

THE BONFIRE COMMITTEE

— B1-B2 —

Даниэла Перес



18+

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The Bonfire Committee

«Автор»

2026

Перес Д.

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Девятого сентября в старом сарае на ферме Хэддон сгорает крыша, и в деревне Марлоу-Энд ровно два подозреваемых: Нора Финнеган, которая была там в тот вечер, и Рэй Абиола, который был там же и по другой причине. Ни один из них не поджигал сарай, ни один не готов объяснить, что он там делал, и оба молчат так убедительно, что через неделю приходский совет выносит приговор: восемь недель общественных работ, а именно организация деревенской Ночи Гая Фокса пятого ноября. Вдвоём. Тёплая, смешная и очень английская история о том, как двое подростков и шестеро пенсионеров восемь недель строят костёр, и о том, что некоторые вещи горят гораздо лучше, чем планировалось. Читайте, изучайте английский уровня B1-B2, влюбляйтесь в язык и чтение с главными героями.

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Daniela Perez

English B1-B2

Chapter 1. The Ninth of September

Key vocabulary

a barn — сарай, амбар
a beam — балка
smoke — дым
a spark — искра
to catch fire — загореться
a fuel can — канистра
straw — солома
a fire engine — пожарная машина
a hose — шланг
to collapse — обрушиться
ash — пепел
a witness — свидетель
to accuse — обвинять
a suspect — подозреваемый
deliberate — умышленный

The Ninth of September

The barn at Haddon Farm had been standing since 1840 and it burned in about forty minutes. Nora Finnegan saw the first of it at twenty past eight on a Tuesday evening, from the inside, which was a fact she would spend the next two months not explaining to anybody.

She had been coming to the barn since March. It was the sort of place nobody bothered with any more: half of it was full of pallets and broken machinery, and the other half had a dry corner where Ted Rowntree stored straw he never used. Ted had stopped farming properly in 2019. He came to the barn twice a year, in June and December, and the rest of the time it belonged to whoever wanted it, which for six months had meant Nora.

There were three cardboard boxes behind the pallets in the dry corner. They had been in her father's workshop until April, when her mother had put them in the hall and said, in the flat voice she used for large decisions, that they were going to the tip on Saturday.

They had not gone to the tip on Saturday. Nora had moved them, in two trips, on her bike, with the boxes strapped to the rack, and she had never told anybody, and eighteen months later she still came up here about twice a week to sit on a pallet next to them and not open them.

That was what she was doing when she heard somebody moving about at the far end.

She stood up.

The barn was long and dark and full of shapes. There was one window at the far end with the glass gone, and against it, in the grey light, she could see a figure that was much too small to be Ted Rowntree.

Then there was a sound she did not recognise, a soft hollow whump, like a heavy coat being dropped, and the far end of the barn turned orange.

For about two seconds Nora did not move at all.

She was not proud of those two seconds afterwards. She thought about them a great deal.

Then she was running, and shouting, and the smoke arrived much faster than she had expected. It did not rise. That was the thing nobody tells you. It came along the roof and then it came down the walls and then it was at chest height, and the far end of the barn was a wall of yellow light with black shapes standing in front of it, and the straw was going up in a way that made a noise like heavy rain.

She shouted twice more and got no answer, and afterwards she was never able to say whether that was because there was nobody left to answer or because the fire was simply louder than a human voice, which it was.

She got to the middle of the barn and could not go any further.

—Get out! she shouted. Whoever you are, get out, get out the other side!

She could not tell whether anybody heard her. The noise had become enormous.

She went back the way she had come, with her sleeve over her mouth, and she was outside in the wet grass with her lungs burning before she understood that she had left the boxes ten metres from a fire.

She was still trying to make herself go back in when somebody came round the corner of the barn at a dead run and nearly knocked her over.

It was a boy in a dark jacket with his hood up, and he was carrying a red plastic fuel can in one hand, and he was moving away from the building as fast as anybody can move while carrying twenty litres of anything.

He went eight or nine metres past her, put the can down in the grass, and bent over with his hands on his knees.

Nora stood absolutely still.

She knew who it was. Everybody in Marlow End knew who everybody was, and Ray Abiola had been in her year at school for three years and in her form group for two of them, and she would have recognised him from the back of his head at a hundred metres in fog.

—Ray?

He straightened up. His face was completely blank for a second, the way faces are when a person is doing several things in their head at once.

—Nora, he said.

—What are you doing?

—What are you doing?

They stood in the field looking at each other while the roof of a hundred and eighty year old barn burned behind them.

—There's a can, Nora said.

—Yeah.

—There's a fuel can in your hand.

—There was a fuel can in the barn, said Ray, and now there isn't, which is the entire point of the last thirty seconds.

Something cracked inside the building, very loudly, and a section of the roof went down. The heat arrived across the grass in a wave that made them both step backwards at the same time.

—Have you phoned? she said.

—I phoned from the gate.

—Is there anybody inside?

He looked at her.

It was, she thought afterwards, the strangest half second of her life. He looked at her and she watched him decide something.

—No, he said.

—Ray.

—There is nobody inside, he said again, and this time it came out differently, and he did not look at her while he said it.

The fire engine came from Bakewell and took nineteen minutes, which everybody agreed afterwards was very good going, and it made no difference at all. By the time the hoses were out, the roof was down and the fire had nothing left to do. The crew spent an hour and a half wetting the beams and the pallets and the black steaming heap where the straw had been, and Ted Rowntree stood at the gate in a dressing gown and a waxed jacket and did not say anything to anybody.

Half the village came. That is what happens in a place with four hundred people and one thing happening. They stood along the hedge in coats over pyjamas, and some of them had brought children, and somebody had brought a flask, and the light from the fire moved on all their faces at once and made the whole thing look like something being watched rather than something happening.

