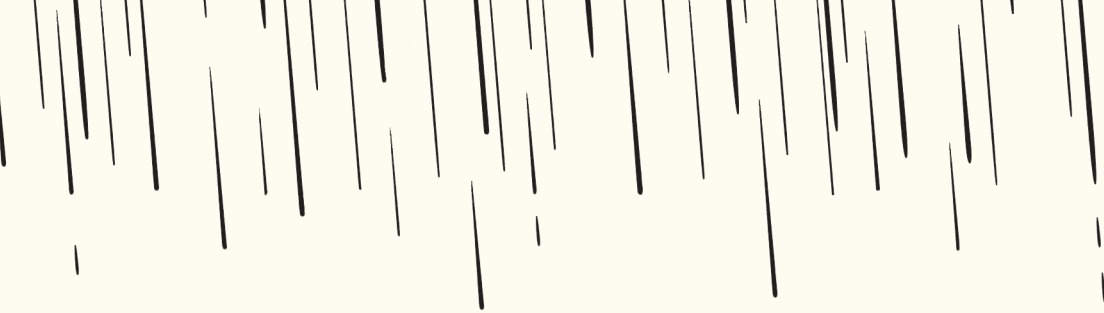
the last days of archie maxwell



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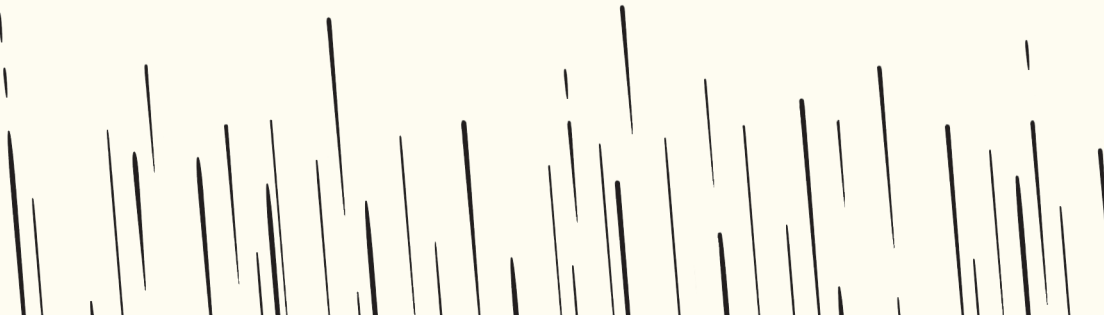
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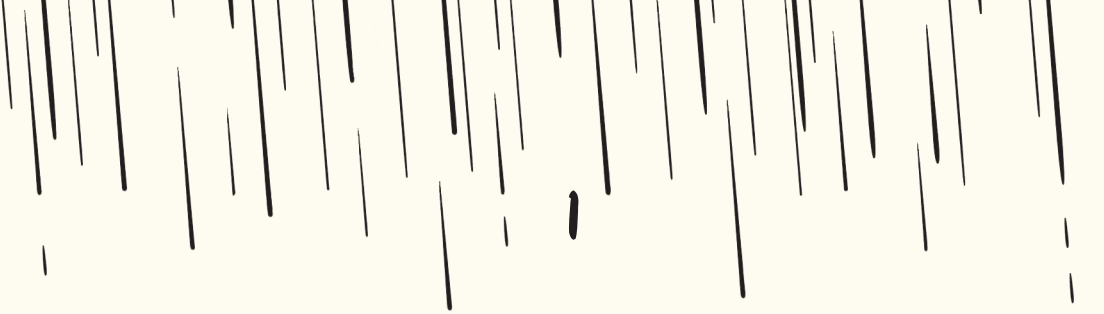
The last days of Archie Maxwell

Annabel Pitcher

Barrington Stoke



For my sons, Isaac and Sebastian



"So, that's what we've decided. It's for the best," Dad said, after two or ten minutes of talking, Archie couldn't tell. Time was standing still, or going fast, or doing both. That wasn't possible, but Dad's words hadn't seemed possible that morning, and yet here they were, discussing divorce over Mum's homemade chicken stew.

