

RAINBOW LAUGHTER

Veronica Bright

It's not the same any more. Life's galloping on and Arthur feels he's standing there in his slippers begging it to stop.

He can hear the people next door, their merriment, their gregariousness. That's how he recognises them. By the sound of their laughter. He gives them colours in his mind. The father's is a chocolate-brown belly-laugh. It rumbles over the fence. The mother's is the tinkle of blue glass, like one of those hanging mobiles jingling carelessly. The girls giggle, a bubbly brook of sound that gurgles over pink pebbles. The boys yelp and tease. They hoot and snort. That's indigo; invasive.

There's a toddler, too. Giggles and chortles and shouts and screams. Her colours clash. They're unpredictable.

Arthur sits in the conservatory. They've got their friends in, or possibly those wild relatives again. Probably both. The smell of something spicy drifts over the fence, leaks in through the windows. Dorothy used to like cooking; trying her hand at all sorts of dishes.

Arthur looks at the rocking chair. Dorothy's special place. He remembers her there so well, a ball of wool at her feet, knitting away, pausing to read the pattern, then gathering needles and yarn into a neat package, to go and make the tea. Always a ready smile for him. Dorothy. Arthur's eyes fill with tears. His shoulders shake. Two years, and it isn't getting any better.

The phone rings. Arthur stands up, blows his nose. He crosses the room.

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“Hello Dad.”

“Suzie. Nice to hear your voice, love. How’s things?”

“We’re all fine. Max finished painting this morning. It’s looking lovely. The cot’s arrived too. It’s beautiful. Thank you so much for that Dad.”

Arthur’s mind travels back down the years. They had a second-hand cot ready and waiting for Suzie, and of course Dorothy had done so much sewing before the baby arrived, Arthur said she could open a shop.

“Are you excited?” he asks.

There is a slight pause before Suzie answers.

“Yes. I’m.....”

“Nervous?”

Another pause.

“I’m frightened, Dad.”

“It’s a big first.”

Arthur imagines Suzie biting her lip. She always does that when something worries her.

“I wish your mother was here for you.”

“Are you all right, Dad?”

Arthur feels his chest stiffen. What is the point of telling his daughter that he isn’t all right, that he hasn’t been all right since Dorothy died; that he probably won’t be all right ever again. A sudden burst of laughter travels over the fence, gushes through the conservatory windows, rolls round the room like a paint-box spilling all its colours.

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“It’s the Indians next door,” he says, “They’re at it again.”

Suzie laughs. “You mean they’re enjoying themselves.”

Arthur sighs. Suzie’s a lot like Dorothy. Always looking for the positive.

“You must come and stay Dad, as soon as the baby’s born.”

The last of next door’s colour fades with the evening light. The wind is getting up as Arthur wanders into the garden. He and Dorothy used to share the work out here. He grew vegetables, cut the lawn. Dorothy saw to the flowers. He misses those in the house now, great vases of daffodils in spring, then on to snapdragons, roses, and Canterbury bells in summer, and later, Michaelmas daisies.

Dorothy was fond of simple things, thinks Arthur. How he’d ever ended up with such a wise and loving woman was beyond him. He’d seen himself as rather quiet, and dull. She said he was fun to be with.

Arthur knew he’d been a disappointment to his parents. By the time he went to university, he’d been convinced that he was probably the plainest, most boring individual this side of ancient Greece. Perhaps that was why he loved fossils so much. They were dead. They offered no criticism. They were all has-beens.

“Palaeontology,” his father had exclaimed. “Whatever do you want to do that for? Fossils won’t get you much of a job, you know.”

Arthur had blushed at this evidence of his failure yet again. But he’d stuck to his guns. And palaeontology it was. He found to his joy that he had an extraordinary ability in his chosen subject, a natural talent, as well as a keenness for digs.

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“Scraping about in the dirt,” his mother called it.

