

THE  
SILVER  
ARROW

LEV GROSSMAN

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## It Really Wasn't Over

NOW THAT KATE WAS RIGHT UP CLOSE TO THE TRAIN, she noticed something else: White steam was floating out of a pipe on top of it and swirling around its wheels.

Suddenly she felt a bit nervous.

‘Go on,’ Uncle Herbert said. ‘This is it. Real life is being interesting for a change. It’s paying attention to you. Isn’t that what you wanted?’

Kate didn’t especially like having her own words quoted back at her, so without answering she climbed up into the cab, the metal rungs hard under her bare feet. Inside the cab was all lit up by glowing



firelight. That cold, sooty box they'd found before was actually a little fireplace, and somebody had built a fire in it. She could feel the heat coming off it in the night air.

Something else, too: Before, the tender was empty, but now it was full of coal, a huge heap of it. Tom climbed up behind her.

'Cool,' he said. 'It's like camping. We could sleep out here.'

'It's like that cabin with the woodstove,' Kate said. 'That time we went skiing and Dad hurt his knee on the first day and was in a bad mood the whole rest of the week. You were little.'

'I remember, though.' Tom perched on one of the seats. 'That was when I lost Foxy.'

Foxy, full name Foxy Jones, had been Tom's stuffed fox from when he was a baby. It broke Tom's little heart when he lost him – he still couldn't read *Fantastic Mr Fox* without crying. Weird how boys had feelings, too, but pretended they didn't.

Kate could see into the house, where her father was setting the table for her birthday dinner. He looked a thousand miles away.

'I wish it were a real train,' she said quietly. 'I

mean I wish it could really go somewhere. Like on an adventure.’

‘Yeah.’

Just then a big lever shifted forward with a *clunk*.

Kate frowned at it.

‘That was weird. Did you do that?’

‘No,’ said Tom.

She stuck her head out the window.

‘Uncle Herbert? Something just moved in here.’

Uncle Herbert looked up at her.

‘What do you mean, moved?’

‘Like by itself.’

He frowned. ‘Couldn’t have.’

But now a couple of the brass wheels were spinning, too, and some of the needles and gauges were stirring and twitching. A couple of switches flipped.

‘Uncle Herbert, really! Things are moving! Like, a lot!’

It was the first time Kate had seen her uncle look unsure of himself.

‘Right. You might just think about climbing down from there.’ He was using that cautious tone you use when you’re trying to reason with a cat. ‘Both of you. Maybe quite quickly actually.’

‘Kate,’ Tom said. ‘Maybe we should.’

‘But what is this? Is it a game?’

‘It doesn’t matter!’ Uncle Herbert said. ‘Just get out of the train!’

Tom went to the door, but Kate stayed where she was.

‘You can go,’ she said. ‘It’s okay. But I want to see what happens.’

Tom thought about it.

‘I’m going to stay too,’ he said finally, in his most serious, solemn voice.

Now white steam was leaking and poofing out of the train everywhere and drifting across the lawn. A knob turned and a pure, bright white light stabbed forward from the nose of the train, lighting up the grass and the trees and the side of the house next door. From somewhere below came a sharp, satisfying *crack*. Not like something breaking, more like something that had been stuck for ages finally being released.

‘That was the brakes!’ Uncle Herbert yelled. ‘Come on! Get out!’

*Chuff.*

The engine made a deep, hoarse sound like an

ancient beast waking up from a very long sleep and snuffing the air.

‘Wait – is this pretend or real?’ Kate yelled.

‘It’s magic!’ Uncle Herbert yelled over the hissing of steam. ‘You didn’t think I got rich by working hard, did you?’

Kate very much doubted that this was true, because unlike in books, in real life magic did not in fact exist. But right now it wasn’t like she had another explanation.

*Chuff...*

*Chuff...*

*Chuff...*

Hissing and clanking sounds came from all over the train. The whole thing, all 102.36 tons of it, started rolling forward along the tracks as smoothly as a boat across a still pond. With something that heavy, you just knew there was no stopping it once it got going.

Uncle Herbert started running alongside the train muttering *no no no no no* to himself and trying to jump on to it like they do in films. But somehow Kate didn’t feel scared. Instead she felt as happy as she ever had in her life.



Like something in her was being released, too. Like her brakes were finally coming unstuck. This was it. This was the *something* she'd been waiting for.

