

L O N  
D O N  
E Y E S

SHORT STORIES



FRANCES M. THOMPSON

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# **LONDON EYES: SHORT STORIES – PREVIEW COPY**

**By Frances M. Thompson**

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Dedicated to W12, and all those  
who call it home.

“In this place, if you work you’re an idiot

Most of the smartest muthafuckers  
illiterate

Coz tax is a bitch, take half of your pension

Just to fight war, now they want  
congestion

And they wonder why we all goin’ insane

This is London, tell me is your city the  
same?”

Akala (Lyrics taken from the song “This is  
London”)

“...this grey monstrous London of  
ours with its myriads of people,

sordid sinners, and its splendid  
sins.”

Oscar Wilde

# A to Zed

## I.

A was his name. Nobody knew what it stood for, though many tried to guess.

“Amir?” said Theo. “It must be something like that.”

“Why?” said Rolly.

“‘Cause he’s Asian. It’s not going to be Aaron or Andre, is it?”

“That’s racist.”

“You’re racist.”

“Everyone’s fucking racist.”

Theo and Rolly were chewing on chicken wings, teeth knocking against bone, grease lining their lips. Leaning back against the glass front of the fast-food shop they’d just left, their backs blocked the menus on display in the window, but no one would ever think about asking the two black teenage boys to move.

“You see they changed the sign?”

“What sign?” said Rolly.

“That sign,” Theo pointed a bone across the road.  
“For the market.”

Shepherd’s Bush Market. The words curved around a blue arch.

“Looks like the old one,” said Rolly, eventually.

“No, it doesn’t. Looks nothing like the old one,” argued Theo.

Rolly shrugged and went back to gnawing at the bone in his hand.

“That’s where A does a lot of his business, you know,” said Theo. “He’s got loads of customers in there.”

“In the market?”

“Yeah. He goes in with that bag full of gear and he comes out with it half empty, but with his pockets loaded with cash, I bet.”

“How much do you reckon he makes?”



“Well, how much is a gram worth these days?”

Rolly wanted to ask what the gram was of, but that would make him look stupid.

“Err, twenty quid,” he guessed.

“Yeah, right,” Theo sniffed. “Like, about that. And how much do you reckon he carries in that bag of his?”

“Probably a couple of kilos.”

“At least! More like ten or fifteen!”

“Yeah, of course,” Rolly nodded.

“So, if he sells it all, that’s...”

A couple of seconds later, Rolly replied. “Well, if it’s just ten kilograms, and he sells all that, that’s two hundred grand!”

“Fuck,” whispered Theo, throwing his last bone back in the box. He needed a napkin but rather than walk the six steps back inside, he chose to wipe his fingers on his jeans. Rolly was still nibbling away, determined to find more meat where anyone else would see there was none.

“So you should go ask him if he needs us to work for

him,” said Theo.

“Me?” Rolly’s eyes were wide and white. They reminded Theo of fried eggs.

“Well, someone’s got to.”

“Why can’t you?”

“It was my idea to watch him today and it was my idea to ask him for work. I can’t do fucking everything,” said Theo. “And I paid for the chicken, so...”

Rolly always owed Theo for something. Today it was the chicken, tomorrow it would be something else, Rolly had lost track a long time ago, but he feared that Theo never would.

“Look, he’s still right there in that stall on the end. Just go talk to him.”

“What do I say?”

Rolly saw Theo pull a packet of roll-up papers out of his pocket. They always looked freshly bought, the corners of the packaging crisp and clean.

“I don’t know, but after we’ve got the job, we’ll go home and celebrate,” Theo said, waving the packet at his friend.

Rolly didn't even need the weed as an incentive. He just liked to be in Theo's flat. It was always clean and smelt like something good had just come out of the oven. Rolly thought about that as he shoved the box of chicken bones into Theo's hands and ran across the road just quickly enough to avoid the number 207 bus.

After putting their rubbish in the bin a few steps away, Theo went back to leaning against the chicken shop window. As he waited he got his phone out, but the battery was dead. He cursed the black screen and felt at a loss about what to do next. He didn't want to watch Rolly mess it all up, which he knew he would. A wasn't someone you approached in the street and if Rolly had given it more thought he would have known that too. But Rolly never did give things much thought and Theo was bored, so at the very least it would kill a few minutes, and if it did work, well that would be an unexpected bonus. Then he could finally make some serious money and get himself a better phone, some more trainers and maybe a gold chain like the one Rude Boy Reggie wore.

With nothing else to do, he did look across the road to the women's clothing stall where A had been leaning on a rack of nighties, talking to another Asian man. However, before he could find A again, a couple walked in front of him and blocked his view by leaning in together to see something on a phone.

The man was tall and wore leather trousers on legs

that were so thin they reminded Theo of the too-skinny white women on the covers of his mum's magazines. And the girl by his side, well she was more of a woman really, all curves in front and on the side, like Theo was starting to think was the right way for a woman to be. He did think it was funny though, that she was dressed all in pink and purple, like a little girl. Whatever it was they were looking at made them laugh out loud, as if they were the only people in the world allowed to stand on the pavement of Uxbridge Road on a Thursday afternoon.

"Poof," Theo whispered under his breath after they'd moved on. He didn't have a word for the woman. She didn't really look like a slag and Theo only used the C-word for really, really stupid people.

When he finally looked up and across the road he saw Rolly running back towards him, ignoring the cars that roared to a halt for him.

"He's gone."

"What?"

"He moved on as soon as I got like this close," Rolly pinched his finger and thumb together.

"There he is," Theo said and nodded to the other side of the road where A was walking quickly past the kebab shop and towards the bank on the corner that always had queues for the cash machines. Theo noticed how white A's

trainers were and that he took long, quick strides, like he had somewhere very important to be. At the end of the road, he navigated across the junction to the traffic island in the middle of the crossing and then he walked all the way across so that he was just a little further ahead of them. Theo and Rolly slowed a little and stretched up on to their toes. Neither were tall young men, though both secretly hoped that they'd gain a few more inches before their teenage years were up. But A wasn't a man of height either and Theo took this to mean that you don't have to be tall to be a big man.

"He's gone down Aldine Street," Rolly said, pointing. Theo pushed his arm down and walked on.

When they reached the corner of Aldine Street, they stopped. Standing close to the fruit and vegetables lined up in plastic bowls outside a shop, the name of which was displayed in the swirls of Arabic, they watched A cross the road and stride along the other side, before turning into a small pathway that led to the front door of a four-storey building painted pale pink.

"Is that where he lives?" Rolly asked.

"How the fuck should I know?" Theo tutted at his friend.

Rolly took a step to the side and leaned against the wall behind him. He began wondering what Theo's mum might be cooking.

Theo stayed where he was, keeping his eyes fixed on the house A had just disappeared into. After a while he moved to join his friend leaning against the wall.

“How did you know what this road was called?” Theo asked many minutes later.

“I know my street names,” said Rolly. “I like maps.”

Theo nodded, thinking that was weird, but he wasn't really in the mood to make a big deal about it.

