The Library of Lost Stories



Eloise Williams grew up in Llantrisant and lives in West Wales, very close to the sea. She was Wales' first Children's Laureate from September 2019 to August 2022. Her books include: *Gaslight, Seaglass, Wilde, Honesty and Lies*, *Elen's Island* and *The Mab*.

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First published in 2026
by Firefly Press
Britannia House, Van Road, Caerphilly, CF83 3GG
www.fireflypress.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.

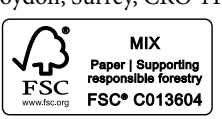
1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

ISBN: 978-1-917718-34-9
e-ISBN:

This book has been published with the support of the Welsh Books Council.

Typeset by: Elaine Sharples

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon, Surrey, CRO 4YY



For Mum and Dad and Jo.

For all the families.

Never Forget

1

Stopped Clocks

December 1976. Aberglas.
It's cold and I am up the river.

I lean over the railings of the bridge, hold on tight, so my knuckles go white and the cold of the metal cuts through to my bone. Forest green water, silver sky reflections, no sign of anything unusual floating its way to Cardiff.

A crow struts along the riverbank, tugging up bits of grass to see if he can eat what's underneath. I like the black fatness of him and the way his feathers turn oily purple, green, blue as they catch the winter light. I copy the way he walks. Hands clasped behind my back. Head bobbing. Stern expression, like an old person who knows everything about everything, except what it's like to be young.

The sky has blazed red in seconds and the edges of it have curled into night on the sly. I shouldn't be down here on my own when it's dark. I'll have to lie to Dad about where I was – if he notices I'm out. I feel a wash of guilt and shove it in my pocket with my marbles and a yellow ribbon my mam gave me. My belly rumbles like a coal train. I'm always hungry because I'm growing, and my stomach's the size of a pit.

Pulling my coat cuffs down I try to cover my wrists, but my sleeves are too short. My knees are blotchy with the cold and my socks are grey and grubby. My daps are good though. They've got almost no holes in the sole and if I wriggle my toes I can feel a tiny bit of room.

There's a loud crack in the trees and the jackdaws shriek up.

I only run because I'm good at it.

Back in town the streetlamps blink, blink on. The wind slices through everything then howls off over the hills. The town square is empty. I wave up to the big posh clock. It's frozen at thirteen past nine. I'll have to stop waving at it when I turn twelve because it's properly childish. I go back to running again.

Past the pub with its yellow windows. Past the chippy with its smell of chips. My belly growls louder than last time. Past the miner's institute. Past the park. Past the phone box. Past the chapel. Up the hill to our terrace. Past the other houses on my road. I lean against the wall to catch my breath when I get to ours, then pull the key up through the letterbox on its string and unlock the door.

Dad is in the living room watching telly. The flickering light from the screen flashes on the wall as I hang my coat up, creep past and go into the kitchen. I put my mam's old pinny on quick. Smooth it down. Act all innocent. Sneak in to stand behind Dad. He doesn't even notice I'm there.

'Your eyes will go square if you watch too much,' I say teasingly because someone once said it to me.

He sits in his armchair pulling the stuffing from a hole in the armrest absent-mindedly, so it looks like it has been snowing on the carpet. I pick it up and put it in my pinny pocket. I'll shove it all back when he's gone.

I tidy his parting, so a pink line runs across his

scalp like a stretched-out worm. I did a better job of his haircut than I did of my own. Mine is still in the shape of the bowl I balanced on my head to cut around. I try not to think of the kids in school laughing at it. I go to the fire, shovel some coal on, pretend that's why my cheeks flame.

'Do you want some soup, Dad?' I put the fireguard back in case the coals roll or spit.

'Noni! How long have you been there, love? I was miles away.' Dad shakes himself back to life.

'Not long, Dad. Don't worry. I'll bring you some food in now.'

'Well done, bach.' He rubs his eyes as if he's surprised to find himself here. His mouth makes a smile at me. I make one back even though my heart feels like a rock in my chest. We are always pretending to be happy nowadays.

I tidy up a bit to cover how sad I feel and how exhausted he looks. This is the worst he's been.

There's a cold cup of tea on the mantlepiece next to a photo of my mam. She's sitting by the river, where I was earlier, reading a book. It must have been a funny story because she's laughing with her head tipped back. The photo is black and white, but her hair has caught the sun so it looks

like a halo of curls. It's the only picture we've got where Dad hasn't chopped her head off by accident. He is no photographer.

She was so beautiful. I try hard to remember her, but she died years ago. I remember she smelled like summer and ironing and her laugh was like spinning coins. I remember her clothes in the wardrobe, sky blue, earth brown, daffodil yellow, and the way she warmed my slippers by the fire. I can't remember her face properly except from this picture. She's been gone since I was six. Dad used to tell me stories about her, but now it makes him upset, so I don't like to ask anymore.

I pick the tea up and knock a bit of broken clock onto the carpet. Dad used to fix things for a living. Now he's too sad and the place is a tip. I bet it wasn't in such a state when Mam was here. Now every space has broken things balanced all over it. Radios and bits of engines, toasters and clocks. Some of the clocks are determined to carry on ticking but most of them have stopped. There's an occasional bong from one of them and a pitiful groan from another. I blow dust off the photo of Mam.

'Won't be long,' I tell Dad as cheerfully as I can.

The kitchen is freezing this time of year and ice

feathers both sides of the window. I've shoved newspaper between the gaps in the frame so it's not as bad as it was, but I can still see my breath as I twti-down to get a tin of tomato soup from the cupboard. I light the gas under a pan and tip the gloopy soup in. We've got a bit of bread left, so I give Dad the thickest slice. Soon the kitchen smells warm, and I've burned my tongue twice because I'm too hungry to wait.

I carry Dad's bowl when it's ready and he balances it on his lap. I help him tuck a tea-towel into his collar as a bib. It saves me on washing if he spills. We eat noisily because there's no one to care. I tip a bit down my pinny then scrape it off when it dries. I promise Mam on the mantlepiece that it will be better next year. I'll get Dad out on the allotment again and help him grow some veg. There's no need to make a fuss or bring anyone nosey in. We can manage by ourselves.

We watch the start of *Wonder Woman*, but we don't want the electric to run out, so we switch it off before we get to the end. I fetch a candle – we've got lots because we are always having power cuts — and light one, putting it on the sideboard. We sit together with the tick-tock of cronky

clocks and the wind blowing sparks down the chimney.

I try to get Dad talking but I give up after a bit. I can't bear to watch how he is disappearing, like he's the shape of him to look at but with most of him gone inside. I do the washing up, then clank the bins out into the lane. I fetch my slippers and put them to warm on the grate with Dad's socks. I wish he'd wear slippers too, but he says that Welshmen don't. I boil the kettle for our hot-water bottles and try not to scald my hands as I pour the water in.

I go through the kitchen to the bathroom and clean my teeth with my finger because it's too cold in there to do a proper job and nobody will know. My face in the mirror looks like my mam's but my nose is all my dad's. I throw my head back and try to laugh like she did in her photo, but my haircut ruins it. I run the hot tap until the mirror steams up and I disappear.

I've seen other disappearing people in our town. Their bodies are still there but they are like shadows with skin. For a while after Mam died, Dad was all right. Then he started to get sad sometimes and the shadows took over him too.

I wipe the condensation from the glass and glare at my reflection. There's no point in moaning. It is what it is and there's others much worse off.

I go up the wooden hill to bed and count my lucky stars, which are glow in the dark and stuck to my ceiling. Soon, I fall asleep.