

1. WELCOME TO BUNBURY

The storm was worsening and the train gradually ground to a halt in the middle of nowhere. Alfie peered out into the blackness but could see nothing except the rain hammering against the window. Nothing could have been further from his memories of the Cotswolds. Over thirty years ago now, those idyllic summer holidays when he came to stay with his grandparents. Endless sun-filled days scampering over the hills, exploring the woods, cooling off in the streams. He had been happy because there was no reason to be sad. His boyhood self could never have imagined the sadness that was to come.

His memories were of July and August but his present reality was November. What was that poem? No warmth, no cheerfulness, no fruits, no flowers, no leaves, no birds, November.

His thoughts were interrupted by the announcement system crackling into life. “We apologise for the delay to the service. This is due to trees on the line.”

Alfie reflected that at least it was a step up from the much-derided excuse for rail delays, “leaves on the line”.

The disembodied voice continued, its nervousness palpable even through the static. “The trees on the line are due to the storm. This is a circumstance beyond our control and we are waiting for the removal of the trees. We apologise to passengers for any inconvenience caused.”

The dark mumblings that indicated outrage on the part of the great British public broke out

in the carriage.

“Oh, honestly!” muttered someone.

“They shouldn’t allow trees so close to the line,” muttered someone else.

Alfie opened his book again, a new biography of Oscar Wilde which had been getting rave reviews in all the papers. He realised he had been so caught up in his own thoughts that he was automatically turning the pages without taking in the words. As he flicked back to the beginning, the book fell open at the title page. He smiled as he wondered what anybody else would make of the ink inscription in bold copperplate handwriting:

***To Alfie
Enjoy Bunburrying
Oscar***

Sometimes he wondered whether Oscar thought he was some sort of reincarnation of his namesake. Oscar was obsessed by all things

Willean, quoted his hero non-stop, and was known on occasion to complete his dandyish outfit with a green carnation, the mark of a true aficionado. If Oscar said this was the best book ever written about Wilde, Alfie wasn't going to argue.

But just as he settled down to read it properly, the carriage door swished open to reveal a young ticket collector, who looked distinctly apprehensive. Alfie guessed this was the owner of the disembodied voice. In an uncertain tone, the young man explained that there would be a delay of at least an hour before the track was cleared.

There was an outburst of protests, complaints about missed connections, anxious spouses, ruined dinners. The hapless ticket collector, who must already have run the gauntlet of the other carriages, looked as though he might now run away to join the circus.

Alfie took a gamble. “Not your fault, just one of these things,” he said, raising his voice slightly so that he could be heard by the other passengers. “Tell me, is the buffet trolley around?”

“It’s right behind me, sir,” said the ticket collector eagerly.

“Great,” said Alfie. “Things always look better after a cup of tea.”

“You obviously haven’t tasted it, mate – it’s rubbish!” came a voice from the other end of the carriage.

“Thanks for the warning,” Alfie called back. “In that case, I’ll add a G to the T, and things will look even better.”

There was an outbreak of chuckling, and ripples of conversations.

“I haven’t had the tea, but the coffee is really not bad.”

“Yes, I think they must use those Arabica beans. You know, the good ones?”