Nora and Ray gave their names to a firefighter with a tablet, separately, and then to a police officer, separately, and both of them said the same three things: that they had been walking past, that they had seen the fire start at the far end, and that they had not seen anybody else.

Neither of them heard the other say it. Both of them assumed the worst.

Nora's mother arrived at half past nine, in her work fleece, having run the last two hundred metres, and held on to Nora's arm hard enough to leave marks and said nothing about it until they were in the car.

—What were you doing up there? she said.

—Walking.

—At half past eight? In September?

—Yes.

Bridget Finnegan drove down the lane in second gear for a while.

—Nora.

—I was walking, Mum.

She could not say: your husband's boxes are in that barn, or were, and I have been sitting next to them twice a week for six months because you would not let me keep them in the house. There was no version of that sentence that did not end somewhere terrible, and it was twenty to ten at night, and her hands still smelled of smoke.

So she said nothing, and her mother said nothing, and they drove home like that.

Nora lay in bed that night with the window open and her hands smelling of smoke however many times she washed them, and went through it again.

A shape at the far end of the barn. Too small for Ted. Too small for Ray, who was six foot one and had been in the school basketball team for exactly one season before deciding he did not enjoy it.

Too small for anybody over about fourteen.

She turned over and put her face in the pillow and did not sleep for a long time.

The village talked for four days.

By Wednesday lunchtime everybody knew that two seventeen year olds had been at the barn. By Wednesday evening everybody knew which two. By Thursday there were three theories, and Nora heard all of them in the shop, standing behind a shelf, while two women she had known her whole life discussed her in normal voices.

Theory one was that it was an accident and it was nobody's fault, and that old barns full of dry straw go up on their own.

Theory two was that it was the two of them, together, and that something had got out of hand.

Theory three was more specific and Nora heard it on Thursday afternoon from a man buying a newspaper.

—The Abiola lad had a can of petrol in his hand, he said. Fact. Two people saw him.

—He was carrying it out, said Amos behind the counter.

—That is what he says.

She left the shop without buying anything, which she regretted immediately, because leaving a shop without buying anything in Marlow End is itself a piece of information and it went round by teatime.

On Friday morning Nora walked back up to the barn on her own.

The police tape was still there, going from a fence post to a tree and back to a fence post, sagging in the middle. The building was not a building any more. Three of the walls stood to about two metres and the fourth had gone completely. Inside there were beams lying at angles and a great deal of grey and black material that had once been other things.

She stood at the tape for ten minutes.

Then she ducked under it and walked into the middle of it in her school shoes, because there was nobody there, and she went to the corner where the dry straw had been.

There was nothing. There was black ground and a bent metal thing that might have been part of a plough.

She got down on her knees anyway and moved some of it about with her hands, and after a while she found a piece of green plastic, about the size of a bank card, curled at the edges from the heat. It had been the corner of a folder. On it there were four printed letters, half melted, and she could read three of them.

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She sat back on her heels in the ash.

—You shouldn't be in here.

Ray Abiola was standing at the gap where the fourth wall had been, with his hands in his pockets.

Nora got up much too fast and did not manage to look as though she had been doing anything reasonable.

—Neither should you.

—No, he agreed.

—Why are you here?

—Why are you?

—I asked first.

—You did, said Ray. That is true.

They looked at each other across nine metres of burnt floor.

—I'm going to say something, he said, and you are going to hate it.

—Go on.

—Everyone in this village thinks one of us did this.

—I know.

—And the two of us are the only people who know that neither of us did.

Nora said nothing, because she did not know that. She had spent three nights lying awake seeing a boy running out of a burning building with a fuel can in his hand, and she had not managed to make it look like anything else, and she was not going to say so standing in the middle of the evidence.

—Do we? she said.

Something happened in Ray's face that she did not like at all.

—Right, he said. Great. Good talk.

He turned round and walked back through the gap, and Nora stood in the burnt barn with a piece of melted green plastic in her hand and understood that she had just made an enemy for reasons that were entirely her own fault and that she still could not explain.

The letter from the parish council arrived on Monday the fifteenth of September, addressed to Miss N. Finnegan, in an envelope with a window.

It invited her to attend an extraordinary meeting of Marlow End Parish Council on Thursday at seven o'clock in the village hall.

It said that the matter for discussion was Item 4, and that Item 4 was:

Community reparation. Bonfire Night, 5 November.

Chapter 2. Item Four

Key vocabulary

a parish council — приходской совет
an agenda — повестка дня
minutes (of a meeting) — протокол заседания
a chairman / chairwoman — председатель
a proposal — предложение
to vote — голосовать
unanimous — единогласный
a motion — резолюция, предложение на голосование
to second (a motion) — поддержать предложение
reparation — возмещение, искупление
a punishment — наказание
to object — возражать
liability — ответственность (юридическая)
an apology — извинение
a resolution — решение

Item Four

Marlow End village hall had been built in 1928 out of corrugated iron and optimism, and it had a stage at one end, ninety plastic chairs, a hatch through to a kitchen and a smell that nobody had ever successfully identified.

On Thursday the eighteenth of September, at seven o'clock in the evening, it contained forty-one people.

—That is more than we had for the defibrillator, said a voice behind Nora.

—That is more than we had for anything since the reservoir, said another one.

Nora sat in the third row with her mother on one side and an empty chair on the other. She had put on a shirt, which she regretted, because it made her look as though she thought this was serious, and everybody else was in fleeces.

Ray came in at four minutes past seven with his uncle and sat on the other side of the aisle, and did not look across, and Nora did not look across either, and both of them managed this for the entire meeting with the sort of concentration usually reserved for exams.

At the front, behind a folding table with a green cloth on it, sat the parish council.

There were six of them and Nora knew all six by sight and none of them by conversation, which is a very specific way of knowing people and is the normal way in a village if you are under thirty.

