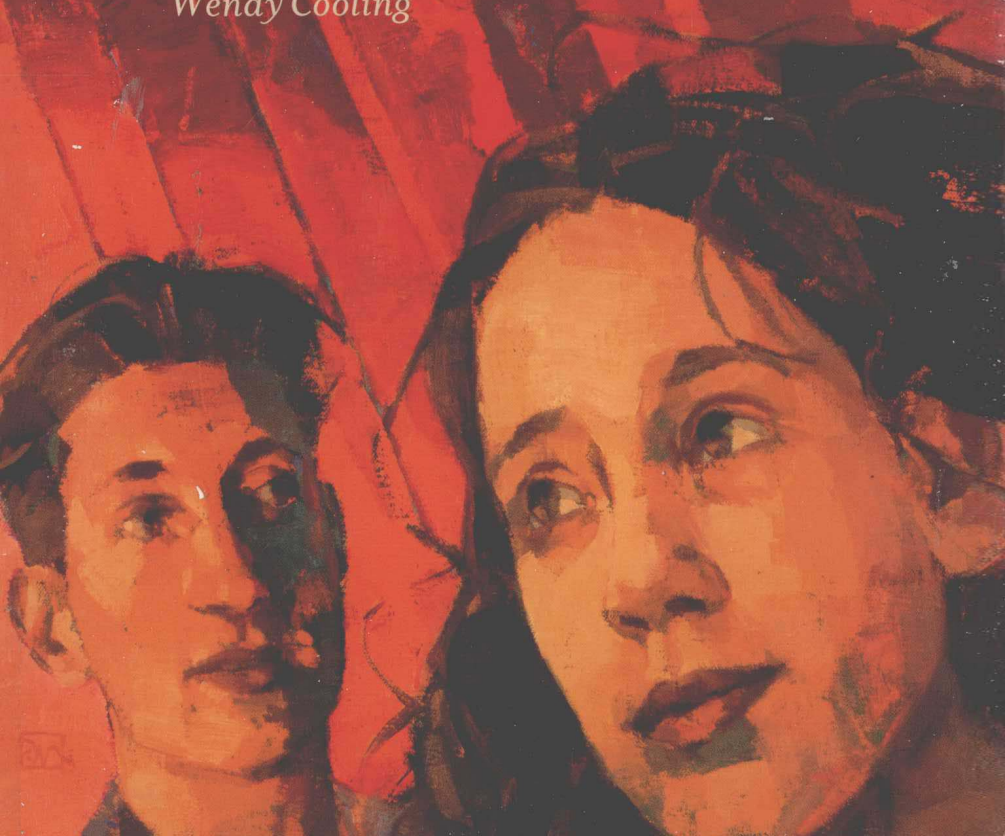


VIADUCT CHILD

PATRICK WOOD

"A very strong first novel ...
fascinating and disturbing..."

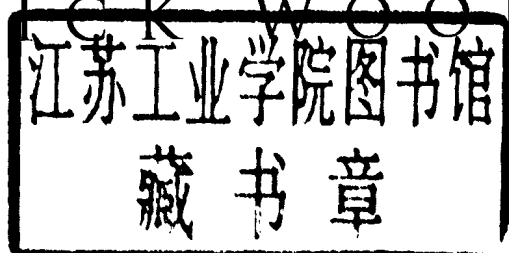
Wendy Cooling



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SCHOLASTIC
PRESS

Scholastic Children's Books,
Commonwealth House, 1-19 New Oxford Street,
London, WC1A 1NU, UK
a division of Scholastic Ltd
London ~ New York ~ Toronto ~ Sydney ~ Auckland
Mexico City ~ New Delhi ~ Hong Kong

First published by Scholastic Ltd, 2002

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ISBN 0 439 98196 4 (hb)

ISBN 0 439 97883 1 (pb)

Typeset by TW Typesetting, Midsomer Norton, Somerset
Printed by Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading, Berks.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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VIADUCT
CHILD



PART
ONE

I

Dushma shuffled closer to the window. She could feel the man behind her swaying with impatience. The soles of his shoes scraped against the gritty tiles and his flapping coat brushed the back of her skirt.