Not that anybody was eating the stew. Five plates cooled on the kitchen table. Their dog, Huxley, sniffed the chickeny air and let out a whimper. It was a desolate sound. Archie felt it in his bones.

Archie buried his bare feet in Huxley's thick fur and glanced at Maisy. Her face was unreadable. Anything could have been happening beneath the layers of brown stuff covering her spots. The false eyebrows she'd painted half way up her forehead made her seem startled, like this was as big a shock to

her as it was to Archie, but he couldn't be sure. Her real eyebrows might have looked less surprised.

Amy's expression was the opposite, heartbreak written all over her face. Archie never touched his sisters if he could help it, but today he squeezed Amy's pudgy knee. She looked surprised then grabbed Archie's hand with both of hers and didn't let go.

Dad cleared his throat.

"What I mean is – that's what *I've* decided. It's my fault, for reasons that ... Well, we'll come to." Dad swallowed. "The important thing is to be good for Mum. This isn't her fault. Do you understand? I take full responsibility."

Dad didn't sound like himself. He didn't look like himself, either. On a normal Friday, he'd have changed out of his work clothes the second he got home, but today he had a job to do, and he was wearing his suit to prove it. Dad's coat looked ominous, hanging on the back of his chair, rather than in the cupboard under the stairs. His bunch of keys was a silver spider next to his plate. Poised. Ready

to dart off into the night. Archie downed his water, imagining trapping the spider beneath his glass.

"No, Tim," Mum said. "It's nobody's fault. Not really." It was the first time she'd spoken since Dad had broken the news, and she sounded calmer than Archie had expected. A flicker of irritation licked his insides. Why wasn't Mum crying? Or Dad, for that matter? This was an emergency, wasn't it? A disaster? They should have been frantic, out of control.

But Dad was smiling. "Thanks, Jo. Honestly. I appreciate you saying that, especially in front of the kids."

"Well," Mum said. "There's no point in pretending, is there? The writing's been on the wall for so long."

Archie wondered why they weren't trying to scribble that writing out. He looked around for a pen. He wanted to scrawl a new message on that bastard wall that said something about *love* and something about *forever* and something about *staying together for the sake of the children*.

That's how Archie felt – like a small, frightened child. He was glad of Amy's hand in his.

"It's sad," Mum said. "But there you are."

She let out a long sigh, and then there was silence, broken only by Huxley, whining softly as the stew went cold.

The clocks had gone back the day before, and the kitchen seemed too dark for teatime. Mum and Dad's words hung in the gloom. Mum and Dad's words *were* the gloom.

It was unbearable. Archie stood up.

"Are you OK, love?" Mum asked.

Outside, a train chugged along the track at the bottom of the garden, dimly lit carriages skimming the black hedge. The train was there and then it was gone, and Archie wished he could jump on board and disappear too.

"Love, are you all right?" Mum said again.

Archie flicked a switch and sat back down. The kitchen filled with light, but it wasn't enough. He needed candles and the Christmas fairy lights from

the loft and Dad's head torch from the box of hiking stuff in the garage. They'd wild camped in the Lake District last year, just him and Dad, trekking up a mountain and putting up a two-man tent on the bank of a river. They were the only ones there, the only ones in the world. They'd played endless games of rummy by the light of the head torch. Pissed behind a rock beneath the moon.

"Shit! Shit ... freezing my bollocks off!" Dad had cried as he'd peed, and Archie had almost died from laughing.

"Me too!" Archie had said, and then, after a pause, "Shit!"

Archie had waited for a telling-off that hadn't come. Dad had simply done up his fly then opened his rucksack, pulling out a tin of beans. They'd cooked the beans on a camping stove, dunking bread because they hadn't got spoons, and then they'd stood on stepping stones in the middle of the river, howling like wolves at the moon. Archie had never felt so strong or powerful or wild, his hair swept back by the wind.

He wanted to lasso that moon and haul it out of the past and into his kitchen to banish the darkness.

"It's for the best," Dad said for the second time that evening.