## II.

A knocked on the door but there was no reply. This meant only one thing. Pumping down the stairs, he could hear him before he saw him. The swearing was loud, slurred and littered with Polish.

“Mr Zed! Mr Zed!” A called out.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Mr Zedrewsky didn’t stop waving his walking stick around attacking the rose bushes that lined the back of the building. You couldn’t call it a garden, this pathway of grass that a few residents did their best to keep trim and lined with narrow flowerbeds. That had been the advantage of living with mostly old neighbours, A used to think. They actually cared about things. Well, most of them did. Looking at Mr Zedrewsky, yielding his walking stick like a golf club, would make you question how much he cared for the flowers he was attacking. Thankfully his unsteady balance and tired muscles made his efforts mostly futile.

“Not again,” said A approaching the man who was in his early sixties, but looked ten, maybe even twenty years older. The stroke had made him old in a way time never could, numbing one side of his body and brain.

“Where’s Moira?” A asked.

“Stupid bitch!” Spit flew through the air. It was hard for Mr Zedrewsky to say S’s.

“Mr Zed, stop...” A took the stick from him with little effort.

“Don’t tell me what to do! Why don’t you just leave me alone?”

“I’m not here for you. I’m here for the flowers. What did they ever do to you?”

“Oh piss off!”

A wanted to, but he couldn’t.

“Let’s go inside, yeah?” he moved to take Mr Zedrewsky’s arm.

“Get your dirty hands off me!”

A filled his lungs with air and he counted to ten before he exhaled. Just like his mum told him to when he was little and got angry.

“Fine,” he said. “But I’ve got your walking stick and I’m going inside. I’ll enjoy watching you struggle to get up the stairs from the top, shall I?”

There followed mutterings in Polish and English, but after some half-hearted kicks of his foot, Mr Zedrewsky’s



frame shuffled towards A who hadn't moved. The stick was snatched back and the two men walked inside together, A positioning himself on the man's right side, so he could slip an arm under Mr Zedrewsky's elbow.

Only when he was halfway back up the stairs, did A turn to Mr Zedrewsky to ask him how he had managed to get down by himself.

"I'm not a fucking cripple," he replied.

"But I don't get it. Why go to all that effort to get downstairs just to kill the flowers? Don't you think they look nice?"

"Flowers bring bees, and bees sting," was Mr Zedrewsky's quiet but firm reply.

"You ever been stung?"

Mr Zedrewsky went silent, and leaned harder on A's arm. "No, but I'm not about to take that chance."

A had come to the conclusion that he would never understand a handful of things about Mr Zedrewsky. Moira's theory was that the stroke had robbed him of his ability to decipher colour, and not seeing the colour of the roses made him angry. A wasn't about to go down the road of trying to find out if this was true. It was much more realistic to expect that the increasing wobbles and

weakness in his right side would eventually stop him from managing to get down there.

Inside Mr Zedrewsky's flat they fell into a familiar routine. Mr Zedrewsky sat down, put the TV on and hooked his stick over the arm of his chair. A walked into the kitchen grimacing at how loud the volume was. He filled the kettle and found two clean mugs.

"Is Moira coming back today?" he called out loudly.

"Stupid bitch!"

"Yeah, you said that already. But is she coming back?"

"She fucking better."

A didn't have to ask to know what had happened. Mr Zedrewsky had lost his rag, said worse things than usual, she'd left offended and upset, and it was anyone's guess if she'd come back. A took his phone out of his jacket pocket and took a photo of the phone number written on a fading yellow Post-it note stuck to the fridge with a magnet that listed phone numbers for the borough's emergency Social Services.

"What are you doing in there? Having a wank?" Mr Zedrewsky called and knowing he couldn't be seen, A smiled.

“Keep talking like that and I’ll forget to put sugar in your tea,” he shouted back.

“Oh, you’re a real hard man aren’t you?” Mr Zedrewsky yelled back but the words bounced up and down in laughter.

Tea served and a pitiful plate of broken biscuits on the table between them, A could see Mr Zedrewsky’s frame had shrunk back into itself. His chest was no longer puffed out and his good leg was stretched out in front of him.

“How long we been doing this?” A asked.

“Doing what? We’re not having a fucking affair...”

“Me, visiting you,” A said. “And you giving me grief.”

“Too fucking long,” Mr Zedrewsky said and his voice was breathy and shallow, as though he was half asleep.

“Three years, I think.”

“Really?”

“Well, it must be. I moved out of next door two years ago and we were already mates by then.”

“Mates?” Mr Zedrewsky raised his eyebrows, but didn’t turn to look at A. “You think we’re mates?”

“Beggars can’t be choosers,” said A and he reached for one of the biscuits. He took a bite. It was softer than he expected and he put it back on the plate, chewing the chunk in his mouth as quickly as he could.

“I thought you were going to make me a millionaire?” Mr Zedrewsky turned and fixed A with his slightly wonky old eyes.

“And I thought you were a harmless old man,” said A. “Looks like we were both wrong.”

### III.

Theo was growing bored of standing around. In the last few minutes, a man from the shop had come outside to watch them and that was starting to annoy him. What did he think they were going to do? Steal a quid's worth of apples? Theo didn't even like fruit.

"Theo?" Rolly's voice was close to a whisper

"What?"

"Can we just forget about this and go back to yours and chill there?"

"But we're not done here," Theo said, folding his arms. "*You're* not done here."

Rolly sighed and his shoulders dipped down. He was starting to wish he'd gone to school instead.

"Is your phone working?" asked Theo.

"Yeah, why?"

"What time is it?"

Rolly's screen flashed on at a quick touch. 14.45.

“It’s been like an hour,” said Theo. “What the fuck is he doing in there?”

Rolly sighed. Theo’s mum would be home from work soon. They wouldn’t be able to smoke, but there would at least be the smell of dinner cooking.

#### IV.

A left the tea cups drying upside down on top of a draining board that needed a good scrub. It was time to get back to work.

“Right, Mr. Zed. You got ten minutes for a quick stocktake and business meeting?”

“I’ll ask my secretary to look in my fucking diary and get back to you!”

Pretending he hadn’t heard, A walked into the bedroom and did his best to ignore the smell of TCP and lavender. Only quickly did he glance at the single bed covered in a quilted patchwork blanket and again, as he always did, he wondered who had made that for Mr Zedrewsky. A wife? A friend? A sister? Maybe it was his mother, a long time ago.

A opened the wardrobe and found the suitcase that stood inside. It was as heavy as he expected and he used both arms to lift it out and pull it into the other room, leaving tracks behind him on the old grey carpet. Mr Zedrewsky turned the volume down and watched A, chewing his lip.

“When’s the next delivery?”

“Tuesday,” A replied. “You’ll be in?”

“What do you think?” Mr Zedrewsky shifted in his seat, fighting that inevitable pull to the right. “Not exactly got any fucking holidays booked.”

“Glad to hear it. You don’t get paid annual leave.”

A laid the suitcase flat on the carpet in front of the television and unzipped it.

“What day is it today, anyway?”

“Thursday,” A said.