She looked up at the arched ceiling and then deliberately down at her clenched knuckles, trying to resist the urge to glance back over her shoulder. She knew instinctively that such a gesture would mark her out: the sudden moist flash of dark pupils in the whites of her wide and frightened eyes.

A loudspeaker announcement rolled around the ticket hall, incomprehensible to Dushma. She concentrated, sure the message must be to do with her, but the announcer had the microphone wrongly positioned and the rustle of papers on his desk was louder than his voice. No one else seemed even to be trying to listen. She gave up and turned her attention instead to a list of fares stuck to an adjacent wall.

Her only thought when she entered the station had been to get off the street, and she still had no idea

where she was going. There was no map near where she stood. So as not to appear suspicious, she tried to hear what destinations the people around her were requesting, but the echoes in the busy ticket hall blurred their speech. Nothing she could catch made any sense to her.

"I dunno..." the woman at the next window was saying listlessly. "I dunno, 'f I want sour feelin' ... or no feelin' ..."

The man in front of Dushma scooped up his change, stooped to seize his briefcase from between his feet and then, still crouching, loped away from the ticket window. It was her turn. She put her fists up on the cold metal sill, feeling the coins slippery and hot in her clammy palm.

"Three stops please," she said, hoping she didn't need to be any more specific.

The assistant didn't look at her, but kept on stacking money in the slots and tubes inside his till. "You got your ID card?"

This was the moment she had dreaded. She feigned surprise, pushed a hand hurriedly into one pocket, then fumbled inside her coat. Affecting exasperation, she rolled her eyes and shrugged. Resignedly, she unslung her satchel from her shoulder. *All right*, she seemed to say, *if you honestly want to stand there and watch me sift through my possessions...*

The assistant began sliding her money towards him through the slot below the thick glass of his protective window. "Bring your ID next time. Polite or impolite?"

This time she really was taken unawares. "I... What?"

"Oh, come on!" hissed the man behind her, as if to himself but clearly intending them both to hear.

The assistant punched some buttons and a long orange ticket lolled out of the slot by Dushma's right hand. She grabbed at it and tore it free, feeling the perforations give like the stiff zipper on a brand new jacket.

A sense of exhilaration overcame her as she rushed down the long escalator towards the platforms, her satchel bumping on her hip. Her earlier panic disappeared, drowned in the excitement of being out on her own in a place she'd never been before. She'd succeeded at the ticket booth, she could find her way around, she could go anywhere! Nobody could catch her now...

Hemispherical lights on iron poles shone a warm yellow glow on the curved brick ceiling overhead. A hot breeze blew past her, billowing out her filmy scarf and stinging her eyes. Weaving her way past the other people on the escalator, Dushma felt the pins and grips beginning to lose their hold on her thick, dark hair. Recklessly she snaked herself around protruding elbows and leapt over bags she found in her path, clutching for balance at the moving rubber handrail.

The wind grew stronger as she reached the platform and squirmed through the waiting passengers. A sign creaked on its hinges above her head. The crowd thinned and in front of her she saw the bright gleam of track, lying in its concrete pit below the lip of the platform. The roar of an approaching train filled her ears.

She caught a zigzag movement in the corner of her

eye. Leaning quickly forward she saw to her astonishment a tiny grey mouse running backwards and forwards beneath the rails. It seemed to move randomly, bouncing off obstacles and then gliding onwards as if on wheels. Then she flinched backwards again as the train burst out of the tunnel, pushing a wave of hot and dusty air before it.

Some of the carriages were orange and others were blue. Her orange ticket firmly in one hand, Dushma moved towards a door of the appropriate colour. The train had stopped but a rumbling noise continued in the distance. She wondered what labyrinthine tunnels ran above and below and alongside the one in which she stood.

By the time she had boarded the train all the seats had been taken. Hot from her run, she brushed damp strands of hair from her eyes and wrapped a dangling leather strap around her wrist to steady herself. There was no more space in either direction, but nevertheless men with briefcases held out in front of them like battering rams pushed their way past her, back and forth along the aisle.

"Minotaurs!" the driver shouted warningly, and the last few people on the platform hurried to squeeze themselves into the already crowded carriages before the doors hissed shut.