Dorothy Vane was in the middle. She was seventy-eight, and she had been chair since 1998, and in front of her she had a hardback book, a pen, a small brass bell and a wristwatch which she took off and put on the table, face up, in a way that made the whole room sit down.

—Right, she said. Marlow End Parish Council, extraordinary meeting, eighteenth of September. We have four items and we are going to do all four of them, including the ones you have not come for, because that is how a meeting works.

It took fifty minutes to get to Item Four, and Nora spent most of them realising something about her village that she had never quite seen before, which was that it ran on procedure the way other places run on money. Nothing happened in Marlow End because somebody wanted it. Things happened because somebody proposed them, somebody else seconded them, and a woman of seventy-eight wrote them in a book.

There were fifteen of those books in a cupboard behind the stage. The earliest was 1954.

Item One was a hedge. Item Two was the drain outside the church, which had been Item Two, in one form or another, since 2016. Item Three was a request from somebody in Bakewell to hold a car boot sale on the green, which was refused, with feeling.

By ten to eight the hall had gone quiet in the way rooms go quiet when the thing everybody came for is next.

—Item Four, said Dorothy Vane. Community reparation. Bonfire Night, fifth of November. She turned a page.

—Before anybody says anything, I am going to establish some facts, because we have had nine days of people not doing that.

She read from her book without looking up.

—Fact one. On the ninth of September a fire destroyed the barn at Haddon Farm. Fact two. The fire service report says the cause is undetermined and probably accidental. Fact three. Derbyshire Police have taken statements and are not pursuing the matter. Fact four. No insurance claim has been made, because Mr. Rowntree stopped insuring that building in 2011.

There was a small noise from the second row.

—Yes, Ted, said Dorothy Vane. I am aware.

—It was a barn, said Ted Rowntree. It was full of nothing.

—It was a listed structure and it was in this village for a hundred and eighty five years and it is now a hole. Fact five. Two young people were present. Neither has been charged with anything. I want that said out loud in this hall because I have heard four hundred people say the opposite in the last week and I am extremely tired of it.

Nora looked at the floor. Beside her, her mother sat very upright and did not move.

—Now, said Dorothy Vane. Councillor Sharp.

Colin Sharp stood up. He was seventy-one and he had worked for the water board for thirty-four years and he was holding a ring binder.

—Thank you, Chair. The council has a problem which is not about blame. The problem is that we have a bonfire on the fifth of November on Rowntree's field, as we have done since 1887, and this year we have a village that is frightened of fire.

He put the binder down.

—I have had eleven people tell me this month that we should cancel it. Eleven. In thirty years nobody has ever said that to me once.

—Then cancel it, said somebody at the back.

There was a small amount of agreement, and Nora noticed that it came from the younger half of the room, the people in their thirties and forties, and that the older half went completely silent.

—If we cancel it this year, said Colin Sharp, we will not do it next year either. That is how these things go. I have watched it happen to the flower show, the carnival and the Boxing Day walk.

Dorothy Vane picked up her pen.

—Which brings us to the proposal, she said. Councillor Hesketh.

Peggy Hesketh did not stand up. She was seventy-four, small, in a green cardigan, and she spoke without any particular emphasis, which somehow made everybody lean forward.

—We have two young people who were in that barn and who have not explained what they were doing there, she said. I am not accusing anybody of anything. But there is a great deal of talk in this village and it is doing harm, and in my experience talk does not stop because you ask it to. It stops when people see something else instead.

She folded her hands.

—So I propose this. The bonfire goes ahead. And the two of them run it.

The hall made a noise.

Nora felt it arrive somewhere under her ribs.

—Run it? said Ray, out loud, which was the first thing either of them had said all evening.

—Run it, said Peggy Hesketh. Site, wood, safety, licence, tea tent, raffle, insurance, the lot. Under the committee, obviously. Nobody is asking a seventeen year old to sign a public liability form. But they do the work and they do it in front of everybody for seven weeks.

—That is a punishment, said Bridget Finnegan, standing up.

—It is reparation, said Peggy Hesketh.

—For something nobody has proved they did.

—Mrs. Finnegan, said Dorothy Vane, that is a fair point and it is going in the minutes. Sit down please.

Bridget sat down. Her hands were shaking slightly and Nora looked at them and then looked away.

—May I speak? said Ray's uncle.

He was a big man in a work jacket, and he stood up slowly, the way people do when they have decided to be careful.

—Femi Abiola. My nephew has lived in this village three years. In three years nobody has knocked on my door. Last week four people did, and two of them were about the fire, and two of them were about whether I have a licence for fireworks, which I do, and which the council has had a copy of since 2022.

—Noted, said Dorothy Vane.

—I am not against the proposal, said Femi. I want to say that clearly. I am against the reason for it. If you make these two do this because the village needs somebody to blame, that is not reparation, that is a show. But if you make them do it because the bonfire needs doing and they are two capable people, then I will lend the van.

He sat down.

There was a pause.

—Well, said Dorothy Vane. That is the most useful thing anybody has said in this hall since March.

She looked over her glasses at the two of them, one on each side of the aisle.

—Miss Finnegan. Mr. Abiola. Stand up, both of you, and look at each other, because you have been avoiding it for fifty minutes and it is childish.

They stood up.

Nora looked across the aisle. Ray looked back. He had a face like a closed door.

—I am going to ask you one question each, said Dorothy Vane, and I want you to know that I am not asking you what you were doing in that barn, because that is your business and because I have read the police report and they did not get anywhere either.

—Thank you, said Nora.

—Question. Did you start that fire?

—No.

—Mr. Abiola. Did you start that fire?

—No.

—Do you know who did?

Nora did not answer for slightly too long.

She heard herself not answering. She heard the whole hall hear it.

