

## Chapter Two

### Things are not always as they seem



Arthur collapsed into his favourite armchair and continued to reflect on the day's events. This proved to be a futile exercise, and although he wasn't able to come to any significant conclusion as to the nature of the events, he was able to determine where his day had begun to go wrong. It was his alarm clock, or rather, alarm clocks. They had indeed proved to be untrustworthy.

Today, he thought, was not going to plan. In fact, nothing had gone to plan. He was discombobulated, another word he had gotten from his great aunt, and though Arthur had never needed it before, it seemed to be perfectly suited to how he felt at this very moment. As he silently rolled the word around in his mouth, he decided that it had far too many syllables and so returned to reflecting.

While he pondered the events in question, it failed to occur to Arthur that he had neglected to call work and report in sick. It bears mentioning that in the twelve years that Arthur had worked for the company, he had never missed a day, nor even been late for work, something he was very proud of. So, when the phone rang about mid-morning, it startled him back to reality.

"Ummmm, Hello," answered Arthur in a rather hesitant voice and clearing his throat. He was not accustomed to receiving phone calls. Indeed, this may have been the first phone call he had received in all the years he had lived there.

"Yes, Mr. Fibble? This is Mrs. Pressford, from the head office. You didn't show up for work this morning, so we were worried about you. Is everything alright? You don't sound yourself at all. Should we send someone over?"

Mrs. Pressford was - of course - not being entirely truthful with Arthur. Arthur wasn't missed and they had not the slightest intention of sending anyone over. Although she had spoken to him before, actually every day he had worked for the company, she couldn't quite remember what Arthur normally sounded like. In fact, she could not seem to recall what he even looked like, beyond the observation that he wore a suit to work, at least she thought he usually wore a suit. True to form, Arthur hadn't made much of an impression on her.

The sentences came over the phone in such a quick succession that Arthur barely had the presence of mind to respond. It seemed as if the phone call was an unpleasant duty that Mrs. Pressford was in a hurry to complete and get to more important tasks.

"No, thank you Mrs. Pressford. That won't be necessary. It's just a bug I think, or maybe something I ate. That's all." As the words were coming out of his mouth, it occurred to Arthur that he had lied. It also occurred to Arthur that this may very well have been the first time he had ever lied ... to anybody. Arthur prided himself on his honesty, and as his aunt had always insisted that he be precise in all things ... this included the truth.

Now, to make things clear, no one had really noticed Arthur was absent until papers had begun to pile up on his desk. Just as no one had noticed him in the lobby of the *Fienstien, Mulleur & Fibble Clock and Watch Company* that morning, no one had noticed he had failed to report to work. Mrs. Pressford had not called out of courtesy, but because a note had been left on her desk asking her to do so. Since the note was unsigned, she jotted down the reason for the absence underneath the request and placed it on the corner of the desk.

Now, had Arthur been paying attention, a very curious thought would have occurred to him. Mrs. Underhill had noticed him. Since Arthur had grown so accustomed to being unnoticed all his life, it was he who failed to note this very important detail in his day, a detail he would come to regret later.

Having hung up the phone, the only thing that was required now was to sit back down in his armchair, collect his thoughts and gather himself. He wasn't entirely certain that everything that had happened that morning, had, in fact, *actually* happened. The thought both comforted Arthur and terrified him. He wasn't entirely sure which feeling was in front and which behind. While he was considering the arrangement of these new emotions, he noticed that he hadn't removed his coat. This was very unlike Arthur since upon entering his apartment, he always placed his coat on the same coat-hook in the hall. As he stood to hang his coat, he felt something unusual in the right pocket, something he certainly had not placed there. Reaching in, he removed the *something*.

The something was an object, or more specifically, a spectacle case. Arthur tried calling them spectacles rather than glasses since that is what his great aunt had called them, but for some reason he could not fully commit to the term. Spectacles was another word he had picked up from his aunt and it seemed to go well with the rest of the words like tizzy and discombobulated, so today, he would use it.

He examined the case very carefully, turning it over and over before opening it. It was a very unusual case, very different from any of the other spectacle cases he had seen. It was made of metal. Brass thought Arthur, though he wasn't entirely sure. The cases he had seen were usually made of leather and embossed with an alligator pattern to make them look more expensive than they were. But this one was different. It didn't need to look expensive. It *was* expensive, or at least that's what Arthur thought, looking at the exterior, embossed with carvings and patterns that looked very old. They reminded Arthur of the carvings he had seen at the museum during one of the many trips his great aunt had taken him on.