Uncle Herbert seemed to be finding out that jumping on to a moving train is harder than it looks in films.

'Come on, Uncle Herbert!' she called.

'I can't! Jump down!'

'I don't think so. It's like you said: Life's being interesting.'

'But this is too interesting! Like *way* too interesting!' Uncle Herbert stopped and bent over with his hands on his knees, huffing and puffing. 'You're not ready!'

'Ready for what?'

Kate felt ready for anything. Wind was whipping her hair around. She didn't know if she was doing something very smart or very stupid, but in that moment she didn't care, because the thrill of it made her heart want to burst.

This was *so* much better than Vanimals.

*Chuff.*

*Chuff.*

*Chuff, chuff...*

*Chuff, chuff...*

Uncle Herbert tried to run after them again, but he stopped almost immediately. He really wasn't in very good shape. They were leaving him behind.

'I'm sorry!' Uncle Herbert called. 'This wasn't supposed to happen! You've got a big job ahead of you, a huge job, so – just do the best you can!'

They were gathering speed now, following the tracks across the lawn as smooth as a blade over ice.

There was just one thing missing.

'How do I blow the whistle?' Kate yelled.

'Dangly thing!'

It was the last thing Uncle Herbert said before they lost sight of him.

There was a wooden handle dangling from the ceiling. Kate pulled it, and the sound blasted out into the night:

**F000000000000000M!!!!!!**

The whole neighbourhood could hear it. It felt like the whole world could hear it. She did it again. And then, because she was a generous person, she let Tom do it, too.



## Things Get Weirder

THE TRAIN SWUNG TO THE RIGHT, FOLLOWING THE tracks into the woods behind their house, which just barely saved Kate and Tom from crashing through the fence and annihilating the neighbours' house and probably the neighbours.

Instead they started smashing their way through the trees.

'I can't believe this!' Kate shouted. 'This is insane!'

'Whoooooo!' Tom whooped. 'Whooo!'

'I mean this is really crazy!'

The train snapped branches and shoved aside

whole trunks of trees, the headlight blasting out ahead of it like the fiery white breath of a dragon. Green summer leaves flew everywhere. They were going to be in so much trouble. *So much.* They were going to pay for this *forever!* But it was totally worth it.

They knew these woods like the backs of their hands. They'd lived here their whole lives, and they'd climbed and jumped off and fallen from every tree and rock a million times. But they'd never seen the woods at night from the cab of a giant runaway steam engine. Kate braced herself for the ultimate



smash, when they would hit something big or when the tracks would run out and the whole train would lurch to a halt. It was going to be such a disaster. But so worth it. She swore to remember this her whole life: the night she rode through the woods behind her house in her own real steam train.

But the big smash or lurch never came. Instead the train kept going. Birds startled. Stiff branches scraped against the windows. She and Tom laughed hysterically. How far was it going to go?

Then Tom stopped laughing.

‘Wait,’ he said. ‘What happens when we get to the hill?’

It was a good question.

In the old days, when people made maps and they came to the part where they didn’t know what was there, they just drew a bunch of dragons and sea monsters instead of land. On the very oldest maps they wrote *Hic sunt leones*, which is Latin for ‘Here be lions’.

About a quarter mile into the woods behind Kate and Tom’s house there was a sudden steep hill, almost a cliff, with a chain-link fence at the top, and at the bottom was a scary dark swamp with a lot of

bugs and, supposedly, a giant snapping turtle so big it could bite your foot off. If an olden-days person were making a map of the woods behind Kate and Tom's house, that hill would've been where they started drawing sea monsters. Or lions.

Kate risked sticking her head out the window.

'Oh my God. We're almost there!'

'Kate,' Tom said seriously, 'what's actually going to happen, though? I mean really? Should we jump out?!'

'I don't know!'

She felt paralysed. Panicked. She was the older one, she was supposed to know! For the first time it occurred to her that maybe this wasn't going to come out okay. She wondered how deep the swamp was. If the train hit that water and sank, they'd be trapped. They could drown.

But it was too late, because even as she thought it she felt the *Silver Arrow* punch through the chain-link fence as easily as a brick through a plate-glass window, hesitate for a moment like a roller coaster right before a big drop, and then tilt forward as the whole massive engine began its horrifying dive down the hill.

