

The background of the cover is a dark, starry night sky. In the foreground, there is a dense forest of evergreen trees, their dark silhouettes contrasting against the lighter, star-filled sky. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

REVERENCE & OTHER STORIES

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Dedicated to my brother.

ROAD-KILL



Zach bought a bag of edibles on his way to work. He was one of those who rolled out of bed, threw something on and ran out the door. A full 5 minutes to get ready for work.

Along the way he popped a 20-milligram THC caramel and slung on his headphones. The huge chunky ones that felt like a spongey helmet. He swayed his head from side to side, taking long strides past the other pedestrians, his pace matching the rhythm of the sounds he was enveloped in. He couldn't hear the traffic, the crowds, the arguments, the crying babies, the bikes or tourists asking for directions. Nothing. Just the soothing sounds of the next great band. Whoever they were this month. Oh who cares. That's not what this is about. Anyway, by the time Zach got to the office, he was serene and calm. Just perfect, you know? He waved to the security guard whose name he could never pronounce and never bothered to learn. The guard was engrossed in a book so Zach rapped on the glass divider and gave him a thumbs up. The guard buzzed him through without glancing up.

Zach wondered what the guard was reading, sneaking a look as he walked past. 'The rise of the far what?' He couldn't make out the last word, but filled in the blank himself after a long pause. Longer than you or I may have taken let me tell you. 'What the hell man?' he said to himself, 'yesterday the guy was reading a book about interior design!' Zach chuckled and got on the elevator, thumping the button for the basement. He reached in his saddle

bag and swigged some water. 'Oh fuck,' he muttered, swallowing the edible by accident.

By the time he reached his desk he had popped another of his caramel delights. The office was empty as usual, yet the narrative in Zach's head was always the same - 'God where are these people? Why am I always the first? Ah, I guess I live closer. That may be it.' Zach was born with a kind heart, and always erred on the side of generosity when attributing reasons to the actions and behaviours of others. Yeah, he really did. Even in a highly unforgiving economic climate where most others would have relied on negativity. Yeah, well, it needed to be said. If you were in trouble, Zach would help. If you needed someone to listen to you, it would be Zach.

Zach shrugged his duffle coat off and settled behind his desk, logging in. There were three red lights blinking on the phone, but he wasn't ready to field any calls. He shook his shoulders for a while before stretching and rolling his head from side to side.

Laughter came from the hall, getting louder as the others arrived. Zach waved and smiled, holding up his bag of goodies and shaking it at them. His two workmates, Mark and Steve, patted him on the back warmly.

'Gonna be a long day,' said the third person, Jeff, sitting next to Zach and eyeballing the bag. He was the manager.

Mark and Steve were both dishevelled looking, no doubt having just thrown something on. They usually sprinted to work with a couple of minutes to spare. Zach chuckled thinking about it. Steve was wearing sliders for fuck sake. How does anyone run in those?

'What?' asked Steve. 'They're comfy! Stop judging me Zach!'

It was minus two outside. Yeah, Steve was pretty out of it most of the time. He was in his early 20s and able to put his body through the mill, bouncing right back. Mark on the other hand, was in his late 40s, and still refusing to accept that he simply couldn't live like Steve. They shared an apartment. Mark had done nothing with his life. Seriously. He'd moved from job to job, all low wage, never been hitched. Guess he hadn't noticed that he was supposed to move on and keep moving. That's what you do right? Progress? Guess he couldn't let go of his college days. Mark flashed Zach a grin and popped on his earpiece. That was something to be said about Mark. He was never unhappy. He actually seemed to like his life. Really wrap himself in it and immerse his whole persona, ignoring looks and questions from those his age. He was also generous to a fault, always looking out for others. If you asked him about his plans he always said he had none, he was happy as he was, that way he'd never be disappointed. There's something in that.

Zach gave Jeff a once over. Unable to determine why he was there and especially why he was sitting next to him. Jeff was something else. He was promoted after two days on the job and he was the regional manager. Who walks into a job and get's promoted three times in under six months? Who? Jeff that's who. Zach could feel his jaw tense as he watched Jeff clear the chocolate wrappers off the cluttered desk. 'Fucker,' he said under his breath. Zach disliked Jeff. Especially since he had given him the benefit of the doubt many, many times, and been punished for it. Truth be told, Zach never was able to understand why people chose to behave badly.

'So, err, Jeff, what are you doing here tonight?' asked Steve.

'Just want to hang ... hang ... you know, see how the frontline is doing.'

'Yeah? Only the last time you did that, four people got sacked,' Steve said, a forced smile plastered on his cherubic face.

Jeff laughed, holding his hands up. 'Woah! Chill, yeah? Just loosen up a bit. Nothing like that man. Just checking in. Making sure you guys have everything you need. Today is about you!' Jeff gave them the thumbs up and flashed a wide perfect smile. He took in the break area at the far corner of the office. The water cooler was empty and damaged. A broken vending machine stood next to it. There was a two-seater, with ripped cushions and a strong musty smell was seeping from the microwave. The tall bin was overflowing and the carpet was stained. Jeff rolled his eyes and muttered under his breath.

There was a rap on the door. It was the security guard from the lobby.

'Who the hell is at the desk?' Jeff took the parcel from the worried looking guard and shook his head disapprovingly.

'Told to bring it straight away, Sir' mumbled the guard, turning and leaving quickly.

'He's okay Jeff. Let him stay will you. He never leaves his post unless those upstairs insist,' said Mark.

Classic Mark. Always thinking of the little guy. Always wanting to help. Zach bobbed his head automatically hoping Jeff would leave and he could put his headphones back on. He had expected the usual day of just the three of them. Stress free with regular, often excessive, breaks. Zach saw Jeff giving Mark a long stare. He wondered if he would stand up for Mark if Jeff tried to fire him for speaking up about the security guard. Jeff hated anyone telling him what to do. He took everything personally. Any suggestion about doing something differently would end you. Just end you. Jeff would hate you for it and make you pay. And pay.

Jeff nodded to Mark. 'As I'm in a good mood' As if that explained anything. He could be a vicious fucker even when happy. The phone rang

distracting everyone, including Jeff. Mark answered the call hurriedly. Jeff walked to the rest area and unplugged the microwave, dumping it with a thump on the floor. He impatiently unpacked the box. It was a new microwave. This bothered Zach. He asked himself why Jeff didn't just unpack the new microwave first, then he could have just put the old microwave into the box rather than the floor. Why not do that? He also wondered why were there pink bubbles in the air? Zach grinned. He sometimes saw small pink bubbles after a very late night. He was no doubt the only one. He probably had something seriously wrong with his eyes. But hey, whatever. He loved the bubbles. They made him happy. But he always forgot about them and was surprised when he saw them again. Now he was watching pink bubbles floating around Jeff and bouncing off his flat forehead. He laughed loudly, causing Steve to shush him.

'Where's the other box? You know, for the old microwave,' asked Jeff looking round.

'Maybe it's in the back ... we didn't touch anything ... you know because ... '

'Yeah, yeah, enough already. I know you are a good guy Mark. You don't have to explain again,' said Jeff walking to the storage room behind the break area. He started moving boxes and old equipment around loudly. Every so often he would yell 'Fucking hell this place is a mess! Guys! Come on! Everything is mixed up. It stinks back here. What have you been doing?'

Steve stretched and took off his head piece, reaching for a gummy bear. 'I swapped all the labels, so he'll be there for a while,' he said.

'What?!' Mark looked over his screen worriedly, 'I need this job Steve.'

'No stress. I'll take care of you Mark. You're like the dad I never had!'

‘Very funny. Ha. Ha.’ Mark turned back to his screen.

The sound of boxes being thrown around made everyone smile. It didn’t take much for Jeff to get frustrated. He really was a tosser. At this point even Zach didn’t care. Guess why? He was planning to leave at the end of the month. That’s right. Didn’t I mention that at the start? Too bad. Yeah, Zach had reached his limit. His mind was a rage. He had gradually become quite unlike himself in many ways, including his capacity to forgive easily. ‘Why the hell do I care about this place?,’ he thought, ‘about Jeff or anyone. I’m leaving. I have to. Otherwise I’ll bludgeon Jeff, cut him up and stuff his pieces in the new microwave. Wanker.’

Thing is, one of the people Jeff fired rather unceremoniously was a girl Zach really had a thing for. I mean it was serious. Zach could barely speak for two weeks when she first joined the team. And after that he watched her and mumbled to her when he could. Frankly, it was embarrassing. But hey, we all experience that sometime, right? Those who don’t are missing out. Pain restores the equilibrium in the soul from all the bought happiness and fake bravado. Haha. Anyway, you’re not here to get all Zen. So with the girl gone, Zach was stuck with the Mark-Steve double act and it was getting him down. Unfortunately, Jeff fired three other people at the same time. They were cool and competent, at least you would think so to hear Zach tell it.

Jeff hated competition. Everyone knew that. Even if the person was of no real threat to him. He just hated it. So, of course he kept Zach on (did the bare minimum of work and wasted time), Steve (fucked up lots of accounts) and Mark (the kind, caring guy who did lots of work, was the lowest paid and would clearly never apply for a promotion and therefore would never be a threat). Jeff sucked, but tell me you don’t have someone like him in your office? Come on! Or perhaps it’s you. Hahaha.

‘Do you think we should go check on him? It’s gone quiet all of a sudden,’ said Mark.

‘Fuck no.’ Steve was focussed on shovelling chips into his mouth while ignoring the phone. He really could put away enough food for all the people working in the building. I kid you not. He paused for a moment, licking his fingers. ‘Let him do what he does best Mark. Get angry, whine and sit somewhere sulking. I mean, what is he looking for anyway? Jerk.’

‘I’m sure he’s doing the best he can Steve. You don’t know what his life is like. Maybe there’s a really good reason why he is the way he is.’ And that is why Mark is still on the same economic wrung, or perhaps two notches below, where he started over 20 years ago. Pay attention.

‘How the hell do you live with him?’ Zach said sarcastically, completely forgetting his own equally gracious view of the faults of others. So sad. Really.

Steve shrugged and patted Mark on the back. ‘Thinking about others is a thing Zach, you should try it sometime.’

‘Oh fuck you Steve,’ Zach laughed throwing a paperclip at him.

Zach had been at work for two hours. All the lights on his phone were lit. He hadn’t answered a single call. Yup. This was work. His work. His rating on the score board was zero. A big egg. And, he was actually proud of it. Mark was at 57 and James a modest 25. Those numbers? Those aren’t calls taken, those are sales. Guess how much one sale is worth? Keep guessing, you’re still too low.

Jeff bounced back to the rest area with a box. His face was flushed and his hair was messed up. He focussed on unpacking a new coffee machine. Zach watched him and thought ‘It’s a coffee machine. We’ve never had a coffee

machine before. Just a scaled up kettle which no one uses because we all live on cans of sugary syrup.’ Zach continued his rant - thankfully in his own head.

Jeff set up the machine, all smiles. ‘You’ll thank me later,’ he winked.

Zach had now become even more rage filled. He thought about how his never-to-be-girlfriend would have liked a coffee when she worked here. Here’s some of Zach’s inner monologue ‘What an idiot. Why should I be positive about Jeff? It’s Mark! His crap has infiltrated my brain. Always saying ‘turn everything into a positive, look for the bright side, it works!’ Fuck! That’s all I heard all summer, stuck in a basement while my ex-friends partied the days away.’ Yup. Zach had no friends. Why? He dumped them all when he got this job. He was just way too embarrassed to tell them what he was doing. So he stopped answering their calls and texts and moved out of their shared apartment for good measure. Zach was ridiculous like that. Then again, stand by me has perhaps lost all meaning in these highly turbulent economic times. Have you noticed how often I mention the economy? Ignore me. We all have issues.

‘Well,’ Jeff said, ‘we need a quick one-to-one Zach. Okay? 5 minutes.’ He held up his palm and pointed to the back.

Zach nodded, mystified.

Jeff made a fresh brew and made his way to the back office - you needed a key to unlock it. Special issue. Just to senior managers. Mark was concerned. He watched Zach pop another edible.

‘This is it Zach. You’re out of here. I hope you have something else lined up,’ said Steve.

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Oh come on Zach. You haven’t made a sale in over 2 months. Yeah, you are here on time everyday but you don’t do anything. Nothing. Ever since the others were fired, you’ve just let everything go. You are no threat to Jeff, true, but you are also way too useless for him to justify your cost.’

‘Yeah. But he’s just going to tell me off or something.’

Steve shook his head. ‘Nah, uh. You, my friend, are gone. Seriously. You need to stop eating those, and think. Why would he keep you on?’

The sudden realisation of what had happened to him since the others were sacked, rocked Zach. He rushed to the coffee machine and start chugging. He urged himself to think fast. He had let everything slip and hadn’t noticed. Steve was right. What the hell had he been doing? Sure he was going to leave, but he hadn’t even started looking for another job. Fuck.

‘Okay. What can I say?’ Zach asked

‘Dead aunt? Grandparent?’ said Steve.

Mark rolled his eyes. ‘Try breakdown. Zach must have had a breakdown and no one noticed. I’ve looked it up. It can happen this way.’

Zach cupped his head in his hands and sobbed. Actually he was more than sobbing. He was wailing, whining and there was some howling in there. Mark came over and patted his shoulder then rubbed my back. Steve got his wallet out and handed Zach all his cash, two 20s and some coins. He looked sorry for him. He’s right, thought Zach, I’m a goner. There’s no way Jeff will keep me on. And, yeah, I probably had a breakdown and didn’t notice. Why would I? My head is pounding and I can hear my blood pumping louder and louder. My chest is hurting and I feel like I am falling. I continue

to wail and I can feel Mark struggling to hold on to me. I can vaguely hear Steve making a call to emergency services. I won't survive. I won't survive this. There was so much I wanted to do. And now I'm going to die in a damp basement with a stinky microwave and a zero under my name on the monitor board. What the hell have I been doing?'

A loud bang stopped everything. Zach touched his chest. He thought his heart had exploded. What a moron, right?

Steve and Mark asked at once 'What was that?'

There were sounds coming from the back office.

'That's the last fucking time someone threatens to take my job away from me. The last time.' The security guard emerged and made himself a coffee. Drinking it swiftly. He put his gun back in the holster. 'Now you three, give me a hand with the body, so I can get back to work and you can keep hold of your jobs.'

It was already dark when they left. The winter months do that, barely any light. Mark gave Zach the name of a friend he could talk to for free about his mental health and told him to text him once he had seen the doctor. He wanted to make sure Zach was okay. Zach nodded through tears. Steve wriggled his toes in his sliders and moved the snow around on the ground.

'What about Jeff? Won't anyone notice?' Zach asked.

Mark winked and patted his back. 'After every round of downsizing, there is eventually a manager change, it happens one way or another. This time it was the security guard, last time it was the receptionist on the first floor. Then the company hires new recruits and the whole cycle starts again. I mean I'm sure he'll be reported missing, but what the fuck Zach. You saw what we did with the body. Who's gonna find that?'

‘There’s so much I need to learn about this workplace,’ said Zach.

Mark raised an eyebrow. ‘You know Zach, it’s time you found something else to do. You have a lot in you. I can see it. He put a piece of paper in Zach’s hand. ‘Call her. I was hanging onto this waiting for the right time. I stay in touch with everyone who leaves. You are all like family to me. Give her a ring. Start living. Take the leap.’ Zach felt tears welling up and nodded. He felt better already.



REVERENCE



Jack Wilding was tall and broad-shouldered. Although by no means devoid of charm, people felt uneasy if they spent too long in his company. Jack had many acquaintances but none he considered a friend. He was never short of dinner companions and dates either, but was indifferent when they asked whether he would like to stay in touch. His professional network in the city had expanded over the past two years to include many high profile figures in government and industry, and he was never short of clients or money. He lived a comfortable life.

But of late he had felt exhausted and drained; easily irritated by the incessant noise and distractions of fast-paced city living. He was restless and his daily routine which he stuck to assiduously no longer gave him the comfort he had once derived from it. That morning he packed a small bag and set off on a long weekend break.

The 3:30 pm from the main station was a busy train, even at weekends, but there were always seats in the first class carriage. Jack sat to the rear. He had always been a very precise man and did not care to be hurried. He arrived 30 minutes before departure. Looking out of the window he caught sight of one of his clients making his way along the platform. Jack pulled his trilby low over his eyes and sank into the plush seat. He really did not want any company. He wasn't planning to speak to anyone over his break. He could already feel his mind and body unwind. A rush of relief to be getting away caused him to smile easily.

The train left on time. As it hurtled past Reverence Mountain, Jack's phone lost service. He knew there wouldn't be any reception further into his journey - this was the quiet zone - a mountainous terrain with few cell towers. It was the one area with a total ban on Wi-Fi and anything that could generate electromagnetic signals. There was one observatory which used radio telescopes, taking advantage of the ban. The highly sensitive equipment was used to tune into frequencies from across the spectrum and was vulnerable to any kind of disruption from electromagnetic signals.

There was a time when Jack had a client who thought they may be electrosensitive and they had mentioned the place at one of their meetings. Jack had been waiting for an opportunity to visit. He wanted to be somewhere cut off. He wanted to be lost, to be undiscoverable. It had been too long. Had he ever been alone? He grew up watching cartoons and playing games on mobile devices while being pushed around in his buggy. His mother was always preoccupied with her phone and so was his father. It wasn't unusual for his time. When his mother left he barely registered her absence and his step-mum was no different, leaving him to his online pursuits while she promoted herself on social media. It never bothered him, there was always something to see and someone to speak to online.

'Ticket please.' The conductor stamped the stub and moved to the next carriage. Jack found it pleasing that some lines still issued paper tickets. He tucked the stub into his pocket book - he would keep it as a memento. He thought he might even make a physical scrapbook of his short break. He settled back, switched off his electronic devices and put them away in his case, determined not to use them at all during his stay at Reverence. He had a small notebook and a pen, that would suffice for anything he needed to remember he thought. When was the last time he wrote on paper? He couldn't remember.

The journey was pleasant and the towering trees and lush green calmed Jack's city frame of mind. He wanted it to last, to soak it in until there was

none of his previous self left. Renewed and awakened. He yearned for it desperately. He hadn't realised quite how much. Jack had grown up in a tower block in the inner city with few green areas or parks. He didn't think much of it, but of late he felt himself drawn to the outdoors. The office he worked in was in a block with a garden on the top floor, overlooking the city. He had taken to spending his breaks there and always found that he never wanted to leave.