II

Dushma lived with her Auntie Megan high up in an arch of the railway viaduct. This huge brick structure crossed London from one side to the other, jammed like a giant comb teeth-first into the streets and squares and parks of the city. Express trains rushed across it night and day, clattering and whistling as they went.

No one was supposed to live in the viaduct. As far as Dushma and her aunt knew, no one else did. There was another set of rooms like theirs next door, but they almost never got the sun and so remained dusty and empty. Auntie Megan's theory was that these apartments had been meant as temporary accommodation for the navvies who worked on the viaduct, and when building was complete they had been forgotten. There was electricity and hot water, but they had never been sent a bill.

It was an interesting place to live, although it had its drawbacks. There was plenty of space, but the walls were mostly bare brick. Nor were there carpets in any of

the rooms. "Loft living, isn't it?" said Auntie Megan sometimes, when in one of her carefree moods. "It's *supposed* to be minimalist. It's the height of chic!" But it could be painfully cold in the winter, despite Auntie Megan's attempts to make it cosier by stuffing old newspapers into the cracks between the floorboards and fitting pink-tinged light bulbs in all the sockets.

It was a long way up, too. They could see for miles from their windows. The only buildings at an equal height were the chimney stacks of factories and the dizzying central spire of St Gotha's Cathedral. But there was no lift, so to reach their front door they had to climb the thousands of steps of the wrought-iron spiral staircase that ran up inside one leg of the viaduct.

Within, their home was a curious shape. Their living-room wall, for example, curved right to the top of the inside of the arch. The highest window looked almost straight downwards. There was a grille to prevent people falling out when the window was open, although someone as thin as Dushma could probably squeeze through. But if she was careful she could lie across the bars, her arms dangling in space like a bushbaby on a bough, and look directly down into the huge, slowly rotating propeller of the underground railway ventilation shaft far below.

Mr Mackenzie, one of Auntie Megan's string-vested lodgers, once constructed a parachute for Dushma to launch from out of this window. For the canopy, he used a large white square of material from one of his old shirts. Then he tied string to each

corner and suspended a plastic soldier from it.

"Mmm, smell those sweaty armpits," he cackled, as they lay at the open window preparing for the drop. He was referring not to the remains of his shirt, but to the stale air he imagined being sucked up out of the underground railway tunnels by the giant fan at the foot of their arch. In fact, being so far above the traffic fumes, the breezes that blew past their flat were almost always sweet, except when an express went over the viaduct and invisible clouds of ozone rolled humming down from the electric rails.

"Will it tangle it up?" asked Dushma, holding the parachute ready and watching the hypnotic spin of the distant propeller blades beneath their wire-mesh covering.

"Wait and see," said Mr Mackenzie.

The parachute fluttered downwards, bright in the sunlight, spinning slowly and swooping from side to side until, about two thirds of the way to the ground, the updraught from the ventilation shaft cancelled out the force of gravity and it began to rise again. Dushma had been thrilled, sure that it would come all the way back up again like a slow-motion bungee jump. But instead it slid sideways out of the column of warm air and drifted out of sight.

"Ah, we should've attached a message to it," said Mr Mackenzie. "You know, telling people where to send it back to if they find it. Like people put in bottles, then they throw them in the sea. Who knows, it might end up in France, or anywhere!"

"That would've been a good idea," Dushma agreed. "Can you make another one?" But Mr Mackenzie said he had no more white shirts.

Mr Mackenzie was the strangest and most entertaining of Auntie Megan's string of string-vested lodgers, and it was with his sudden departure that everything had started to go so horribly wrong. Several of his predecessors had also been called Mr Mackenzie, or sometimes Mr MacHendry or something similar, leading Dushma to suspect as she grew older and less gullible that in fact none of them was called Mr Mackenzie, or whatever it was Auntie Megan introduced them as.

Most of them tended to lurk in the spare room throughout their stay, only emerging at mealtimes. At the table they would hardly speak at all except to give brief and reluctant answers to Auntie Megan's small talk. This latest Mr Mackenzie, however, had been much more communicative. He liked to surprise Dushma at odd hours of the day with a trick, an observation or an interesting piece of information.