The *clackety-clack* of the wheels went faster and faster and faster. Kate closed her eyes and felt a sick, weightless lifting in her stomach. She clenched her jaw tight and gripped the seat till her knuckles went white...

But the end didn't come. When they got to the bottom of the hill they just kept rolling smoothly along, faster now but quieter, with no more breaking branches. Slowly she unclenched her jaw and ungripped the seat. The engine chuffed happily. Cautiously Kate opened her eyes.

They should have been sinking into the swamp by now, with the snapping turtle waiting impatiently to snap the feet off their drowned corpses, but



instead they were cruising along easily through dark, still woods.

Kate knew perfectly well that there were no woods here, there was only swamp, and after that an office park, and beyond that the motorway. It was impossible.

But the woods didn't seem to care about that. They just went on getting deeper and darker.

'Where are we?' Tom whispered.

'I don't know!'

'I can't believe we're in a real train!'

'I know, right?'

'I mean what is even happening right now!'

Over the next few minutes Kate and Tom had three separate versions of this conversation, different but all basically the same. They raised the possibility that they were going to Hogwarts and decided they probably weren't, though that would've been cool, too. And it was Kate's eleventh birthday.

Kate stuck her head out her side of the cab, and Tom stuck his head out his side. She wondered where they *were* going, and whether it was a good idea to go there, and whether, if they absolutely had to, they could jump out of the train without getting badly injured,



and how long it would take them to walk home after that, and how exactly their parents would punish the bejeezus out of them when they got there. They were definitely putting Grace Hopper's whole permission-versus-forgiveness theory to a serious test.

But at the same time all the excitement, all the energy, all the joy she'd been waiting her whole life to feel were finally thrilling through her whole body. Anything was worth that.

The air outside was getting pretty cold, even though it was June, and Kate shivered in her T-shirt. She was grateful for the warmth of the fire. After a few minutes she saw a pale light through the trees up ahead.

It was dim and distant at first and blinked in and out among the branches, but it got stronger and stronger till at last it came fully into view. It was a train station.

Not a fancy one, just a small country train station, a long lit platform in a clearing among the trees. There were people waiting on it.

Except they weren't people, they were animals. A few deer, a wolf, several foxes, a big brown bear, some

rabbits or hares – or were they the same thing? – and a stripy-faced badger. Perched along a railing at the back of the platform was an assortment of birds, large and small.

They just stood there, as still as commuters waiting for their morning train. Each one had a ticket in its mouth.



## Click-*bing*!

THE *SILVER ARROW* SLOWED, PULLED SMOOTHLY INTO the station, puffed out a huge cloud of white steam, and stopped with a loud hiss. There was an old-fashioned train clock on the platform, the round kind with a light inside that sits on top of a lamp post. It was late, almost ten o'clock at night.

Tom came over to Kate's side to look at the animals. The animals looked back at them. They didn't run away the way wild animals usually did. They just stood there.

It was like a dream. The air was so cold now they could see their breath in the lights of the station.



Finally Tom said:

‘Hi.’

Kate wasn’t always grateful for Tom’s presence – in fact a lot of the time she preferred his absence – but at that moment she was. She knew she tended to hesitate and overthink things. Tom didn’t have that problem, he would just blurt out anything that came into his head.

A small grey fox bent down and placed its ticket carefully on the platform.

‘Hi,’ it said.



‘Hi,’ Kate said.

‘Been a long time since a train came through here,’ the fox said.

‘Very long,’ said the badger, transferring its ticket to its paws.

Kate thought of saying *Is that so?* or *How about that!* but rejected both ideas as fatally uncool.

‘How long?’ Tom said.

‘About thirty years,’ the badger said. ‘Where have you been? You’re very late.’

‘Wait – just – how can you be talking?!’ Kate said.

‘Oh, I know,’ the fox said. ‘We do talk sometimes, just not around humans. Frankly, we don’t meet a lot of humans who are worth talking to. No offence.’

Kate supposed that was fair.

‘But you haven’t been standing here waiting this whole time, have you?’ she said. ‘Like, the whole thirty years?’

‘Oh, no. Of course not. We just look in here once in a while to check. I mean, we’re animals, it’s not like we have jobs.’

‘I guess not.’

‘You need to get over to the rail yard to pick up some train cars, and fast,’ a hare said. ‘It’s almost too late.’