It might be appropriate to introduce Arthur's aunt at this point, as she had a profound impact on the man Arthur had become, despite his best efforts in resisting her tutelage at times. Aunt Marrion, as she was called, was a monumental figure in Arthur's life, a force of nature really. And like sunflowers

turning to the sun, people paid attention to her whenever she entered a room. She didn't really enter a room per say, but rather sort of "swooped in" and commanded it. She was the complete antithesis to Arthur.

Aunt Marrion took a great interest in Arthur's upbringing, given his parents' busy schedule and their frequent absences on business trips, and since she had neither married nor had children, time was something that she had in ample supply. She had always felt that every boy, despite any protestation they might make, should have regular doses of culture, and so she hauled Arthur to the museum, the opera, the theatre, and the symphony on a regular basis. Although Arthur would have preferred a science museum to an art gallery, he did come to appreciate his aunt's efforts, especially as he got older.

His aunt's dedication to his *informal* education, as she referred to it, compounded exponentially after his parents' death in 1937. Despite being only eight at the time, she was intent on raising Arthur properly, at least until he reached the age of majority, a point when she felt that she had done all that she could do for him. Feeling that she had fulfilled her duty with Arthur, setting him up for what she called *the bounty of life*, she announced that she was off to see the world, at least the parts that she had previously overlooked. After packing her bags one morning, she was off, leaving only a simple note, written in exquisite calligraphy on watercolour paper, carefully folded and placed on the crisp linen tablecloth in the dining room. When Arthur opened it, it read,

***Off to see the world. Might be a while.***

***Don't wait up.***

***Love, aunt Marrion***

Although Arthur hadn't seen her in many years, nineteen to be exact, she did manage to keep in touch with regular postcards sent from foreign destinations. Shortly before these latest developments in Arthur's life, he had received an exotic-looking dog-eared postcard from Madagascar.

One of the cornerstones of aunt Marrion's philosophy on life, is that she insisted that there was a proper way to do everything, a proper way to respond to anything, and above all else, there was always a proper word to use. She would never hesitate to correct Arthur on his vocabulary.

She also insisted that Arthur read regularly and provided him with a collection of classical titles which he was required to master. They would discuss these and other subjects over afternoon tea, something Arthur was expected to attend. The result of all these efforts was that Arthur received a very classical upbringing, though he had never learned to play an instrument, something for which his aunt never really forgave him. He did however learn to brew a very good cup of tea, and if he were to make any progress this morning, he decided a cup was in order.

***The art of brewing a proper cup of tea.***

Tea was something that Arthur took very seriously. This was a direct result of his aunt's tutelage. Aunt Marrion was a woman of exacting standards, though excruciating might be a better word in Arthur's opinion, and had taken it upon herself to raise her nephew properly, as she had put it. After Arthur's parents had died, his aunt had taken Arthur under her wing. She felt that a young man, if he

were to grow up and enter manhood armed with all of the required skills, should at the very minimum, know how to make a right proper cup of tea. And so, she had taught Arthur the fine art of making tea.



It does bear mentioning here that Arthur's aunt had a clear distinction between what she would call "everyday tea" and "formal tea". It was permitted to make everyday tea with bags, but formal tea must only be made with the finest loose leaf (normally kept in reserve for when company called). Since Arthur never had anyone drop over, he never bothered to keep loose leaf tea in his home. Instead, he kept his orange pekoe tea bags in a tin container, labeled, well... TEA. The container had once been one of a set of four. The other three were labeled flour, sugar, and coffee. Since he neither drank coffee nor cooked anything from scratch, he had gotten rid of the other two and kept only the container

marked sugar.

The first step in making tea is to boil the water. In order to get a truly good cup of tea, the water must be at a rolling boil. Once the water begins to boil, one must first warm the tea pot, and so Arthur's aunt had insisted he splash water in the pot and swirl it around, returning the kettle to finish boiling fully. Now, it also bears mentioning that for a truly perfect cup of tea, one should never wash the tea pot with soap and water, but rather, allow a patina finish to build up on the inside. This seemed silly to Arthur, but he would never have said so, for fear of being on the receiving end of one of his aunt's scowls. Her scowls were legendary and had the habit of bringing every conversation, protestation, or inappropriate remark to a sudden and abrupt end. Arthur even wondered if her scowls had the ability to turn milk sour.