On arrival at Reverence the sun had set. It was the last stop and the other passengers had disembarked at earlier stations. Jack walked the short distance to a diner and enquired about transport to the Willow Inn. The manager and the two customers at the bar looked puzzled. 'The Willow Inn shut last year,' said the manager. He indicated to a stool at the bar and poured Jack a coffee.

'I booked it online,' Jack said. He removed his hat and settled in. He was thirsty.

'Uh, huh. The site must still be up.' The manager showed Jack a menu. 'Best get something in you buddy, the cook leaves in 30 minutes and we are the only rest stop in town.'

Jack ordered a burger and fries. He asked about other places to stay.

'No one visits here these days. You know, on account of the howling man?' said Reggie, one of the customers. He was wearing a plain blue baseball cap and had straw blonde hair. He moved closer to Jack. 'You one of those news men are you?

'No. Just someone on vacation. I didn't see anything on the news about the ... what did you call it?'

'Howling man,' said Reggie turning back to his coffee.

The manager returned with a large plate of food. 'We're pretty much off the grid here. We prefer it that way. You eat up. You can stay with me for the night and catch the morning train out. There isn't anywhere else for visitors.'

Jack was disappointed. But chose not to argue. He ate his food. It was fresh and delicious. 'This is amazing,' he smiled.

'Yeah, everything is fresh. The cook makes everything from scratch.'

Jack nodded and listened out for sounds from the kitchen but could hear nothing.



The manager, Spencer, lived in a cabin at the North edge of Reverence. It was large and spacious. Feeling peaceful and happy for the first time in a long while, Jack settled in for the night and fell asleep straight away.

The next morning he awoke to fresh coffee and pancakes. He wanted to stay for a few more days so he could explore the area. And after much discussion and debate, Spencer finally agreed reluctantly on condition that Jack not disturb any of the local residents and that he return to the cabin before dark every evening.

Spencer looked drawn and tired. He spoke about the howling man without prompting from Jack. 'You know, I've heard many, many different animals in the wild. I used to go on walks with my dad when I was young, always lived around these parts, but I have never heard howls like this

before. It sounds deep and disturbed. My sister got so scared she packed her bags and left, shutting the Willow Inn. She's never coming back. I hear she's back in the city. She believes that the two visitors who disappeared last year were killed by whatever is howling out there. Did you hear it last night?'

Jack shook his head and continued eating his pancakes. He wanted to set off early and spent time on his own. Everything about this place made him feel energised. Spencer looked surprised. 'It was loud ... the howls made the cabin shake. You heard nothing?'

Jack shook his head again and gulped down his coffee. He was excited and wanted to see everything. He cut the conversation short, said a quick goodbye to Spencer and set off for his walk. It got dark early in these parts so he took long strides. He finally paused, hand resting on the thick bark of an ancient sequoia. He had hardly noticed the scale of the trees. His determination to capture everything meant he lost sight of his surroundings. He chastised himself and slumped against the tree. The deep silence and crisp clean air was powerful and made Jake smile. He was exhilarated. He sat down and closed his eyes. When he woke he was startled. Reggie was standing watching him.

'I was just going to wake you. Get going. This part is too near the observatory for you to stay,' said Reggie.

'You take care of this place huh?' Jack brushed himself down.

'I look after this place, yeah. I'm here everyday like clockwork.'

Jack looked upon in the direction of the observatory but couldn't see anything for the trees. 'People still use that place? When will they be here next?'

‘What’s it to you?’

‘Sorry. I just ... look, nevermind.’

‘Not many come here these days. No. Not many at all.’

‘Well, I’m just here for the quiet and the green. These trees are wonderful,’ said Jack.

‘Are they? A new development would make this town attractive and get some money in. You city folk don’t get that.’

Jack sighed, he hoped discretely. He had clients that developed places like this all the time. No more he thought. The trees and the forest had met his yearning for intimacy on a level he hadn’t yet consciously registered. Jack was taken aback by how he was feeling and wanted to savour every moment. He also wanted nothing more to do with felling trees and clearing ancient forests such as these. He hoped Reggie would leave so he could stay a little longer. The skies were darkening. Reggie spoke about the howling man and how it had destroyed the only real source of income for the place. Tourists would never come back he felt. He continued talking about his life and his job at the observatory. Jack did his best not to engage. He was feeling his anxieties all come flooding back the more he listened to Reggie. He let out a deep sigh, which Reggie did pick up on.

‘I’ve got things to do. Just checking on you. Like I said, can’t be too careful around this parts. You make sure to get back indoors before sun down.’ With that Reggie gave him one last look and set off towards the observatory. Jack could tell he was puzzled by the lack of interest he showed in the tale of the howling man. As for the disappearance of tourists, Jack was sure the police would have investigated had there been anything to it. He was sceptical. He had always relied on online sources for news. Didn’t everyone? If any of this really had any truth to it he was sure the

internet would be buzzing and there would definitely be more people travelling to Reverence to find the source of the howls.

By the time he made it back to the diner Spencer was getting ready to close. He was frustrated and worried about Jack and wanted to hit him. 'I told you to be back before sundown. If something happened to you I'd blame myself. And so would the others.'

Jack nodded, apologised and helped close up.

'What were you doing anyway Jack?'

'I fell asleep in the forest and when I woke it was dark.'

Spencer raised an eyebrow. 'It's good you leave tomorrow. I feel responsible for your safety. This place isn't safe for explorers. I keep telling you that. I told you to stick to the main path through the forest.'

'About that. I'd like to stay a few more days if I may. I'd like to spend more time in the forest looking at the trees. I feel so relaxed ... and happy.'

Spencer said he would think about it, taking his time closing up. He knew he couldn't force Jack to leave, but he wasn't sure if he wanted to have company in his home any longer. Jack said he understood and would wait for a decision.

On their drive to the cabin it started to drizzle and as they got closer they heard a loud cry. Jack froze up. It was a terrible cry, hollow and empty, painful and wretched. And it didn't stop. Spencer continued to drive. 'We'll be indoors soon,' he said quietly, over and over again. He paid no attention to Jack's attempts to speak to him. By the time they got to the cabin, the howls had lessened. They jumped out of the truck and ran for the door.

Spencer got there first, unlocked it, then kicked back at Jack and slammed the door shut.

‘Spencer? Spencer what are you doing?’ He banged at the door and kicked it. ‘Jesus Christ!’. He ran back to the truck, got in and locked the doors. He was breathing heavily, sweating and close to tears. He felt himself unravelling and couldn’t stop shaking. The lights stayed on in the cabin and the howls continued in the distance, getting louder then quieter.

Jack searched the truck frantically, the back seat, under the seats, the glove compartment. ‘There must be something, I need something I can use ...’. He wondered if he could jump start the truck but didn’t know how. The howls grew louder. Jack tried to block the cries out. He covered his ears and shut his eyes. The howls seemed to penetrate the car, filling it with the horrible sound. Jack could stand it no longer, he was terrified of staying in the car and leaving the car at the same time. He felt like he was going mad, he started whining, then sobbing and from within him came the most fearful scream. He screamed louder and louder trying to block out the howls. He thought he felt something on his shoulder and he frantically swiped at it but there was nothing there. He was crying and struggling to keep from tearing at himself. The truck began to rock and sway and he didn’t dare look, keeping his eyes shut tightly ‘Please someone help me!’, he cried over and over again. ‘Spencer help me!’ he cried, pushing down on the horn, but there was no sound, or perhaps there was, but all he heard was the wretched cries surrounding him. Jack heard thumps above him. Now, his fear turned to anger, he was filled with a rage that takes over when you realise you are trapped and there is nothing left but to fight. He screamed and yelled louder and louder and leapt out of the car. ‘Where are you? Come out. Come on. Show yourself,’ he yelled searching for a weapon. He ran forward and grabbed a shovel by the front door of the cabin, swinging it round, stabbing the air. The howls seemed to come from everywhere, behind him, next to him, close to him, far from him and yet he couldn’t see anything. It filled the air and caused everything close by to reverberate. You could hear nothing else.

‘Spencer!’ Jack banged the door and then struck at it with a shovel, but nothing happened. Suddenly he felt something grab his ankles, he struggled but was pulled by an immense force, he tore at the ground, but couldn’t stop. He kicked, struggled and screamed as he was pulled deep into the forest.

He was taken at great speed, tearing through plants and the damp ground. The rain had gotten heavier and in the darkness he could see nothing, just feel the grip on his ankles and the howls. He cried out over and over again, trying to cling on to anything he could. Then suddenly, he was released. He wasted no time. He scrambled to his feet and ran and kept running. The moonlight illuminated his path and he grew in confidence recognising the area. He was near the tall sequoia he had spent the afternoon under. He wanted to die by it. That’s all. To be next to it one last time. After that he really didn’t care anymore, he couldn’t fight off the terror he felt from the howls. The sound was tearing through him, his entire body shook with it. The sequoia stood tall and majestic under the moonlight. Jack held the trunk and pressed his body against it. He felt his heartbeat slow and a warm comforting aura envelope him even as the howls raged around him. ‘Thank you, thank you,’ he said, closing his eyes.

A tree had fallen on the cabin causing it to collapse and crush Spencer. The diner was destroyed by falling branches and strong winds had taken the roof clear off. Reggie was found dead in his home. It was presumed a heart attack. There were no marks on him. All the other cabins and buildings were destroyed including the Willow Inn. Even the observatory was not spared. The police and rescue services spent the day clearing the area and moving searching for the residents of Reverence. Some had simply vanished and others were found dead in their damaged homes.

When Jack woke, he was lying curled up at the base of his favourite tree. He could hear the birds and there was a faint breeze. He felt rested and privileged to be alive. He stood up slowly, brushed himself down and touched the bark of the sequoia. He didn't look back. He walked to the train station and set off back home.



THE WAY DREAMS COME BACK



There was no question about it, it was him. Beth was on her way to London, and as the train rushed past minor stations, Mr. Ames walked past and positioned himself diagonally opposite, one seat back. He opened his newspaper, folded it over and smoothed it out. Unbuttoning his jacket he sank back in his seat, tugging at his blue and white tie, loosening it at the neck. He didn't appear to have seen Beth. The last time they crossed paths he had slammed her across a room and then crumpled when she double kicked him in the ribs. At the time Beth took the opportunity to escape with all his documents, contacts and £2 million in cash. He had pursued her across France, Germany and the Netherlands, before he lost track of her in London. That was three years ago, almost to the day. Beth knew she should have ended his life when she had the chance. But she had been distracted and she reprimanded herself for that again. Returning to London was perhaps not the best decision to have made, but she had unfinished business to take care off. She couldn't keep away forever.

Beth slung her bags over her shoulder and walked towards the front of the train. She planned to exit at Gatwick and switch trains to London. By the time she got to the front carriage, Ames was just a few feet behind her. She could see a slight grin form across his pale thin lips. He pushed his thin dark glasses further up his nose and sat down on an aisle seat, watching her closely. Beth thought he must have been alerted to her presence when she landed in the UK three weeks ago. She stood close to the exit doors. She knew she would need to leave her bags and run. She visualised the escalators in her mind and gripped her automatic door closer in her hand.

She planned to leap and fizzle the doors so they stopped working. That would buy her more time.

The platform was crowded. It was the holiday season and there were people and their luggage in rows ready to board the train. As soon as the train came to a halt, Ames leapt to his feet, the door opened and Beth buzzed it shut. There was a loud pop and the crowds jumped back. Ames slammed against the closing door, cursing loudly. Beth darted between people and hurried up the escalators. She headed for the terminal trains and boarded one immediately. Everywhere was crowded. Beth removed her brown wig, and turned her coat inside out. By the time she got to central London her hair was short, covered by a black baseball cap, and her coat was a dark shade of blue - the other side was red. She had lost her bags, but all her documents were on her.



Jim was far from amused but most wouldn't be able to tell. He was always civil and smiled easily. He talked slowly and was a good listener. Beth watched his fingers tighten on the top of the chair, his knuckles turning white. Beth told herself to be patient. Jim was not someone you disturbed, especially when he was talking to customers. The art shop looked the same as it had done all those years ago. A flourishing enterprise in a neglected part of the bustling city.

Jim finally showed his customer out the door. A sale well made. He shut and locked the door, and turned the sign to closed, before drawing down the blind. Jim's clipped black beard had started to whiten. Beth felt he had aged well and told him as much. His deep set eyes belied the journey he had been

on. He took off his blue jacket and placed it on the back of a chair. He indicated for Beth to take a seat and dragged another from behind the counter. He sat opposite her and lit a cigarette.

'I'd offer you a drink, but you won't be staying long enough,' he said.

'I need to stay here a couple of days. Ames is on my tail.'

Jim stared at her. When they first met at university, Jim had the exact same demeanour, nothing unsettled him, he always had a calm exterior. People assumed something was happening inside him, but if you knew him long enough you often felt otherwise. 'You shouldn't have come back Beth. Some things should be left unfinished. I was the one who taught you that.'

'Is that a yes?' Beth asked.

Jim stubbed out his cigarette.

Later that evening the two ate a light supper in the apartment above the art store. Jim was monitoring Ames through his network using an online forum.

'Which one is it now?' asked Beth.

Jim always used different forums - dog walkers, florists and musicians were just some of them.

'This is the city discovers forum, it's the best for something like this. Ames is hard to track. He has more experience than even me.'

When Jim and Beth first became a couple, their friends assumed they would be together for life. Beth felt they would have been, if not for Jim's inability to demonstrate even a little affection and concern. He didn't seem to know what it was and could not be bothered to mimic what others were doing. Beth didn't mind at first, she wasn't particularly affectionate either, but things changed when she realised she was pregnant. When that happened, Beth needed and wanted Jim to be more than he was. She discovered she wanted more from what they had too. When Jim found out about the pregnancy he said, 'That's good. Mothers are seldom stopped or suspected of anything. We could cast the net wider.' Beth had a miscarriage that same evening and left Jim the next day. She was broken and her core had shifted. They had been together for over 7 years. His statement, although in keeping with his demeanour and outlook, had shocked her nonetheless. She had loved even without any display of it, but he clearly hadn't had he? She knew she would never return to her previous self or need, so she immediately started up her own network which led to one of the biggest corporate espionage cases in the country. After that she was in high demand and travelled widely while Jim continued making a decent living through his own network. Their paths never crossed although it was Beth's network that made more gains. She had become an accomplished operative and commercial spy, better than Jim in many ways. Perhaps even colder. It was rare these days for Beth to demonstrate any kind of concern or emotion herself. She lived without hope or regret. At least that's what she told herself. She watched Jim working at his computer while chewing the last of his food. It was how it always was. He rarely spoke at dinner when they were together, always preoccupied with his work. It never bothered her when they were together, but now she was irritated and felt a pang or hurt and anger at the lack of attention.

Beth stood up and cleared the plates. 'Will you take care of Ames? Only I don't think I can. He's too close.'

Jim shut the computer and walked over to her. He drew her to him and kissed her gently, then harder.

'The law of returns Beth. Just remember that,' he said.

'I have money. I can pay you,' she said.

He held her at arms length and took her in. She was still his Beth. It was how he felt. There was never anyone of significance after her. There was something always missing since she had left. He hated to admit it but he now realised he didn't want her money or for her to work for him again. When he kissed her, he felt that he had just wanted her back with him. He shuddered at the realisation, the sheer stupidity of it, and the inexplicable feeling that it was what he needed. It was something he hadn't allowed himself to feel when they were together or when she left. He nodded. He knew he would need to handle Ames himself, or he would never get her to stay. She would keep running. Ames was not only dangerous, he was unrelenting and a force no one wanted to get in the middle of. But he would do this. Jim kissed Beth again.

'If I do this you'll stay?' he asked. His voice quiet and low. There was an imperceptible tremble.

Beth nodded and sat down. A pain which started in her chest had spread throughout her body. She tried not to shake.

'Then, you go to bed,' he said. 'I have work to do.'



Two weeks later the police found the remains of Ames' body in the basement of a multi-storey carpark. It took them over two years to identify him and another three to name the person found next to him - Jim Mitchells, art shop owner.



PAUSE



‘Do you think you’ll finish that today? Only it’s after 6 and you are still here,’ said Sally, grabbing her purse and shrugging on her coat. She untucked her collar and waved, trying to get Rex’s attention.

‘Huh?’ Rex looked up from his screen. His eyes were blood-shot. Sally handed him some eye drops. ‘Here. Don’t stay too late. You are making the rest of us look bad. See you tomorrow!’

Rex turned back to his screen then drained the rest of his coffee. He had been texting Lydia who he had matched on a dating app. They had texted feverishly all weekend before Lydia stopped replying. After a week of silence, this morning Rex heard from her and he had spent the day messaging her. He had barely looked up from his screen.

Rex: Are you still there? They have left. I have the place to myself.

Rex stretched his arms up and scanned the office just to make sure.

Lydia: The paragraph?

Rex: I let him know! He said cheers for letting him know!

Lydia: No, Rex. He knows that already. I want you to tell him that his article is missing a comma in paragraph three line four, fifth word along.

Rex: Oh?

Lydia: Eyeroll emoji

Rex: I mean noticing a missing comma ... that is some crazy good grammar. It's a comma-n mistake.

Minutes go by, causing Rex to get anxious. Like others, constant ghosting has rendered him unable to trust that a response will be received. So these days he's always twitchy when texting a new person or even an old friend.

Rex: Are you there? Lydia? Are you there?

Rex got up and made himself a coffee. Checking his screen all the while. He decided to stop using his computer, and just use his phone now the others have gone. He checked his photos and looked at the picture Lydia had uploaded to the dating site. He sighed. He had saved it and still liked the look of her. His phone pinged causing him to feel a flutter inside.

Lydia: Are you still on the dating app?

Rex: I am. Why?

Lydia: Just wondered.

Rex: Wait? Did you remove me from your matches? Haha I just went to check and can't see you. Found someone?

Rex: Lydia? Are you there?

Lydia: I deleted my account because Gareth wouldn't respond to me.

Rex: I have no idea who Gareth is. Did you start speaking to him after me? Is that why you went silent after Sunday?

Lydia: Whatever, I have a new profile now. The dating app is nightmarish. But I am addicted. I also get all my music recommendations from the different profiles.

