



The Last Bard

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For my beloved friend

Tim Sutton

Lord, what fools we mortals be . . .



Also by Maz Evans

Who Let the Gods Out?

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The Exploding Life of Scarlett Fife

The Wobbly Life of Scarlett Fife

The Stormy Life of Scarlett Fife



None of us knows where we are in our story. Today might be the start of a new tale, the end of one already told, or simply another chapter along its way. Our stories are often comedies, occasionally tragedies, many are histories and most are all three. Maybe we'll have to fight the monsters beyond. Or perhaps we must battle the beast within. We can never know how our stories will end, or even if they've already begun.

But for William Davenant, this story started in a traffic jam on the M3.

'Urgh,' Will groaned, pulling at the collar of his jumper for the thirtieth time in two hours, unsure if he was releasing the August heat from his body, or letting more in. 'It's soooo hot.'

'I'm sorry, kiddo,' his mother Mary apologized, aggressively twiddling a dial to improve the weak gasp of warm breath leaking from the fans. 'Uncle Claude said he'd get the air con fixed . . . Why don't you take your jumper off, you daft brush? You must be hotter than a dragon's vindaloo!'

'It's not your fault,' Will interrupted, not wanting his mum to feel bad. 'Uncle Claude says he'll do a lot of things.'

'He most certainly does,' Mary muttered, giving up and slamming her hand back on the steering wheel. The car inched forward on the shimmering tarmac. Will peered across the ocean of cars ahead, but still couldn't see any land. He returned to the sketch pad on his lap, adding wings to his drawing of their car as he imagined it taking off over the traffic and soaring towards the sea. Will liked to draw the world as he wanted it to be. The real picture before him didn't always make great viewing.

'We'll be there soon enough,' Mary promised, as she had done for the last hour in the sweltering, stationary traffic. 'And let's look on the bright side – we get a few days by the seaside! You'll love Arden Heights – our first proper holiday in years!'

'Cleaning out your dead dad's flat is *not* a proper holiday,' Will grouched, then immediately wished he could

suck the words back. His grandfather might have been a loser who wanted nothing to do with them, but his mum was still struggling. It had been months since Rex Davenant died. No death was easy. And as Will knew far too well, some were almost impossible.

‘Sorry,’ he muttered. ‘I’m just really hot.’

He felt Mary’s hand on his knee.

‘It’s OK, kiddo,’ she whispered. ‘And if you think you’ve got problems, wait till I tell you about the wee I’ve needed since Winchester . . .’

Will smiled. His mum could always make him smile. Even on the days when Will had thought he’d never smile again.

‘Let’s take our minds off it. The number plate game!’ Mary said brightly. ‘That Hyundai over there, last three letters are HFM . . . Hairy Ferret Man.’

Will threw his head back on the headrest and closed his eyes.

‘It’s too hot,’ he groaned. ‘I can’t think.’

A cold splash to his face made him gasp.

‘Wakey-wakey, then,’ his mum giggled with a wink, putting her water bottle to her lips. ‘Huge Fairy Mullet? Happy Furry Martian? Howling Fish Moron? Hiccuping Flying Mouse?’

‘Hopeless Forty Mother?’ Will offered with a sly grin.

‘Oi!’ Mary cried, squirting him again. ‘I’m not forty for

months! So start saving up for my present!’

Will tried to smile, but this time he couldn’t. He’d love nothing more than to buy his mum a massive present for her fortieth, or throw her a great party, or take her to her favourite restaurant. Dad would have done all of that and more. They’d talked about surprising Mum with a trip to a hotel, or one of those fancy spas in magazines, or maybe taking the train to Paris. But none of those things would happen now. There would be no hotel. Will had no money for a spa. And there was more chance of the tooth fairy taking them to Paris than Uncle Claude.

Because that’s what happened when Will lost his dad. He’d lost all their dreams as well.

‘Hey,’ said his mum softly, reaching for his hand and reading his mind like she always seemed to. ‘We’ll have a great time whatever we do. Do you remember that breakfast in bed you made me for Mother’s Day?’

‘Yeah?’ Will grimaced, recalling the burnt toast and concrete eggs.

‘Well,’ Mary whispered, ‘don’t do that again, kiddo, and I’ll have a wonderful birthday.’

Will playfully slapped his mum’s hand away.

