

Carys Davies

## Jubilee

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Standing now at her shoulder, no longer caring much about his future, Arthur Pritt began to speak.

In a quiet voice he apologised for the tediousness of the day, for the marching bands and the pipers, for the choirs and the speeches and the dreadful cacophony of the Morris dancers<sup>1</sup> on the cobbles; for the boring gifts. In a whisper he told her he wished they'd been able to conjure something new for her,  
5 something splendid and fascinating and unthought of instead of the dull nonsense she must have seen a thousand times before in a thousand other places.

At ten o'clock he had been at the station with the rest of the town to greet her and had known not to expect a happy smiling face. He'd known to expect something miserable and grim-looking, and with her short neck and her pouchy eyes and her sad downturned mouth she'd reminded him, emerging slowly from  
10 her compartment, of a hundred-year-old tortoise he and Alice had once seen at the bottom of a dusty pit at the zoo in Calcutta<sup>2</sup>.

He'd wondered if it was true what people said, that she had her husband's clothes laid out for him every morning, his stockings and his shoes, his diamond star, his sash and garter<sup>3</sup>, as if she could not let go of the hope that he would come back to her one day from the dead.

15 Arthur had never laid out any of Alice's clothes.

He had some of her things that he'd brought back in his trunk from India, a dress and a cotton wrapper that smelled of soap and dust and heat and happiness. He looked at them often, hanging in the armoire in his room, and most days he lifted a sleeve or a hem and held it for a few moments between his fingers. It had never occurred to him though, to lay out any of her things, in spite of his dream that she would come  
20 strolling in one day wanting to put them on.

Ahead, in the square, the pipers in their furry headgear were still at it; he could hear the dismal grating moan of their instruments. The town had been informed that Her Majesty<sup>4</sup> was very fond of a bagpipe but looking at her now, at her grey stony profile, he found that hard to believe. There was the same look on her face as there had been all day – the same look as when she'd sat enduring the shrill repeated notes of the  
25 Manchester Flute Band; as when she'd had to put up with the Morris men cantering back and forth across the cobbles like escaped lunatics in their noisy wooden shoes, shaking their foolish ribbons and their bells; it was the same look she'd worn through all the shouts and cheers and hoofbeats and the pealing of the church bells; it was a look that seemed to be asking, *When for pity's sake is this all going to end?*

How small she looked on the town's makeshift throne!

30 How bored and miserable and alone, how remote and marooned and cut-off from the world.

All day he'd found himself wishing they'd thought of something in every way more exciting and unusual. Fireworks perhaps. Acrobats, magicians. Anything that would enliven her sad doughy face and bring a sparkle of interest to her half-closed eyes and help her forget, just for a moment, that after all these years she was still bereft.

35 And then the moment had arrived for the presentation of the gifts – Mr. Boucher's Morocco-bound *History of the Town*, Mr. Binns's<sup>5</sup> map of Lancashire, Mrs. Maudesely's commemorative cake – the moment when he, alderman Arthur Pritt, was to stand at the old Queen's shoulder and murmur a few words of introduction and explanation as each new offering was brought up onto the platform.

40 For a while he had held Boucher's *History of the Town* and quietly turned its gilt-edged pages, hunting for items that might kindle her interest or otherwise lift her leaden spirits. Obediently he had highlighted

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<sup>1</sup> *Morris dancers*: English folk dancing

<sup>2</sup> a city in India

<sup>3</sup> *his diamond star, his sash and garter*: honorary decorations

<sup>4</sup> *Her Majesty*: Queen Victoria reigned from 1837-1901; her husband, Prince Albert, died in 1861

<sup>5</sup> *Jonathan Binns*: (1785-1871) a Victorian historian, writer and cartographer

the illustrations of the linoleum factory, the wallpaper works, the brewery, the old bridge and the new bridge, the Priory and the lumpy piece of ground below the castle where the Roman Baths had once been. The Queen had continued, though, to sit like a stone, a poor unhappy tortoise, and as Binns's map was lifted up onto the crimson-covered platform and propped up before her between two rows of greenhouse plants in their earthenware pots, Arthur had decided he could no longer go on, and glancing quickly at her son the Prince who stood next to his mother on her other side, he began, in a soft whisper close to her ear, to apologise.

His name was Arthur Pritt, he said, and he was sorry for the day.

He was sorry they had not thought of something beautiful and exciting. Fireworks perhaps or acrobats. A magician. He said he wished that in the many, many meetings he'd attended with the other aldermen and the Town Clerk and the Treasurer and the Mayor, and in all the letters that had been exchanged between the Corporation and her Secretary of State on the question of how things should be organised, they had not thought of arranging things a little differently for once.

The Queen's face didn't move. Her mouth seemed locked by its downturned corners into the deepest and most immovable frown.