Rex felt hurt hearing that Lydia had been that concerned enough about someone called Gareth to delete her profile. He decided to take a break. He didn't like that Lydia could make him feel. He had just wanted to get laid, not get drawn into her orbit.

Rex: Eyeroll emoji I need to head out will catch up with you later.

Rex got home, checking his phone for a message from Lydia. There was no response. Perhaps he shouldn't have used the eyeroll emoji he thought. He wanted to send her a text but resisted. He was due to meet friends tonight and should be thinking of that instead. Three hours later his phone pinged. It made him smile automatically and he felt a rush as soon as he saw it was Lydia.

Lydia: Do you get free trips working for your company?

Rex: Nah I don't unfortunately.

Lydia: A security guard at the local burger joint says they don't get freebies either ... so don't feel bad.

Rex: Haha! Not many businesses do give away freebies!

Lydia: A barista on the dating app says he gets everything free ... that said he expected me to buy a pizza and trek over to his ... cheapo.

Rex: Haha Well you gotta have your booty call show up with pizza.

Rex: Post sex snack, always required haha Lydia: I think a bag of chips would have sufficed after an experience with him.

Rex: Haha

Rex: A snack-attack box haha

Lydia: Hahaha

Lydia: How long have you been on the dating app? Is it common to get asked about threesomes?

Rex: Haha. Not for me. But pretty common for ladies tbh.

Lydia: lay - dees. Hate that word!

Rex: You should have threesomes!

Lydia: You first. I get bored easily ... tiring dealing with one person, never mind two!

Rex: Bored easily ... during sex? I mean the convo after, sure, ... but during? That's like the 12 seconds I'm most actively engaged haha.

Lydia: Haha - you lie! You don't take 12 seconds.

Rex: Shut up! I have definitely lasted that long before.

Tbf ... most guys like a good sex story.

Same as most guys want nudes.

Or n00dz.

Lydia: I bet you get laid all the time. You are probably getting laid now.

Rex: I'm at a gig. Haha

I'm a slut, I'll give you that! But I'm going through a dry spell.

Lydia: Well, try making a move tonight. People want sex to confirm their 'immortality' when times are tough and they are afraid.

Rex: Oh. I'm immortal until proven otherwise.

Lydia: Are you getting ready for what is to come?

Rex: What?

Lydia: Are they handing out masks where you are?

Rex: What?? No!!!

Lydia: Eyeroll emoji

Well I've written my paper. It's done. 'The use of online dating apps to facilitate wellbeing during isolation.' Kiss emoji Wave emoji Rex: Hey Lydia? The porn companies have added extra servers for the upcoming quarantine.

Rex: Also why everyone needs toilet paper I assume. Haha I was wondering if we could meet. It's been fun talking. How about next week?

Rex: Lydia? You there? Lydia?



INTERLUDE



Ben and Cara are arguing by text.

Ben: Give that back to me, do you hear.

Cara: Forget it. Finders keepers. I have what you need and you will never get hold of it. Ever! I hate you so much I'm going to keep it, store it, hide it and even destroy it rather than letting you have it. And guess what? I don't even like it! I don't even want it! Hahahahaha Ben: You are a complete psycho. You know that?

Cara: Whatever!

Ben: You really are. Every single time you do the same thing. Just give it back.

Cara: Never!

Ben: Psycho!

Cara: Loser!

Ben: I still love you.

Cara: I hate you. I hate you so much I could kiss you.

Ben: Be home in 10.



LINES IN DUST



‘Fuck off, yeah? Just fuck off. I can’t be bothered with this today. How many more times? I just told you this last night. No more clueless fucks. I won’t see them. I won’t. Just turf them out.’

Justin Clark cleared his throat. ‘I understand. Believe me I do.’

‘No you fucking don’t. You have no clue. What? You went through the same thing 20 years ago? Fuck you! You think it’s the same now? What the fuck do you know about my life? I’m not you. I won’t settle for this crap. I don’t need to. Why do you anyway? Huh? What the fuck is wrong with you?’

‘Have a seat,’ said Justin.

‘No I fucking won’t have a seat. Fuck you and your lies. I want what you promised. All of it. Or I walk. I leave today and there is fuck all you can do. Because why Justin? Huh? Because there are three people here today - there are supposed to be twelve. You think you can manage without me? Huh? Give me what I want.’

Justin stood up and stared out the window. It was 7 in the morning. He hated the town, the dark mornings and the crappy moods because people only smile in this city when the sun is shining. He hated his job, his life and

how he looked. Even after the plastic surgery and hair plugs, he was still finding it hard to date. Sure there would always be a queue of people wanting to be with him, but that was only because of his job. They didn't care about him. He wanted love. For someone to truly see him for who he was. He knew it was naive, but he didn't care. He really didn't. This town was a wasteland, full of tragedy, empty eyes and angry minds. It had taken him 3 months to recruit this joker and now he was threatening him. Justin knew the guy was right, but there was nothing he could do. Or was there?

'Chris, isn't it?' said Justin.

'Fuck you Justin. You know my name.'

'Yeah. Just don't know how to get you to settle and sit down so we can talk,' said Justin, picking up the phone and asking for coffee, which was swiftly delivered by a harassed looking pale young man. 'I can't keep them quiet and the phones won't stop ringing and I don't know what to do. I need help or I am going home.'

Justin looked at his young assistant and sighed. 'I'll be out in a minute Nick.'

The man glared at him and slammed the door real hard as he left.

'Tell you what, let's do it your way today. Okay? Just turf out whoever you want and see whoever you feel like. Mark it down anyway you want in the logs. Then we'll assess later today.'

Chris looked genuinely surprised. He sat down slowly and sipped his coffee. 'Well, yeah. Yeah Justin. I ... I can't believe you agreed. Well fuck! You do have balls after all. It may work, you never know. We could probably leave at a decent time today.' Chris sank back in his chair and sighed. It was the first time that Justin had seen him look unclenched. The

muscles around his face went slack and he actually looked approachable. 'I'm glad Justin. Because we are all against the wall and this can't continue. That's not what any of us signed up for.'

'I know. I've got your back if anyone says anything and I'll make sure the others do the same thing. If anything happens we'll all go down and we'll all walk. I doubt any of us will find it difficult to find something else.'

'Agreed.' Justin downed the rest of his coffee, threw the cup behind him and it landed next to the bin. It didn't matter. The place was a mess and no one could be bothered. Even a little bit of bad behaviour made them feel better. They needed to take out their unhappiness and frustration somehow. Taking it out on the rubbish made more sense than laying into each other.

'I'll see you later. We'll catch up at the end of the day. I'll speak to the others now.'

Chris came up to Justin and gave him a hug. He looked tearful. 'Thanks.'

It was just after 2pm when the shit hit the fan. The project managers had arrived in full force with their programme managers and executive managers. The department was knee deep in managers and their laptops. 'Oh fuck this! I'm not hanging around for this. You don't pay me enough.' Nick, the assistant, switched off his computer and waved a bye-bye to Justin.

'Well, what do we have here? What's the problem now?,' asked Chris. 'You leave Justin alone or we'll all walk now. As in today. As in right this minute.'

The most senior looking manager, stepped forward with his laptop. 'Remember me? I'm Gary Simmons, Executive for your area. We had a

meeting scheduled with your team this morning and none of you showed up. Now you've wasted my time. I have had to walk all the way from my office. Everyone is busy. What makes you special? We need to go through the expenses and the metrics. The report has to be delivered tomorrow. That's the deadline. It can't be moved. Do you understand? This place looks a mess. You can't walk, you have a contract with us. And from what I can see you have violated several of our requirements. So let's find a meeting room, and hash this out.' He waved behind him, 'This is my power team. They'll get you in shape so you can focus on deliverables. Are we clear? Or do I need to do a capacity audit?'

Chris went bright red. He lunged for Gary, but Justin stepped in, catching him.

'Oh, come on! I'm not putting up with this behaviour,' said Gary, straightening his jacket. 'You lot are all the same. Whining about one thing or another and getting in my face. I'm doing my job, are you?'

Chris let out a loud growl and leapt forward again. This time it took two more people to hold him back.

'You don't calm down and I'll report you, there'll be an investigation,' said a member of Gary's power team. She looked like she meant it and had already started typing up a report .

Justin held onto Chris and told him to take a few moments to himself. He instructed the rest of the team to do the same. 'I'll take care of this,' he said.

'Well, I wanted the whole team present, but I guess it'll have to do,' said Gary.

Justin went to get coffee for everyone after showing them to the large meeting room. He apologised for the mess and left them to their laptops and mobile devices. In the kitchen he found Nick.

‘Thought you left.’

‘Didn’t want to let you all down. But didn’t want to hang around them either.’

Justin nodded.

‘I can do the coffees.’

‘No, that’s alright Nick. Why don’t you go to the break room and help the others. I know Chris could do with some support with his documents. You good with that?’

‘Yeah, no problem.’ Nick patted Justin on his shoulder.

Justin was tired. He wanted a hug and maybe someone to lie next to when he got home. A kind word from a soft voice. He knew he wouldn’t get that anytime soon if he stayed here. He sighed and checked his phone - no responses to his personal ad. He would need to improve it. Maybe he’d ask Nick for some pointers. Get a young man to glance over his ad, perhaps it was too long or maybe none of the pictures fit right. He became distracted thinking of how to get more appealing photos uploaded by the end of the day.

Gary Simmons was tapping on his keyboard. His power team of six sat around him, all engrossed in their screens. They didn’t seem particularly happy to see the coffee in chipped mugs. Justin left it for them to help themselves if they wanted. ‘So where are we?’ he asked.

One of the young women, dressed in a blue suit said ‘There are eight unfilled vacancies in your team. We are working hard on promoting this as the place to work for up and coming people in the field.’ She flashed him a broad smile. Justin wondered if he would ever consider dating a project manager. Then he thought better of it.

‘Is there anything else?’ he asked.

‘Well, we need to talk about some wellbeing initiatives for all of you. Make sure we build your resilience,’ said Gary, without a hint of irony. ‘We’re bringing in an experienced therapist so you can all have one to ones and learn some self-care. Perhaps Chris should go first.’ Gary chuckled.

‘Okay,’ said Justin. ‘Anything else?’

Gary indicated to a young blonde man next to him.

‘Well, as you know, your department has not met any of your targets. So we need to brain storm and come up with solutions. Let’s focus on that, not problems. We’ll make sure we talk to the whole team - including all your support workers. I’ll set up a poll so you can find a good meeting date. Then we’ll get a workshop going so we can look at where the inefficiencies are and what we can do better without compromising quality.’

‘Okay,’ said Justin, ‘Anything else?’

A middle-aged woman with dyed brown hair and frizzy tips closed her laptop. She looked at him and smiled with fake sympathy. Justin hated that. ‘Now Justin, you need to remember we are here to support you, okay? Work with us, not against us. We are only trying to make improvements that will

help you, your team and the customers. We are not the enemy Justin,' she said, putting her hand on her heart and smiling some more.

'Okay,' said Justin, 'Anything else?'

The woman wasn't giving up. 'But you see, that's what we mean Justin. That's all you've said for the last hour. You haven't asked questions. You just haven't engaged with us. How can we work together if you don't tell us what you need? You are important to this organisation. We value all our employees. We want to make things better. We know things haven't always been good. But we are trying here. Meet us half-way eh?' She smiled at him like he was a pathetic sulking child.

'Okay,' said Justin, 'Anything else?'

'I think we are done here,' said Gary. 'We'll get dates to you and this time we expect the team to attend. If they don't you will all have an automatic warning on your records and you will be reported for insubordination. All of you will see the therapist and will attend the workshop. You will also make sure Suzette has all the information she needs.' Startled, Justin looked sharply at the woman with frizzy hair who was still smiling. This was Suzette. The infamous executive who had worked in the organisation for over 20 years and destroyed staff morale like it was going out of fashion. He always wondered what she looked like. He couldn't believe she had actually left her glass tower. Wow, his team must really be in trouble he thought. They would never have brought the harbinger of death with them if this was just a routine conversation. Suzette was still smiling. Justin knew it was too late. His team would be sacked by the end of the week. This was just a tick box exercise to say they had tried to be reasonable with the team and had no choice but to sack everyone, shut the department. As always it would be someone else's fault, but definitely not management. Justin could take it no longer.

‘Suzette, tell you what, how about you and your team send us a date for everyone to get together for tomorrow. My team and I will come to you and meet with all of you with facts, figures and additional information.’

Suzette looked at him. Was there a flash of confusion on her face? He couldn’t tell. ‘Look we like our jobs. We want to do better. Obviously things have been difficult ...’ said Justin. He knew if he laid it on any thicker he would throw up or at the very least slam Gary’s head on the table and kick Suzette off her high chair.

‘Well, that’s more like it!’ beamed Suzette at Gary. Justin realised that it was Gary who had been undermined. He had been charged with getting something done, and it had only happened when the high and mighty herself had come. Justin knew Gary was smarting. He had shrunk by at least a foot. Justin tried to keep his face expressionless. He stood up.

‘If there isn’t anything else, I’ll get back to work. Thank you all for coming to see me and I look forward to our meeting tomorrow. I’ll get Nick to finalise details.’

Suzette was still beaming. ‘Wonderful!’

It wasn’t difficult to get the rest of the team to support him with the idea. But what Justin didn’t realise was that teams from other areas wanted to support him too. It was Chris who spread the word to see if there were others who would like a part in the meeting. At 9pm that night, all team leads in the organisation had signed up to support Justin. It was incredible and frightening at the same time. When Justin went home that night he felt both elated and disconnected. How did it come to this? Thirty years ago he was filled with hope and enthusiasm. Was it wrong to want to make things better for everyone? Even if he was naive about what he could accomplish in his career, wasn’t it still important to have believed he could, and to have

at least tried? If he had just accepted things as they were, what would have been the point of working at all?

The next morning Justin and Chris made their way to Suzette's office. They went alone, knowing that the others had their back. People nodded to them on their way there, some gave the thumbs up, others clapped. Suzette's office was in a five story brick building with ornate windows and a large wooden staircase. All the managers and executives were located in this building, separate from the rest of the employees. Suzette and two other people were already in her office. It was small, with just a meeting table and a computer. There were no pictures on the wall or anything you would expect to see in a traditional office. Justin double-checked the name on the door - her name was on it.

Suzette indicated for the two of them to sit. One thing about Suzette was that she would tell you to your face if she had something to say. This was unlike the other executives who would send a messenger instead. And why was this the case? What made Suzette braver than the others, able to withstand the cries, pleas and rages that could emanate from disgruntled employees. Well, who knew?

'I'm glad you are here,' said Suzette. 'I understand the rest of the team is busy holding down the fort, but this is a start isn't it?'

Justin nodded and looked at Chris.

'So let's start shall we? This is Jason and Steph. They work for me with more complex organisational issues. They'll be supporting me so I can help you. Okay?'

'Yes, well, we are actually representing all department leads,' said Chris.

‘Oh? Are you?’

‘Yes. We have their agreement to negotiate on their behalf so we can improve things around here once and for all. It’s all above board. Everyone agrees things need to change for the sake of the organisation,’ said Justin.

‘Of course,’ said Suzette. ‘And what is it that you think you want?’

‘We would like to run our own teams and make sure we provide the service we need to. We need you to free up capital held up by PR so we can recruit more people quickly. We can’t stand around and watch as more of our colleagues collapse under the pressure. I think you’ll find that we have come up with a workable plan to make sure we get things back on track and really help everyone ... reduce the frustration you know?’ said Justin. He opened up his portfolio and handed out typed up documents. ‘We have used an idea that is already in place in similar organisations? It is working for them. It’s more people-focussed.’

‘I see,’ said Suzette.

‘Do you want some time to look over it?’ asked Justin. He didn’t think she could possibly disagree with trying the plan. He wasn’t asking her and her team to leave, just for them to stop putting stumbling blocks and red tape in the way. Just let him and the others do their jobs. He just knew that if this plan was put in place it would solve a lot of problems. And, it would cost less. Justin and Chris had spent all night working on the costs, facts and figures. He looked expectantly at Suzette.’

‘So you have the support of all the team leads do you? asked Suzette, closing the portfolio.

‘Yes,’ said Chris. ‘They’ll stand by us. Let’s just try this.’

Suzette smiled and leaned forward. She clasped her hands together. Jason and Steph stood up quickly and hit both Chris and Justin over the head. Suzette watched and smiled. They fell to the floor. The room went silent.

‘There’ll be a promotion for the two of you. Make sure PR get the message out - their usual. Just so everyone knows what not to do around here. They need to be reminded who is in charge.’

‘They should have more respect. Talking to us like we are stupid,’ said Jason.

‘How do you make money when things run efficiently? There would be no contracts, no improvement consultants, nothing. Zero. Fucking idiots,’ said Steph.

‘Now. You know I don’t like that kind of language,’ said Suzette. ‘Not in my office, do you understand? We have standards.’

Jason nodded.

‘There won’t be any more problems with meeting attendances for a while. When I ask people to attend my meetings I expect them to.’



UNDER GLASS



The room is always cool and freshly vacuumed. Jugs of water, cups, pens and notepads are elegantly arranged on the smooth oak table. Hannah doesn't have to do much. Just sit in a corner, head down, taking notes. It has been this way for three decades. She still wears the same outfit. Black skirt, black polished flats, a white blouse and a cropped black jacket. Her hair is pulled up in a tight bun. She stopped dyeing her hair five years ago so its white and grey. After all this time she is still not allowed to use an electronic device to take notes. Everything has to be handwritten for Tracey. Most meetings have about 30 people and Hannah is known for her accuracy, speed and efficiency.

At first she hoped her excellence would help her to move up and progress, get more opportunities, but instead she'd been turned down for promotions because people just thought she was an excellent note-taker and no one wanted her doing anything else. Thirty years of covering four meetings a day, six days a week and typing up the notes and distributing them. She knew everything there was to know about the company. A couple of times she had to travel with an executive to take notes at a meeting in another country. When Tracey heard about it she put a stop to it.

This morning when Hannah woke, showered and dressed, for the first time she didn't want to wear her silver and amber unity pin. On her first day of work at the company, Tracey and Hannah got the pins together,

promising to look out for each other - the new recruits fresh out of secretarial school.