Now, once the water had been fully boiled, Arthur dropped two tea bags into the pot. The rule his aunt has instilled in him was one bag per person and one for the pot, and since Arthur always had his tea alone, that meant two. Once the bags were dropped into the pot, it was quickly filled halfway with water, the lid replaced and wrapped in a tea cozy to steep for exactly five minutes. She was extremely particular about the time and would always remind Arthur that tea should steep and never stew.

Arthur took his tea with a teaspoon of sugar, always added before the milk to allow it to fully dissolve. The milk was always to be a splash and never more. It was to colour the tea only. Arthur could recall the cold look of derision that would resolve itself across his aunt's face anytime a guest would add too much milk. Philistine was the term she would use to describe such boorish behavior. Tea was serious business.

Once Arthur had made some tea, he sat down in his favourite chair to continue processing the morning's events. He thought it was best to begin with the beginning, and that was with all three of his alarms having failed to wake him. This got him nowhere, so he tried a different tact. He turned his attention to the case.

He carefully opened the case he had placed on the table beside his armchair, only to find a fairly nondescript set of men's spectacles, though they did seem to be a little more robust than a typical pair. Based on the case itself, Arthur half expected to find something a little more remarkable, but what he held in his hand were ordinary men's spectacles, black plastic frames with silver hinges. He turned them over and over in his hands, looking for any distinguishing marking which might warrant such an

elaborate case, but found none. Satisfied with his examination, he did the very next thing that occurred to him; he cleaned them with his white pocket square and proceeded to try them on.

Arthur had never needed glasses (he decided to refer to them as glasses since this particular pair was quite ordinary). His vision had been good enough that it never required correcting, a fact that, deep down, bothered Arthur just a little. You see, he had always felt that glasses made one look smarter, more distinguished. And having always wanted to make more of an impression on people (something he failed at regularly), he had felt that glasses were just the thing. When he placed them on, they did not change his vision in the slightest. He wondered if the previous owner had only a slight need for correction. This thought would not stay with Arthur for very long.



He got up to walk to the hall mirror to see if he did in fact look more distinguished, and as he passed his living room window he saw, for the first time, a completely different building. It wasn't an old building that he now saw differently, but a completely different building that did not belong, on a part of the block that had hitherto not existed. It was as if someone had stretched the block and stuck an entire brownstone apartment building in the middle, just sort of plunked it there. Plunked wasn't the right word, and it occurred to Arthur, if only for a fraction of a second, that his choice would have displeased his aunt.

Now, one must bear in mind that Arthur had never been one for emotion, as his aunt had disapproved of the notion. She felt that emotions were private things, and not to be trotted out for public consumption. Instead, feelings were to be talked about, in a calm and rational manner, and then put away, ideally in a box and then slipped under a bed somewhere, or better yet an attic. As Arthur was safely alone in his apartment, he felt that this might be just the occasion to break with tradition and let go. No sooner had he done this, than a flood of contradictory ideas and emotions washed over him. Suddenly, feeling rather hot, he reached for the chairback to steady himself. He noticed beads of sweat forming on his brow and had to catch his breath.

Arthur took several deep breaths, and having regained his composure, stood upright again. It took him several tries, walking back and forth, glasses on... glasses off, before he was sufficiently satisfied that he had not completely lost his mind and there was indeed something going on. As impossible as it was, Arthur tried to make sense of what he was experiencing.

When he lifted the glasses, the world he saw was the one to which he was accustomed. When he put the glasses on, the world was, well, different. There were, how best to put it, extra things, not everywhere, but here and there, peppered about the city. He shifted to one side of the window and looked down the street as far as he could. Repeating the process. Every time he raised and lowered the glasses, the street would change. Buildings would sort of pop-up in places they shouldn't be, or extra floors would appear on the buildings that were already there. Everything shifted. And most surprisingly, this shift did not seem to affect anyone in the slightest. People kept on walking down the sidewalk; cars kept on driving down the street. It was as if everyone was completely oblivious.

It was then that Arthur started to once again breathe rather quickly and begin to feel dizzy. As he collapsed into his chair, yes, thought Arthur, hyperventilate was exactly the right word. Aunt Marrion would have approved.