

PROLOGUE

This story starts around four hundred years from now. Nature has retaken the earth.

Our planet's population, which peaked in 2044 at nine and a half billion, now numbers mere millions.

No one died, other than normally. But almost no one was born, either.

From the moment the lump of space rock burst through the earth's atmosphere and smashed into the ground, and the alien germ that it carried spread round the world on the wind, the only babies born were to the tiny number of people who were immune to the infection.

By the time the germ was identified, it was too late.

Towns and cities that once hummed with the din of humanity now lie silent and empty, winds howling through roofless, windowless buildings covered in ivy. Trees, shrubs and wild animals fill the once-busy streets. Rivers, controlled by humans for centuries, have burst their banks; magnificent bridges that linked cities and even countries are crumbling away; tunnels have flooded; dams have burst; vast ships have broken loose from their

moorings and sunk; aeroplanes lie rusting where they last landed; and everywhere millions of cars, vans and trucks slowly decay on roadsides or in damp and dripping underground car parks where bats and wolves and wild dogs live. Medicines are scarce, and lives are short.

Hospitals, schools, libraries; shopping malls, offices, airports and railway stations – all have been smothered by the unstoppable regrowth of nature.

The electronic communications on which humans relied no longer work; computer memories deteriorated long ago; electricity is rare. There's no more petroleum, although some centuries-old engines remain, powered by steam, or fish oil.

And yet . . .

For those who remain, food is plentiful. Housing – once repaired – is free. Homes are filled with the furniture and belongings left by those who lived in what is called the Wonder Age. On the island they still call Britain, it's warmish and wettish; there are many small farms. The survivors often have big families. Small communities are usually peaceful and harmonious. A few cities and ports still stand – Newcastle, Liverpool, Edinburgh, Dover. (London, however – once the capital – is a hellish flooded wasteland.)

And still every child born is celebrated and loved as has been the way throughout humanity's long history.

One such child is Ocean Mooney. She is eleven and lives with her grandmother. This story begins with her.

PART ONE

OCEAN MOONEY'S STORY
NEWCASTLE, ENGLAND
AD 2425

CHAPTER 1

In the summer, the quayside fish mart in Newcastle ends when the old cathedral clock strikes midday. If there's any fish left, I give it to one of the children from the orphanage over the river. Nanny Moo does not mind; if it was not for her, she says, I would be an orphan too.

I noticed the new boy straight away, skipping across the rope bridge high above me. He hardly held the rope sides, looking right ahead and trotting confidently over the wobbly planks. Just watching him made me gulp with fear, but he swung the bag by his side without caring that a single misstep would send him plunging to his death in the river far below.

Since a huge, rusting chunk of the last remaining bridge collapsed into the Tyne a few weeks ago, this is the only way left to cross the water.

A few mins later, I was rinsing my plastic fish crates, and the boy on the bridge was now just metres away from me, whistling as he nailed a poster to a wooden noticeboard. I saw that he was too dandified to be an orphanage boy. His boots were newish, and he wore a

long grey coat that was overbig for him, and a round-topped black hat of the sort that was popular during the early Wonder Age.

He saw me staring at him, and I quickly looked away.

‘It’s all right to look, young paloni,’ he said. ‘Do y’not want to vada me sticker-bill?’

His words, his accent: he is not from around here. ‘Young paloni’ I think means ‘young woman’. I did want to see his poster, though.

‘You should be more guardy,’ I said. ‘The Brownies do not like people putting up . . . sticker-bills.’

He scoffed and banged another nail in. ‘Brownies? Oh, rats to them: I ain’t scared o’ no muddlin’ Brownie. Here – hold these, will ye? Don’t wanna put them down in the puddle.’

He handed me a large bundle of rolled-up posters, and took another ready for affixing to the wall behind him.

As if on cue, there was a clotting of horses’ hooves from along the quay as a large brown-clad marshal on a tired-looking pony emerged from a side street and hollered, ‘Oi! You two! Stop right there!’

The boy did not wait even half a second, but barged past me in his haste to get away, then he turned and grabbed my arm. ‘Come on! He means you as well.’

I dropped the bundle of posters and ran after him.

*

What would have happened if I had not done that? If I had simply said my apologies to the Brownie and that I did not know the boy in the hat, and I was just here to sell my fish? I suppose I will never know.

You see, until I met that boy, my life was good. Uncomplicated. My grandmother – Nanny Moo – is a fish-filleter by the harbour in Tynemouth. I go to Papa Springham's morning school in Culvercot thrice a week, and I sell fish below the broken bridge on the Newcastle quayside on the other days.

Of course, I could not know, when I ran after that boy, that it would lead to me finding the Time Tablet, and meeting Kylie and Thomas, the children from 400 years ago.

Everyone calls that time 'the Wonder Age', and I went there. I really did.

Let me tell you how.

CHAPTER 2

The boy turned left and ran up the narrow stone stairway that leads from the quayside. We were halfway when the Brownie appeared at the bottom. His pony reared up, refusing to mount the steep, crooked steps. The boy, seeing this, let out a whoop, then bent down to show his bottom to the Brownie before taking the rest of the steps two at a time.

The marshal did not come after us. Instead, he yelled, 'You'd better watch out, you cheeky wee varmint!'

At the top of the steps, the boy turned and fell to the ground, laughing and holding his sides. I was still peeping scaredly round the wall.

'Don't vex y'self,' he said after he got his breath back. 'What they gonna do if they catch ye?'

'Beat me? And you?'