—No, she said.

Across the aisle, at almost the same moment, Ray said:

—No.

Dorothy Vane looked at them both for a period of time that felt considerably longer than it was.

—Right, she said, and wrote something in her book.

—I have one condition, said Peggy Hesketh, before we vote.

—Go on.

—If they do it, nobody in this village helps them out of pity. If somebody wants to lend a trailer, they lend a trailer because it needs lending. I will not have half of Marlow End turning up on the fourth of November to do the work for two children so that everybody can feel comfortable about it.

—That is a good condition, said Dorothy Vane, and it is going in as an amendment.

The vote took four minutes.

Peggy Hesketh proposed it. Colin Sharp seconded it. Gordon Pym, the treasurer, asked whether it would cost anything, and was told that it would cost exactly what the bonfire cost every year, and voted for it. Winnie Bhatt voted for it without putting down her knitting. Ted Rowntree said that it was his field and that he would think about it, which Dorothy Vane recorded as an abstention.

—Motion carried, five for, none against, one abstention, she said. Not unanimous. It is never unanimous, and the last time it was, in 1998, we ended up with the wrong bus shelter.

She closed the book.

—Miss Finnegan, Mr. Abiola. First committee meeting is here on Monday at half past six. Bring a pen. Any questions?

Ray put his hand up.

—Do we get a say in this?

—No, said Dorothy Vane.

—Right, said Ray.

Outside, in the car park, in the dark, the two of them ended up ten metres apart for the second time in nine days.

—Seven weeks, said Ray.

—Yes.

—With six people whose combined age is about four hundred and fifty.

—Yes.

He put his hands in his pockets.

—You paused, he said.

Nora's stomach did something unpleasant.

—What?

—When she asked if you knew who did it. You paused.

—I was thinking.

—You were thinking about whether to say no.

—Ray.

—I am not having a go at you, he said, and the annoying thing was that he sounded as though he meant it. I am telling you that everybody in that hall heard it, and one of those people is going to think about it for seven weeks, and it is not going to be me.

He walked off towards his uncle's van.

Nora stood in the car park of a corrugated iron hall in the middle of Derbyshire and thought: *he paused too.*

She had heard it. Half a second, maybe less, before he said no.

She got into her mother's car and put her seatbelt on and looked out of the window all the way home, and in her head, over and over, was a shape at the far end of a burning barn that was much too small to be anybody it should have been.

Chapter 3. Six People and a Binder

Key vocabulary

a treasurer — казначей
a budget — бюджет
a raffle — лотерея
a marquee — большой шатёр, тент
a trestle table — раскладной стол на козлах
a risk assessment — оценка рисков
a regulation — правило, норматив
a deadline — крайний срок
a rota — график дежурств
to allocate — распределять
a volunteer — доброволец
an item — пункт
to postpone — откладывать
in charge of — ответственный за
a spreadsheet — таблица (электронная)

Six People and a Binder

Nora arrived at the village hall on Monday at twenty past six with a notebook, a pen, a printed spreadsheet and a plan.

The plan had four phases and a colour code.

She had made it on Sunday afternoon in about three hours, and she was aware, in a distant way, that three hours was a lot of hours, and that she had spent most of Sunday doing something that stopped her thinking about anything else, and that this was probably the point of it.

Ray arrived at twenty-nine minutes past six with nothing at all.

—Do you not have a pen? she said.

—I have a phone.

—She said bring a pen.

—She said it to both of us and you have brought four, said Ray, sitting down two chairs away. Statistically we are fine.

The committee came in over the next six minutes, in the order they would come in every Monday for the next seven weeks, which Nora also wrote down eventually, because by the middle of October she was writing down everything.

Colin Sharp first, at twenty-five past, with the binder.

Winnie Bhatt at twenty-eight, with a bag for life containing knitting, a flask and eleven books of raffle tickets.

Gordon Pym at half past exactly, with a cash box that he put on the table and did not open.

Dorothy Vane at half past, with the minute book.

Ted Rowntree at twenty-five to seven, in boots, having clearly come from the yard.

Peggy Hesketh at twenty to, with a tin.

—Right, said Dorothy Vane. Bonfire committee, first meeting, twenty-second of September. Six weeks tomorrow.

—Six weeks and three days, said Nora.

Everybody looked at her.

—Sorry, she said.

—No, said Dorothy Vane. Do not apologise for arithmetic. Six weeks and three days. Minute that.

—You are minuting yourself, said Gordon Pym.

—I have been minuting myself since 1998, Gordon.

Peggy Hesketh opened the tin and passed it along, and it contained flapjack, and Nora took a piece because it seemed politically important, and it was extremely good.

—Now, said Dorothy Vane. Before we start. I want to say one thing to the two of you and then I am not going to say it again.

Nora put down the flapjack.

—You are not here to be sorry, said Dorothy Vane. If I wanted somebody to be sorry I would have asked for a letter. You are here because there is a job, and the job is quite large, and this committee has done it for a long time with people who are now considerably older than they were.

—Speak for yourself, said Winnie Bhatt.

—Winifred, you are eighty-two.

—I know how old I am, Dorothy.

—The point, said Dorothy Vane, is that everybody in this room is going to spend seven weeks working, and at the end of it there will either be a bonfire or there will not, and that is the only measurement anybody is going to apply. Is that understood?

—Yes, said Nora.

—Yeah, said Ray.

—Good. Councillor Sharp.

—Before you do, said Ray, can I ask something?

—You can.

—Why is it on the fifth?

There was a pause.

—Because it is Bonfire Night, said Gordon Pym.

—Yeah, but everywhere else does it on the nearest Saturday. Bakewell does it on the Saturday. Half the country does it on the Saturday because more people come and you make more money.

—We do it on the fifth, said Dorothy Vane.

—Why?