As the years went by, the long evenings over drinks outside of work talking about ideas to get ahead were used by Tracey to rise up through the ranks. Tracey made Hannah her secretary promising that when she reached the next rung she'd pull her up too. She always flashed her toothy smile, pointed to her pin and said 'unity sister'. As Tracey's department grew, it was only men she promoted and Hannah remained her secretary. She said Hannah wasn't ready yet but that soon she would run the department with her. Hannah just had to trust her and wait. For a long while Hannah was grateful that Tracey was looking out for her. She would do Tracey's research, write her reports, develop strategy and contact clients with new ideas and Tracey would give Hannah gifts like scarfs, notebooks and chocolate. Sometimes Hannah would be allowed to leave early. Tracey would grin and say 'Shh, we won't tell anyone.' But when it came to pay increments and progression, Tracey was always evasive and blamed the directors for holding everything back or something else. There was always something or someone getting in the way. It was only much later that Hannah realised Tracey had been passing her work off as her own, telling senior staff that Hannah was an excellent organiser and secretary, but too timid and lacking in confidence to do anything else. By the time Hannah realised, it was too late she was stuck, a woman in her early 50s with no experience to speak of. She wasn't offered any other jobs and she wasn't even considered for other secretarial posts. No one wanted to take a chance on her, and no one wanted an older woman in their office. Tracey realised and made a big show in meetings of thanking her former friend for her work. While others received actual thanks by being given bonuses or pay rises or additional responsibilities and new job titles.

Hannah sat staring at the pin in her hand. Habit made her put it in her lapel as always. She slipped her gloves on and made for the bus. Tracey sent her a text reminding her not to be late. It was ritual. Hannah had never been late once in her 30 years at the company.

Hannah sat on the top deck of the cross town bus and looked out the window. She always left on the dot of 6:30 am to leave ample time for delays. She would spend the journey sitting quietly at the back counting the glass beads on her long necklace. Suddenly, the bus slammed to a halt and she slipped forward in her seat, banging her knees on the one to the front. Hannah had dosed off which was very unusual. She worriedly checked her watch then the name of the stop, relieved that she hadn't missed her drop off point. She settled back and continued counting her beads.

At the next stop a young woman got on and slumped into the seat next to Hannah. She sipped her iced coffee through a straw and bobbed her head to music. She looked me over at Hannah and stared at her pin. Slipping her cherry headphones off she asked 'May I have a look at your pin? It's lovely.'

Hannah smiled, took off the pin and handed it to her. She pointed to the symbol of the woman inlaid into amber. "it's very delicate, but beautiful don't you think?'

The young girl uncapped the end of the pin and with one swift move pierced her thumb. She handed the pin to Hannah and smiled 'Now you'. Her green eyes were wide without a trace of malice. As if in a trance, Hannah did the same. The girl pressed her thumb against Hannah's and said 'There, we stand together'. Hannah flinched and pulled her hand away. Noticing her stunned look, the girl smiled and said 'here', gently put the pin back on the lapel. She slipped her headphones back over her long blonde hair and ran down the stairs of the double decker bus. Hannah gathered her bag hurriedly hoping to catch up to her but by the time she got off the bus the girl was nowhere in sight. She ran the rest of the way to work making it in time to brew Tracey's coffee, type up her handwritten messages and print out papers for her meeting.

Almost ready for the day, Hannah straightened her jacket and went to the restroom hoping to tidy up her hair, gather herself and splash some water on her face. She nodded to the two other people in the restroom. They didn't acknowledge her. It could be that way sometimes, Hannah thought. PAs getting in a bad mood after being reprimanded or spoken down to. But she was still surprised. She knew them both by name and they had all gone out for drinks after work a couple of times. She knew she didn't have time to dwell on it now, however as the meeting was about to start. She quickly opened her cosmetic bag and looked in the mirror. A youthful woman in her early 20s stared back at her. With raven hair coming loose from her bun and her face was flushed. Her big brown eyes sparkled and her skin was smooth. Hannah felt a chill run through her. She stepped away from the mirror, confused and afraid. She spun round to face the long mirror next to the sink and mouthed her name. Was that her in the mirror? Her clothes still fitted her but her lips were fresh looking and dewy. She looked exactly like she did on her first day at the company. She touched the surface of the mirror, now noticing a smooth blemish free hands. Her phone alarm went off giving her a start. She quickly grabbed my things and rushed out the door.



Tracey stepped out of her car with a flourish. Her new hand-made dress fitted her just right. She was happy they had given her the parking spot so close to the building. It would only be a question of days before she would be put in charge of main operations. Hannah had done an amazing piece of work on a plan to expand operations 5 years ago when Tracey had said if she did the work she would definitely be considered for a promotion. She smiled, pleased that she would be able to get rid of Hannah soon. In her new position, she would need a more vibrant, youthful PA and Glenn in accounting was just the person for the job. She'd parcel Hannah off to one of the satellite companies across the city. The commute would be longer of

course. She looked up at the towering steel building and smiled, smoothing down her the front of her dress.

‘Hey’ came a voice from behind her, ‘Yeah, you.’

Tracey turned to see a young blonde woman wearing high tops and a short tight blue dress. She had a pair of cherry headphones round her neck and she was chewing gum loudly. ‘Go away,’ said Tracey.

The girl laughed, her green eyes widening. She pointed at the pin on Tracey’s jacket. ‘Give me that,’ she said. Tracey rolled her eyes and started for the main entrance. The girl spun her round by the arm and yanked the pin off, tearing the fine wool fabric of the dress. ‘Not for you,’ she said. Tracey reached to slap the girl, then shrank back. For a moment she thought she was staring into Hannah’s face, she recognised something in the eyes. She shook her head, feeling dizzy, trying to rouse herself. When she woke, the girl was gone and she was lying on the ground. People were standing over her peering and asking if she needed help. She looked frail and tiny and was mumbling ‘Hannah that bitch’ over and over. Security had called an ambulance but Tracey was already getting fainter. Hannah knelt down and stared into the eyes of the woman. Then jumped back in recognition. The old woman gave a final rage filled yell ‘Hannah’ before falling silent. She spun on her supple feet and walked away looking forward to starting anew.

TOGETHER



Ever since Joe woke that morning he had an ominous foreboding. The night before he had sat on his usual stool at his local bar and knocked back shot after shot. Low and alone, he stumbled home, narrowly missing a pothole in the middle of the side walk. He fell into bed and dreamed the dream. The one he had been having for over a year. Under clear skies, he was in a white room, filled with white people of all shapes and sizes. Tall, thin, short, some distorted and others in perfect proportion. They were all looking at him, eagerly waiting for him to make a move. Dressed in all white scrubs, they watched as he moved towards someone on an operating table. The overhead lights were suspended high up into the blue sky. Joe held a red scalpel. He was dressed in all white. He woke with a cry. It always ended just there. Rubbing his forehead, he tried to picture the person who was lying on the table, but frustratingly could not.

Two hours later, he stepped into his office wearing white chinos and a light blue shirt. His dark, thick brown hair tied back in a pony tail. People he passed, paused momentarily to wish him good morning, some handed him documents, others had papers for him to sign. Suddenly the sense of foreboding gripped his body, causing him to reel back. He lost his balance momentarily, excused himself and walked slowly towards the break room.



Being gay wasn't something one broadcast in this workplace, but that didn't deter Joe. The moment he joined the team, he told everyone he was gay and that he would not tolerate abuse or discrimination of any kind. He remembered that day. There were at least a handful of people who sighed with relief and smiled. That one gesture of his led to five other colleagues coming out that month. Now it was part of the fabric, to talk about weekend plans, dates, loved ones and partners without prejudgement.

The break room was brightly lit and Adam was standing in a corner, leaning against the window, reading by the morning light. His copper skin shone, his dark hair clipped close – he looked like a work of art. The muscles in his arm tensed as he turned the pages of a magazine. Joe gasped when he saw him. It was Adam. It was Adam in his dream. He was the one on the operating table.

Adam closed his magazine, turned towards Joe and smiled, 'Hello. Still here then?'

Joe hated when Adam did that, speak to him that is. Now they were no longer together it hurt to hear his warm voice. It was more than that. Seeing Adam made him remember what it was like to hold him, to need him, to breathe him in.

'What are you doing here?' asked Joe, trying to sound casual.

'I have been called to sit in on a meeting – don't worry, I won't misbehave,' Adam winked.

Joe cleared his throat. Was it only a year ago when they were making plans for their engagement? How had he not seen it coming? Time froze for Joe when Adam left. A year seemed like a day. Being in the same room as Adam felt like it was just yesterday when he held him and begged him not

to leave. Adam had called it off. Joe was heartbroken. He just knew Adam was the one for him and even if you asked him now, he would say the same thing. He had love, intimacy, passion and fun with an equal – Adam. He cherished him and every moment they had spent together, Joe grew stronger and wiser, and felt safer. Adam in contrast felt trapped. That's what he had said at the time.

Joe grabbed a bottle of water. He gulped back a tear. 'I'll erm ... leave you to the meeting,' he said softly.

'Joe, don't go yet, eh? Let's catch up later? I really need to talk to you.'

Joe looked down and shook his head. He couldn't look Adam in his face. He didn't want him seeing his pain. Not again. He left the room, walking swiftly to his office. Adam kept calling out to him. He slammed the door to his office and sat down, burying himself in his work. He heard Adam knock on the door but he ignored him.

By three that afternoon Joe had waded through the obligatory paperwork, the sense of foreboding and ache from seeing his ex-partner kept at bay. He took slow deep breaths, closed his eyes and wondered if he was in fact having a panic attack. The anxiety and unhappiness of the past year catching up on him perhaps? He had immersed himself in work, the long hours burying all the pain which was now surfacing.



Adam waited in the staff lounge. He wasn't leaving until he spoke to Joe. He scrolled through the images of them on his phone. Loud voices in the corridor startled him. 'Oh my God you are still here! Thank God. We

need you.’ Adam followed them, entering Joe’s room. He was lying on the floor. Adam held him, ‘I’m here Joe.’



The operating theatre was brightly lit. ‘Adam, are you sure you are going to be able to do this? We can wait. One of the others is on their way in.’ Adam shook his head. The nurse swabbed his forehead. Adam looked down at Joe. ‘Ten blade.’



When Joe woke, Adam was lying next to him reading.

‘Hey! Look at you?’ Adam smiled.

Joe tried to speak. Adam shushed him. ‘Later. You rest.’

After a while Adam sighed. ‘This can’t wait. Look, Joe, I didn’t come for a meeting. I came for you,’ he said presenting a ring. Joe smiled. He was happy and in pain. But he knew he would heal.

Adam kissed him. 'You get some rest. By the way, I have been having the oddest dream ...'



HOME



The day I said ‘No’ I sat down and didn’t move. I felt guilty about letting Melanie down, but I couldn’t take another step, I really couldn’t. Something deep inside me snapped and I longed for release. I was exhausted and didn’t know who I was any longer or what I was meant to be. Melanie was understandably upset and tried to coax me, but my body didn’t respond. The thought of waiting patiently at another pelican crossing or watching for cars or boarding a bus made me feel sick. I threw up when the agent got to us. It was two o’clock in the afternoon in front of the city library.

I was assessed by three people. They checked everything thoroughly. I was in and out of consciousness for almost a week.

‘I am sorry Melanie, but this does happen sometimes. Some are just not suitable for this job. The stress can get to some. We must consider your safety,’ said Dr. Langdon.

‘But he was doing so well,’ said Melanie.

‘He will be retired now and he will go to a good home. We will make sure of that,’ Dr.Langdon smiled at me reassuringly.

I heard the word 'retired' and my body loosened. The sun looked bright again and I could breathe. My paws felt less heavy. I just wanted to rest. I didn't want to have to worry all the time. I barked loudly and freely. I sniffed everything I wanted to and I rolled in the grass. I was three years old.

Evie and Brice adopted me. I moved from a busy city. There were fewer cars and lots of trees now. I travelled silently in their red pick up truck. They had already bought me a bed and a throw. Evie spoke kindly and smiled warmly. Brice complained about how much they paid for me. My new home was down a small dirt track. It was white, with a porch, a sun room and a huge field to the rear. There was lots of space. I had been living in a one bedroom flat and didn't know there were places like this one. My first week was a dream. I could go out when I wanted and spend as much time as I liked in the garden. There were lots of colourful plants, squirrels and birds. I slept in a room by the kitchen and sometimes in Evie's study at her feet. She liked me being close to her and took me everywhere she went. Evie was kind and introduced me to her neighbours and different parts of the small town. I didn't see Brice much and he never said anything to me. I didn't feel comfortable around him, he had a strange scent that made me fearful.

On Fridays I accompanied Evie to visit her mum in hospital. The nurse said, 'ever since you started bringing Kurt to visit, your mum has improved in leaps and bounds! You must bring him to the children's wing sometime Evie.'

Within a week her mother was discharged and came to live in the house with us. I liked Maggie straight away. She spent most days in the sunroom reading and telling me stories. She brushed my coat and held me tightly. Everyday she whispered 'thank you for coming into my life Kurt.' In the afternoon Evie would walk with her in the field and I would go with them. Maggie had her own room downstairs, next to the study. She was too frail to use the stairs. I didn't go upstairs either. Brice was always there working on

his projects or arguing with Evie. He didn't want Maggie living with us and wanted her to leave.

This made Evie cry and plead with Brice to give Maggie some time to recover fully.

I'm quite sure Maggie was aware of how Brice felt. Sometimes I saw her crying softly and calling herself a burden. I did my best to comfort her and curled up close.

After three months the lady from the agency paid us a visit. She came to check that I was settling in and seemed pleased with what she saw. I was on my best behaviour. I never wanted to be away from the field or house and by now I loved Evie and Maggie dearly. I was grateful Brice wasn't there that day. He was in the city for the week completing a project. It was always different when he was away. Evie seemed happier and we laughed a lot more. We even stayed up late in the den watching old movies and eating popcorn; all three of us cuddled on the large sofa. I had begun to wish it could always be like this. I even heard Evie and Maggie say the same thing.

'Just divorce him dear. You and Kurt can come and live with me. I don't have much, but we will get by.'

'He won't let me leave mum. I've tried. You saw what happened last time. Since then he hasn't let me go back to work.'

'Has your arm healed completely, dear.'

Evie stroked her left elbow. 'It's worse when it is cold.'

'I'm surprised he let you get Kurt.'

‘After the incident someone at his golf club suggested he do something charitable. He wasn’t expecting to pay for Kurt, but by then it was too late. He had told everyone about the nice thing he was doing.’

‘Ah,’ said Maggie, giving me a treat, and stroking my ears.

‘Kurt has the most beautiful amber eyes I have seen. And so soulful too,’ smiled Evie. ‘I would never give him up for anything. Now that I’ve told Brice about Kurt’s visits to the children’s hospital, he’s backed off. That’s something else he can brag about.’

I snuggled closer to Evie, relieved that she wanted me around.

‘Well, I’ll do what I can to support you dear, but I’m not sure how much longer Brice will let me stay.’

I started to whine sadly. ‘Oh Kurt! I’ll always be with you in spirit dear,’ said Maggie.

The day Brice was due to return, Evie spent the morning cleaning the house and making sure everything was as he wanted. She had lists to get through and we went to the farmers market to get fresh supplies so she could cook his favourite meal. Maggie went to her room just before he was due to return and stayed there for the evening. I lay on her bed with her. I could hear Evie in the kitchen making the final preparations. She popped in just before dinner. She was wearing a short red dress with red heels. Her hair was tied loosely in a bun and she smelt of flowers. ‘My word Evie! I barely recognise you,’ said Maggie.

‘Brice sent me this yesterday. He wants me to wear it. Last time he was away it was a different outfit.’

Maggie looked concerned and clutched her sadly.

‘I’ll be okay mum,’ Evie said. She left us dinner and went to meet Brice.

‘I don’t know how this happened Kurt. I always told Evie she could be anything she wanted. True I didn’t have much, but I made sure she never went without. And she had a good education. You know she got a scholarship? She was studying law and so happy Kurt.’ Maggie looked towards the windows. She brushed my fur absently. I nudged her arm, trying to remind her to have some water. She understood.

‘And then she met Brice and I suppose he must have made quite an impression. I mean she’s speaking to me now, but when they first got together I never saw her. I was so worried Kurt. Then later she showed up married and she had dropped out of college.’

I could hear Evie talking on the phone. Brice was delayed. She would need to prepare his favourite dish again so it would be fresh for his arrival. He didn’t want it heated up. I could hear her clattering pans and dishes in the kitchen.

Maggie finished her dinner and took her photo album out of the bedside drawer. She talked to me about her family and how they struggled to make a living. A lot of people at the time were fearful about hiring foreigners and people like her were often accused of all manner of things and rarely treated fairly. That’s why she had worked so hard so Evie could stand on her own. ‘Perhaps I pushed her too hard,’ she said sadly. ‘I just wanted her to be able to look after herself.’

I wanted to reassure Maggie, but could only put my head on her lap and hope she drew some comfort from that. She was soon asleep.

Maggie was occupied in the kitchen. I wasted no time. I snuck out the house and moved swiftly down the lane. I followed the main road, running beside it among the trees. I came to the sharp bend in the road and waited. The temperature had dropped and it was cold. There was a slight wind. I was alert and focussed. A couple of cars turned slowly round the bend and that's when I saw the red pick up. I could recognise it anywhere. Just as it approached the bend, I ran to the middle of the road, stood still for a moment to make sure the headlights caught me. I heard the screech of brakes as I leapt to the side. As expected, Brice hadn't slowed down. Evie always told him to but he found it fun to turn sharply at bends throwing me and her violently against the doors. I watched the truck crash into the trees, the front crumpling like a tin can, Brice was hurled through the front window. I sat silent and still. It had started to rain. I looked up at the moon and released a low howl, then turned and made my way back home.



WAKING THE SILENCE



My wife left me three months ago. I signed the divorce papers in the morning and felt nauseous. My PA, Mara, came in and perched on the edge of the desk. She twisted the long curl to the side of her face. Her glassy-eyed stare was always fixed just above the eye line. She had this ability to be physically present and yet remain detached enough for you to feel you were alone.

'Can I get you lunch Stanley?' she asked. She looked bored and more tired than usual for a Monday. 'I don't mind. I have to go for the others anyway,' she said. She handed me a notepad and indicated for me to write, then crossed over to the large window which overlooked the city. We were on the 50th floor so it was quite a view, even with the late summer fog that clung to the air, a result of the traffic and fumes. I had been meaning to find her an office closer to mine. She was stuck in one of the cubicles in the inner corridor which faced a white wall and she was surrounded by people she had no business working with. I knew she had only taken the job because there was nothing else available. That was a year ago. I wondered why she hadn't moved on to something better suited to her impressive intellect. I guess I should have helped her, but was otherwise preoccupied. I wish I had now. She definitely looked worse for wear after a year at the firm.