The flicker of irritation became an inferno in Archie's gut. He burned with it, red-hot. Archie freed himself from Amy's grasp and pressed his palms against the cool table. His arms jerked as he pictured pushing it over, plates smashing and Mum's stew splattering the floor.

Archie dared himself to do it, counting slowly, his fingers pulsating with the need to do something – anything – to shut Dad up. *One ... two ... three ...*

"People break up all the time," Dad said.

Four ... Five ...

"Not for this reason, necessarily, which we ... which *I* will come to. Soon enough."

Six ... Seven ...

"But it's normal, isn't it?" Dad went on. "Splitting up?"

Eight ... Nine ...

Mum nodded too hard. "In some ways it's boringly predictable."

TEN.

Archie willed his hands to move, but nothing happened. A volcano erupted soundlessly in his stomach.

"I know it's a lot to take on board," Mum said, "but it really is for the best." She smiled at Archie and his sisters. Her attempt at warmth was met with ice. Mum's eyes filled with tears, and Archie wondered how long she'd been holding them back. "Look. I get it, OK. I know you're upset. I am too. Your dad and I ... We're both gutted. Gutted to have to break this news. This isn't easy for us. Not by a long stretch. It's just ... some things can't be helped, you know? No matter how much you wish they were different."

Dad leaned forward so far his tie almost dipped in the cold stew on his plate. "I've spent a long time wishing I was different. Trust me. Almost every day of my adult life."

Mum touched Dad's hand. "Oh, Tim."

Archie frowned. It made no sense. When Leon's

parents split up, his mum threw things at a wall and his dad hacked up her favourite dress with the kitchen scissors. And yet here Archie's parents were, sitting at the same table in front of a homemade tea, squeezing each other's fingers.

"The important thing is, we're still good friends," Mum said. "We've always been good friends." For some reason, she shook her head at this. "Maybe that's the problem. We've only ever been –"

"Let's leave it there for now," Dad interrupted. "There's no rush."

Mum nodded. Something silent passed between them, right in front of Archie, but unknowable.

"What you need to understand is that we love you," Dad said. "Very much. And that won't change no matter where I live."

"Where are you going, Daddy?" Amy asked in a tiny voice. Her hands were fists, balled up in her lap.

"Just to a friend's," Dad replied, too quickly. He scratched the side of his head. "Down in Kirkburton. Not far."

"This friend of yours," Maisy said, her tone hinting at something Archie didn't understand. "What's he called?"

There was the longest pause. "Malcolm."

Dad stared at Maisy and she stared back. Archie drifted out of the window and floated in the black beyond the glass.

"This is bull," Maisy said. "Bull!" She stood up so suddenly, her chair flew back and clattered to the floor. "Malcolm? Really? Is this a frickin' joke?"

"Language, Maisy!" Mum said. She put her hands over Amy's ears, but Amy squirmed free.

"I'm not six!"

"No, you're seven. Too young to –"

"*Frickin'* is not a fucking swear word," Maisy said before storming out of the kitchen.

"Get back here!" Mum called as the door slammed and Amy burst into tears. "Now look! You've upset your sister!"

"*Maisy* didn't upset me," Amy said. "You did!" And then she ran off too.

Archie remained at the table. Mum seemed to be holding her breath. Archie wanted to shout, to kick over his chair, to fling open the back door and flounce off into the night, but Mum's blue eyes were pools of sadness and Dad was patting him on the back.

"Women, eh?" Dad said.

"Boys are so much easier than girls. I've said it a million times." Mum reached across the table and touched the pale scar that ran down Archie's cheek. "Apart from the silly cuts and bruises, but I'd take those any day." She clutched Archie's hand, rubbing his knuckles with her thumb. "You're a good boy, Arch. Always have been. And it will be OK. I promise."

Archie wanted to believe her. He longed to feel the flutter of hope in his chest, but his heart had lost its wings. Time was slowing down now, no doubt about it. The volcano had subsided. There was only ash. Smoke. Darkness.

"Eat your tea, love," Mum said.

Archie did as he was told.