“Is it?”

“Yep.”

“Well, that means shit meals for two days, after tomorrow.”

A wanted to ignore him, but he found it hard to. “I’ll bring you some food from my mum’s. I’m going there tomorrow.”

“Curry? Onion bhajis? I don’t want any of that muck,” said Mr Zedrewsky, but it was a half-hearted insult. He watched A as he lifted the lid of the suitcase and began to pull out a number of shoebox-size packages wrapped in



brown paper. A began to unwrap them, rolling the paper up into little balls, which he collected to one side. This part always reminded Mr Zedrewsky of Christmas, or of what Christmas used to be.

“Any good?” Mr Zedrewsky said when all the packages had been unwrapped.

“Yeah,” A replied, flipping the contents over and pulling them closer to his eyes. He cut into the cling film. “I think so.”

“Well, I hope you can shift it quickly this time. I don’t want to have to see you too many times this week.”

“I can probably take half of it now and I’ll get the other half on Tuesday, after the delivery comes.”

“Will you be bringing that other guy again? That one I don’t trust?”

“You don’t trust anyone.”

“Quite right. I bet you pay him too much too.”

“Not as much as I pay you. Speaking of which, I’ll put your money through the letter box on Sunday, maybe Monday.” A walked across the room and picked up the half-empty bag he’d brought in with him.

“I’ll be counting every fucking penny, so make sure it’s all there, alright?” Mr Zed leaned back into his chair and sighed again. The lids of his eyes lowered and he was asleep before A had finished loading the sports bag with as much as he could carry.

Before letting himself out, A put the suitcase back in the wardrobe, switched the television off and made sure there was food and fresh milk in the fridge. While there, he opened the freezer drawer and found all of the envelopes of money he’d ever put through the letterbox, each one still sealed shut.

## V.

Theo was just about to curse the situation one more time and spit at the feet of the man who was still hovering close to them, when Rolly told him A was walking towards them. They watched together.

“The bag’s full again,” said Rolly.

“More stash, probably.”

“Where’s he going with it?”

“How should I know?”

A walked to the end of the road and turned left, diving into a crowded pavement. Rolly and Theo picked up their speed. They hopped on and off the road, dancing around a long line of bus stops to keep up.

“He’s going to the tube?” Rolly wondered out loud, as he had a tendency to do.

“Shut up,” said Theo who was worried the flood of people was going to swallow A up.

The beeping of a crossing ahead caught Rolly’s attention and he stretched his neck to get a look between the parade of red buses.

“He’s crossing the road! Looks like he’s headed to the Green...”

Meandering their way through the cars and ignoring the horns, the two boys made it to the edge of Shepherd’s Bush Green and began to take the same pathway as A, the one that diagonally sliced the Green in two. They slowed their pace to keep more of a distance.

Rolly looked around him and again saw how much the Green had changed. They’d even planted new grass. He remembered that there used to be a playground, close to where they’d crossed the road. It had been old, falling apart and always too busy, but it had done the job when he was a kid. Now it was gone.

“Shit,” said Theo, who stopped walking. Ahead, A had turned and was walking back towards them.

“Are you two following me?” A called out. Neither boy moved.

When he finally reached them, A dropped the bag he was carrying and pointed a skinny, brown finger at each of them. “You are, aren’t you?”

His voice was deep and his eyes seemed to darken the more they stared at Theo and Rolly.

Theo was the first to speak. “No,” he said simply,

though the word sounded like it should have been followed by more.

“Then why were you standing on the corner of my road ten minutes ago and now I see you both standing in front of me?” A said. “Who are you working for?”

“No one,” said Rolly quickly. It was easy to say things when they were the truth. “We want to work for you!”

Theo looked at his friend through downcast eyes and he kissed his teeth, like he'd seen his cousin do when he got pissed off by his boss or his wife. Theo's mother always said it was a bad habit his cousin should never have picked up and that Theo was not to learn it, but Theo liked to practise in his room and the noise he just made sounded exactly like the way his cousin did it.

A was laughing now, big bubbles of laughter that burst when they popped out of his open mouth.

Theo saw that A's front teeth were almost as white as his trainers. He began to feel a heat rise in his neck and cheeks.

Rolly couldn't understand what A was laughing at and he was surprised to see that he had lots of fillings dotted around his back teeth.

“You want to work for me? What exactly is it you want to do? Carry my bags?”

Rolly looked at the bag on the ground. It looked full and heavy.

Over the steady hum of traffic that stop-started behind them, the wail of sirens got closer. None of them turned to look, even when the sound multiplied.

A pinched his eyes as he looked at the two boys. He guessed their ages to be fourteen or fifteen; he could see expensive trainers and logos on every item of clothing one of the boys wore. The other wore clothes that looked too big for him and there were grass stains on the knees of his jeans. Both boys wore the hoods of their sweatshirts pulled up over their heads.

“I could carry your bag for you?” said Rolly who was poking his thumb through a hole in his sweatshirt, pulling the sleeve down over his hand.

“Or we could do other things, you know, like...” Theo lost his trail again.

A stopped smiling and gathered together a frown. His mouth flat lined, expressionless.

“What is it that you think I do?” he asked.

Between them there was silence. Around them there was heavy wailing as a chain of police cars weaved through the traffic that flanked the Green on all sides.

Rolly looked at Theo, expecting him to explain. Theo was the one who had been watching him all this time. It was Theo who had seen him with the man they called Rude Boy Reggie, the one with the Jamaican accent – though Rolly’s mother swore on her life he was born in Kilburn. It was Theo who’d explained that Rude Boy Reggie called him “A” and that they’d shared a special handshake after an envelope had passed between them. And it was Theo who had seen A pay regular visits to the roughest estates and tower blocks in the area, the ones their mothers would never let them go into. And they never actually did, unlike A who they had seen disappear down alleyways and up dark staircases while they stood on the other side of the road.

Theo stayed silent, even his eyes seemed to have nothing to say as they stared down at the tips of his shoes.

“You don’t even know, do you?” A was grinning wildly again.

Rolly was the first to look away, as if he was suddenly curious about the sirens. Into his gaze stepped an old man just a few metres away. Shuffling along, he wore a woollen jumper with a dark stain all down the front and his dirty trousers were tied up with string. Rolly told himself that things weren’t so bad. So what if A was making them feel stupid? So what if they didn’t get to work for him? So

what if they had missed the chance to get stoned today? So what if he had to go home and eat his mum's frozen meals rather than Mrs Osman's home cooking? Things could always be worse.

"You deal drugs," Rolly said. The sound of his voice a surprise to all three of them.

"Open the bag," A said, kicking it with his toe. "Go on, open it."

His face was free of expression again, as he folded his arms. His brown skin was the same colour as Rolly's who stepped closer and bent down. Theo shifted his stare from looking at one spot on the ground to the one where his friend now knelt, next to the bag.

The small sound of the zip seemed to climb above all others. Rolly pulled at the opening from either side. He dipped his hand in and pulled out a stack of colour, covered in plastic.

