

*Something's wrong with Millie.* She hears them: whispering down phones, gossiping in the art room. The sewing machine keeps snagging, and she starts to cry. *Something's wrong with Millie.*

'It isn't me that's wrong,' she tells the rumpled fabric. 'It's time.'

Toot! Past nursery, round playgrounds, racing across fields; through maths tests, shy first kiss, squeezing pimples. Then – *We regret to announce that the time train has broken down. We apologise to those of you expecting this pace of life to carry on. Please leave the train and make your way to The Rest of Your Life Platform. Time will eventually arrive again to take you to your final destination.*

Daylight has gone, time has disappeared, and Millie still hasn't done any sewing. Ta-ticker-*thump* goes the needle. Ta-ticker-*thump* goes her heart.

She abandons the pile of fabric. The walk home from school aches her legs.

'Just in time for dinner,' Mum tells her, gaze wandering to Millie's unwashed hair.

At the table, Adam makes an announcement. Mum reacts breathlessly, tripping on the table leg in her haste to hug Emma, who waggles her bejewelled finger. Dad goes to shake hands, but Emma launches a kiss on his cheek instead.

Nothing's expected of Millie – because there's *something wrong* with Millie. But she tries a smile. Emma returns it, perching forward to the tips of her eyelashes.

She'll never fit in.

Adam is like Millie; they sit behind their eyes, observe, consider. Mum sits so much behind her eyes, they've dislocated, sliding at angles as though she forgets each morning to put them in their place.

A sip of water and a familiar tang of metal hits the back of Millie's throat. She complains to Adam, but their telepathic link-up doesn't seem to be working and he

doesn't hear. She hears Adam, though, hissing at Mum as they clear the table to get Millie to the doctor.

'There's something wrong with her.'

No, no, Adam; there's something wrong with the water – or time – or both. Adam doesn't flicker. Clearing her throat, she asks Dad if he checked the water pipes. Dad looks at Millie, but he doesn't answer.

Retreating to her room, Millie stares out the window. She smiles at the face reflected, squeezing her left cheek between jagged back molars to deepen a dimple. The face does the same, clenching its jawbone, exposing a black cavity. She stares at the hole in the cheek of the face for a minute – or an hour. How can she tell?

In the garden below, she notices Adam and Dad checking the lower branches of the locust tree for signs of bud, of life.

We used to climb that tree.

As Adam trudges back toward the house, Millie knows, via telepathic link-up, that he too is remembering them climbing it.

Adam shouts up, 'See you, Millie!'

Millie pads out onto the landing. Dad tells Mum: 'Adam's right – Millie shouldn't go to university. Not this year anyway.'

'Not go?'

Their conversation is muffled. Mum's voice sounds like sticky custard sits in her throat. Millie creep-creeps back across the landing, spring-hops over the threshold, and slides into bed.

Eventually, there's the sound of teeth brushing followed by the creak of a mattress and then silence. Now!

Millie gets to the kitchen alright – the hop and skip through the door easier to manage when no one is watching. Tap on. The water looks clear but smells bad,

like her palm when she's held change too long. Inside the cupboard, Millie traces the pipes with her finger to the back, but there's no sign of anything suspicious. She edges out of the backdoor in side-steps, negotiates the drain. In the darkness, the plastic pipe is slimy.

Stumbling, Millie forgets to hop-skip through the doorway. Her heart beats a warning – tick-*ta*-tick-*ta*-tick-*ta*.

Downstairs, the backdoor is open and the tap still running.

Time disappears until Dad comes in. Millie's too scared to attempt a telepathic link-up, blocking his transmissions too. She has no idea what he's thinking when he says: 'Did you break the pipes, Millie?' He sounds croaky. It's best not to answer.

The doctor instructs Millie to take warm baths before bed and to avoid too much screen-time. He should sit further back in his eyes because he's about to briskly fall into his tip-tapping computer. Millie says nothing and nods in what she hopes are the appropriate places.

Back home, unstitched fabrics pile up and threads lie dormant. Fingers frayed. She's trying to keep things quiet as she doesn't want to get into trouble.

It might be too late for that.

How so?

Telepathy can travel through water.

I'm not showering.

Good.

I think it must be poisoned.

I agree.

I'll stop washing my hands.

Be careful, Millie.

I'll use hand-gel.

Fine.

Mum wants to take Millie clothes shopping or to a café or swimming.

'It's not right, all this time in your room on your own.'

Millie drags the chest of drawers across her bedroom doorway. Outside, there's lots of shouting, banging, crying. Eventually, Dad takes an axe to the door, makes a hole big enough to wriggle through. Panting, they both wait. Under the covers, as flat as she can roll herself, Millie is not here. Her heart beats – *ticker-thump-bump*.

When the doctor comes, he prescribes antidepressants and advises a walk every day and adds the name Amelia Witherow to a waiting list for counselling. His eyes are less brisk, lingering on Millie for a moment before scratching his pen on the prescription paper.

Adam prepares for his wedding. Millie watches the swirling pattern on the carpet, lips shut. Sometimes she closes her eyes too.

'Tea, anyone?' Mum is a blur of indecision. 'I'll put the kettle on.'

