which he did. Then, checking that no-one could see him, he pulled himself over the garden fence. Ten minutes later he was opening the side gate to Celia Dart's bungalow on the Plymouth Road.

Finding out where she lived had been easy: he simply followed her home one evening. He expected that gaining entrance to the house would be more of a challenge, but a key to the patio

doors was under the predictable plant-pot. His heart-rate picked up speed as he stepped into the conservatory that doubled as a studio. Among the pencil drawings and water colours pinned to the back wall, he recognised several studies of the arch over Totnes High Street. The arch bathed in sunlight; in rain-soaked moon-light; the arch in surprising flames. In a surge of adrenalin, Toby explored the rest of the bungalow. Two bedrooms at the front, a small snug sitting-room at the back. In the kitchen he found some crisps and a can of coke. Which he took through to the snug. Where he turned on the TV. Because he could. Because, like Brutus, he was king of this castle.

Toby didn't break into houses to steal. He simply yearned for some sense of normal, somewhere that wasn't a placement or a unit; a space where he could pretend he belonged. Celia Dart's house felt right, even as it grew darker. Outside, beyond the clouds, the moon moved over the face of the sun, turning the dull day briefly to night. The world stilled. Toby heard a door snap shut and he held his breath. No footsteps, but suddenly, here was a cat, jumping onto his lap.

"Purr-fect!" smiled Toby. And he stroked the cat as the soft light returned, had his snack and, for an hour or so, felt ever-so-much at home.

On his way out, Toby stopped to look again at Celia Dart's art-work. He lifted one of the arch-in-flames water-colours and couldn't resist. It was only small, he reasoned, as he unpinned it from the wall, rolled it up and tucked it into his back pocket.

Had she been asked, Celia Dart would have described herself as a hobby-artist. But it was a hobby that had enriched her working life. She had used art as a vehicle for communication as well as creativity, both in the Children's Home, and after that had closed down, in Prison Education. Which is where she came across Toby Stone again. She didn't try to hide her disappointment.

"Not to worry, Miss", Toby told her. "I am just on that trajectory. You know, kids home – hostel – prison. It's a career path of sorts."

He had always had a dry wit, Celia recalled. She found he also still had a gift for art. With her encouragement he produced some fine drawings, good enough to win a few prizes. And now, he had sent her a copy of his newly published graphic novel, with a note to say he would visit.

Celia must have been looking out for him; she opened the front door before he knocked.

"You can go round the side of the house to the patio at the back", she told him.

"I know", Toby said without thinking, and he felt his face flush.

"Thank you for the book." Celia motioned for him to sit on a patio chair. "How exciting. You must be so pleased."

Toby nodded. Sending the book had been a way of making contact, of saying thank you. Now he pulled a newly-framed picture from his bag and gave it to Celia. She recognised the mounted water-colour as her own work, the Eastgate arch on fire. It looked rather good, she thought, as she carried it through to her studio. She unpinned another picture from the wall, as if to make space, and brought it out to Toby. It was the comic strip he had made in the kids' home.

"I salvaged this from your room when you left", Celia told him. "Tit-for-tat so to speak."

Toby stared at her, "You knew I'd been here", he blushed again.

"I guessed", she said. Then, changing the uncomfortable subject, "You know, your timing is uncanny. The fire at the arch was thirty years ago this week."

But Toby persisted. "I have a home of my own now and I'd be so gutted if somebody broke in. Even if just to hang out for a bit. I'm sorry I did that."

Celia waved his apology away. "Water under the Brutus Bridge", she said and he laughed.

They shared lock-down tales and far-future dreams. Toby told her about life on the road after prison; how he had made money in tourist towns as a pavement artist, how he had found his tribe among the street performers and buskers, the modern-day minstrels.

“After all”, Toby had to say it, “Home is where the art is”.

On his walk back to the station, Toby Stone felt lighter. His back-pack was empty, but that wasn't it – his visit to Celia Dart had lifted some of the guilt he had been carrying. He could come back to Totnes when the world opened up, maybe revisit the sights with Celia.

“Plus,” he thought, looking down as something caught his eye, “It's nice to be in a place where children chalk rainbows on pavements”.