—Because we have done it on the fifth since 1887 and because this village does not move things to Saturdays.

Ray looked as though he was going to say something else and then decided against it, and Nora, who had been thinking exactly the same thing about Saturdays and had put it on page three of her spreadsheet, quietly turned to page three and crossed it out.

Colin Sharp opened the binder.

It was four inches thick and it had coloured dividers, and Nora felt something in her chest that she recognised as respect.

—Marlow End Bonfire, he said. I have run the safety side since 1994. This binder is every year since then. I am going to take you through the shape of it and then I am going to give you the two documents that matter.

He turned the binder round.

—The event is on Rowntree's Field on the fifth of November. Gates open at six. Bonfire lit at half past six. Fireworks at half past seven. Everybody gone by nine. That is the shape and it has not changed since I started.

—Since 1962, said Winnie Bhatt.

—Since 1962, said Colin Sharp. Now. The two documents.

He put two sheets of paper in front of them.

The first said RISK ASSESSMENT at the top and had thirty-one numbered lines.

The second said DEADLINES and had nine.

Nora read the second one twice.

1 Oct. Confirm field with landowner. Written.

1 Oct. Public liability insurance renewed.

8 Oct. Fireworks order placed. Deposit paid.

8 Oct. Notify police, fire service, parish council.

15 Oct. Marquee booked.

15 Oct. Wood collection begins. NOT BEFORE.

22 Oct. Rota complete. Minimum 14 marshals.

29 Oct. Final safety walk with Councillor Sharp.

4 Nov. Bonfire built. Site closed overnight.

—Wood collection not before the fifteenth, she said. Why?

—Because if you start collecting in September you have a six week pile of dry pallets in a field and children in this village are not different from children anywhere else, said Colin Sharp.

—Right.

—And because in 1996 we started on the second of October and it went up on the twelfth.

The room went quiet for a second.

—Oh, said Nora.

—Yes, said Colin Sharp.

—Question, said Nora. What happens if it rains?

—It rains, said Colin Sharp.

—No, I mean, is there a cancellation policy? Do we call it off?

—Miss Finnegan, this is Derbyshire in November. If we cancelled for rain we would have held four bonfires since 1887.

—What about wind?

He looked at her with slightly more interest.

—Now that, he said, is the right question, and it is line nineteen. Above thirty miles an hour we do not light the fireworks. Above forty we do not light anything at all. And I make that decision at four o'clock on the day with a wind meter, and nobody argues with me, including Dorothy.

—Including me, agreed Dorothy Vane.

Gordon Pym opened the cash box.

He was eighty-one and he had been treasurer since 2004, and he took out a paper ledger, a calculator and a pencil, and Nora understood immediately that the next twenty minutes were going to be difficult.

—Budget, he said. Last year the event cost two thousand one hundred and forty pounds. Fireworks eleven hundred. Marquee three fifty. Insurance two eighty. Toilets one ninety. Everything else, two hundred and twenty.

—And income? said Ray.

Gordon looked at him over the top of the calculator, apparently surprised that he had spoken.

—Gate, two thousand four hundred. Raffle, four hundred and ten. Tea tent, three hundred and eighty.

—So it makes money.

—It makes about a thousand pounds and the thousand pounds goes to the hall roof, said Gordon Pym, and it has gone to the hall roof every year since 2009 and it will continue to go to the hall roof until the hall has a roof that does not require it.

He closed the ledger.

—We have four hundred and twelve pounds in the account.

Nora looked up.

—Sorry, how much?

—Four hundred and twelve pounds.

—But the fireworks deposit is due on the eighth of October.

—It is.

—And the fireworks are eleven hundred pounds.

—The deposit is five hundred and fifty, said Gordon Pym.

—Which we do not have.

—Which we do not have, he agreed, and he said it with what Nora slowly realised was satisfaction. Every year we do not have it. Every year somebody sits where you are sitting and discovers that we do not have it. And then somebody does something about it, and that is the actual work, and it is not on Colin's list because it cannot be.

—Why is there no money? said Ray.

—Because we spent it in March on a defibrillator.

Ray sat back.

—Right, he said. Okay. That is a good reason.

—I am aware that it is a good reason, said Gordon Pym. I signed the cheque.

Winnie Bhatt put down her knitting for the first time.

—Raffle, she said. Thirty-one years. Four hundred and ten pounds last year and that was a bad year because I was in hospital in October and Sandra did it.

—What do you need from us? said Nora, with her pen ready.

—Prizes.

—How many?

—Twenty-two.

—Twenty-two prizes.

—Twenty-two prizes from twenty-two businesses, said Winnie Bhatt, and there are not twenty-two businesses in Marlow End, there are five, so you will be going to Bakewell and you will be going in person, because nobody gives a raffle prize to an email.

Nora wrote *22 prizes, in person, Bakewell* and underlined it.

—I can drive, said Ray.

It was the first thing either of them had said to the room that involved the other one, and Nora felt it land.

—Can you? said Dorothy Vane.

—I passed in June. It is my uncle's van but I am insured on it.

—Well, said Winnie Bhatt. That is the first useful thing anybody has said about the raffle since 2011.

—One more thing on the raffle, said Winnie Bhatt. Do not ask for vouchers. Everybody asks for vouchers and vouchers do not sell tickets. You want objects. A hamper sells forty pounds of tickets. A twenty pound voucher for a garden centre sells six.

—Why? said Ray.

—Because people want to carry something home, said Winnie Bhatt, and she picked up her knitting again as though this settled the matter, which it did.

Peggy Hesketh went last.

—Tea tent, she said. I do the tea tent. I have done the tea tent for nineteen years and I need two trestle tables, four urns, and somebody strong on the fourth of November at eight in the morning.

—That is fine, said Nora, writing.

—And it goes by the gate.

