

A Good Life

My name is Archie Newbourne. I disappeared without a trace on 22 February 2022. This is my story.

The day started like any ordinary Tuesday. My alarm sounded at 6, and I was out the door by 6:10. Mr Singh stood in front of his shop, newspapers stacked and ready to be delivered.

‘G’morning!’ he said. ‘Some fog, eh? Be careful out there, Archie.’

He was the last person in my previous life to see me.

I pushed my bicycle up Avery Hill, past the Quaker Hall, towards Common Road—my regular round. What happened next is inexplicable. I remember seeing an ominous purple cloud hurtling towards me from across the common.

Everything went black after that.

Lily Newbourne paced, her eyes fixed on the open front door.

‘Anything?’ she asked her husband upon his return.

He shook his head.

‘Archie wouldn’t abandon his bicycle and leave his phone. Something’s terribly wrong, Martin.’

‘It hasn’t been three hours, Lily. Let’s not panic yet. He’s fourteen. Kids do stupid things.’

A man holding a large wooden box appeared at the door. ‘Mr Newbourne?’ he said. ‘Hello. My name is Thom, and I’ve come from the Quaker Hall up the hill.’

‘A distant relative of yours entrusted us with this in 1952,’ he continued, handing the box to Martin. ‘We were instructed to deliver it to Clementine Cottage on *this* date. No sooner.’

Martin examined the box and tugged on the combination padlock that held it shut. ‘Is there a key?’

‘No, sir.’

‘The engraving on the lid—DoBAN. What does it mean?’

‘We were hoping you would know, sir.’

‘Could it be ...’ Lily ruminated, ‘Date of Birth, Archie Newbourne?’ She snatched the box from Martin then fiddled with the padlock’s dials until the mechanism released. She lifted the lid.

‘What is it?’ Martin asked.

‘Old photos ... several journals ... a letter ...,’ Lily stammered. Her eyes welled up. ‘They’re from Archie.’

Dear Mum & Dad,

What I'm about to tell you will come as a shock, but please don't despair. For reasons I can neither fathom nor explain, I was transported back to 1882 on the morning of 22 February 2022. I was desperate to return to you and the life I had, but seeing no way home, I resolved to accept my fate and make the most of my unusual predicament.

A generous family took me in and raised me as their own. They sent me to Cambridge to study engineering, Mum. Wasn't that your dream for me? I met Clementine, my dear wife of sixty years, shortly after I began working for the Underground. Together, we built Clementine Cottage—just as I remembered it. The wonderful home I grew up in was also our family home for many happy, memorable years. It is filled with the joy and laughter of your grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

While I may no longer live in your world, please take comfort in knowing I lived a long and very fulfilling life.

Your loving son,

Archie