'I don't want anything Mara. I'm not feeling right. I may just go for a walk,' I said looking over at her. 'Sure,' she said. She left, shutting the door

behind her.

I walked to my private restroom and splashed some water on my face. Straightening my tie I stared into the mirror. My thick hair had whitened considerably over the past year and my skin looked blotchy. The dry patches felt painful to the touch. My lips were cracked and my eyes were red and puffy. I still couldn't believe my marriage was over. Hadn't I fought hard enough to keep it going? Sure there were late nights in the office, but everyone faced that including me. Then there were my wife's occasional trysts on business trips. Again that was expected and routine right? I forgave Rachel all that. I never fussed over anything and I supported her as much as I could. I was grateful there were no children involved. I really didn't want to repeat the fiasco that was my parents marriage. Of course, it ended differently for them. When my mother left my father, he leapt out the window of his office, slamming into the sidewalk. I was 12 years at the time and had been waiting for him in his car. After that day I never saw my mother either. She left the country. What was the point of going over and over the past? It was something I had tried to block out and just forget. But it always resurfaced. I had been terrified that Rachel would leave and history would just repeat itself. Maybe that's why I kept forgiving her for everything and admonishing myself to do better, even after the start of her violent outbursts. Twenty years, gone. I peered into the mirror again. The scar across my left eyebrow was still there. The day she had struck me one too many times and I had tried to hold her arms at bay, only to be slashed with sharp tweezers. Such a small implement. The doctor had said it could have been worse. Rachel insisted she was fighting me off. I didn't want to show him the bruises on my back or some of my other scars. I forgave her and moved into the guest room. She seemed happier after that. We had loved each other once. I just kept telling myself that during the marriage. And now it was over, I didn't even know if I had ever loved her. Maybe I just didn't want to be alone.

When Mara returned with her lunch she came to my office again. She was the only person who never knocked. She placed a blue and white lunch

bag from Bens on my desk and an orange smoothie. She knew me well. I could never resist either. I thanked her and reached for my wallet.

‘It’s on me Stan,’ said Mara taking a seat at the conference table in the middle of my office. She unwrapped her veggie burger and settled in, flipping through a magazine.

I knew this was her way of being nice, but I really wanted to be alone. I joined her at the table anyway, sharing my salad pots. She nodded a thanks, and offered me some fries.

‘You need to eat. Divorce can really fuck you up. And your skin looks truly wasted. Not to mention the fact you have lost a lot ... and I mean a lot, of weight.’

‘I think that’s the most you have said to me all month.’

‘Just take some time, go on holiday, unwind. Get centred. Everyone has pain Stanley. You just need to get past it and say to yourself fuck everything I want my life to be good.’

‘Thanks.’ I wondered where all this had come from. Mara seldom said a word to me. She now seemed really unsettled and concerned.

She sipped her juice. ‘Look. All I mean is, just forgive yourself. Some things just don’t work out no matter what you do. You know?’

‘What’s with the sudden need to communicate?’

Mara shrugged. She cleared her food and shoved the magazine at me pointedly. I wanted to apologise, but she left before I could. I knew it was hard for her to speak up like that, especially to me. I should have been more

gracious. I sighed. At the back of the magazine there were some advertisements for meetings circled in red, most near the office. I threw the magazine in the waste bin and slumped back in my chair at the desk. She knew. Did others too? I started to cry.

I went through some of the urgent messages. The last one was from the board of directors. They had promoted me to VP. I called to confirm my acceptance and ask for them to move Mara into the office next to mine and give her a substantial pay rise. It was the least I could do. It really was. I could hear her loud shriek of delight from the corridor an hour later. But she didn't pop in to see me. I didn't see her for the rest of the day.

I left at just past 7pm. The traffic was heavy. The city was in perpetual rush hour. This had become the norm. I lived within walking distance of the office. It was the one concession Rachel made. At the time it felt like a big win for me. It was only later that I realised it made it easier for her to keep an eye on me and check on me at work when she wanted to. People at the office commented on how devoted she was. Perhaps they think better now. Or maybe they blame me. I shook my head. How could I know what they thought of me? Most people are more concerned about their own lives and rarely give their colleagues a second thought. I needed to hold on to that.

When I got home I collapsed on the sofa, waking at 4am to loud voices coming from the apartment above. I threw a book at the ceiling and went back to sleep. I dreamt of my father. He was packing a bag. A bed was piled up with suitcases. All were black. He was crying loudly, humming and mumbling. All in turn. His expressions changed rapidly. I couldn't hear what he was saying. I tugged on his sleeve but he ignored me, like I wasn't there. I started to scream. The walls turned red. I woke with a start hearing a knock on the door. It was 6am. I opened the door to find the magazine Mara had given me on the floor. I ran through the five ads circled in red and found one closest to me. By the time I arrived at work I had made up my mind to go for the advertised meeting. I was nervous for the rest of the time and it was past 8pm when I arrived, almost an hour past the start of the

meeting. I had found different things at work to delay me. I wanted to miss this. I took my time walking to the church. It was set back from the main road with a cemetery to the front. I pushed open the heavy oak door and made a left, entering a large, spacious room with tall windows. People were sitting in a circle. I walked forward slowly, then stopped.

‘I even had to get stitches this time,’ said a large man shaking his head. ‘I never wanted to. But the bleeding wouldn’t stop you see. I had no choice.’ People nodded in sympathy and agreement. He started to cry.

I felt a pain in my chest and turned to leave. A striking man with shoulder length blonde hair saw me. He smiled and waved me over, indicating to the seat next to him. I paused for a long while before sitting down. The others watched and smiled encouragingly. I nodded.

‘Welcome. My name is Elliott. I’ve been expecting you. Thanks for calling ahead. Would you like to introduce yourself?’

‘Hello. My name is Stan.’

‘Well, Stan, this is a private, confidential safe space. Our rules are on the board next to you. Do say as much or as little as you want. There’s coffee and juice over there. Take a break when you need to. Okay?’

I nodded. Thinking back to the time I needed stitches on my ankle and later on my arm.

Another man started talking and then the next. By 10pm I had learned that my experiences were no different to theirs and rather than feeling relieved, I felt an intense rage. Apart from two of the people there, the others had either left their spouses or had come home one day to find them gone. Elliott himself had been in a similar situation and once his wife left him he set up the group. It was the first of its kind in the city. The men there

didn't want anyone to know about what they had been through. All felt ashamed, rejected, guilty and fearful of what others might think. Even those who had plenty of evidence, didn't want to reveal it. They were sure they would be laughed at, ignored or made to pay at a later date.

'I just wanted to get away. Each time I tried, there would be something else. Her friends accused me of abandoning her, of not looking after her, of using her and worse. I didn't even realise she had lied to my father and told him I had been harming her. I never touched her. But no one believed me,' said a slight looking man. He looked down at his tightly clasped hands and started to rock. 'Everything's gone ... my job, my house, my kids, my friends. If not for this group I, ' he shook and sobbed. We waited patiently and gave him the time he needed. I was feeling torn to the core. But I didn't want to speak. I just wanted to listen. It felt like the others were speaking for me. It was hard to hear, but our stories were all similar in so many ways.

When the meeting ended I helped Elliott put away the chairs and clear the refreshments.

'I'm here every week at the same time. People come when they want to. You can also speak to me privately if you wish. Here's my card.'

I started to cry and my legs gave way. Elliott caught hold of my arm and pushed me towards the table. I rested against it while he got some tissues.

'How long?' he asked.

'It'll be twenty years tomorrow. We met at college and were married within a year.'

'Children?'

I shook my head, feeling sad when I suddenly realised that I had wanted children, but had just given up. I really had done as I was told. I had shut down. I was shut down still. 'I don't think I know who I am anymore. Oh God. I really don't know what the fuck I am.'

Elliott smiled faintly and sighed. 'It'll take time. Be kind to yourself. Call me when you need to or I can suggest someone else who can help you through this. You need to reach out and get the help you need. That's the first step.'

I nodded and straightened my tie. It was something I saw my father do all the time. No matter what was happening he would straighten his tie and look up. I never saw him slouch, not once. I had mimicked him and it had stuck. I hadn't thought about it until now. Perhaps this was how it was meant to be. At least I was somewhere safe. Maybe I would get the chance to heal and have a second go and life. Mara was right, we all do have pain. I grabbed my coat and hat and left. I would return the next week.



ANOTHER DAY



‘Can I have more sleeping pills? I still can’t sleep.’

‘What did they give you last time?’

I take in a deep breath. Why is my doctor looking at a computer screen while having a conversation with me if he is not going to pull up my records? I am on six different meds, does he really think I can remember the name of a seventh?

He ruffled his blonde hair. ‘Ah, I see it now ...erm ... what do you mean you are still not sleeping?’

‘I take a pill and feel drowsy but only get 3 hours sleep. I mean look, I now have panda eyes, yet another reason to end it all.’

‘When was the last time you thought about killing yourself?’ he says staring at me, before turning back to the computer screen.

Thirty minutes ago I think to myself, sitting in the waiting room looking at the dishevelled mess of humans waiting to die. I’m no longer sure if I really think that or whether all the medications I am on how dulled my emotional capacity.

‘I’ll prescribe sleeping pills for another week. Was there anything else?’

‘I can’t go to work. I tried yesterday. When I opened the door to the office I threw up. The smell of the office did it. The thought of sitting in my windowless cubicle made me want to take a fork to my throat. The sound of my bosses voice made me want to pierce my eardrums with a knife. I don’t know. Am I being clear enough?’ I said trembling.

‘I’ll sign you off for another week. Do you think that will be enough?’

I want to strangle him or maybe kiss him or just leave. I have lost the urge to kill myself. I now realise that if I ignored everyone else my life would be fine.



I walk home instead of taking the bus. These days most people succumb to some illness if they ride public transport too often. I want to die by my own hands not be taken by some measles-ridden brat coughing in my face while its mum checks the web for studies on vaccinations and designs anti-vax placards during Sunday school. Fuck off and die already. It’s not enough you want to suck this planet dry by reproducing until nothing else can breathe, now you want the rest of us to die painful deaths because you couldn’t be bothered to stay awake during a fucking biology class or read a 50 word public health brochure.

I get home and slam the door really loud. The neighbours were drinking and yelling all night because they can. That's the mantra - 'I do what I want because I can'.

I check my messages. I have been texting someone I met online. She put out an ad saying she was looking for friends with benefits and I thought I'd help. What I didn't count on was her propensity to name drop and ask 'what are your vices?', 'what is something you have always wanted to do?', 'tell me about your last relationship.' When I contacted her I thought she wanted someone to talk to about comics and movies and stuff and make out once in a while after a couple of drinks. I wasn't expecting a full-blown investigation into my life. I check my other messages. It is from a guy I met online who put out an ad asking for someone to meet now and again. He claimed to be in an open relationship. I sent him a message saying I'd meet him for a drink. He claimed it was too easy and he'd preferred to have stalked me on the forum for a while and speak online before meeting. What the hell? I have to be entertaining and sleep with him. Bet he would have expected me to buy my own beer. I tell him to stalk away and click off.

Lying on my bed sideways and staring at the ceiling while listening to the tap drip is my last remaining pleasure. I've decided to hang on to it as long as I can. I pop a sleeping pill and turn up the music loud. Bet it rains tomorrow.



LIGHT ON THE WATER



‘Because I can’t be bothered that’s why. Do it yourself.’ I cross my arms and sit in my swivel chair.

Two minutes later security guards arrive and I am ejected from the office. I lasted three weeks. That was a good run. I got more information than I could have hoped for.

I get called in by worried managers to find out about company leaks, data breaches and employee disaffection. When I first started offering my services people were sceptical about my ability to deliver the goods. I never asked why. I just told them to pay me if I did a good job and find someone else if I didn’t. Not surprisingly managers liked these terms. After a year I set up a company and now get paid half upfront. I’m in demand. I’m good at slipping into workplaces and settling in like I have somehow always been there. That lone person who couldn’t get a job anywhere else and has been stuck in the basement doing the filling for over 30 years or the new secretary who is a temp and can’t be bothered to do the notes so the boss finds someone else and lets me go after a week - but during that time I have access to everything. Or how about coming in as a data analyst and getting more clearance than the boss who has been there for 40 years and hasn’t had a skills upgrade. He gives you everything you need so you can make him look good because he is too lazy to train up - ‘my pension is only 5 years away’. Yeah, what a great run you’ve had. None of us can sleep our way into that kind of job security these days much less work ourselves to it.

I fell into this work by accident. My last 'proper' job was something I believed in. Short story? I got disillusioned by the corruption and not being helped to get justice and change things for the good. Yeah, I know. I was a regular naive college graduate who had written a thesis on white oppression and the moral costs in saying nothing. But hey, now I have a career where I am screwing everyone so no one can complain that I am being unfair. The revolution is being televised, it's just no one can be bothered to do anything to help. Only yesterday a woman in the company warehouse told me she can't wait for the next round of downsizing because she had already decided to sack all the immigrants. I asked her what she was gonna do for work. She didn't get it, thought I was being funny. Everyone's an immigrant where I live. If there was anyone here before, they were slaughtered or just died from first contact viruses. But I don't have the time to explain that to Helen. I just leave her with her two litre bottle of Pepsi, online shopping app and perfectly white world.

David wants me to help him out. He's my brother and heads up one of the largest firms in the city. He benefits from being white, tall, male, blonde and schooled privately. He's also smart, hates people and is an awful human being. He can persuade anyone to do anything. That's how he got a brother. He got his mum and dad to adopt me. He said he wanted someone different so he could watch how well I did compared to him. David is convinced that I get doors slammed in my face because I'm the opposite of everything he is. He says he's glad about that because he doesn't want his kind to loose what they worked for. As CEOs go David fits the profile. As brothers go he's useful for contacts and expensive birthday gifts and not much else. When I was 15 and got arrested for shoplifting, David convinced my dad it would be better for me to spend time in custody to learn to be grateful for being provided a roof over my head by a well-known upstanding white family. The fact that I hadn't stolen anything and David had put that stuff in my bag made me sore about the whole episode. For David it was just another experiment he could tick off.

‘So what do you want?’ I ask feeling the ocean breeze on my face. It’s only the second time David has invited me onto his yacht. It’s nice. A little large for my tastes, but David has a couple of bodyguards these days, and an entourage of assistants and they take up a lot of room.

‘I need you to find out about a competitor who is well connected and bidding for a contract I want.’

‘Why don’t you just use your connections to pull the contract from him? When do you ever bid for contracts? Don’t they just hand it to you on a platter?’, I watch David sink back into his seat. I know why he wants me to do this job but I want him to pay me a lot to do it. In fact I want him to give me so much money I can retire right now.

‘Yeah, the thing is, I can’t be open about this. There’s too much scrutiny about the land mines issue in the press. There won’t be time to wait for that fucking mess to get buried.’

‘Well your inability to dispose of the equipment did cost an entire village their lives.’

‘What the fuck Sam, whose side are you on anyway? I’m your brother.’

See here’s the thing. David feels that he can do anything to anyone including me, but when it comes to him, I need to support him and help. And here’s why.

‘Do I have to remind you that if not for me you’d have nothing. You’d just be another foster home drain on the state.’

And there you have it.

‘Just do your thing, you know. For me, and I’ll make sure you get something for it.’ David has a killer smile. People forgive him anything. They really do. He gives me a hug and we eat lunch in silence.

By the time I get dropped back home I have agreed to do everything David wants. He’s agreed to nothing but promises to wire me enough money to cover all my costs for the rest of the financial year. I decide to screw him over. I’ve had enough. I think I mentioned that earlier. When people like me get disillusioned too many times, the breaking point comes down hard. I used to think that was a foolish theory and that a little bit of deep breathing and meditation would set the person back on a positive life course, but I was wrong. Very wrong. We all have different tolerance levels so it’s hard to predict these things. I take solace in that often. I tell myself that there are others in the world that will continue to do the good work and when they reach their breaking point, there will be others to takeover and continue. I know there are holes in my argument the size of craters but I’m doing all I can not to pop enough pills to keep some junior doctors busy for a week so let me just have this one. And the next, if you are feeling generous.

By the time I finish the job for David he is in the wind. He has cleared his offices and there is no trace of him. I figure he’s living the life of luxury somewhere and I will never see him again. My parents miss him and my mother takes an overdose unable to cope with his loss. My father knows we’ll never see him again. I mean he’s even cleared out their bank accounts. So guess who gets to carry the bag and look after them in old age. Yeah, you are right. The state. Because David, being David, he cleared me out too.



LOSS



Amy was updating her profile while eating her cereal. She had been on the dating site for two months, had gone on three dates and was in a sexting relationship with two people.

‘I just need to get my profile right. I’m not attracting the right type of bloke, you know?’

‘What happened to Daniel?’ Jill asked perching by the counter waiting for the kettle to boil. ‘Given up on him rather quick haven’t you?’

‘I’m going to change my profile name to Lexi. I just read that it’s the kind of name that guys really like. I’m also going to put ‘no vanilla’. Margaret told me it gets her way more likes than before and that was the only thing she changed. She’s been getting likes from lawyers, doctors and even company directors!’.

‘I see.’ Jill poured her coffee and sat next to Amy, peering at her profile. She looked beautiful with her warm smile, perfect teeth and long hair. But men always had the upper hand on dating apps. It was just how these things worked. Amy’s first date claimed to be a surgeon, but really was a medical instruments sales rep who was tired of being rejected by women and was convinced that he would only get dates if he claimed to be in the medical profession or a marine biologist. Her second date was a divorced banker in his 50s who asked her if she was a gold-digger over dinner and asked her to

convince him that she wasn't. Her third date turned up late, said his brother had been the one messaging her on his behalf, bought her a burger from a street vendor and asked her to loan him money for a cab home when she refused to make out with him at the bus stop.

But Amy was a born optimist. She had been searching for her soulmate for a long time. Her quest always informed her decision-making. She chose to study at a particular university because a guy she thought was the one had decided to go there. She converted from Sociology to Law in the first year because she met someone else who she thought was the person she was meant to love forever. Then she worked for a music industry mogul for two years after graduating because she felt a connection with him she was convinced meant that they were destined to be together. At the time, she told Jill that the only problem was that he hadn't realised that she was his one. Then she discovered he was married. And so on it went. Now she had hit the major dating apps in a very big way to find this elusive man. She had read a quote on a social media site which said the person you are meant to be with is looking for you too. For Amy it was just a question of locating her forever love. At one point she decided the country she was in was the problem. She needed to travel to find this person so she back-packed around the world. Jill went along. There was no other way that Amy's mother would have let her leave the country. Not on her watch. In fact if she knew she was talking to random strangers on dating apps and meeting up with them, she would have sent her to live with her other mum. When Amy was 14 one of her mums had a spiritual awakening, left the family and went to live in a commune. She sent Amy and her other mum a card every year to mark the day of her departure. As her parents had never married, it was a clean break. Amy hadn't seen her mum since but didn't seem to mind. She forgave as easily as she loved, and that meant she suffered considerable heartache.

The phone buzzed. Amy looked up from the screen and tried to grab it. Jill held it away from her. 'What did we agree? You only check your messages once in the morning, then in the late afternoon and before you go to bed. That's it Amy!'

‘We never agreed that you couldn’t check it for me.’

Jill gave in. She was curious and also was getting a little worried after reading yet another dating nightmare story in the news that morning.

‘What does it say? Amy asked.

‘Hey, are you up? That’s all it says. It’s from Daniel.’

‘Oh my God! Give that to me!’

‘No. Has he been jerking you around?’

‘Not really. He’s just been off-the-grid. He’ll have a good reason Jill. He said we have a connection.’

‘Uh-huh,’ Jill said, switching off the phone and zipping it up in her pocket. ‘You can have it when we meet for lunch.’

‘But he’ll think I’m not interested!’

‘I saw his profile Amy. Why the fuck would you think your soulmate would do what he does?’

‘He hasn’t had me in his life so he obviously hasn’t realised who he really is.’

‘That’s stupid *and* crazy and you know it,’ said Jill.

‘I know you worry about me and want to keep me safe, but I know what I’m doing.’

‘Amy, you have to stop. Please?’

Amy pushed herself up from the table and closed her laptop. ‘I forgive you because I love you and you are like a sister to me. But I’ll never be truly happy until I find him, don’t you see? How can you not understand this huge emptiness I feel inside me, that I have always felt?’

Jill rolled her eyes. Amy was very good at melodrama, so good that even she believed it, and there was no reaching her. They had had this exact conversation so many times it really was pointless. Jill gave her the phone and hugged her. ‘Just be careful Amy, okay?’



Daniel checked his phone again. Amy had not responded. He looked at her new profile photos and updated description. When he first started messaging her online he was just working his usual routine. Say nice things, throw in some light humour, mention going out somewhere interesting and use some appropriate emojis. Then use words like ‘connection’, ‘intriguing’ and allude to how different the woman was to all the others. Get a number, say ‘speak soon’, end the conversation abruptly and then not call for a while or ever. Daniel had gone on a course run by a dating guru who said that women always remember the person who did not call, who kept them waiting, who ended contact abruptly without reason, rather than the ones who responded straight away, stayed in touch all the time and were predictable. Daniel, above all, wanted to be remembered by every single woman he met online or off. He wanted that more than chalking up the number of women he slept with, although the technique he had learned

enabled him to do both. The dating apps really were a blessing. He was able to take his roadshow to a bar, meet a date and set up the next date with someone else all at the same time.

Daniel had spent a Sunday afternoon messaging Amy. He wouldn't normally spend so long on one person but he wanted a release and he had picked someone who was slow to the uptake. He had seen her profile, ticked like, and waited for her response. He had added a picture to his profile which showed him at a beach, the sunset forming a perfect backdrop with a sign next to him which read 'Are you the one?'. He found that adding this image to his profile always got a positive response. He was a popular one on the dating apps. On seeing Daniel's profile, Amy immediately liked him and when she did, Daniel sent her a message 'hey, your profile is really intriguing.' Amy spent the afternoon messaging Daniel who had ended their conversation saying 'Don't you think there's something here? A connection?'

She had responded excitedly only to find that the icon was no longer illuminated which meant Daniel was no longer online. She had spent the week waiting to hear from him.

Daniel checked his phone again, puzzled that Amy still hadn't responded to his morning message. The meeting was over so he stepped out of the office. He stopped at the local cafe for his usual and sat outside scrolling through the new profiles on the dating app. The sun was out and the layers were coming off. Daniel hit like on a selection of profiles then put on his shades and watched the women as they walked by. Just as he was trying to decide whether to approach one of them his phone buzzed.

'Hey Daniel, how are you?' read the message.

'Great. Was worried for a sec!'

‘LOL.’

He smiled. Amy always used his name in her messages. Who the fuck else did she think she was talking to? He re-read her new profile again and this time he sat up straight. ‘No vanilla?’ Sensual exploration?’

‘Yes.’ (smiley face)

Daniel replied with a heart emoji.

‘What are your limits Daniel?’

‘I’m up for anything behind closed doors.’

(heart emoji)

‘Daniel, can we meet?’

‘Sure. Cocktails at 7 at the Ice Bar’

(heart emoji)

Daniel drained his cup. Never fails. She must really want to hook him. He was going to have fun with her no vanilla bullshit. Daniel headed back to the office pausing at a window to take in his reflection. He pushed back his hair and turned to his side. He wanted tonight to be special. He entered the shop and bought a new suit. Next he stopped to get Amy a small gift.



‘When I was young I had this huge crush on a boy called Daniel. He had glowing blonde hair and huge eyes. To me he was beautiful and just perfect. I followed him at a distance most days because I didn’t want to scare him off. One day I got home to find that his family had moved in next door to us. Sometimes he came over to play with my brother. I used to sit and watch them. At school Daniel would talk to me when his friends weren’t watching. When he was with them he would join in the teasing. But I didn’t care. I knew deep down he really loved me like I loved him. When his family left I promised that someday we would meet again and he said he would write to me. I was sure he would. I really was. But he never did.’

Daniel got to the rooftop cocktail bar at 7.15pm. He scanned the place then settled into a booth and ordered a drink. He checked his messages. He liked to be late, it built up tension plus the women were always really relieved when he finally arrived. He could give any excuse they would just be happy to see him. Their smiles would widen, he would see their jaws unclench and their shoulders relax. Try keeping a guy waiting and see what happens. Daniel smirked. If the woman was a model she might get away with it. Daniel scrolled through the last message with Amy, concerned he had missed something. He was certain she would already be here. By 7:45pm Daniel was on his third drink. He had removed his tie and was taking in the view of the city. Sitting alone on a comfortable sofa, he stretched his arms up and shook his head from side to side. He felt a hand on his shoulder, he turned to see Amy. She looked worried.

‘I’m so sorry Daniel,’ she said shrugging off her black coat. She looked at him nervously.

‘It’s okay. Let me get you a drink and you can tell me all about it.’

Amy nodded and opened her purse. Daniel shook his head and went to the bar. She settled into the sofa and exhaled. She took a long breath in and slowly breathed out. She clicked open her purse, took out a compact and checked her make up and hair. She had spent the afternoon getting her hair, nails and make up done. She had bought a new outfit and had even got Daniel a small gift. She was wearing over the knee black boots with heels and a short off-the-shoulder black dress. Daniel set the drinks down and patted the spot next to him. Amy moved and sat down. On the journey there she had read an article about appearing confident so that you actually became confident. She decided to focus on doing that. She rested her arm on the top of the sofa, crossed her legs and turned to her side to face Daniel. There was a light breeze.

‘You made it. I’m glad,’ said Daniel, taking her in and smiling.

‘I was making sure you really wanted to see me.’

Daniel laughed. ‘Really?’

‘No. My flatmate wanted to come along so it took me a while to get away.’

‘She can call me if she wants to check on you.’

‘That’s kind Daniel.’

‘You look amazing. You really do. Here I got you a little something. Just ... I was thinking about you.’

Amy took the small red box and opened it. A red heart pendant was nestled in deep velvet. She removed the chain. 'Help me with this would you?'

Daniel kissed Amy, brushing her lips just hard enough to feel her stir. He kissed her again, drawing her in closer.

'I got you something too Daniel,' Amy said pulling away. She reached in her bag and produced a blue velvet box. Daniel opened it. Inside lay a polished silver pen. He removed it from the box and looked at it, feeling its weight. It was engraved with the phrase 'You promised you would write'.

'Do you like it Daniel?'



AS ADVERTISED



I spilled the coffee over the front of my white blouse because I needed to miss the first interview. It worked. I was told to get changed and come back in the afternoon.



Last night at approximately 10:47 pm I received a text which read 'Interview at 08:00. Fugitive Motel Park Street'. It was code for stolen files belonging to client PS. I didn't sleep. Well I couldn't. I tried to reach Malorie but she wasn't answering her phone. Then I tried Ramesh but his line was dead. Finally, in desperation, I called Evan himself. His wife answered, he wasn't coming to the phone. It was his way of telling me he would be putting his family first and I couldn't rely on him for anything. That was his choice and I had to accept it. I was grateful since it meant I could give him up if I was cornered, like for like. Evan was the worst of the four of us - he really shouldn't have been involved in the first place. But he had something to prove to himself. Malorie wanted the money, nothing more. She didn't care about PS or any of the clients. Ramesh I couldn't be sure of. There was no reason for him to join in, but he did. He said he was

bored. That was it. That was his sole purpose of getting involved in something that could send all of us away for the rest of our lives. I couldn't figure it out. But he had the necessary skills and he brought Evan along with him. I should have left at that point, but I needed the information in the file. Malorie was welcome to the money. I just wanted the file itself.

The morning it happened, Ramesh provided the pass key and Evan manipulated the security cameras and tapes. Malorie raided the lock box while I distracted the front office by doing what I do best, picking an unnecessary fight, generating drama and drawing everyone in. By the time lunch came around, Evan was safely back on the 10th floor guarding PS himself while he was in the building, Malorie was back at her desk, checking through the accounts for the day and I was on the third floor speaking to the HR managers about my poor conduct for the third time in 6 months. They had already sent me on an anger-management course and felt the next best option would be communication skills and mentoring. I agreed. Why bother arguing with HR?

I don't know how the alert went out or why anyone thought to look in the lock box. PS only ever came in twice a year, he had 10 boxes with us, why would anyone notice that one box had been tampered with. I tried Malorie again, just on the off chance she was at home. The phone kept ringing. I changed quickly and headed back to the office. Traffic was light, so I stopped off at Ramesh's apartment along the way. It didn't matter if people saw us together, we had a fling and most assumed it was still on the cards. He answered the door and stood aside when he saw me. I went in. The place was spotless. His bags were by the door. He looked great if a little tired.

'You'll be late for your interview. I hear you were bumped to the afternoon,' he said.

'I, erm, just wanted to know how you are.'

‘I’m not saying anything to you. You had your chance with me and you blew it.’

‘Ramesh. I’m not here about us! What is wrong with you? Actually don’t answer that. Just tell me you stuck to the story we agreed on.’

He nodded. But I could tell he was lying. I always could.

‘What? What did you say?’ I glanced at my watch. I needed to hurry this up.

He kept quiet. So I did the only thing that I could to get him to talk. After a 3 minute interlude on the sofa, he fessed up that he had said that Evan had been seen near his office in the morning and he thought that was how his key went missing. According to him he didn’t report it straight away because there was a crisis with one of the teams and he was called to manage it.

‘Did they believe you?’ I asked, buttoning up my shirt.

‘Maybe.’

‘What did you take from the box?’

Ramesh smoothed his hair back and slipped on his blazer. ‘This’ he said, holding up a data stick which looked old and grimy.

‘What is it?’

‘The original client list. I’ll be taking them over one by one and setting up on my own. PS will be dead by then. I can’t believe he’s still alive. His people must know. They’ll kill him for being such an idiot. Who the fuck uses a lock box these days never mind a data stick?’

I wasn’t going to argue with him. His father owned enough security operations for him to feel nice and smug and now he was going to become his father’s favourite son by providing him with more paranoid customers. The more money you have the more you have to lose and the more afraid you are because others don’t have what you have and what you have is what everyone needs to stay above the water. Security companies make a killing. You should see their private pitches. They ramp up the potential threats and the paranoia just spirals and builds until you sign up for the best security money can buy. Some even hire guards to guard their security team. I mean, if you are that rich, why wouldn’t the security team just fleece you themselves. After all that’s what we just did - Ramesh, Malorie, Evan and I.

‘So this is goodbye then,’ I said.

‘Kisses’, he said, opening the door and gesturing for me to leave. I reached for my hair pin and stabbed him in the neck. He didn’t make any noise. I took the data stick and left him where he lay.

By the time I got to the office Malorie had been interviewed. They were holding her. It would seem that both Evan and Malorie had blamed each other. I really don’t know why we bothered to spend a full month on plans and practicing what we would say if we were found out. Why the panic? If we had stuck to our stories we would have all been fine. But of course, people get greedy.

‘Thank you for coming in,’ said Mr Carter, lead investigator and firm heavy weight. He wasn’t looking all that bad given the theft could ruin the company. Perhaps he really was a cold bastard who felt nothing but the air.

‘Will this take long? I have to finalise some travel documents for one of our clients and he doesn’t like to be kept waiting.’

Carter raised a brow. ‘I don’t know,’ he said, turning pages in his file. ‘Why did you start the fight in the office three days ago?’

‘Which one? I had two fights that day, both related to the incompetence of new hires. I had to copy and file all the paperwork myself just because this company can’t be bothered to pay for administrators and brings in ungrateful interns to get under my feet. I’m sick of it. I can’t get any of my work done and if I don’t satisfy the clients, I don’t get my bonus do I? Today I’m behind on my work again. Why? Because the company can’t be bothered to have ...’

‘Stop!’ Carter let out a whoosh. ‘That. That was what the fights were about?’

‘I have fights all the time. I’ve got two warnings in my file and have attended anger management. I now have to go for a lame communications training day. What the hell? Just hire some competent people already. But, you know, if you are wondering about that day, why not just ask HR? They kept me in their stupid office until past seven.’

‘Did you see or hear anything about the PS lock box?’

‘I don’t know anything about lock boxes. I just work with the clients and get the contracts signed. Security and customer relations handle the rest.’

‘How well do you know these people?’ said Carter, laying out photos of Malorie, Ramesh and Evan.

‘I’ve had flings with all of them. After work drinks ... you know, I’m not embarrassed, I mean we are adults and we make choices and on particular nights ... you just ... you just need someone, you know? There were others too, but I haven’t slept with anyone from floors 5 upwards - okay maybe someone on the 17th floor.’

Carter sat back in his chair and looked over his shoulder at the note-taker.

‘Is HR going to see any of this? You know I can get fired for sleeping with co-workers. We aren’t supposed to have personal relations. But it was just one offs, here and there. And who can blame me. I work hard, I can’t get home in time, and even if I could there’s just the cat. And who can date these days? Where do you meet anyone? I mean most people meet their mates at work right? I read that only the other day and ...’

‘Thank you, Miss Stewart,’ said Carter, closing the file slowly. He arched his fingers together and leaned forward. Then paused and indicated for the note taker to leave.

‘Just between you and me, you are a good looking woman and clearly have a good head on her shoulders. With a bit of work on your anger issues, you could go far here. Find another dating pool Miss Stewart and you could land up running this place,’ he paused, watching me for a reaction.

I kept quiet and looked down at my hands. I was almost home free. They were going to blame Evan and Malorie for sure - one for the files, and the other for the money.

‘What do you say? Shall we close this interview?’

I nodded.

So Evan was sent down for the files. Malorie was taken in for the money. When they found Ramesh they decided he was murdered for being part of the whole thing - PS's employers were known for their low tolerance of errors. As for me, I decided to stay on. I had plans to leave with the information I had at my disposal but I felt running the company in a few years may not be so bad. Plus I could access anything I wanted, whenever I wanted by then.

So, if you are wondering what I actually wanted from the lock box? Nothing. I just wanted to find a way to rise up in the company quickly and it was a real easy way to eliminate the competition and get noticed.



HARD FROST



When I bought the hotel I expected to stay afloat for about a year. I just felt an urge to do something different one morning, saw a lease and purchased it. My wife said I was having a crisis. She insisted I see her therapist when I stopped cutting my hair and took to wearing ripped jeans. She said I must be having an affair and made a fuss.

Anyway, I left. A year after opening the place, I divorced her. It was an easy decision. One I choose not to dwell on. If I had listened to her, I'd still be selling overpriced homes to foreign dignitaries. Don't get me wrong. The money was fantastic and it was easy. I have charm, I work hard and the high-end market benefits from the wealth divide and always will. What else do you need in property sales really? It doesn't hurt that I am 6 foot, with thick blonde hair and blue eyes.

My wife and I have an unremarkable history. We met in college and she wanted to marry and so I did. She pushed me into real estate, convinced my looks and charm would propel me to the top. Well, it did. She wanted to keep house, throw parties and shop. I supplied the capital and kept out of her way. It's a common tale really, so you can fill in the rest.

You're probably wondering about my hotel? The place has 10 rooms on three floors. It sits between a laundromat and a grocery store. This part of town was ignored for a while, so of course it has become occupied by the artistically minded with few resources but lots of enthusiasm. Opposite the

hotel there is a second hand bookstore. There are also vintage clothes shops, clubs, smoking dens for reefer aficionados and restaurants plying low-end fusion cuisine. Further to the north of the street disused buildings have been snapped up, a clear sign of creeping gentrification.

Most days I am at the hotel front desk, resting in a swivel chair reading a book. I live in a small compact room to the rear. I enjoy it. I have gone super minimal - I can pack everything I own in 30 minutes and it all fits in a backpack. I gave my ex-wife everything else. She has our townhouse, the holiday villa, our antiques, paintings, cars, stock options and membership to numerous clubs. I don't care. I just wanted the hotel. And peace. Yeah. That I really wanted.

These days I listen to travellers and hear stories from all over the world. The real stuff - not that online news bullshit. I get different perspectives and viewpoints that aren't filtered to cause maximum disagreements and conflict. It makes a difference. It really does. I almost feel myself again, the way I used to be in college.

I had the place done up by local artists, so it's eclectic and an experience. It's supposed to challenge, but comfort at the same time. The 'don't sweat it, we're all fucked up' school of thought.

There's an overgrown garden with wild flowers, a bird bath and some benches to the rear, right next to the parking lot. There is an ice-box, a reading nook and a coffee-machine near the front desk. And that's it. My biggest expense was the huge neon sign at the front with retro lettering. I like it. It lights up the street. People pay extra to stay in the front rooms so they can see the lights blinking, it reminds them of some sad B-movie.

The hotel has housed young travellers, students, artists, writers, musicians and those looking for an alternative to your standard white hotel sheets, brown carpets and miniature shampoo bottles. People don't stay here

for uniformity. Some come for a night just to take photos for their blogs. I don't need to advertise. My customers seem happy to do it for me. I can't be bothered myself. I just want to make enough to keep this place ticking over. I don't care that some reviews call the hotel Disney for boomers. Yeah? Whatever. Millennials have a ball here too. Categories bore me - no one fits.

Tonight the street is buzzing. Christmas and New Year in this city is big. The parties attract internationally renowned DJs, tourists and the glitterati. I decorate the small Christmas tree in the lobby with home-made baubles and tinsel. I like crafts these days and even made some frosted cookies. I don't bother with presents, shopping or fancy dinners. What's the point? I just have a quiet glass of beer and read. That's my kind of Christmas.

I am prepared to turn in for the night, leave Henry, the night desk clerk, to it. But my ex-wife walks through the door. She's looking baked and overdone. I guess wealth isn't everything, or it might be, just doesn't look good on her. She's still seething about the divorce; I can see her grinding her teeth. She looks around before sitting on the red sofa by the front window. I bring her coffee and sit opposite her as if I was expecting her all along. She pushes her hair to the back with both her hands and stares at me through blue eyes. Her skin looks tighter than I remember it and her lips are plumped. She's 34 and already in a panic about her youth. Sadly this has had a negative effect on appearances and she looks older than her age rather than younger. Whatever. It's what's on the inside that counts right? Well, here's the thing, her inside is like the black hole.

'You look really well,' she says.

I thank her, but don't return the compliment. I know she's annoyed by this, but whatever, we aren't married anymore.

'This time of year is hard on me. There's so much to do.'

‘I remember. Look Simone, this is it for me. Don’t come here again.’

‘How is it so easy for you to walk away, Ed?’

‘Just accept it.’

‘I want to talk to you. I flew in especially. The least you can do is give me a few hours of your time.’

‘I’d rather not.’

‘The first time I saw you was at a Christmas party in a bar on this very street. Is that place still open? What was it called?’

‘What are you talking about Simone?’

‘The Crown! That’s it. You didn’t see me, but I saw you.’

I sit back in the chair and massage my fingers. It’s how I keep calm; it helps me focus and breathe. I remember that night. I was with Carla. I don’t remember seeing Simone. We met the following summer, introduced by a mutual friend.

‘Jesus Simone! What do you want?’ I instantly regret being unable to control my frustration.

Simone is happy. She is fake pouting. ‘Well. I was just thinking about it today. You know, the party?’ She stares intently.

‘Uh-huh. Goodbye Simone. Don’t come back.’ My voice trembles. I grab my jacket and rush out. I don’t need this. I never did.

There is a slight breeze. The night air is fresh and welcoming. Small groups are gathered, sharing alcohol and snacks - impromptu parties and get togethers - everyone welcome.

I head towards the The Crown. It's my regular spot. Yeah. I lied to Simone. And yes, it's on the same street as my hotel. What of it? You never wanted to go back to a happier time?

People leave me alone in The Crown. There are barely any customers in this place. It's the only venue on the street that hasn't been done up and students no longer come here. The owner doesn't care. He just sits at the bar reading. Other than ordering a drink, don't bother trying to talk to him, he'll just ignore you. I have my beer and read my book at a table to the back. A few regulars are at the bar, sitting in silence. A small radio rests on top of the broken jukebox. It's tuned in to a classical music station. The music is restful.

Away from the hotel I try to recover. If I'm not careful I'll cry. The thought of Carla brings it all back. And, it's why I live close by. I never wanted to leave this place. Carla and I were regulars at The Crown. The night of the party was my last happy Christmas. I loved Carla. I did. We had only been together for 7 months, but I knew she was the one. I know. I know. People say that right? And what does it mean really? She was sunshine. It didn't matter what, I just knew I wanted to see her everyday and hear what she had to say. Right from the get go I never pretended to be someone I wasn't with her. I knew she just loved me for me. How many people have that? Even once? She was warm and felt like home. My home. Just hugging her made me complete. It wasn't the first flush of love, in case you are wondering. It was real.

And then it was over. Just like that. I tried finding her in the first week. Then I got a letter. She said it just wasn't what she wanted and she was

happy and not to try finding her. Then I met Simone over the summer break. She was empty. I was too at the time. It was supposed to be a fling, but she wouldn't let me go. I gave in. I didn't care. I really didn't. Carla was gone and nothing mattered.

The owner brings me another beer. It's rare for him to move from his seat. I hadn't even noticed I had drained my glass. I nod a thanks and then look up. It's Simone with her usual - vodka and tonic. She is dressed for a party. All reds and silver, her short dress sparkles. Her heels click against the floor. No one pays attention. 'I walked a while to find you,' she smiles.

I can't bear the thought that she is going to continue her pursuit of me. I moved cities, I gave her everything and I kept to myself. I sip my beer, ignoring her.

'I have a story for you Ed. I think you may like it.'

'Will you leave?'

'When you left I collapsed. I showed you nothing but love Ed. I did what was best for you. If you had just listened to me you would have been happy too. We can still repair this. But you must believe that I only want the best for you.'

I sigh. I'm in pain. I let it get to me. I remember Carla. I think she would have loved the hotel. I imagine her with me, running the place, spending evenings in the garden, barefoot, staring up at the stars and listening to music.

'Did you hear me? I found Carla for you.' Simone is practically screaming with joy. 'See. See how much I love you?'

‘What? That’s, ... that’s, not possible.’ My breathing quickens. I grab her wrist. ‘Where is she? Tell me where she is!’

She smirks, pulls her wrist away.

‘Simone, just tell me where she is.’

‘That’s who you want to see?’

I down my beer. She is lying about Carla. She must be. I can see the owner looking annoyed. His place is not one for raised voices, tantrums or arguments. I throw on my jacket and run out. Simone follows behind, laughing happily and calling my name. She has managed to get a rise out of me. It sums up our relationship.

I hear her heels clicking behind me. I just run, and run. The groups gathered in the street are dancing, smoking and listening to music. It is loud everywhere. I keep running, pushing past people.

There are a couple of cars in front of the hotel. I ignore Henry, slam the door to my room and lie curled up on my bed.

The next morning Henry tells me Simone spent the night and is checked in for two more nights. He apologises. I forgive him. There are very few people who can say ‘no’ to Simone. I take the elevator up to the third floor and knock on her door. There is no answer. So I turn the handle and go in. The light is streaming into the window. The bed has been slept in and there is a suitcase on the floor. It looks familiar. I take a closer look. It has Carla’s name on it, stitched in the material on the front. There are patches for all the places she wanted to travel to. It is her old overnight bag. I cover my mouth to hold back my sobs. I collapse there stroking the bag, clutching it to me and rocking.

‘Ah. I was wondering when you’d come to speak to me,’ says Simone, emerging from the bathroom. Her hair is in a towel and she is wrapped in a short towel.

‘What did you do?’

‘You have to fight for what you want Ed. Remember? I always told you that.’

I push myself up, still holding the bag. I finally comprehend what happened. I can’t stop crying. I can see Simone smirking at me as she gets dressed. I am churning up inside and no amount of deep breaths is going to help. It all goes dark.

It is late when Henry comes in. He excuses himself to tidy up. He gives me a hug and pats my shoulder. I look out at the garden. You can barely notice where the ground has been disturbed. Music plays in the background. One of the guests puts a hand on my shoulder and smiles. He asks me to join him and the others at the front. It is Christmas Eve. The guests are gathered at the entrance of the hotel, watching the street parties and singing a long. I join them with my beer and read my book.



FALLING THROUGH



The air in the warehouse was cold and stale. The overhead lights blinked erratically. Zoned out workers stacked boxes and emptied crates.

Jake was tired, but continued to respond to his manager Mr. Andrews.

‘I told him to go away lots of times. I told him to ‘fuck off’ over and over again, yeah? But he continued following me. I don’t know what he wanted. He walked into the elevator with me when I arrived this morning and each time I turned round, he was right there! Right behind me. Sometimes in front of me. It was fucked up. Totally.’ Jake shook his head and rubbed his face firmly to rouse himself. ‘I already told you that Mr. Andrews. Why do you keep asking me the same questions?’

Andrews cleared his throat. ‘Jake, are you sure you asked this man what he wanted? This is important. Are you absolutely sure?’

‘Yes! I asked him ... I did,’ Jake pushed his hair back and exhaled. Andrews stood tall over his employee who was sinking deeper into the swivel chair. He looked down at him.

‘Yes, I asked him what he wanted at least three times. No wait, it must have been five. Please, just ask him to fuck off will you Mr. Andrews?’

‘Thing is, he wants to speak to you,’ said Andrews.

‘What? So why didn’t he just say something?’

‘He said he did. He said he tried to speak to you many times today. But you kept walking past him as if he wasn’t there. He said he even sat opposite you during lunch, but you got up from the table and left.’

‘Yeah, I did. Because the fucker wouldn’t leave me alone. I asked him what he wanted. I swear I did. Ask anyone. Ask Cynthia over there. She saw me. I even asked her for help.’

‘We already spoke to Cynthia and the others in the building. They said they saw you walk past him and ignore him.’

Andrews checked his phone. ‘Wait right here. Give me a minute. I have to check the security cameras.’

Jake slumped back in his chair with a thud. He looked around at the others. Most were in their heavy winter coats with their hats pulled down low, working their way through parcels wearing large gloves.

Jake spotted Cynthia and waved her over. ‘Hey, Cynth? Why did you tell Andrews I ignored that guy? Huh?’

‘I ... I was scared. I’m sorry Jake, I really am. But I need this job. You understand don’t you? I have kids and bills. I need this job Jake. I have been working really hard. Long hours have kept me here rather than at home in the evening. I’m finally due for a promotion. I just need to hold on. I need the money.’ Cynthia averted her gaze, glancing up at the security camera in the corner.

‘But what does this have to do with your job Cynth? Nothing!’

‘I can tell something’s up ... we all can ... look, I have to go. They’ll be checking the work station.’ Cynthia slunk off, her bell-bottoms swishing against her work boots. She looked ill. Her skin pale and sallow; her eyes red, puffy and swollen. Jake felt sorry for her and irritated with her at the same time. But there was nothing he could do. He stood, stretching his arms, bending forward to touch his toes. When he came up again, the man was standing in front of him. He was the same height as Jake only much, much older, with white thinning hair.

‘Oh. Fuck. No.’ Jake reached out to touch the man’s shoulder, but his hand went right through. He gasped and tried again. Thrusting his arm forward and waving his hand.

‘It’s too late Jake,’ said the man, ‘I’m so sorry.’

Jake wanted to run screaming out the building. His mind was blank, his throat was dry and his heart was pounding so hard, he couldn’t stop shaking.

The man frowned. ‘I tried to tell you this morning. You need to get out of here. Leave. Just leave. Don’t you see. This place is no good for you.’

Jack’s legs gave way. He fell back into his chair. ‘What ... what are you?’

‘Does it matter? Why should that matter Jake?’ I’m telling you that you need to do what is best before it is too late. Look at me. Look closely. Notice anything?’

‘What?’

‘I’m you Jack. I’m you!’

‘Fuck off!’

‘Do you want to die working here? There’s nothing here. If you stay today, you’ll be here for the rest of your life.’

‘You mean you are from another dimension?’ Jack trembled, a hysteria gripped him.

‘Does it matter? Why should that matter?’

‘Well fuck, I have nothing to go to if I walk. How do I pay my bills huh?’

‘You’re young. You’ll find something. Just leave before it is too late.’

He really did look like him with the same deep set eyes. He even sounded like a gruffer version of himself, with the same accent and pitch. Jake looked around, but the warehouse was empty. This made it even worse. Keeping his eyes on the man, he cried out, ‘Hello? Is anyone here? Hello? Cynthia? Mitch? Where is everyone?’

‘Shut up! You stupid boy! I came to help you ... I’m here to help you Jake ... Just run ... run. You’re lucky I came to warn you. You can still do something with your life. Make something of it. Change your world, your life. Live your dreams. Achieve, progress, find love. Find freedom. Don’t get stuck here I am begging you. You’ll die here Jake. You will.’

Jake started to nod slowly as he let the words sink in. He couldn't control his trembling. He shut his eyes tightly, balled up his fists and counted to 10. 'I am dreaming', he said. He slowly opened his eyes and blinked.

The man was still there. 'You are running out of time Jake! Leave!' He said it with such force and authority Jake jumped up, grabbed his jacket and ran, and kept running until he got home. His chest and throat burning, his legs on fire, he slammed the door to his apartment and double-locked it, before sliding to the floor and passing out.

The next morning Andrews and two senior managers called the warehouse team upstairs to the main office. Cynthia stood against the wall at the back, out of the way. She didn't want them noticing her.

'Jake handed in his resignation this morning. Just to let you all know. We will all miss him. We have cleared his workstation. That will be all for now,' said Andrews. He held the door open and watched the workers leave. Then joined the others at the table. They listened to the footsteps descend down the metal stairs. When it was silent, they burst out in wild, raucous laughter. And they just got louder and louder and louder. Ed, who had been there the longest, unbuttoned his waistcoat and reached for the tissues. He was laughing so hard, tears were streaming down his face.

Andrews cleared his throat and was the first to compose himself. 'Like I said, there are really cheap and easy ways to encourage staff turnover. If we hadn't got him to leave we would have had to promote him. This way, he's gone with no complaints and we can bring another high-flyer in, bleed them dry, promise them the moon and then get rid of them in the same way when they are due for a raise.' The others nodded with wide grins. Ed, enthused by the cost savings, slammed the table with his fist and pointed 'You, you, Andrews, are the man! Bravo!'

Andrews patted down his tie. ‘Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. We don’t want word of this getting out. Do I make myself clear? In two months it’ll be Cynthia’s turn. What do you think she’ll be wearing in her 60s eh? How will she look? Tech need the specs today.’



THE PLAZA



‘It is difficult to know, perhaps it doesn’t matter, especially now,’ I say.
‘He left without a word or a note and I have no way of finding him. I
remember when I was happy and wonder what I did wrong.’

‘He said nothing to you. Gave you no indication of where he was
going?’

‘No.’

‘You didn’t report him missing?’

‘I didn’t think anything of it.’

‘Were you together long? Hello? Are you still there?’



Two years ago I was visiting Sabine, one of my closest friends. She lived in a stone house in the south of the country, overlooking the sea. It was a beautiful journey there - I took a train which made its way through mountainous terrains. And the holiday was magnificent. I hadn't seen Sabine in years, not since we graduated and she went her way to set up a studio and dedicate her life to her art. I stayed on in the city working a regular job and hanging on to a loveless marriage, which ended soon after my third miscarriage. When we saw each other, all the time between us fell away and I felt ready to start anew. I think we both did. You know how it can be. You forget about who you used to be and how the world was all possibilities to you when you were younger. I got that back with my friend. That whole month gave me a fresh perspective on life again. There was still time to recapture my youth. I knew there was and so did Sabine. I didn't want the time we spent together to end, and when it did I decided to explore the rest of the southern part of the country. Much to my delight, on an accidental detour I found myself in a very small village which even Sabine hadn't heard about. She was worried about my safety. A lone woman travelling on her own still attracts all manner of attention in this part of the world. So she arranged for a guide. And that's how we met, Joe and I.



It was cooler in the shade that day, so I sat beneath the canopy in the only cafe in the village. It was a beautiful day. There weren't many people about. I had heard that at this time of year, with the noon sun, most people stayed indoors. Where I was we felt the warmth of the sun so irregularly that I made the most of it. The secluded setting of the village made it inaccessible to most. I was lucky to have found it at all. To me it was another sign of my new beginning. The cafe was at the edge of a main plaza, with ornate tile work and large trees to the side. I was wearing mirror reflective glasses, a black calf length glamour dress and heels. This place brought out the 50s Hollywood glamour in me. I checked my make up and

started reading my book. I picked it up in the local newsagent. I had a penchant for romance novels and this did not disappoint. I sipped my tea and waited for the guide to arrive. I appreciated Sabine's gesture. I thought it would be nice to be shown around and perhaps have someone with me if I chose to explore the coast line any further.

Across the plaza a man emerged from the shadows. He was dressed in a black suit with white shirt and tie. He had a trilby down low and was carrying a black bag. I couldn't make out his features but liked the way he walked. It had the poise, confidence and grace I imagined strong men had. I observed him from over the top of my book imagining what it would be like to be on his arm, kissing his rugged cheek. I felt my ears burn when he took a seat next to me. He smiled gently and winked. It made me even more embarrassed. It wasn't salacious in any way, more self-assured. Something that I found both attractive and arousing. I glanced away quickly like you do when the person you are keen on notices you staring at them for a little too long.

'Waiting for someone?'

'My guide ... erm my ride.'

He smiled. 'That would be me.'



Joe was a stranger to these parts himself, something he had omitted to mention to Sabine. He had been recommended by a friend of a friend and by my third tea I had lost track of where he said he had come from. Sabine was apologetic of course, but I didn't hold it against her, especially given

how wonderful Joe was. His conversation was exhilarating; he had been on so many adventures. Sabine agreed that since he had come through a friend it would be fine for me to spend time with him. To be fair, Joe was happy to be my guide, although I had hoped for much more. I startled myself. I hadn't felt this desire before. By the time we stopped talking it was getting dark. Joe had yet to find anywhere to stay so he came with me to the room I had taken in a converted hotel. It was now a small residence run by an elderly couple. They rented out rooms on the third floor upwards. I had found the place by chance. The kindly cafe owner had helped with my bags and shown me the way when I arrived. Thankfully the couple were grateful for another guest and once Joe had settled in we went to the only eatery in the village and spent the evening talking over wine and a selection of local dishes. Joe had a wondrous command of different languages and was at heart a musician. He had been travelling since graduating and was in no hurry to settle down. When he laughed he looked upwards and then back at me. His laugh was as lyrical as his voice was. It was smooth you know, and still deep. I felt very fortunate to have met him. I felt a slow glide towards him and I wanted to be pulled in completely.

After dinner we went back to the hotel and stood on my fifth floor balcony overlooking the plaza. We shared some wine and spoke about our forgotten youth.

'It really is wasted on the young, don't you think? Always in such a rush to grow up. I know I was,' said Joe.

I simply nodded. I was captivated by his dark eyes. I didn't dare tell him I was still in my youth - well psychologically speaking. Still chasing after the notion of true love and all that. Wondering whether he could be the one.

'Well, it's getting late,' he said, 'I should get to bed. We have much to explore tomorrow.'

He turned to leave then stopped. Standing behind me he wrapped his arms around my waist and drew me to him. He nuzzled my neck and put his hands beneath my dress, touching the top of my stockings. His hands felt perfect against my skin - just the right pressure, just the right touch. I wanted to turn round to kiss him, but he whispered for me not to. He continued to touch and caress me in parts long asleep now suddenly woken. 'Tell me you are mine,' he said, nibbling my neck and pulling me even closer to him.

'I am yours.'

We spent the night holding each other. When I woke my head was on his chest. I lay just listening to his breathing and feeling his warmth.

Joe seemed a little distant in the morning and even made a show of leaving early and finding someone else to be my guide. I gulped and took a step forward, telling him that if he wanted to go he should. It was hard for me to do, but it was what I always did. Thing is, as much as I liked Joe, I would never beg. It wasn't like me and what would be the point? If someone wanted to be elsewhere they would leave. It wouldn't matter what I said or how much I tried to reason with them. I learned that young watching my mother plead with my father over and over again every time he left, only to return and hurt her again.

I was packing my bags and getting ready to head home when there was a knock on the door. It was Joe, with a picnic basket. He was apologetic. I can't remember what his reason was for his behaviour. Perhaps it's because he didn't give me one. After a late breakfast we set off for a drive. It was another warm and sunny day. I decided to forgive Joe this one time but told myself that if it happened again I would just leave.

I longed to be with him but I would get over it wouldn't I? Like I got over so many other things in my life, including the death of my mother

when I was 17. She had been the only stable person when I was growing up. I never knew my father, he was always leaving and returning as if to say we were just a stopping off point to better things and a happier life. When my mother died, my grandmother took me in and raised me and it was only when I was in my teens that I realised how hard it must have been for her to be the only source of support to me. I thought I was the model child but I must have disappointed her somehow, or perhaps she was just lonely or in the end, succumbed to her long depression after losing her only child, my mother. When she ended her life, I was looking forward to our summer holiday.

When I told Joe the story, he shrugged, then rubbed the back of my neck and said, 'Sorry, it's hard to know what to say.' Joe didn't want to talk anymore after that so we returned to the village and had the picnic in his room. We laid out the blanket on the floor and sat eating our food. Joe even got a few flowers on the way back and put them in an empty wine bottle. It was sweet and touching and romantic and all those things I wanted which I never got from Dennis, my ex-husband - ever practical, forever knowledgeable and never expressive. He took care of all my needs with the exception of delivering any emotional connection. When I left Dennis a weight lifted off my shoulder and I didn't look back. I think it was the same for him, I really do. It must have been hard being with someone who wanted him to be expressive all the time when it was clearly not in his nature.

'Would you like to play a game with me?' Joe asked.

The sparkle in his deep brown eyes excited me. He had a way of looking at me that made me feel young and alive, desired and yearned for. He took off his tie and bound my wrists together at the back. It wasn't too tight so I allowed him to continue. He kissed me and told me to just sit like that with him for a while, which I did. He fed me and gave me the rest of my drink. Later when he untied me he gave me instructions. I got on all fours and crawled towards him with just my heels and stockings on. He

looked at me hungrily. He instructed me to part my knees and arch my back. He ran his hands over me and stroked every single part of me. By the end of that I would have let him do anything. He touched all and every part of me. I kissed him when he allowed me to and kissed his hands, when he placed them near my mouth, tracing my lips.

‘There is so much I want you to do to me,’ I said.

‘This is just the beginning,’ he responded.



The next morning I woke alone. I assumed Joe had left to get us breakfast, but his things were gone. I still had one wrist tied to the bedpost. I dressed hurriedly and went to my room. Everything was as I had left it. I sat on my bed and cried. I couldn't bear the thought that Joe had simply abandoned me. Not after everything we shared and the things I told him. I felt a closeness to him that it would usually take months perhaps years to develop. And now he was gone. Just like that, taking so much of me with him. I sat on my bed and cried.



When I got home I felt exhausted and numb. But one of the benefits of changing environments fast is that a major unhappiness can seem like a bad dream - something that never happened. I tried to cling on to that, but memories of Joe kept resurfacing. In the end I knew it was because I wanted to know why he had left like that. What were his reasons? I truly felt we had a connection that at least warranted a goodbye.

Later that day I went to see Dennis who had called to say there were still some papers I needed to sign. He was more friendly than expected. But I didn't want to engage in small talk. I just wanted to get everything done and leave, go home and sleep, but he insisted on taking me to lunch. It must have been my recent bruising that made me agree. I was also surprised when Dennis paid me a compliment, so unlike him.



‘I hear you’ve been on quite a journey,’ he said.

I nodded focussing on my cob salad. I hadn't realised quite how hungry I was. Dennis watched me closely. I had forgotten he had a habit of doing that. I resisted his gaze and kept scanning the restaurant, hoping to catch sight of Joe. I wasn't even sure why I thought he would be here, I just felt somewhere deep inside me that he would find me, that he would come back, return.

‘I made some enquiries and Sabine tells me that you spent some time with a man called Joe?’

‘What?’

‘Joe? Your guide? May I have his number? I was thinking of visiting the area and thought perhaps he could help.’

‘No. I don't have his details. Sabine is the one who recommended him.’

‘Oh? That's odd. She never said that to me.’

‘Well, he is a friend of a friend. That’s how she found him.’

‘Okay. Erm ... are you okay? Only you don’t look like someone who has returned from a vacation.’

‘I’m fine. Just feeling listless and you know the saying, when you return from a vacation you just need to go on another.’ I pushed my cob salad to the side. ‘When did you speak to Sabine?’

‘Just this morning. I wanted to find out if you had returned.’

‘I see.’

‘Look, if there is anything you need, just let me know. I’ll always be here for you, no matter what. I always promised you that.’

I nodded. ‘Thank you.’

‘Mr.Elliott? There’s a call for you,’ said the waiter.

‘You take the call Dennis. I have to go anyway. I’ll stay in touch.’



Sabine was sitting in the cafe her arms around Joe. They were sipping coffee and watching people walking past the plaza. I knew I would find them together. What I didn't know was why. It's interesting how that was the one question that brought me back to the village. I needed to know why one of my closest friends had set me up for pain, because that is what it was. They didn't realise I was there until I sat down opposite them. Neither Sabine nor Joe looked surprised, but they did look in love, which hurt much more.

'Why? Why did you do it?'

Joe smiled at Sabine and kissed her lightly on the cheek. 'You tell her darling,' he said.

'Because it was fun,' said Sabine.

'What?'

'It was fun.'

'A game remember?' said Joe.

'You did all that for your amusement Sabine?'

'Yes.'

And that was it. There was no other reason. I was just a source of fun, someone to be toyed with over a summer to keep a couple of lovers amused. It didn't seem so ridiculous hearing it sitting in a wide open plaza, under the warmth of the sun, but when I left it filled me with rage and a pain so immense that I lost myself, perhaps forever.



‘Hello? Are you still there? I’m still not clear why you didn’t report Joe missing?’

‘I don’t know. Don’t men leave women all the time? I know my father did. He was always leaving my mother. I just assumed the same thing happened to me. Now if there isn’t anything else, I need to get back to my children.’

‘Just one more thing Mrs. Elliott, have you heard from your friend Sabine?’



RIBBON



‘I bet you think you would done better. Perhaps handled the situation well? I don’t care. I did my best. It doesn’t change the fact there was a problem in the first place and all of you knew about it. I wish I hadn’t done anything, but I had no choice.’

‘Oh really? You could have walked away. I would have. Everyone round this table agrees with me. No one, Tanya, agrees with you. Have you noticed? No one! I have a stack of complaints to get through. People are upset. They were used to how things are done around here. They came in and just got on with it. We ignore problems. That’s how they go away without upsetting anyone.’

Tanya gritted her teeth. She could have kicked herself for saying anything in the first place. But she really felt she had to do something. Her professionalism was at stake. No, her sense of integrity. No, perhaps she was worried about the cost of errors. Or maybe they were right she just wanted the attention. Oh God, what have I done? she thought. ‘What am I going to do?’ She couldn’t stop the voice in her head. She felt dizzy and light headed. ‘Help,’ she said, before falling off her chair.

Bob grumbled loudly. He had drawn the short straw and had to carry Tanya to the lounge so she could be seen by a doctor. He hated touching people. Still he did put Tanya down ever so gently, making sure she had a pillow under her head. He even brushed back her blonde hair and put her

legs in a comfortable position. He waited by her side until the doctor arrived.

‘This? This is the patient?!’

‘Er, yes doctor. She fainted in our meeting. Do you have anything to help?’.

‘Are you out of your mind man?’

‘What’s the big deal? Just rouse her or something. We need her to get back to work in less than 20 minutes. People are waiting doc. Just do your thing. What we pay you for,’ said Bob, a little more brusquely than he wanted to, but he was worried about the time. Keeping this crowd waiting was a very bad idea. There were not enough security guards to quell any disturbance. People had travelled long distances to see Tanya, some had even come from abroad. She needed to just get up and sit in a chair. The others would do the rest. How hard was that?

The doctor glared at Bob, punched Tanya in the arm and threw some water in her face. ‘That should do it. Now. I have real work to do within my field of expertise.’

Tanya sat up slowly with Bob’s help. She looked at him, trying to get her bearings.

Bob decided to go gentle on her, ‘Just this session Tanya. Just today. And then we’ll have the full investigation. We can’t do anything now. Everyone is waiting. Please? Please just think of the reputation of our organisation. Or those who count on us. Huh? You can do this can’t you?’

Tanya nodded slowly and held onto Bob's arm as he helped her to her feet. She pushed her hair back and straightened her blazer. 'Do I look okay?' she asked.

Bob nodded uncapping a bottle of water. 'Here get this down you. I'll come and get you in 15 minutes. Okay? I'll send Stacey in to sit with you.' He patted Tanya's shoulder encouragingly and left.

The place was packed. Had it been this busy in previous years? The noise was overwhelming but Bob enjoyed it. This was his dream job. If he worked it right, this would be Tanya's last session and he would take over. No one would disagree. He was quite sure of that. Everyone was fed up with Tanya's meddling and questions. Why couldn't she just let things be? But of course, she had to do the 'right thing'. Whatever that meant. Bob picked up his pace. He would shut down anyone asking questions. He knew the main reporters; it was the bloggers he was concerned about.

'Is everything ready? What do you think? Too much?' asked Laura, indicating to her make up. 'Only we need to make sure everything is perfect okay Bob? It's very important. I'm up for an award. The big one!'

Oh fuck off, thought Bob. What have you ever done here eh Laura? Just show up in your new dress, get your photo taken and then piss off when we need you. Fuck all help you have been. This could be the biggest scandal to hit our organisation and you're worried about your skirt.

When Tanya emerged her face was plastered with a professional smile. She strode confidently to the front, past the others and stood at the main podium. She nodded and the music played. The closing night was always a sensation. Everyone important was here, not to be missed.

'And the winner this year for best in show is Amiable Accolades, an Afghan, by breeder Stanley Peters.' She put the medal on the man and

nodded at the dog. She didn't want to touch it. There was rousing applause. Amiable Accolades was a popular choice but Tanya wasn't happy about how winners were selected. Stanley hugged his dog and took it for its obligatory victory lap. Tanya felt faint again, but managed to hang on and made it back to the waiting area after the photos were taken and she had given her reasons for the judges choice.

When she got back to the room she collapsed on the sofa and lay back. Her head was spinning, so she closed her eyes. And that was the last anyone saw of Tanya.

Stacey called the police. 'Well, that's it then. Bob? You'll step up? Take Tanya's place? We'll make the announcement tomorrow. You saved us yet again. Everyone got the winner they wanted and Tanya's report on vote rigging has been buried with her. Good call on the bottled water. You made it look like a heart attack. See you at the meeting next week. Oh and by the way, Laura says to tell you she's nominating you for an award for all your hard work. Isn't it great how everything comes together in the end.'



MS.PRESTO



Suki stood next to the wooden stool. She carefully combed Ms.Presto's fur with a large soft brush. Her tiny hands gripped the brush as best she could and she had a look of quiet determination. Ms.Presto, sat upright proudly. The large cat was a siamese cross with deep brown eyes, flecked with amber. She tilted her head, encouraging Suki to brush under her chin, purring contentedly.

Suki loved Ms.Presto. Her room was filled with pictures of the regal looking cat. When they had visitors, Suki would show pictures of Ms.Presto and entertain them with her story about Ms.Presto having travelled through time to be with her. Ms.Presto had been a high priestess cat according to Suki and still held magical powers. Most found the tales about the feline companion amusing and wondered at Suki's imagination.

Ms.Presto was Suki's first friend and also her only friend. But she didn't mind; in fact she felt lucky to have such a kind, fun, magical friend. Suki's mums found Ms.Presto, alone and sickly in an abandoned warehouse they were surveying and brought her home. Apart from during school, the watchful cat never left Suki's side and even then she sometimes sat on the school fence watching Suki in her classroom and when in the yard playing.

But since last Tuesday, Suki had been kept home. She had been teased by her classmates since joining the school, for having two mums. One of them went so far as to tell her she would meet a fiery death as punishment.

That didn't bother Suki much, her response was she had little time for any supreme being that would punish her for being lucky enough to have two doting mums. Unfortunately her classmates wanted Suki upset, and given she laughed at them instead, and refused to succumb to constant bullying, they decided to push her down the stairwell, breaking her arm. The headmistress chose to exclude Suki from the school, arguing that her staff was not equipped to manage such families. While Suki's broken arm would heal, it would take much longer for her mothers hearts to mend. Jenny was still tearful even after a week, and Priya was beside herself calling friends and friends of friends to find somewhere they could move to. It would be their fourth move in under a year.

When they first decided to rent in the city, they had been attracted by the newly elected mayor who promised fairness for all. It was a short lived residency. The mayor was ousted after a year, having found guilty of embezzlement through a charity for homeless dogs of all things. Shortly after that the councillors started overturning gains made on equality and soon people of minority sexual orientations and gender identities were made to leave the city one way or another. Hate incidents rose and although Jenny loved her work at the University, even there, there were signs of the coming clamp down on anyone not part of the majority. Priya quit her job in the architecture firm as soon as she got the call from Suki's school. She wanted her family to move far, far away, but was still having trouble finding somewhere she considered safe. Almost all the cities to the north were forming a coalition to bring back wide reaching bans on same-sex marriages, adoptions, birth rights and gay venues. Writers of ambiguous sexuality were being banned from the curriculum overturning decades and decades of hard work and loss of life.

Suki spun Ms.Presto round gently on the stool so she could reach the other side of the cats well-tended coat. Ms.Presto was composed, but it was clear to Jenny and Priya, that she had been unsettled and upset by Suki's injury and was sticking even closer to the 6 year-old child than before.

‘My mum has said we need to move in with her, while we decide,’ said Priya. She stood up with a sense of finality.

Jenny knew she would start packing immediately. ‘That’s sweet of your mum. We are fortunate she loves us so.’

Suki grabbed Ms.Presto to her pulling the large cat off the stool. Ms.Presto held onto Suki as the child walked across the room. ‘We need to pack your things too,’ she said to the cat. ‘Can Ms.Presto have the red bag mum?’



On Saturday Suki sat in her room with her new chemistry set and book. She had tiny goggles on. Priya had given her the gift so her daughter would be happy while she and Jenny packed and loaded the truck. Ms.Presto lay next to Suki listening to her read and watching the child mix the different concoctions. Her red bag lay next to them, filled with Ms.Presto’s toys, black bandana and food bowl. She was settled about the move because she felt part of the family from the time she was adopted. She loved them for everything they were and was sad when she caught sight of Suki’s arm, still bandaged. She had wished she had been at the school that day. Maybe she could have done something. Priya popped her head round the door ‘Sweetheart we’ll leave later this afternoon. Come down for something to eat. Let Ms.Presto out for a while, so she gets a stretch before we leave.’



By 3pm the family were secure in the front of the small moving truck. Suki sat next to Jenny, with Ms.Presto on her lap. Jenny reversed out the drive. 'Here we go, she said. She was good at making her voice light and airy even at the worst times. They just got to the end of their street when they heard loud sirens blaring. Fire engines rushed past. In the distance they could just make out a billow of smoke.

'Is that the school?' asked Priya.

'I don't know,' said Jenny.

They continued onto the next street and saw teachers and students huddled together in the yard. The gym looked burnt and the fire marshals were surveying the site. They drove past in silence.

Suki was asleep cuddling Ms.Presto once they arrived at Priya's mums house. Jenny tried to separate the two, but Suki had a firm grip on the cat, so they had to be carried in together.

'What is this stuff?' said Priya, touching Ms.Presto's coat.

'It looks like dust, grime and cobwebs. Ugh,' said Jenny, tugging Ms.Presto from Suki, who started to cry.

By the time Jenny and Priya were ready to turn in, Ms.Presto had been cleaned, brushed and cleaned again. Suki insisted on staying up to make sure Ms.Presto looked pristine. When the mums managed to get Suki bed, she was still mumbling about Ms.Presto's morning adventure in the basement by the gym and starting the school fire. According to Suki it had something to do with wires. The cat stared at the two mums for a while before curling up next to Suki.

‘Let her just have this one Priya. She’s been through enough. Let her pretend. Children do that sometimes when they are hurt,’ said Jenny, exhausted from the drive.

‘It’s not healthy. She’s convinced Ms.Presto started the fire and thinks that’s okay!’

‘Well at least we know it wasn’t Suki,’ said Jenny, yawning and switching off the light, ‘Ms.Presto was the only one who went for a walk this morning.’



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



O S King is a published author who has written and told stories all their life. Their poems and short stories have been published in print and online. This is their second book of short stories.



REVERENCE & OTHER STORIES

O S KING