‘High Five Mum,’ Mary cheered triumphantly. ‘Although I still really need that wee . . .’

The car inched forward again, slightly faster this time, generating enough of a breeze to cool Will’s thoughts.

Mum was right. A break would be good. The seaside was all right. And anywhere was better than Uncle Claude's.

His mum's brother had 'kindly' taken them in after Will's dad had died. Mary had tried to pay the rent and bills on her own. But the job she loved, helping people find emergency housing, ironically couldn't keep a roof over her own head. So they moved in with Claude. And he was determined to remind them how kind he'd been every day.

Uncle Claude had 'kindly' given Mary the box room he used for storage and 'kindly' let her cook and clean for him and his son Jon to repay his generosity.

Uncle Claude had 'kindly' agreed that Will could sleep on the sofa bed in the utility room, so long as Will was up every day at five-thirty a.m. with the bed tidied away so that Claude didn't have to be reminded of his warm-heartedness when he left for work at six. Not that Will ever got to sleep in that long.

Uncle Claude 'kindly' gave Mary a job as a secretary in his office, then kept nearly all of her wages to finance his goodness.

Will didn't know how he could ever repay Uncle Claude's 'kindness'. But he certainly knew he couldn't take much more of it.

'Beggars can't be choosers,' his uncle would snarl as Will wore Jon's threadbare hand-me-downs and ate

lukewarm leftovers and watched his mother being treated like an unpaid servant just to make sure they had somewhere to live. Mary used to have fire in her eyes. But Uncle Claude had dimmed it to barely a flicker.

‘It won’t be forever,’ his mum promised daily. Will hoped she was right. Because it had only been two years. But it already felt like an eternity.

‘At last!’ Mary exclaimed, wiping the sweat from her head as the traffic finally started to move. ‘We’re out of first gear! We’re on our way! At least Uncle Claude got the gearbox fixed.’

But as their car made a Horribly Fractured Moan and spluttered to a slow, shuddering halt, it became clear that, once again, Uncle Claude had been his typically ‘kind’ self.



Three hours later, they finally arrived at Arden Heights after two miserable hours spent on the side of the motorway and a worse one in the Doug Berry Repairs tow truck. After sixty-two minutes with Doug, Will knew two things about their rescuer: one – he was very proud of his neighbourhood watch, and two – he really liked egg sandwiches. Will could have lived a long and happy life without either piece of information.

‘At least he has air con,’ Mary whispered as Will

struggled against the nasal assault of Doug's third sandwich.

'Yeah,' Will said, breathing in through his mouth. 'At least now we'll suffocate cold.'

'... and so I walked up to the fella, bold as grass, and comprehended him in broad nightlight,' Doug chortled. 'I was as proud as lunch! Oh – speaking o' which – you want some?'

He offered his half-eaten sandwich to his passengers. Will tried not to gag.

'We're good, thanks,' Mary grimaced politely, jiggling around in her seat. She still hadn't had her wee.

'Shame,' said Doug, chomping down on his buttty again. 'I shouldn't have brung so many – I've got eyes bigger than me bum. Any road, did I tell you about the time I stopped her from number 38 from putting her bins out on the wrong night?'

'You didn't!' Mary said enthusiastically, winking at Will. 'But if it's half as good as the one about Mr Verge's leaf blower, we're in for a treat ...'

By the time they reached the block of flats, the August sun had long since retired for the night. As Will burst out of the cab of the truck and took his first deep breath for over an hour, the evening air still felt sticky and close around his warm skin. He couldn't wait to take a long, cold shower and wash this horrible day away.

‘You’re kidding,’ Mary said to Doug, who somehow still hadn’t finished his egg sandwich. ‘Someone’s parked in our space!’

Will looked at the space designated for flat 29, which was occupied by a big blue people carrier.

‘Well, I’ll be,’ said Doug disapprovingly. ‘Reminds me of the time Debbie Quickly parked her Ford Cortina in front of Marie Fenton’s driveway – they fought like cats and frogs, I tell you. Where d’ya wannit, my love?’

‘Urgh,’ sighed Mary, pulling her damp T-shirt away from her damper body. ‘Just leave it in one of the visitors’ spaces – you can pick it up from there in the morning.’

‘I’ll do it on the triple,’ said Doug cheerfully, saluting them both. ‘Your wish is my demand.’