At first Theo thought they were pages of LSD tabs. He'd seen on TV shows and in films how they looked like printed paper, covered in coloured cartoon-like images. But it only took a few seconds to realise that he was wrong.

"CDs," said Rolly.

"Wrong," said A. "DVDs."



“Films?” whispered Theo.

“Not just any films. Bollywood, boys, and Pollywood and Gollywod, too.” A took the pile from Rolly and began flicking through them, showing the occasional cover. Theo and Rolly saw the pixellated images of men and women dancing or embracing, printed on paper with coloured ink that looked like it was running out. “These are the newest releases you can find. Straight from India. Most of these haven’t even been in the cinemas yet.”

Rolly started smiling, and Theo looked away, kissing his teeth again, though it sounded less impressive.

“And we thought you were doing all this illegal shit,” said Rolly, holding his rolled up hand to his mouth, hiding a smile that wanted to spill into laughter.

A put the discs back in the bag and zipped it up.

“Make no mistake,” he said. “This is very illegal. I’m breaking a number of copyright, import and export laws. Not to mention the tax I’m dodging. But at least I’m making my customers happy in a way that’s not going to kill them, or anyone else.”

Theo finally looked up and A could see the slightest tinge of pink poking through on his cheeks.

“Not that I don’t appreciate the offer of help, boys, I really do,” A offered. “But right now I don’t think my business partner and I are looking to take anyone else on. To be honest, he’s enough of a handful as it is.”

He picked up the bag.

“So, you’re both local?” A asked.

“Yeah,” said Rolly. “White City Estate.”

“That’s where I grew up,” said A. “I’ve got a lot of customers there.”

The boys stayed silent.

“Well, I’ll see you around.” A turned and started to walk away.

“Mr A!” Rolly called out. He then approached the man he had been so petrified of earlier. “One question...”

A raised an eyebrow and waited.

“Your name. Why do they call you A? What’s it stand for?”

A laughed, his body leaning over to the side which carried his heavy bag. “That’s what you want to know?”

“Yeah. What’s your real name?”

“My real name is Gary, Gary Kumar. But people started calling me A because I kept getting A grades in school.” Gary Kumar straightened up and looked at the two boys in front of him, one at a time. “Which is probably where you both should be?”

“Yeah,” said Rolly and he sighed a small laugh.

“Come on, Rolly,” Theo hit his friend on the arm before turning and walking away without looking at A. “Enough of this shit, let’s go!”

A was already walking away when Rolly looked back to say goodbye. Rolly watched him, noticing how he held his back straight and his head up. The way he walked, with his knees bending outwards reminded Rolly of the way some of QPR’s players walked when he saw them at Loftus Road, the one thing he still did with his dad these days. Rolly checked his phone to find out the time.

“Hey, Theo! They’ll be playing footie at Wood Lane in half an hour. Let’s go!” He ran after his friend.

Theo didn’t talk to Rolly as they walked back up Uxbridge Road and down Frithville Gardens. He didn’t even say goodbye when Rolly said he was going to run on to join the kick about. Instead, he walked home alone.

Once there, he grunted hello to his mother and then walked to his bedroom. He closed the door, plugged his phone in to charge and lay down on his bed, staring up at the posters of the rappers he wanted to be like. When one particularly strong wave of anger spilled over inside him, so strong he could feel the beat of his pulse on either side of his forehead, he jumped up and tore down all the posters until these men were nothing but scraps of paper on his floor. When he lay back down on his bed he couldn't believe how blank his walls looked.

When his phone finally beeped and switched on again, a little chunk of battery bringing it to life once more, Theo checked that his alarm for school in the morning was on. Then he went to see what his mum was cooking for dinner. His mum was the best cook in the world.

“Always follow your dreams...

Except for the one where you're naked at  
work.”

Thought of the Day at Angel Tube Station  
on Tuesday 3rd June 2014.

“It is not the walls that make the  
city, but the people within them.

The walls of London may be  
battered, but the spirit of the  
Londoner stands resolute and  
undismayed.”

King George VI

# Angel

## Chapter One

It didn't take Tim long to realise what made life in London colder than in his native Edinburgh: loneliness.

Standing in his apartment, a sharp wind whipping its way through the gap under the door, Tim felt it bite the toe that popped out of a hole in his sock. Trying to wiggle it back inside, he wrinkled his nose at the worn carpet on which he stood. There was no denying it; it was distinctly poo coloured.

“Remember, you get what you pay for in London,” the estate agent had said.

Tim had been in no position to argue so he'd signed a one year lease and told himself he'd ask about changing the brown carpet just as soon as he'd built up the confidence.

Two months later, at 9.30pm on a Saturday evening, the brown carpet was still there. Perhaps more depressingly, so was Tim.

Before moving there, Tim knew three people who

lived in London. One was his Uncle Mack, an eccentric drunk who'd left the family stronghold of Edinburgh to marry an unsuitable English woman. At least, that was Tim's mother's version of events, who warned him not to make contact. He was, however, permitted to contact Marie, the second person he knew in London and the product of Uncle Mack's seemingly successful thirty year marriage to the unsuitable English woman. So Tim did. He emailed his cousin and when that went unanswered, he sent her a text message. Eventually he called and to his surprise she picked up.

"Yeah, who's this?" A high-pitched voice asked.

"Hi Marie! This is Tim, your cousin."

"I don't have a cousin called Tim. Oh wait, are you one of the Scottish ones?"

"Er, yes. I'm from Edinburgh, but I live in London now."

"Did Dad give you my number?"

"Well, no. My mum did actually..."

"How the hell does she have my number?"

"I'm not sure, but I just called because I've just moved down here for work. I'm living in Angel, do you

know it?"

"Yeah, 'course I do..." Tim found it strange that someone related to him had such a strong London accent.

"Well, I thought it might be nice if we met up. One day, or evening. Whatever... You're a student aren't you?"

"Yeah. St. Martin's. Fashion."

"So, it'll be my treat, you know. Seeing as you're a student. You could meet me after work one day?"

"Where do you work?"

"Canary Wharf."

"Serious? That's far!"

"It's actually pretty quick once you get to Bank, you just take the DLR and -"

"Yeah but my Travelcard only covers Zones 1 and 2."

"That's fine. It's in Zone 2."

"No, it ain't."

"I'm pretty sure it is," said Tim. "Never mind. I'll



come to you. Where do you live?"

"In halls. Students only. Maybe I'll just text you if I want to meet, yeah?"

"Okay. Well, anytime should be fine..."

But she'd already gone.

The third person Tim knew in London was an old school friend. His name was Malcolm and he'd been the only person in Tim's high school science lessons who got higher marks than him. Rather than this leaving Tim a little put out, he was deeply grateful, appreciative of the fact that someone was more of a nerd than him. He'd had other classmates who had headed south for university, but Malcolm was the only one Tim had kept in touch with. That was until a few years ago. At first they'd exchanged emails comparing their computer science courses, but eventually the contact had petered out and Tim never really knew why. However, he still had Malcolm's email address and, much to Tim's pleasure, Malcolm emailed straight back suggesting they meet for a coffee the next day at a place in Dalston.

After a long stop-start bus ride Tim only needed to check his A to Z twice before he walked through the doors to the coffee shop and felt instantly hopeful. This was exactly the place he could imagine himself and Malcolm hanging out. There were piles of board games in one corner, a pinball machine in another and rows of old leather sofas

in between. Tim ordered a black coffee, found a seat and waited. And waited and waited. Some forty-seven minutes after their agreed meeting time, a tall skinny man marched up to him, a wave of hair slicked back atop shaved sides, and a metal bolt skewed through the middle of his nose.

“Tim, mate!”

“Malcolm?” Tim stood up to shake his hand.

“It’s Mal...”

“Mal...”

“Yeah, sorry I’m late. Had a nightmare journey here - on my bike, fucking traffic - and well, I also totally slept in. Bit of a late one last night...”

Tim watched his old friend talk. The sheepish lad he’d sat next to in physics was now a pierced, confident and colourfully dressed young man; Tim had to blink a few times to adjust to the brightness of his neon yellow T-shirt.

“Yeah, two of my flatmates just secured funding for their art gallery so they insisted we all stayed up smoking to celebrate.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“Yeah, it was, man. Wild night... Actually, every night is a bit wild, these days...”

Tim thought it was great Mal had come out of his shell and he liked his friend’s new confidence. What he didn’t like was Mal’s English accent.

“Sounds cool. Can I get you a coffee?”

“Yeah, that’s the thing, man. I can’t stay. I’ve got to be somewhere.”

“Oh, right. No problem,” said Tim feeling his shoulders sink.

“It’s for a tattoo. Getting this filled in.” He pulled up the sleeve of his T-shirt and wrapped around the small curve of his upper arm was the outline of a man with a beard, his arms outstretched. “I know what you think it is, but it’s not.”

“Jesus?”

“Exactly. You think it’s him but it’s not. It’s just a guy with long hair and a beard. Cool, huh?”

Tim didn’t really think so, but he nodded regardless.

“You got any tats?”

“God, no!” Tim raised up the palms of his hands in instant dismissal of the idea. “I mean, they’re not really my thing.”

Malcolm shook the bunch of keys in his hand and took a couple of seconds to look Tim up and down. “Shit, mate, you’ve not changed one bit.”

“Haven’t I?”

“What’s this job you’ve got then?”

“I’m an assistant IT lead in a foreign currency exchange firm.”

“I have no fucking idea what you just said.” Malcolm shook his head and laughed. “Sounds intense.”

“It’s a good job. I like it. I just... I just don’t really work with anyone else. My boss is based in Switzerland and I work in an office on my own.”

“Well, that’s pretty sweet.” Malcolm turned towards the door of the cafe. “Hey, walk with me to my bike, tell me about it.”

“Well, that’s all there is to tell really.” Tim followed his old school friend. “I don’t really mix with everyone else so it was cool to connect with you again, Malcolm... Sorry, Mal.”

“Yeah. Do you want a fag?”

“Oh, no thanks. I don’t smoke. So, what are you doing for work?”

“You know, a bit of this and that. I’m in between jobs at the moment, just got to build up my portfolio and start networking...”

“Portfolio? What’s that for?”

“Graphic design. Posters mainly. Music posters, you know the ones you see around for club nights, DJs, festivals and all that.” Mal gripped his cigarette between his lips as he bent over to unlock a chain that was securing a racing bike to a metal railing. The bike was completely white, apart from the tyres, which were fluorescent yellow, just like Malcolm’s T-shirt.

“Posters? I didn’t know you also studied graphic design at uni?”

“Uni? Oh mate, I fucked that off a long time ago. Yeah dropped out during the second year,” Tim noticed that Malcolm sniffed a lot. Perhaps it was that piece of metal bolted through his septum.

“Hey, I know you don’t smoke, but do you *smoke*?”

“Sorry?”

Mal stood up again. “You know mate, weed?”

“Oh.”

“Do you want some? That’s kind of my thing now, you know. Just to tide me over now and again.”

Tim nodded, understanding. His old school friend was a drop out, a drug dealer, and had an English accent. Tim didn’t know which was worse.

“Thanks but no, I’m not really into that much.”

“I can sort you out with other things too, if you have other, you know, interests.” His bike unlocked, Malcolm took a long time squeezing his keys back into the tight opening of his jeans pocket. “I’ll give you a good deal. Like an introductory offer?”

“No, thanks. I’m fine. But we could go for beers one night this week?”

Mal climbed onto his bike. “Yeah, maybe, I’ve got quite a lot on at the moment.”

“Or next weekend, if that’s better?”

“Maybe.”

“You’ve got my number,” Tim called out to Malcolm.

But he was already gone.

Tim never heard from Marie or Malcolm again and it was with a nervous energy that he tried to contact both on more than a few occasions. He also continued to try and strike up conversations with colleagues in the cafeteria at work, not once being rewarded with more than a polite smile or one word answer. His boss had warned him that “...nobody likes IT, until something needs fixing.” So Tim stopped trying so hard, told himself to be patient, and he began praying for hardware problems. But that wasn’t proving very successful either as it was a Saturday night in London and all Tim had for company was the brown carpet he so eagerly wanted to get rid of.

He sighed, opened another can of beer and started reading a book he’d already read before.

## Chapter Two

The following morning, Tim woke early. Opening his eyes he saw the sun pushing through his thin curtains, filling his room with light, and this made him think that perhaps today could be a good day.

Struck with the urge to feel the warmth of the spring sunshine on his skin, Tim showered and dressed quickly. He stared at his empty fridge briefly before deciding to find breakfast in a nearby cafe.

Though his flat and building were a tired state of affairs, the location he lived in couldn't have been better. Nestled in the far corner of the busy triangle squashed between Essex Road and Upper Street, Tim liked saying his new home was in Angel. It sounded like a gentle and special place. Of course, the reality was a bit different. But Tim saw past the sirens, traffic and lost souls who liked to zig-zag across the pavement talking to themselves, by reminding himself that according to Time Out magazine his forty minute journey to work was better than the average Londoner's commute.

Emerging onto Essex Road, Tim found that being a Sunday morning, most places were closed. The streets belonged to runners and dog-walkers, and two girls with holes in their tights and hair spilling in all directions who walked past Tim giggling and smelling of last night's



alcohol. As they did Tim felt a little bit jealous.

He eventually found a chain coffee shop open near Angel station. After ordering an over-sized cappuccino and a pastry, he sat in a chair opposite a young blonde woman who was wearing a man's jumper and reading a broadsheet newspaper. Tim considered the ways in which he could start a conversation with her. He was still looking at her when she sneezed. Without raising her gaze from the paper she wiped her nose with one of the sleeves of the thick wool jumper. Tim stared at the stain left on her sleeve as it soaked into the wool.

Then Tim opened his book and picked up where he'd left off the night before.

Two hours later, the girl had left, his second coffee had gone and he found himself craving a change of scenery, so he took the long way home. He walked north up Liverpool Road before taking a wrong turning that led to a dead-end, rather than back on to Upper Street as he had expected. A little confused, Tim began to dig into his backpack for the A to Z that he had grown to feel naked without. It was then that he heard the sound.

It was the sweetest sound he'd heard in a long time. It was a chorus of people laughing. Laughing aloud and freely. He looked at his watch. 11.20. Was this some new London concept he'd not yet read about in Time Out? A Sunday morning comedy club perhaps?

There it was again and he walked a few steps in its direction. He found a driveway at the end of the cul-de-sac. It was shaded by the new leaves of old trees and led to a one-storey, grey brick building. Stepping closer, he noticed a blue sign at the entrance of the driveway.

## **St. Anne's New Voice Church**

**Sunday Celebration 10.30am.**

### **ALL WELCOME**

Reading those last two words, Tim thought about taking a few more steps forward, but he didn't. Instead, he turned, ready to walk back the way he came.

Then there was more laughter, like a blast of happy birdsong. It was followed by the scrapes of chairs being pushed back and Tim heard the beats of drums, the strum of an electric guitar and, suddenly, singing. Tim couldn't make out the words or the tune, but he listened to the chorus of voices singing the same song.

Then Tim put his A to Z back in his bag and he walked down the driveway.

## Chapter Three

“Welcome!” A tall man with a big smile was standing at the doorway. He bobbed up and down in time with the music. “There are plenty of seats inside.”

Tim followed the direction of the man’s point, down a short corridor and through double glass doors. He found himself at the back of a large room full of people singing and clapping, standing in front of plastic chairs. Ahead of him was an aisle that led to a stage where a small group of musicians - two men with guitars and a woman on a keyboard - were playing with their eyes closed. The audience waved their hands in the air and threw their heads back in happiness. It wasn’t dissimilar to the crowds Tim had seen at T in the Park festival a few summers ago.

“Excuse me.”

Tim felt a tap on his forearm. A woman was standing beside him. She had short white hair and a face lined in soft wrinkles. “There’s a spare seat here, next to me.”

It was the first time he’d been invited to sit next to someone since he’d arrived in London.

“Thank you,” he accepted with a smile and moved past her. A few seconds later the music stopped.

“Wow!” A man jumped onto the stage.

He was young, maybe in his late thirties, and wore a plain blue T-shirt tucked into jeans. Tim wondered where the priest was.

“You know, sometimes, when I wake up on a Sunday morning, the first thought that comes into my head is ‘I do NOT want to get up today! I don’t want to go to church. I don’t want to lead service. I don’t want to do anything but go back to sleep!’”

The congregation laughed. Tim turned to the woman with white hair. She was grinning, a leather-bound book lying in her lap.

HOLY BIBLE. Tim recoiled a little.

“But then I get here and I see all of you and I hear all of you and I sing with all of you and I find myself having another conversation with myself. I say, ‘Rob, what is wrong with you? You should set your alarm earlier! You should run here every Sunday morning!’ And that’s thanks to you all. I feel happier here than I do anywhere, all week! Where else can we find that on a Sunday morning, people? I ask you?”

“Nowhere!” Someone shouted back.

“Well, let us be thankful!” The man on the stage raised his hands and looked upwards. Tim followed his gaze. He saw nothing but the ceiling panels.

“Amen!” Came a reply from across the room.

“Now all I need is for you all to remind me of this feeling at 7am next Sunday morning when my alarm goes off!”

Laughter erupted again and Tim realised it sounded even better when he was a part of it.

Not wanting to disturb the woman next to him, Tim stayed until the end. It didn't take long, just a few more songs and a quiet prayer. As those in front of him bowed their heads and a listening silence set in, Tim looked around at a diverse sea of people: old and young, black and white.

“Lord Jesus, our Saviour, our Light. Thank you for bringing us together today. Thank you for welcoming us into your love. Thank you Lord for bringing new friends to us today...”

Tim felt his ears redden and he looked at the stage again expecting to find the man called Rob staring back at him but he wasn't; his eyes were closed. He held one hand on his chest and the other was extended into the air above him.

“...Lord, let them know that they are welcome. We are happy that they found us and we pray that they will always feel welcome here. Thank you, Lord Jesus. Amen.”

A hushed rumble of ‘Amen’ echoed through the room and Tim wished he’d taken advantage of the bowed heads to escape. For now that he turned to leave, he saw the woman next to him had turned towards him, smiling.

“So,” she said.

“So.” Tim smiled back. He stood up and she did the same.

“Jessica Marchant,” she offered her hand to him.

“I’m Tim. Tim Fletcher.”

“Ah, do I detect an accent Tim?”

“Scottish, from Edinburgh. Just moved down here actually.”

“Oh, that’s a long way. To study?”

“To work.”

“Wonderful.” It was a funny thing to say, but Tim believed she thought it was. “What do you do, Tim

Fletcher?”

“I work in IT, computers. For a bank based out at Canary Wharf.”

“Oh, really? Do you know I’ve never been to Canary Wharf. Well, I have, but that was a long time ago. I’m sure it looks very different now with all those big buildings you can see in the distance. It’s changed so much in the last few years... London’s skyline.”

“Change can be hard. I’ve found moving to London quite hard actually.” Tim felt his shoulders loosen with this confession.

“Of course it is. London is such a big place and there are so many people. It’s very easy to feel alone here.”

Tim nodded and pulled both straps of his bag onto his shoulders.

“Now Tim, would you mind if we carried on this conversation in the hall next door with a cup of tea? I’m gasping.”

Tim opened his mouth to decline politely.

“Could you hold this a moment?” She handed her Bible to him as she gathered her coat and scarf.

It was heavier than he expected, and the leather was cold to the touch. Tim thought it strange to feel so awkward about this particular book when others gave him so much pleasure and comfort.

“This way, Tim.”

He followed Mrs Marchant, carrying her Bible in his hand.



## Chapter Four

Two cups of tea and three chocolate biscuits later, Tim was giving his phone number to Nick, a guy who looked a little younger and a lot trendier than himself.

“So Thursday evenings, yeah? All we do is get some stuff out - table tennis, cards, board games, some snacks and we put a film on the big screen over there - and then we just leave them to it. We don’t organise group activities, because they never want to do them. We just stand back, drink coffee and make sure they don’t kill each other. Sound good?”

“Yep,” Tim nodded. He wasn’t sure why he’d agreed to volunteer at the church youth club on Thursday evenings but when Mrs Marchant had introduced him to Nick it seemed to come up in conversation very quickly.

“Oh and Pastor Rob is really particular about making sure we don’t talk about church.”

*“Don’t?”* Tim repeated.

“Right. No Bible study, no prayer, no mention of faith. He just wants the youth club to be a safe place for kids. If they want to talk about it, then that’s fine, you can answer their questions. But trust me, they never do,” Nick

said. "That alright with you?"

"Yes, absolutely," Tim said with confidence.

"Great." Nick raked his fingers through a fringe that swept across his whole forehead from left to right. "So, I'll see you Thursday?"

"See you Thursday."

"Cool. Later." Nick dug his hands in his pockets and walked back into the throng of people who were still in the church hall nearly an hour after the service had finished.

"Wonderful!" Mrs Marchant said. She'd not left Tim's side. "I'm rather looking forward to Thursday now."

"Me too," Tim said and he really meant it.

As it happened, Thursday came around quickly. Tim arrived at St. Anne's early, coming straight from work. The doors to the church hall were locked but the entrance to the church was open. Stepping inside, he heard a woman's voice singing. It was the hymn All Things Bright and Beautiful. A song he must have heard weekly in the morning assemblies at the C of S primary school he'd attended. But the voice he heard wasn't a child's; it was that of a woman singing with great enthusiasm and no knowledge that she was completely off key.

On the raised stage he saw a very short and very round woman wearing a bright purple trouser suit, standing in front of three boxes of flowers, collecting strands to add to a display that was bursting with white and yellow blooms.

She turned suddenly and stopped singing.

“Oh! You startled me!” She walked towards Tim, though it was actually more of a waddle than anything.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt. I’m early for the youth club.”

“Youth club? You look a bit old for that! Ha!” She let out a laugh that rippled through the room.

“No, I’m a new volunteer.” Tim rocked slightly on his feet, unsure if he should walk towards her.

“Good for you! You’re a braver soul than me. Those kids... lost causes most of them.” She tutted and shook her head. “I’m Gladys.”

Finally standing in front of him, she put her hand out to him.

“Tim,” he replied taking her hand.

Gladys squinted at him. “I don’t recognise you. How

have I not met you before? I know everyone! Ha!”

There was that cackle of a laugh again.

“I’m sort of new.”

“Sort of?” Gladys still held his hand in hers, even though they’d stopped the shaking part. It didn’t feel awkward at all, which surprised Tim. “Well, welcome. St. Anne’s is a good place, a happy place.”

Tim nodded.

“Did you hear me sing?”

“Yes, it was good.”

“No, it wasn’t!” She pulled her hand away and gently pushed at his shoulder. “You’re lying! Ha! I can’t sing to save my life, but it doesn’t stop me. You know I once got chucked out of a church for my singing?”

“Really?”

“Yes! I used to go to this big church near my house in Hackney. It was a proper black church for black folk, so singing was a huge part of the service, but that’s why I loved it. I love to sing. Years and years, I went there, every Sunday. Religiously, you could say, ha! And then one day, we get a new pastor and he decides it’s time to have an

official choir, with robes and soloists and concerts, and I'm so excited! I sign up to the auditions. I practise for weeks. Then the day comes and I stand up in front of the new pastor, who's leading the auditions - though only God knows why, he's a preacher, not a choirmaster, you know - but before I even finish one verse of Amazing Grace he tells me to stop. He says, 'Gladys, I'm very glad you came to these auditions. Not because I want you to sing in the choir, but because God has given me an opportunity to tell you that you should turn the volume of your singing down so we can actually hear this new choir I'm forming. The Lord has blessed you with a big voice, use it wisely...' Ha! I never went back to that church again. And a few Sundays later I came here and the woman next to me - a small old white woman who's long passed, God rest her soul - she turned to me and she said. "Thank you. Thank you for singing so loudly, it's the first time I've been able to hear the hymns we're singing so clearly in years..." Ha!"

"What your preacher said. That doesn't sound like very... er... Christian behaviour," Tim said.

"Damn right!" Gladys exclaimed before looking up at the ceiling. "Forgive me for that one Lord Jesus, but this young man is right, is he not? Ha!"

Gladys pointed behind Tim's head and he turned to look.

"There's Nick opening up the hall," Gladys said. "Prepare yourself for the onslaught of rude young things

that will walk through the door..."

"Is it that bad?"

"No. Of course not. I'm just a tired old woman who would rather sing to her flowers than get abuse from young ones who don't know how good they've got it. Anyway. You can tell me all about it on Sunday, can't you? War stories and all!"

"Yes, perhaps."

"Ha! I've scared you... But don't you worry, Tim." She turned to waddle slowly back to her flowers. "God's on your side!"

## Chapter Five

Youth club was nothing to fear. The teenagers he'd felt intimidated by on station platforms and at bus stops weren't the kind of youth that attended a church youth club. Instead, Tim found himself staring at a room full of tracksuits and baseball caps, stood around the table tennis table or lying on worn-out second-hand furniture playing on their phones.

Despite being his first time, Tim found himself bridging a gap between the other volunteers, Mrs Marchant and Nick. The former preferred to stay hidden in the kitchen making orange squash that didn't get drunk, while Nick took it upon himself to start conversations with some of the teenagers despite being mostly ignored or shrugged at. Not imagining he would have better luck, Tim drifted into the kitchen and helped Mrs Marchant with a pathetic amount of washing up.

“So where did you used to go to church, Tim?”

Tim was lying before he realised it. “Back home in Edinburgh.”

“Oh, Church of Scotland?”

“Yes.”

“Wonderful. How did you hear about us?”

“Oh, a friend at work used to come here.” Tim fished around in the lukewarm water for something else to wash. “But he’s moved away now...”

“Really? What was his name?”

“Err, Steve.” Tim scrubbed hard at an already clean cup. “Steve Johnson”

“I don’t know him. But I’m sure Pastor Rob will. You should ask him.”

“I will,” Tim said, and he walked away from his first evening at youth club thinking how sad it was that lying apparently got easier the more you did and the less you said.

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Tim fell into his new routine quickly.

He looked forward to Thursday evenings most because of the rule that discussing religion was off-limits, though he had seen Nick talk about Sunday service with a few of the quieter kids, the ones that Tim couldn’t figure out if they were shy by nature or because of another, possibly horrible reason. Tim didn’t blame Nick for trying to help



them but he didn't always feel comfortable watching it so he started to think about other ways to connect with those who sat on the periphery while others played noisy games of ping-pong or argued over which TV channel to watch.

For his third week at youth club Tim, brought in pencils and a stack of notebooks he'd bought at the supermarket. He placed them on a table near where a group of boys were sat, their arms folded in defiance of life.

"If anyone wants to do some drawing, sketching or even writing..." Tim said and walked away again.

It didn't happen immediately - nothing did with these kids - but when he looked back maybe twenty minutes later he saw a young boy called Shane curled up with one of the notebooks on his knee. His pencil scratched feverishly over the page. Later when Tim collected the notebook he found several examples of graffiti tags and the promise of talent.

In a month the notebooks were full and Tim asked Nick for some money from petty cash to buy some more.

Tim's only problem with Thursdays was Sundays. He returned to St. Anne's on Sundays because he feared if he didn't, he couldn't then be a volunteer on Thursdays. It wasn't exactly a hardship. Mrs Marchant saved him the seat next to her and it was only when Pastor Rob read sections of the Bible that he felt an uncomfortable heat rise up his spine. That and when Rob sometimes placed his hands on people who began to shake or speak a language no-one else

could understand. Tim didn't mind the quiet prayers and he actually really enjoyed the singing, especially because he could hear Gladys' voice rise above everyone else's.