Ted Rowntree looked up for the first time.

—It does not go by the gate, he said.

—It has gone by the gate for nineteen years.

—It has gone by the gate for nineteen years and every one of those nineteen years I have had a queue of people standing in my gateway with cups of tea while a tractor is trying to get through.

—Then move the tractor.

—It is my field, Peggy.

—It is the village's bonfire, Ted.

Dorothy Vane picked up the small brass bell and rang it once.

The room stopped.

—Item deferred, she said, writing. Tea tent location. To be resolved by the fifteenth of October.

—It will not be resolved by the fifteenth of October, said Gordon Pym.

—It has not been resolved since 2006, said Winnie Bhatt.

—Then it will be resolved this year, said Dorothy Vane, because we have two new members of this committee and they can do it, and it will be extremely good for them.

She looked at Nora and Ray.

—Congratulations, she said. You are in charge of the tea tent.

Outside afterwards it had started to rain, the fine kind that does not look like anything until you have been in it for four minutes.

They stood under the porch of the hall.

—So, said Ray.

—So.

—Five hundred and fifty pounds by the eighth of October, twenty-two raffle prizes, fourteen marshals, and a war about a tent.

—Yes.

—How long is your spreadsheet?

—Four pages.

—Does it have five hundred and fifty pounds on it?

—No, said Nora.

—Right, said Ray Abiola, and put his hood up, and went out into the rain.

Chapter 4. Rowntree's Field

Key vocabulary

a gateway — проезд, въезд
a hedge — живая изгородь
a slope — склон
drainage — дренаж
waterlogged — залитый водой, раскисший
a rut — колея
livestock — скот
a tenancy — аренда (земли)
a footpath — пешеходная тропа
to graze — пасти(сь)
to fence off — огородить
a stake — кол, колышек
tape — лента
to pace out — измерять шагами
to mark out — размечать

Rowntree's Field

Ted Rowntree said he would think about the field, and then he thought about it for nine days, which everybody agreed was quick for Ted.

He rang the shop on the first of October, because he did not have Nora's number and would not have used it if he had, and left a message with Amos that the two of them should come up at four o'clock and bring boots.

They walked up together because there was no way of avoiding it.

Fen Lane, which was not called Fen Lane, but Marlow Lane, went up from the green past the church and then turned into a farm track with grass down the middle. It was the first properly cold afternoon of the autumn. The hedges were still full but they had gone the colour of old tea, and there were sloes on the blackthorn, and somewhere out of sight a machine was going backwards and forwards in a field.

They did not talk for about six minutes.

—Right, said Ray eventually. Are we going to do this the whole way?

—Do what?

—Not speak. Because it is seven weeks and I have worked out that if we do not speak, all the work goes through a committee of pensioners, and that will kill us both.

Nora kicked a stone off the track.

—What do you want me to say?

—Anything. Say something about the weather. Say something about the tea tent.

—I have a plan for the tea tent.

—Of course you do.

—It is a good plan.

—I am sure it is a beautiful plan, said Ray. Does it involve telling Ted Rowntree that he is wrong about his own gateway?

—It involves measuring the gateway.

He looked at her.

—Go on.

—They have been arguing about it since 2006 and nobody has ever measured anything, said Nora. Peggy says the tent goes by the gate. Ted says a tractor cannot get through. Those are both opinions. One of them is wrong and it takes a tape measure to find out which.

Ray walked a few steps.

—That is annoyingly sensible, he said.

—Thank you.

—It was not entirely a compliment.

—Can I ask you something? said Nora, after another minute.

—Go on.

—Why did you agree to this? At the meeting. You could have said no. Your uncle was there, he was clearly ready to argue, and you just sat down and said nothing.

Ray walked for a bit.

—Because saying no makes you look like somebody with a reason to say no, he said.

—That is a very depressing sentence.

—It is a completely accurate sentence and you know it is, because you did exactly the same thing.

Nora did not have an answer to that either, which was becoming a pattern she disliked.

Ted was waiting at the gate with a dog and a stick, neither of which he appeared to be using.

—You came, he said.

—You asked us to, said Nora.

—People say they will come.

He turned round and opened the gate and they followed him in, and Nora saw Rowntree's Field properly for the first time in about four years.

It was six acres and it sloped. That was the first thing. It went down from the gate towards the beck at the bottom, not steeply, but enough that you could feel it in your knees, and the far end was darker green than the near end.

—Right, said Ted. I am going to tell you about this field and then you can tell me what you want, and then I will say yes or no.

—All right, said Ray.

—It is six acres and it is not good land. It has never been good land. It floods at the bottom in a wet winter and that is why the bonfire has always been at the top, and that is why the tea tent argument is a stupid argument, because there is only one place the tent can go and it is near the gate, but the gateway is nine feet wide and my telehandler is eight foot two.

Nora took out her notebook.

—Nine feet, she wrote.

—You are writing it down.

—Yes.

—Nobody has ever written it down, said Ted Rowntree.

—Why is the far end darker? said Ray.

—Because it is wetter.

—Why is it wetter?

—Because water goes downhill, said Ted Rowntree, and then, after a moment, in a slightly different voice: and because the drainage in the bottom two acres was put in by my grandfather in 1958 and it has been failing since about 2004 and it would cost eleven thousand pounds to do properly.

He set off up the slope without waiting for them.

They walked to the top corner.

The site of the bonfire was still visible from last year: a circle of ground about eight metres across where the grass grew differently, greener and thicker at the edges and thin in the middle.

—There, said Ted. Same place since before me. My father did it, his father did it. That circle has been burned a hundred and thirty times.

—Does it damage the field?

—It ruins that eight metres for a year and then it comes back better than the rest of it, said Ted. That is fire for you.

He walked round the circle once.

—Now, he said. My conditions.

—Go on, said Ray.