Carrying a bag labelled Groom's, Adam asks if Millie wants to sit in his car and listen to the radio. Millie keeps very still until he's gone and then she does as he suggests. It's much better in the car. Only Adam comes and goes, packing suitcases for the honeymoon. He hands Millie a cup of tea, but she doesn't drink it. Millie's told Mum countless times to only use bottled water but she never does.

Adam leaves in a shower of confetti like a celebrated hero. Like a god.

You're a god.

I am.

You're an ancient god.

I am. I am.

Millie is back on the train. The scenery smudges as she hurtles past. Green into stone into bright shining glass. Doors glide open as she approaches.

‘There’s something wrong with the water,’ she tells the inferior being behind the front desk. Meek under the gaze of Millie’s power, their shoulders rise.

‘Your address, please.’

‘It’s not just our house. It’s the whole city – the whole of the country. There’s something wrong with it.’

The inferior being’s mouth hardens like a pebble. ‘If you go to our website, there’s a page for you to relay any concerns.’ Pause. ‘That would be your best bet.’

Millie stares and as she stares, the walls of the building tremble and disintegrate. Weakness softens the godly strength from her limbs, hollowing bones, dissolving organs. She is a slug, slithering back toward the doors – which this time fail to open; she has to slop back again for them to even register her presence.

In the glare of sun, Millie curls up, a slug left to perish in the drying heat.

Dad appears, scoops her up, not minding the froth of Millie’s slug-skin. He drives her home. The sofa is hard. Dad places a cushion under her head. He tells Mum the counselling isn’t working, and Millie should see a different doctor. Mum tells him the doctor has already increased her medication. She suggests Millie is maybe seeking attention. Dad makes a strangled noise then plods upstairs. Mum sits next to Millie, perched on the edge of the sofa. She strokes Millie’s oozing hair. It makes Mum sniff.

The hum of Millie’s heart – *cha-tat-cha-tat- cha-tat*. It’s like electricity.

Maybe I’m a robot.

You’re just a girl.

I know.

You made a big mistake going to the head office.

I know.

Now they know you know.

I know.

You better hide.

But where?

How about in the branches of the locust tree?

Dad said it was dead. He cut it down.

Perhaps the tree's soul lives on, waits for you to climb its branches, to stretch your arms as it stretched its limbs, ever upward, ever free. Would that be safe?

Would that be better?

I need to be anywhere but here.

Go now. Go lie next to the stump. The time train might find you there and carry you away.

It's cold.

I know, Millie.

The grass is tickly.

Yes, it is.

Are you sure the time train knows I'm waiting?

Of course. The entire surface of the earth is the platform. Stop wriggling, Millie.

Sorry.

Lie still. Lie flat. Wait.

Dad drags Millie back indoors – help me – but the telepathic link-up is broken.

What will the water company do to me?

You don't want to know.

Tell me. Please.

They'll make you be quiet. Lock you away. They'll shut you up.

Chipper-*chopper*-chipper-*chopper*

Get out of the house, Millie. They're looking for you. Run!

Chipper-*chopper*-chipper-*chopper*

The crash of glass hurts her ears, slices her legs.

*Chop-chop-chop*

A speeding train whizzes past. Scenes play out, one after the other, after the other, after the other. Enemies weaving through the carriages, watching. Whispers and shouts rattle her skull.

Hands grip hers. The taste of rusting metal. Someone cries, another screams. Announcements from the train station tannoy stitch through. *You're safe, Millie. Will you let me help you?*

Millie's eyes sting and tire.

Don't take your eyes off the train. You're not safe!

The train station manager is called Dr Syed. He says Millie *needs to talk*. Dredging the last of her energy, Millie explains telepathy is the only safe form of communication in her home. Over the tannoy system, Dr Syed says he *can't read minds*.

Millie holds a book. A crayon is next to her hand.

Don't write anything.

No?

Some things are best kept private.

It's not easy writing in crayon anyway. Some weirdo sitting on the platform opposite is eating theirs. It's distracting. Red crayon, like bright blood, is dribbling down their chin.

The speeding train fades. The flashes of colour dim. The scenes inside the carriages are harder to follow.

Don't talk, Millie.

But telepathy is not a form of communication here. No one can do it. So she whispers: 'Something's wrong with Millie.'

The windows are empty spaces, holes. The passenger's voices are the rustle of dry leaves on the track. The announcements over the tannoy system are words spoken by people. One of them is Adam, crouched at Millie's feet, holding her hand. His eyes are shiny.

'Hey, Millie.'

I'm glad the train has gone.

She repeats, 'I'm glad the train has gone.'

'So am I, Millie.'

So am I.

Dr Syed tells her she's in a hospital called Wyde Ford. That can't be true. Wyde Ford is for mad people, those scary loonies who shout at you in the street and chew their own fingers.

Is that me?

You deserve to be caught.

What's that? Millie's afraid to listen, yet she's afraid not to.

Don't drink the water.

But she does and it tastes fine.

Adam brings her home in his car. It smells like wet dog.

‘Do you have a dog?’

Adam shakes his head, frowning.

Mum hands Millie a cup of tea, eyes slipping. Dad takes her holdall, carries it up to her room, then watches telly with her like a guard dog.

Why are they afraid? Together, they watched the speeding train leave, travelling to a secure unit for unwanted visions and voices. Toot! The passengers waved and Millie waved back.

She sits on The Rest of Your Life Platform. *Millie is much better*. She hears them, and she waits.