‘Thanks, Doug,’ Mary said kindly. ‘I don’t know what we would have done without you.’

‘Breathe properly?’ Will muttered, to a stealthy poke from his mother.

‘You’re welcome, my sweet,’ said the driver, pulling their suitcases out of the cab before clambering back into it. ‘Always happy to lend a foot. Mind how you go now.’

Mary and Will each grabbed a case, along with the now-ruined food they had brought from London, and headed towards the entrance to Arden Heights. Will couldn’t make much out in the gloom – it was much

darker down here on the unlit coast than in the illuminated city – but what reared up ahead of him was a brown-brick block of flats with balconies dotted around the three sides of the square building, some of the residents sitting out in the warm evening air. As they walked around its perimeter to the front door, Will could just make out that the block was set in a pretty garden with a swimming pool at its heart. He looked longingly at the mass of water, desperate to jump in and feel its coolness against his skin . . .

But he couldn't.

Will was aware that Mary had come to a halt. He looked over at his mum, whose face was a strange mixture of feelings he couldn't pull apart.

'You see? Told you we'd have fun,' Mary said quietly. She tore her eyes away from the building and gestured to the pool. 'I can't remember the last time we went swimming.'

Will felt a familiar and uncomfortable sensation twist in his stomach. He could remember exactly when they'd last swum. It was on their final holiday with Dad before he got ill, not that they'd known it would be their final holiday then. They'd had no idea when they laughed and joked in that caravan in the Lake District, or splashed around in the sparkling lake, or played card games in front of their campfire, that their happy story was about

to take the saddest twist. Will would have loved to swim in that pool with his mum. But there was no way that was going to happen this week.

‘Now, I know it’s on here somewhere,’ said Mary with false brightness, pulling a bunch of keys out of her overstuffed handbag. ‘Or at least I think it is – I never took it off for some reason.’

Will watched Mary struggle with a thought that she quickly threw away. He wasn’t entirely sure what had happened between his mum and her dad. He knew it had something to do with his own father, Leo. And he knew that Rex – Will only ever used his first name, Rex hadn’t earned the title ‘Grandad’ – disapproved of his mum being with his dad, although he didn’t really know why. Leo had only spoken of it once and Will could only remember a single piece of information.

‘Your mother was forced to make a choice. And she chose us,’ he had said proudly. ‘So we must always choose her.’

It always amazed Will that he still had any tears left to cry over his dad – surely there couldn’t be any more inside? But as he thought how his dad would have happily chosen his mum every day of his life, had he been allowed, he could feel a fresh crop rising to his tired eyes.

‘Here we go!’ Mary declared triumphantly, holding a

strange-shaped square key from her key ring. 'Right – let's get inside, get washed up and get some food down us.'

She peered into the plastic bags at the sweaty, soggy remains of the leftovers Uncle Claude had 'kindly' let them take from the fridge that morning.

'Takeaway it is,' she said with a grin. 'Uncle Claude gave me some money for his new bedroom curtains and I haggled the man down. So we've got twenty pounds he's not going to miss – we'll eat like kings! Now, let's get inside.'

'Oi!' came an aggressive shout from across the car park. Will lurched his tired head around. What now?

'This is private property!' yelled the older man hobbling towards them, threateningly waving a broom. 'Residents only! So clear off!'

Will heard Mary exhale next to him. His mum was very good at diffusing difficult situations – living with Uncle Claude had given her plenty of practice. She took a second deep breath and turned around with a forced smile.

'Good evening,' she said, extending her hand. 'I'm Mary. Nice to meet you. And you are?'

'Caleb,' the man growled, not taking Mary's hand, nor offering a surname. 'Arden Heights caretaker. What business have you here?'

'I'm Rex Davenant's daughter,' Mary said, her voice

hardening at Caleb's rudeness. 'I'm here to . . . I'm here to sort out his flat.'

The old man stopped and scrutinized them both. He put the broom down, although not his suspicious gaze.

'So the prodigal daughter has returned,' he said unpleasantly. 'The Duke told me all about you.'

'Who's the Duke?' Will whispered out of the corner of his mouth.

'Dad's nickname,' Mary whispered back. 'He loved jazz. Haven't heard him called that in years.'

'I've got a few other names for him,' Will muttered.