‘The rail yard,’ Kate said. ‘Okay. Thank you. We’ll do that.’

It sounded like good advice.

‘See you soon then.’

The animals all picked up their tickets and went back to waiting. With a jerk and a loud hiss, the *Silver Arrow* moved off down the track again. Tom pulled the whistle, two quick blasts:

**FOOOM! FOOOM!**

Kate clanged the bell for good measure. They quickly left the lights of the station behind.

‘Did you see that?’ Kate said.

‘I totally saw that!’ Tom said.

‘Those animals talked! To us!’

Not only that – and that was incredible enough – but what they’d said had made Kate’s ears prick up. This wasn’t just a joyride, Kate and Tom were going somewhere specific – namely to the rail yard, wherever that was – and for a reason – namely to pick up some train cars. A joyride would’ve been fine, obviously, but this was even better. It wasn’t just fun and games. They were on a mission. They had a job to do.

The glow of the firelight was nice, and it was starting to feel cosy in the cab. The air smelled like hot engine oil: a savoury, interesting smell. Everything was made of brass and leather and wood and glass and felt very old, like the kind of place that would usually be behind a velvet rope at a museum.

‘I wonder who’s driving this thing,’ Tom said. ‘I mean, we’re not.’

‘Who knows?’

Suddenly there was a click and the *bing* of a bell

behind them, kind of like the click-*bing* of an old-fashioned typewriter.

Kate hadn't noticed it before, but on the wall of the cab, in among the pipes and dials and levers, was a little loop of paper. It unrolled out of the innards of the train at one end and then scrolled back into them at the other. A message had just been printed on it:

### I KNOW

As soon as they'd read the words the message scrolled out of sight and more paper scrolled out with





another click-*bing*. It really was like a typewriter, or a very low-tech printer.

More words appeared, neatly typed:

**THE FOLLOWING ARE INSTRUCTIONS FOR  
OPERATING THIS STEAM ENGINE**

*Uh-oh*, Kate thought. *Here we go*.

Click-*bing*. More words.

**OPERATING A STEAM ENGINE IS  
REALLY COMPLICATED**

**BUT DON'T WORRY, I'M GOING TO TEACH YOU  
HOW TO DO IT**

'Great.' Tom rolled his eyes. 'Train school.'

Click-*bing*.

**IT'S NOT 'TRAIN SCHOOL'**

**THIS IS CALLED LEARNING**

**WHEN DONE PROPERLY IT CAN ACTUALLY BE  
QUITE ENJOYABLE**

THOUGH ADMITTEDLY IT'S HARDLY EVER DONE  
PROPERLY

Tom folded his arms. He looked unconvinced.

LOOK, LEARNING THINGS IS INCREDIBLY HARD  
AND UNPLEASANT

IF IT WASN'T THEN EVERYBODY WOULD DO IT  
ALL THE TIME

AND THEN EVERYBODY WOULD KNOW  
EVERYTHING

WOULDN'T THEY

Kate shrugged. 'I guess.'

YOU GUESS RIGHT

WHAT YOU NEED IS A GOOD TEACHER

FORTUNATELY I AM ONE

'Right,' Tom said under his breath.

**I AM RIGHT**

‘How can you even be talking?’ Kate asked, keenly aware that she’d also just asked a fox that exact same question.

**I DON’T KNOW, I JUST AM**

‘Are you like a giant metal robot or something?’

**I DON’T KNOW**

**I MEAN AREN’T YOU JUST A ROBOT MADE OF  
FLESH AND BONES**

**IF YOU THINK ABOUT IT**

Kate thought about it. The train did kind of have a point.

**FOR NOW YOUR ONLY JOB IS GIVING ME MORE  
COAL**

**THE COAL IS IN THE TENDER. JUST SHOVEL IT  
INTO THE FIREBOX**

**THE FIREBOX IS THE BOX WITH THE FIRE IN IT**

‘I figured that,’ said Tom.

**LESS TALKING, MORE SHOVELLING**

There were two short shovels and two pairs of work gloves hanging on pegs in the tender. They put on the gloves and shovelled chunky pieces of black coal into the firebox. It took only a few shovelfuls before the fire started to get hot and glowing again.

Job well done. It was surprisingly satisfying.

‘So,’ Kate said, ‘I guess it’s a talking train.’

‘I guess so.’

Click-*bing*.

**I GUESS SO**