He waved his hand don't-carily as if a beating from a Brownie was no big deal.

I said, 'It may be nowt to you, but I sell fish down there! He may recognise me. You . . . you are reckless.'

'Nope, I ain't reckless.' He leapt to his feet in a single

fluid motion, then went *rat-tat-tat-tat* with his clompy boots on the ground. He swept his coat to one side as he bowed low, tipping the hat forward from his head. It rolled over on his forearm. He caught it in his hand and replaced it on his haystack of spiky blond hair.

‘I’m Deucalion Smiff . . . Better known among me more *hintimate* acquaintances as Duke! Pleased to meet ye.’

One of his eyes was dull and motionless, with an old swelled-up scar beneath it; the other was such a bright blue that it seemed to sparkle to make up for its companion’s lifelessness. He held out his bony hand for me to shake, and when I took it he pulled me to my feet.

‘What’s yer name?’

‘Ocean. Ocean Mooney.’

He looked me up and down, as though working out whether to trust me. I do not know if he liked what he saw: a smallish girl with freckles and pigtails in an oversized, patched smock and red welly boots. I suppose he did because after a moment he said, ‘Come on then, Ocean Mooney – the Brownie’s gone now. We’ve gotta get them sticker-bills back that *you* dropped. They cost me uncler a portion!’

I stood before the poster that this strange lad had nailed up.

MONSIEUR MUSTAPHA B. LUMIÈRE

&

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‘Ever seen a fillum before?’ said Duke. ‘Y’know – a proper *moovie*?’

I shook my head. I knew what they were, of course. In the Wonder Age, they were everywhere – on people’s televisions, on their cellphones and tablets and computers. Fantastic stories with music and ‘special effects’, which made things that were not real look as real as if you were standing next to them.

‘That’s a true story, that is,’ said Duke, pointing at the title *Star Wars*.

‘What? Was it not just made up?’ I said.

‘Course not. In the Wonder Age, they had spaceships,

and they went to th'moon all the time, and they were always having wars, so it's obvs true!

I wondered if he was teasing me. Just then, there was a patter of footsteps coming down the stone stairs, and a smallish man in a spensive-looking velvet coat appeared beside us. He was holding the hand of a monkey who was sucking its thumb like a well-behaved toddler, and I let out a gasp of surprise.

'Aha!' said the man, and he clapped his gloved fingers together. 'My fabu-labulous poster. Well done, Duke!' he said. He looked at me and removed his tall hat in the same showy way that Duke had. '*Bonjour, mademoiselle!*'

'*Bonjour, monsieur!*' I replied, and the man's face lit up, although I was finding it difficult to take my eyes off the monkey, who was wearing a tiny sleeveless jacket in the same purple velvet as the man's coat.

'*Mais, mam'selle!* You speak French?' He then gabbled rapidly and incomprehensibly for about half a min, pointing at the poster and gesticulating 'stravagantly. I did not understand a word so I studied the man instead. Neatly trimmed beard, black hair oiled into a tall pompadour, normous eyebrows styled into points, and old, often-mended clothes of rare style and quality. At the end of his speech, he bowed to me again.

Well, this was 'barrassing. Venually, I said, 'Erm . . . I am sorry, ah . . . *je regrette* . . . ah, my *français* is not

very, erm, *bon.*' (My teacher, Papa Springham, would be disappointed, I think.)

'You understand nothing of what I just say?' Monsieur Lumière looked forlorn, and he pouted as though he had just given the speech of his life and no one had heard it.

'Well, I understood *bonjour!*'

He ran a finger beneath his neat moustache. Then his face suddenly brightened, and he was once again the chipper figure from a moment ago.

'No matter. It is a good thing I speak English good, *n'est ce pas?* Allow me to present myself. I am Mustapha B. Lumière. *The* Mustapha B. Lumière! You have met my nephew, Duke. And this,' he said, gesturing towards the monkey, 'is my compani-anion Pierre.' The monkey bowed just as his master had done a moment ago, making me giggle.

Monsieur Lumière jerked a thumb at the poster. 'You 'ave 'eard of me?' he said, his dense eyebrows waggling hard.

'I have now!' I replied, diplomatically.

'Ah, *merveilleux!* And you are coming to my show, I expect. I 'ave never met anyone who is not incredified, transformixed and – 'ow you say? – smacked in the gob by the unbelieve-alieve-abubble show I present!'

'I would love to come,' I said, 'but it is a little spensive.'

Monsieur Lumière held his hands up to his face in stonishment, his mouth forming a perfect O.

‘*Oh là là!* But today is your day of lucky, my friend. For I need an *assistante*. Can you ride a bible-cycle?’

‘A what? Oh . . . a *bicycle?*’ I repeated in surprise.

‘*Oui!* The bible-cycle! Another beautiful French invention, like the cinema! I use a form of this vehicle to create the light for my movie show – and you, mam’selle, could be the extra person I need. Help me, and you will see the fillum for free!’

‘Yes, please!’ I said.

Monsieur Lumière’s eyebrows danced. ‘All you ’ave to do is pedal. Like a crazy person! You will be perfect!’

He removed his right glove and held out his hand.

‘Ocean Mooney,’ I said, shaking his hand and marvelling at its softness. Duke slapped his dirty mitt on top of ours. Then the monkey squeaked, jumped up on to Monsieur Lumière’s shoulders and added his little monkey paw.

‘And now, mam’selle, you can ’elp me further. We are looking for accommo-dommodation?’

Well. That is something I deff could help with.