"We'd be OK up here if there was a flood," he'd said to her one time when she'd been lying at the open living-room window. "We could get up on to the railway and escape to safety, couldn't we? Walk all the way to France, even!"

It was indeed possible for them to climb right out on to the viaduct. The landing outside their flat was little more than a wooden platform suspended in a lofty space, criss-crossed with dusty bars of sunlight in the

summer from the many chinks in the brick. Pigeons got in sometimes, and flapped around in panic or sat burbling on a ledge.

A short vertical ladder led upwards from the landing to a manhole cover which opened on to the gravel verge of the railway line. Dushma sometimes climbed this ladder, raising the hinged metal lid above it just enough to see up and down the gleaming metal rails. Further than this she was strictly forbidden to go because, a few metres from the manhole cover, there stood a pole with a buzzing camera turning left and right on top of it. But if there had been a flood, of course, then there wouldn't be anybody watching.

The only other feature of the railway verge was a life raft suspended from davits, ready to be swung out over the side of the viaduct so that train-crash survivors could descend to safety. One evening, after drinking too much sherry and nearly setting light to herself with the aromatherapy burner, Auntie Megan had made a notice and stuck it to the front door. "In the event of fire or flood, man the lifeboat!" it said.

"Reminds me of night-time bombing raids in the war," confided Mr Mackenzie to Dushma, lying at the living-room window after dark with the lights turned off. "You're hanging there in this glass bubble in the belly of the plane," he explained, "looking for a shadow underneath you, waiting for the tracer bullets like a line of street lights in the distance when the enemy opens fire. Hoping you'll get it cleanly when it comes. Those things turn into flaming coffins in an instant. No

chance to climb back up inside and bale out the hatch. See these bars here? I could've hung from those when I was younger. What, five minutes, ten? Squeezing tennis balls, that's the secret."

Dushma didn't know whether to believe him or not, about the war or the bars. He looked quite old, with his grizzled stubble and slack, wrinkled skin. And his wrists were still thick and sinewy.

Throughout their acquaintance, Dushma would not see Mr Mackenzie lose his temper until the day he fell out with Auntie Megan and left for good. Before then she knew him only as the mildest of men. The only thing that annoyed him was the regular passage of the trains across the viaduct. "Makes my fillings rattle," he complained.

Once they were playing chess in the living room when the air began to hum and the walls to rumble with the vibration of an approaching express. It was a sensation Dushma had grown so used to that she hardly noticed it any more. But Mr Mackenzie jumped to his feet, reached into his pocket and took something out of his wallet. Just before the train passed overhead he extended his hand and opened his fingers, revealing a tiny silver needle in his palm. Then he lifted his arm up high and Dushma saw the needle rise towards the ceiling, hang trembling in mid-air, and then drop back as the train moved on.

"See!" he said triumphantly, as if he had proved something. "Living here all your life, I don't know why your hair's not all frizzed up like curly wire."

He never asked her anything about herself, like why

she didn't go to school, or why her friends never came to visit. Dushma assumed that he knew at least some details of her situation and avoided such subjects out of tact. She had read somewhere that it used to be considered polite to ask people questions about themselves, to show you were interested in them. It used to be bad manners to talk too much about oneself. But now, she read, society had fragmented to such an extent that nobody could tell which questions would be welcome and which might be intrusive. So now, if you didn't really want to know, you shouldn't ask.

"What does it mean, society is fragmenting?" she had asked Auntie Megan.

"It means everybody's cracking up!" shrieked Auntie Megan, whooping with laughter at her joke and pouring herself another glass of sherry.

One of Dushma's most vivid early memories was of the tall fridge-freezer in the kitchen.

It had been bought only the previous week, paid for in long-hoarded wads of crumpled notes. Three strong men had taken all morning to carry it up the stairs. It was Auntie Megan's pride and joy, and meant they no longer had to hang their milk out of the window in carrier bags.

Dushma always woke early in the summer, when the uninterrupted sun streamed into her bedroom window through the thin curtains. She would get up and pad through into the kitchen, still in her nightie, and make herself breakfast.