Binns was kneeling now on the carpet, indicating with a malacca baton<sup>6</sup> the course of the river through the town. On the far left-hand side of the platform, Arthur could see Mrs. Maudesely's vast three-tiered cake on its trolley, ready to make its approach. The Queen had shifted her head slightly and was looking at it, at its profusion of thistles and shamrocks and roses, its expanse of hard white icing like plaster of Paris, and at the lonely little sugar statue of herself balanced on the topmost layer. She looked away, as if the cake had depressed her even more than the bagpipes and the Morris dancers. It seemed to produce a lowering effect on her spirits, to have to see herself up there on the cake looking so tiny and isolated and aloof. She rested her chin on her hand, her eyelids drooped. Arthur wondered if she'd heard what he'd said about him being sorry for it all; perhaps she was about to turn to someone from her household and order them to remove him immediately from the platform. Instead she turned a little towards him and said, "Tell me a story, Mr. Pritt."

Her son the Prince gave Arthur a sharp look and Arthur hesitated.

"Please, Mr. Pritt. A story."

So Arthur told the Queen a story, and either because he wasn't an imaginative person, or because the Queen's grief had made him dwell more deeply than ever on his own, or because the time had come when he wanted to tell someone what had happened, he told her a true one, about his wife.

"It was when we were in India," he told the Queen, "in Calcutta."

For the first time all day, a flicker of interest seemed to pass, like a gentle wind, across the Queen's melancholy face. She waved the crouching map-maker away with the point of her fan.

"I left the house as usual one morning," said Arthur, "and walked through the city down to the water where the company offices were. When I'd been there an hour, I discovered I'd left some papers behind and went home to fetch them."

By now Mrs. Maudesely and her helpers had wheeled the gigantic cake into the middle of the platform; the Prince of Wales<sup>7</sup> was leaning down a little towards his mother as if he might be about to ask her to pay attention, but the Queen's hooded eyes were on the balding alderman at her shoulder and without looking at the Prince she flicked her black glove in his direction, a smart reminder that she was the Queen and she would do what she liked.

Arthur explained how he'd expected, on entering the house, to hear the sound of the piano. It was eleven o'clock and at eleven o'clock his wife's piano teacher arrived and stayed till noon, when Arthur came home for lunch and a nap. But the house was quiet, there was no steady beating of fans, the only sound the movement of a broom across the tiles somewhere towards the back of the house or out in the garden. "Alice?" he called but there was no reply, only the silence of the fans and the distant scraping of the broom.

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<sup>6</sup> *malacca baton*: a walking stick

<sup>7</sup> *Prince of Wales*: official title of the Crown Prince of the United Kingdom

He took off his hat and moved on through the house into the large parlour where his wife's piano stood. "The lid was open, her music was on the stand. The only thing missing was Alice."

90 The Queen nodded. "Continue, Mr. Pritt."

Arthur swallowed, his throat felt tight. His robes were hot and heavy. He paused, as if suddenly aware of the strangeness of his situation, but like Macbeth<sup>8</sup> he seemed to have gone on too far now to retreat.

He'd looked into the morning room, he said, where Alice did her reading and planned her menus and wrote her letters and took her sewing but she wasn't there either.

95 The Queen seemed to be holding her breath, as if she knew now what was coming. Arthur paused, as he always did when he replayed everything in his own mind, picturing himself in his pale linen suit, a frightened sweating figure who seemed to understand by now that his life was coming to some sort of end.

At their bedroom door, he'd stopped. Beyond it he could hear the soft sounds of his wife's pleasure and when he'd bent down and looked in through the keyhole he'd seen her with her head thrown back, a look on her face he'd never seen before; a tangle of flushed white limbs; Miss Gordon, the piano teacher.

100 One fat hand had flown to the Queen's throat; her pouchy eyes were wide with wonder, as if Arthur had just pulled back a heavy curtain and revealed to her a unicorn, or a talking mirror, or proof of some other astonishing legend.

"Good heavens, Mr. Pritt," she whispered.

105 Her blue eyes were fixed on Arthur's face, and for a moment Arthur wondered if she was going to try to console him or comfort him in some way. He was going to carry on, and tell her how Alice had told him afterwards that she wanted to spend the rest of her life with Miss Gordon – Elizabeth, as she now called her – instead of with him, and that he'd been mourning her loss ever since; he was going to tell the Queen that he no longer cared very much about his future, that he missed Alice every minute of every day, and that even this morning, even though he knew she was thousands of miles away in Calcutta still, he'd looked for her face in the crowd.

115 But the old Queen didn't seem to be interested in what had happened afterwards; she didn't seem to want to hear Arthur talk about his feelings. She seemed lost in a dream of her own; she was looking around at the crimson-draped platform and the walls of the buildings swathed in their yards and yards of flags and patriotic bunting, at the streamers and the barriers, the row upon row of greenhouse plants in their earthenware pots, at the crowds in their Sunday best, waving their white handkerchiefs, at the Corporation men like Arthur in their embroidered robes, at the people of her own household, at the Secretary of State, at her son the Prince of Wales.

Her mouth drooped and she shook her head.

120 "Nobody tells me anything, Mr. Pritt," she murmured softly, and after that it was almost time for her to go, for her train to depart.

125 At the station Arthur stood with the Town Clerk and the Treasurer and the Mayor and the eleven other aldermen and watched the royal gifts being stowed away: Binns's map, Boucher's illustrated *History* in its purple Morocco binding, the enormous cake. He watched and he waved, and when she was gone he threaded his way through the dispersing crowds along the narrow streets of the town and in through the front door of his own empty house.

(2014)

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<sup>8</sup> main character in the play *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare