

Excerpts from *The Tower, The Zoo and The Tortoise* by Julia Stuart (New York: Anchor Books, 2011). First published in the UK under the title *Balthazar Jones and the Tower of London Zoo*.

When the Swiss cowbell sounded just before noon, Valerie Jennings's heart leapt. She covered her lips with another coat of Lilac Haze and walked to the coat stand in the shoes that forced her toes into two red triangles. But when she turned the corner, instead of the tattooed ticket inspector, she found a woman in a duffel coat and beret in tears. "Has anyone handed in a boot?" she enquired, gripping the edge of the counter.

It was no ordinary boot, she went on to explain, as it had once belonged to Edgar Evans, the Welsh petty officer who had died while returning from the South Pole under the command of Captain Scott. The curator recounted how she had suddenly fled the carriage when she realised that she was travelling south on the Northern Line instead of north as the name suggested. Only when the doors had shut did it occur to her that she had left behind the historic footwear, which was to be triumphantly united with its mate, for decades the crowning glory of Swansea Museum, labelled simply as "Evans's Boot."

Hunting amongst the shelves, Valerie Jennings eventually found it next to a pair of angling waders in the footwear section. When she returned to the counter with it, considerably hotter and crosser, the woman promptly burst into tears again subjected her to an oral biography of Edgar Evans, warning her never to confuse him with Teddy Evans, Scott's second-in-command on the expedition.

"Good gracious me, I wouldn't dream of confusing him with *Teddy* Evans," Valerie Jennings assured her, snapping the ledger shut to signal an

end to the Antarctic ramble. Just as she was sliding it onto the shelf below the counter Arthur Catnip arrived. The battleground of his hair had been razed with the pomade that his barber had given him as recompense for the previous assault, and it now bore the shine of an ice rink.

Instantly regretting not having taken off her coat as she started to sweat, Valerie Jennings accompanied him to the street, wondering where they were going. Eventually she found they were in Regent's Park again, and the ticket inspector pointed to a bench by the fountain, suggesting that they sit down. "I've brought a picnic," he announced, as he opened his rucksack and spread a rug on her knees. "Let me know if you get cold."

As Valerie Jennings helped herself to a roast pork sandwich, she told him that, according to the papers, there had been two further sightings of the bearded pig in Essex and East Anglia. Arthur Catnip replied that if he spotted it in his garden, he would never tell the press as the last thing he'd want would be a herd of journalists trampling all over his vegetable patch.

He offered her a pastry parcel, which Valerie Jennings eyed suspiciously. After her first mouthful, she congratulated him on his salmon en croute and told him that she'd once gone salmon fishing with her ex-husband, and had been so bored that she threw herself into the river so that they would have to go home. Arthur Catnip helped himself to a tomato and replied that he had once thrown a sailor overboard after he made a comment about his then wife, but immediately dived in to rescue him as he realised that the man had a point.

As the ticket inspector looked at the fountain, he recalled the time he poured car anti-freeze into the garden pond one winter, as his biology teacher had told him that the fish in Antarctica had anti-freeze in their blood so they wouldn't freeze solid. But when he went back to check on them, all

his father's koi carp had died. Wiping a corner of her mouth on her napkin, Valerie Jennings told him how she had just handled a boot that had belonged to Teddy Evans, the petty officer who died on his way back from Scott's ill-fated trek to the Pole. He was not, she pointed out, to be confused with Evans, Scott's second-in-command on the same expedition.

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The Boot in the Swansea Museum

Wondering again why she hadn't heard from him since their second lunch, she thought what a fool she had been to mix up Edgar and Teddy Evans

during her tale of the lost Antarctic boot. As she approached the church, she cursed herself, explorers, and finally their forsaken footwear.

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