—One. Nothing goes on the field until the fifteenth. No wood, no vehicles, nothing. I have sheep on here until the twelfth.

—That is on the list, said Nora.

—Two. The bottom third is fenced off and it stays fenced off, because the beck is up and if a child goes down there in the dark on a night when there are eight hundred people on this field, I am the one who lives with it.

—Understood, said Ray.

—Three. The footpath along the hedge stays open. It is a right of way and I am not having a conversation with the council about it for the ninth time.

—Fine.

—Four.

He stopped and looked out across the field towards the beck for a while.

—Four, he said, is that I want somebody to tell me why we are still doing this.

There was a pause.

—Sorry? said Nora.

—I have given this field for the bonfire for thirty-one years, said Ted Rowntree. My father gave it for forty before that. And every year it is more paperwork and more insurance and more men in high visibility jackets, and last year I stood at that gate and counted, and there were two hundred and six people. Two hundred and six. In 1994 there were nine hundred.

He turned round.

—So you can have the field. But I would like one of you to tell me what it is for, because I have stopped knowing, and I am not doing it for one more year just because it is in a book.

Nora opened her mouth and found nothing in it at all.

She had four pages of spreadsheet. She had a colour code. She had deadlines, a budget shortfall, twenty-two raffle prizes and a plan for a tent. She did not have an answer to the question of what any of it was for, and she had not once thought about it, and she stood in the top corner of a six acre field and felt genuinely stupid for the first time in about a year.

—I do not know, she said.

Ted nodded slowly.

—Right, he said.

—Because of the fire, said Ray.

They both looked at him.

—Sorry? said Ted.

—That is why it matters this year, said Ray. Not why it matters generally. I do not know why it matters generally either. But this year half this village thinks the other half is either a liar or a coward, and my name has been in eleven conversations I was not present for, and hers has been in more, and if there is no bonfire on the fifth of November then that is what this autumn was.

He put his hands in his pockets.

—And if there is one, then that is what it was instead. That is all. That is the only thing I have got.

Ted Rowntree looked at him for a long moment.

—Well, he said. That is not an answer to my question.

—No.

—But it is an answer to a question, so I will take it.

He whistled at the dog, which had gone down towards the beck and did not want to come back.

—You can have the field, he said. Fifteenth of October. And bring the tape measure, because if that gateway turns out to be nine feet six I am going to be extremely annoyed with myself.

—Mr. Rowntree, said Nora at the gate. Two hundred and six people last year. Do you know how many the year before?

—Two hundred and forty.

—And before that?

—Three hundred and ten. And in 2019, four hundred and sixty. I count every year because I stand at that gate every year and there is nothing else to do.

He scratched the dog behind the ear.

—You can put that in your book as well, he said.

They measured the gateway on the way out.

Ray held one end of the tape and Nora held the other, and they did it three times because the first two disagreed, and the third one settled it.

Nine feet four.

—Eight foot two telehandler, said Ray.

—Fourteen inches, said Nora.

—Fourteen inches of clearance with a tea tent guy rope in it.

—So he is right.

—He is completely right, said Ray, and he has been right since 2006, and nobody has ever asked him for a number.

Nora wrote *gateway 9'4" / telehandler 8'2" / clearance 14"* in her notebook and underlined it twice, and then stood there with the pen in her hand.

—What? said Ray.

—Peggy is also right.

—How is Peggy also right?

—Because the tent has to be near the gate, said Nora. Not in the gate. Near it. Everybody has been arguing about a position for nineteen years and the actual problem is a rope.

Ray looked at the gateway, and then at the corner of the field beside it, and then back at her.

—Move the tent six metres and put the ropes on the hedge side, he said.

—Yes.

—That is it? That is the whole war?

—That is the whole war.

—Right, said Ray. Bad idea number one.

—We ask the pub.

—The pub gave two hundred last year and Gordon says they will not do it twice.

—Bad idea number two. We ask everybody in the village for five pounds each.

—Four hundred people, said Ray. You will get sixty of them and you will spend three weeks doing it and half of them will want to talk about the barn.

—Bad idea number three, said Nora, and stopped.

—Go on.

—We sell the wood.

He turned round in the middle of the track.

—Say that again.

—There is a hundred and eighty year old barn full of burnt oak beams sitting in a field nine hundred metres from here, said Nora, and it is going to a skip in January, and reclaimed oak is worth money, and I looked it up on Sunday instead of sleeping.

Ray stood there for a moment.

—That is not a bad idea, he said.

—It is a horrible idea.

—Why?

—Because it is the barn, said Nora.

They walked back down the track. The light was going already, at five o'clock, which happens very suddenly in the first week of October and always surprises everybody.

—Do not tell them tonight, said Nora.

—Why not?

—Because if we solve it in nine days they will think it was easy and they will give us something worse.

Ray laughed.

It was the first time she had heard it, and it was a completely ordinary laugh, short and slightly surprised, and it changed his face in a way that Nora noticed and immediately decided not to have noticed.

—All right, he said. What do we do about five hundred and fifty pounds?

—I have no idea.

—Great.

—I have three bad ideas.

—Better, said Ray. Tell me the worst one first.

Chapter 5. Reclaimed Oak

Key vocabulary

a beam — балка
oak — дуб
reclaimed — восстановленный, вторичный
a timber yard — лесной склад
a quote — смета, оценка стоимости
a load — груз
a trailer — прицеп
a chainsaw — бензопила
charred — обугленный
salvage — спасённое имущество, утиль
to haggle — торговаться
a bargain — выгодная сделка
worth — стоящий, ценный
profit — прибыль
stubborn — упрямый

Reclaimed Oak

The man from the timber yard came on the third of October and walked round the burnt barn for twenty minutes without saying anything at all.

He was about fifty, in a body warmer, and he had a small hammer which he used to hit the beams, and he listened to each one after he hit it, the way a doctor listens to a chest.

Ted Rowntree stood at the gate with his hands behind his back. Nora and Ray stood by the tape.

—Right, said the man eventually. There are eleven beams worth having. Four of them are oak and they are from the original build, and they are charred on the outside and completely sound in the middle, which is what oak does. The rest are softwood from a repair in about 1970 and they are worth nothing.

—How much? said Ted.

—For the four, eight hundred.

Nora heard Ray breathe out beside her.

—Eight hundred, said Ted.

—I am not haggling with you, Ted.

—I have not started haggling with you, Ron.

—You have been haggling with me since 1988.

The two of them looked at each other for a while, in the way of men who have known each other for forty years and enjoy this part.

—Nine hundred, said Ted.

—Eight fifty and I take the softwood away for nothing, which saves you a skip.

—Done.

They shook hands. It took eleven seconds.

Nora stood there with her notebook and did not write anything, because the entire transaction had happened in a language she did not speak.

—Right, said Ron. I will want a fortnight. I have to get a lorry up that track and I am not doing it in the wet.

He drove off. Ted came over to the tape.

—Eight hundred and fifty pounds, he said.

—That is your money, said Nora.

—It is.

—The beams are yours. It is your barn.

—It was my barn, said Ted Rowntree.

He looked at the black heap for a moment.

—Five hundred and fifty to the committee for the fireworks, he said. Three hundred stays with me for the fence at the bottom of the field, because if I am putting eight hundred people next to a beck I want a fence I have not mended twice.

—Mr. Rowntree, said Ray.

—Do not.

—I was only going to say thank you.

—Yes, said Ted. Well. Do not.

He walked back to his quad bike.

—One thing, he said, over his shoulder. It was her idea, was it?

—Yes, said Ray.

—Thought so, said Ted Rowntree, and started the engine.

—Can I ask you something? said Ray, when the quad bike had gone. Why did you not want to do it?

—Do what?

—Sell the beams. You said it was a horrible idea and then you went to Ted anyway. So you did it, but you did not want to.

Nora looked at the black outline where the barn had been.

—Because it feels like being paid for it, she said.

—It is not being paid for it.

—I know it is not.

—Nora, said Ray, and it was the first time he had used her name since the ninth of September. Ted is going to get eight hundred and fifty pounds for four beams that are otherwise going in a skip in January. That is not us profiting from a fire. That is a man with a broken fence.

—I know.

—But it still feels like it.

—Yes, said Nora.

They walked down the track and neither of them said anything until the gate.

Then Nora stopped.

—I need to tell you something, she said, and I have been trying to work out how to do it for two days, and I have not worked it out, so I am going to do it badly.

Ray waited.

—My dad's things were in that barn.

He did not say anything.

—Three boxes, said Nora. From his workshop. He left in March last year and my mum was going to take them to the tip in April, and I moved them up here on my bike, and I have been going up there about twice a week since then to sit next to them. That is what I was doing on the ninth of September. That is the whole thing. That is the entire secret.

She looked at the gate rather than at him.

—And I could not say it at the meeting because my mother was in the second row and she does not know, and she is going to find out, because Ron is going to move eleven beams and somebody is going to find whatever is left of them, and I would rather you heard it from me than from the village.

There was a silence that went on for about four seconds.

—Okay, said Ray.

—That is it?

—What do you want me to say?

—I do not know. Something.

—Right, said Ray. Something. I have spent three weeks assuming you were up there for a reason you were ashamed of, and it turns out you were up there for a reason that is nobody's business, and I feel like a complete idiot, and I am sorry.

Nora looked at him.

—Why did you think I was ashamed?

—Because you would not say it.

—You would not say yours either.

—No, said Ray. I would not.

And that, Nora thought afterwards, was the moment. That was the point at which one of them could have said the other thing, and neither of them did, and everything that happened in the next four weeks happened because of that gap of about two seconds in a farm gateway on the third of October.

—Right, she said. Fine.

—Fine.

—Where are we with the raffle?

—Six.

—Six prizes?

—Six businesses said yes, said Ray. Out of nineteen. Two hampers, a haircut, a meal for two, a car wash and a bag of dog food.

—A bag of dog food.

—A very large bag of dog food. Winnie says it will sell.

—We need twenty-two.

—We need sixteen more in twelve days, said Ray. Saturday. I will get the van.

—Do you want the bad news first or the other bad news? he said.

—There is other bad news?

—Colin has sent me the marshal list. We need fourteen. He has got nine, and four of the nine are over seventy-five, and one of them is Winnie, who will be running the raffle at the same time.

—So we need five people.

—We need five people who are willing to stand in a wet field in the dark in a yellow jacket and tell strangers where to park, said Ray, on the fifth of November, which is a Wednesday.

The Saturday was the fourth of October and it rained from eight in the morning until four in the afternoon without stopping.

They did Bakewell first, then Matlock, then the industrial estate at Rowsley, and they went into forty-one businesses and came out of them with fourteen prizes, which Nora had not expected and which took nine hours.

She learned three things.

The first was that Ray was extremely good at this and she was not.

She had a printed letter, on paper, with the parish council heading, explaining the event, the charitable purpose and the tax position. It was a good letter. She had checked it four times.

Nobody read it.

What worked was Ray leaning on a counter and saying: we are doing the bonfire in Marlow End on the fifth, we need a raffle prize, everybody who comes will see your name on the board. Twenty seconds. That was the whole approach and it worked eleven times out of forty-one, which was better than her letter did.

The second thing she learned was that people asked about the barn.

Not everybody. Maybe one in five. A woman in a card shop in Matlock said: Marlow End, is that where the fire was? And Ray said yes, and she said, oh, that was terrible, and Ray said yes, and she gave them a candle.

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