'And you must be the boy,' Caleb pronounced, nodding dismissively in Will's direction.

'Yes, this is my son, Will,' said Mary through a clenched jaw. Mary was always polite and reasonable with people. Right up to the point until she wasn't. And this Caleb was pushing his luck. 'Now we've had a long journey and are desperate for some food and some sleep, so if you'll excuse us . . .'

'You can't just dump your car there,' Caleb snarled. 'Them's for visitors.'

'Well, someone parked in our space,' Mary snapped. 'And we're just visiting. So that's all super, isn't it?'

Will had seen this before. Mum was brewing like a volcano before it erupted. Things were about to get molten.

‘You need to move it!’ Caleb barked. ‘We have rules about this sort of thing! I’ll be reporting you to the residents’ committee and then there’ll be all hell to pay, mark my—’

‘I’ll tell you what, Caleb,’ Mary said firmly and rather loudly, moving menacingly towards the caretaker, who took a step backwards. ‘I’ve had a very challenging day. My journey was long, my car is broken, my son and I are tired and hungry and I’m about to wet my pants. I’m not sure what you want me to do with a vehicle that has already failed to get us here once today, but if you want some suggestions, I’ve got a long and creative list of precisely WHERE I’D LIKE TO PUT IT!’

Will had to stifle a laugh as the elderly caretaker cowered slightly. Dad always described Mary as a ‘fire-work’. It was good to see his mum’s fire back. Uncle Claude hadn’t managed to extinguish it entirely.

‘Like I say,’ Caleb growled. ‘I’ll be reporting you to the residents’ committee.’

‘Knock yourself out, Caleb!’ said Mary brightly. ‘Because there’s a chicken chow mein with my name on it and nothing and no one is going to keep it from me! Right after I’ve had a MASSIVE WEE!’

And with an aggressive flourish, Mary turned the key in the door, her back on Caleb and ushered Will inside Arden Heights.

The heavy wooden door slammed behind them like a rude word.

‘Well, he’s a charmer,’ Mary smiled at her son, calm restored to her face. ‘C’mon, kiddo – let’s get you to flat 29.’

They walked along the narrow hallway and turned right at the end towards a small lift. Ahead was a room with several tables covered in half-finished jigsaw puzzles and board games, a pool table and a dartboard.

‘The rec – recreation – room,’ Mary explained as she hit the button and stretched her tired neck. ‘Most of the residents here are elderly, you see.’

Will was struck by the smell of the flats – it wasn’t bad, it was just . . . different. He looked to where a bowl of very old potpourri had been placed on a glass table under an old mirror. His mum followed the direction of his gaze and laughed.

‘I believe it was your grandmother who put that there,’ she chuckled. ‘The guy who lived at flat 2 used to smoke cigars – my mum was making a point. Classic Violet.’

Will did the maths. He knew his grandmother Violet had died when he was two, so that was eleven years ago. From what Will had gathered about his grandparents, they agreed on most things, but they certainly did not agree on Rex’s treatment of his daughter. Grandma Violet had defied his order not to have anything to do

with Mary and her new family, and Will knew that his mum missed her own very much.

But surely no one was going to miss potpourri that was at least eleven years old?

The lift pinged and Will and Mary slumped into it. There were four floors at Arden Heights – Mary hit the button for the second. Will looked at his mum. Until now, Mary had seemed quite relaxed. But as the lift neared its destination, he could smell the anxiety on her like Doug's egg sandwiches.

'You OK?' he asked her.

His mum looked confused, as if she wasn't entirely aware how she felt, nor that she was broadcasting it to her son.

'I'm fine,' she said with a reassuring smile. 'It's just . . . strange. I've not been here in forever.'

As the lift came to a halt, Will smiled back. His mum had already had to deal with far too much strangeness in the recent past. He hoped that this would be the last bit.

'Two pieces of good news,' Mary said as they approached the door to flat 29 and she put in another key. 'One – I now officially hold the world record for holding in a wee. And two – my father was a neat and tidy man. This really shouldn't take us that long—'

But as the door to her father's flat swung open, Mary stopped in her tracks.

‘Oh,’ was all she said.

Will peered around his mother to see what had silenced her so suddenly. The answer came back quickly.

His grandfather might have been a neat and tidy man.

But his flat was an absolute tip.