He remembers telling Dorothy about his job when he first met her. By then he was a minor researcher and part-time university lecturer. He tried to make it sound not too bad. Dorothy’s eyes had opened in wonder. What an exciting thing to be doing. Much more rewarding than teaching teenagers about Keats and Shakespeare, trying to share her own enthusiasm for literature. Especially when most of them would rather be listening to the latest groups, or going out with friends.

Dorothy.

The leaves are rustling now; twigs clank together; branches shake on the old apple tree. Lightning forks the sky; thunder rumbles in the distance.

The storm’s one of the worst the neighbourhood’s ever witnessed. It’s as if the bedroom is lit by searchlight for a second, then darkness reasserts itself. Time and time again. The crash comes at around three in the morning. There’s no electricity. Arthur goes downstairs on autopilot, fetches the torch from the kitchen, shines it round the room. The conservatory’s a mess. Glass everywhere. The old apple tree has given up its branch to the fierce wind. It’s crashed through the conservatory roof, and lies on the floor.

There is nothing to be done till morning.

Arthur’s poring over the yellow pages when the doorbell goes. It’s the Indian with the chocolate-coloured laugh. Arthur assumes he’s come round to apologise for the racket yesterday. This is all I need right now, he thinks.

The Indian holds out his hand, introduces himself as Bijay.

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“We’ve seen from our upstairs window,” he says, “your sun lounge roof. May I offer you some assistance please?”

Arthur leads the way.

“We can do this between us in no time,” says Bijay. “I will ask my good friend Jay to come and help us. I will go and fetch the necessary.”

Arthur stands for a minute looking at the mess. Then he rings Suzie. Max answers the phone, commiserates, and talks about the repairs.

“You should have that apple tree taken down,” he says.

“Dorothy loved that tree.”

“Look at it this way, Arthur. It’s a danger to your house. It’s leaning more and more. If you ask me, another branch’ll come down in the next storm.”

Arthur changes the subject, asks after Suzie. Half his mind is elsewhere.

Everything has been exactly the same since Dorothy had died. Somehow it seems to lessen the distance between them.

Arthur puts the phone down with a sigh. Changes. They come and go before anyone can stop them. Now their first grandchild is on the way. If only Dorothy could be here. Arthur imagines the gentle voice of his late wife, and he weeps once more.

He’s been sad for so long. Bordering on depression, the doctor said. Sent him to a woman from Cruise, who wanted to help. But Arthur was back to feeling unworthy of love, unworthy of friendship, sunk in the depths of gloom.

He hears the doorbell ringing again. It’s the Indian, Bejay, and his friend. They’ve brought brushes and leather gloves. Arthur is anticipating their colourful laughter,

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echoing round his house all the morning, but they are quietly respectful. All three men work together as a team. Half way through the morning Arthur makes them coffee. Beejay is interested in the photographs of Dorothy, of Suzie and Max. Later he asks Arthur if he would like to have lunch next door. His wife is expecting them.

Arthur hesitates. He hasn't been anywhere much for a couple of years.

"We would very much like you to join us," says Bijay.

When Arthur meets Bijay's wife, she gives her blue glass laugh, and Arthur smiles. I'd know you anywhere, he thinks. She speaks gently to her three children, and shakes her head when Arthur says he thought they had more.

"We have many friends and relatives," she says. She asks Arthur about his family. Her gentle questions about Dorothy encourage him to talk about her.

"I wish we had known her," says Bijay's wife. "You are a lucky man. You have her memory to cherish for the rest of your life, no matter what else comes your way."

Arthur repeats these words as he stands in his damaged conservatory once more. A lucky man. If it hadn't been for last night, he'd never have got to know the Indian family next door. And how kind of them to ask him round again, for their barbeque next Saturday evening. He is actually looking forward to joining in their rainbow laughter.

That apple branch has done him a favour. You could call it a lucky break, he thinks.

Arthur stands there in his slippers, looking into the future with something that feels strangely like hope.

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