He also liked the cups of tea he drank as he forged new friendships with the parishioners he met after service.

He spent one Sunday talking to Mr Rindshaw, a man in his sixties with deep-set eyes and a flat smile, who joked with Tim about looking after OAP mornings, even though he was one himself. The following week, Gladys introduced him to Simon, the young man who had met him at the door of the church that first Sunday. He was St Anne's property manager, a full-time role that he said was the best job in the world. He had a booming laugh that was almost as loud as Gladys' and Tim tried to ignore the tattoo on the side of his neck which read "RIP Mum & Dad". It was here that Tim also met Marcia, the parish secretary, a small, slim woman who wore tight T-shirts and the same kind of trainers as the kids at youth club. She had two small children who had perfect manners and their mother's sky blue eyes. Tim didn't like to think how old Marcia had been when she'd had the first, or how their father was neither seen nor spoken of on Sundays. And Pastor Rob - while passionate and uncompromising in his words when he led service - was a relaxing and refreshing conversationalist one-on-one.

Originally, he'd hoped to develop a friendship with Nick, seeing as they were close in age and spent every Thursday evening together. But Nick hadn't opened up to Tim very much since their first meeting. He talked a lot but

didn't reveal much about himself, other than being very serious about God and his faith. Mrs Marchant was different; she liked small talk. As they hid in the kitchen watching the youth club through the open door, she told Tim stories about her life, about the lives of others in the church and about the city he was starting to mellow towards.

Pastor Rob often popped into youth club after going for a run, his face bright red and sweat patches bleeding through his T-shirt. He would pick up one of Mrs Marchant's ready-made squashes, shout a breathless hello to the kids and then ask the volunteers how they were. On one of these occasions, he asked Tim what he did for a living. A few minutes later Tim found himself in Rob's office installing a driver so they could connect his computer to a printer somebody had donated to the church.

"Goodness, you're really good at this." He clapped his hand on Tim's back when he heard the printer stir into action. "Thank you. I'd never have figured that out. I'm terrible with technology. Don't tell anyone! They think because I'm young I know what I'm doing, but I don't!"

"Oh, it's my job. It's what I do every day."

"Quite. I suppose my job is fixing souls, not computers..." Rob moved into the seat that Tim had just been sat in. "Say, could you have a look at this?"

Rob opened up a browser window and showed Tim a

web page made up of boxes and lime green text set against a brown background that was the same sad colour as the carpet in Tim's flat. Along the top of the page flashed the words "St. Anne's New Voice Church – All Welcome".

"Do you think you could bring it into this century?" Pastor Rob asked and even though he had no idea how to build a website, Tim nodded, figuring he could fill an extra two or three nights of his week working on it.

## Chapter Six

The night of Tim's first parish meeting was a hot, humid June evening. Everyone joked how summer had arrived early, though only Tim seemed to be genuinely pleased by it.

Tim counted thirteen people in the room including Marcia's two young children who were playing quietly in one corner. According to the printed agenda that lay in front of him, Tim's input wasn't needed until near the end of the meeting just before Any Other Business, so he sat and listened as the others discussed other matters at considerable length.

The longest deliberation of the evening was to do with the financial accounts. A young woman with small features, and glasses that she often propped up on top of her head, spoke quietly but confidently about income, outgoings and the predicted outcome of the quarter. He checked the agenda and saw that her name was Carol Benjamin. As she spoke, Tim found his stare sticking on her, taking in the way her copper-coloured hair was all piled on top of her head and how her dress curved into a small waist. After Carol concluded that there was more money going out than coming in, a number of people around the table had something to say about it. It took Pastor Rob many minutes to bring this discussion to a close, but eventually he was able to ask Carol her opinion.

“Well, it may be worth reminding people about tithing. The regular income is what we need, not the one off donations.” The way she spoke reminded Tim of the women he often sat in meetings with at work, but to look at she was nothing like them and their impossibly straight hair and suits.

Tim spent the rest of the meeting sneaking as many looks as he could at Carol and working up the courage to maybe ask her out for a drink.

“Tim...?” He heard Pastor Rob say.

“Yes?” Tim sat up straight and felt a lot of eyes on him.

“Would you like to show everyone the new website?”

Tim fumbled his way through opening his laptop and spinning the display round so everyone could see.

“Ooh...” cooed Gladys.

“Wonderful!” Mrs Marchant said.

“Very smart,” said Mr Rindshaw.

“Such an improvement,” Tim heard Carol say and

when he looked up she was smiling at him, not the website.

“There’s nothing on there about the youth club?” Nick said.

“No, this is just the bare bones, but it’s really easy to add pages, I just need the content and maybe a few photos.” Tim said.

“I just think there should be something up there about it. Kids are online more than anyone, you know. There should also be information about our Friday night prayer groups,” Nick added.

Pastor Rob interrupted. “And there will be. As Tim says it’s just the skeleton version and he’s designed it so we can keep updating and adding content.”

Nick sat back silent.

“I’d personally like to thank Tim for all his hard work on this,” said Pastor Rob. “We’re so glad you found us, Tim, and that we found you.”

“Praise be to God!” shouted Gladys, and several calls of ‘Amen’ followed.

Feeling his cheeks redden, Tim closed the lid of his laptop. When he looked up he saw Carol was still looking at him, her glasses hovering on top of her forehead.

Tim was suddenly glad to have a new reason to go to church.



## Chapter Seven

The following Sunday Tim didn't once think about how strange he found the preaching, he was too busy trying to find Carol in the crowd. Despite persistent efforts he couldn't spot that ball of red hair on top of her head when everyone bowed their heads to pray at the end. He was just about to ask Mrs Marchant if she knew where Carol was, but she already had her own favour to ask him.

"Tim, will you come to prayer group with me on Friday?"

"This Friday?"

"Yes. And maybe every Friday, if you like it."

"I'm not sure I'm free. We could meet another time if you like?"

"The thing is, I'd like to pray for you."

"I see."

"And I'm also bringing some of my homemade elderflower wine. I think you'll like it."

That Friday Tim learned that prayer group wasn't just about praying, at least not all the time. There was praying at the beginning and praying at the end, but what happened in the middle wasn't dissimilar to the conversations he was part of in the church hall after service. Nick did his best to talk about specific sections of the Bible and to ask the group to share what helped them keep prayer a part of their daily lives, but the conversation was often interrupted by Mrs Marchant topping up people's glasses with elderflower wine, which flowed into Mr Rindshaw's stories about home-brewing beer in his loft, an adventure that cost him his bathroom ceiling twenty years ago.

Tim didn't even flinch when Nick led a group prayer that they all contributed to individually. When it came to Tim's turn he chose his words very carefully.

"I am grateful for the welcome I have received today and for the generosity that has been shown to me by my new friends at St. Anne's." He said, and the nodding of bowed heads he saw through his partially closed eyes suggested that he'd done okay.

"Oh dear," Mrs Marchant rested her hand on Tim's arm as he walked her to the bus stop afterward. "I rather forgot to pray for you."

"Oh yes," Tim smiled. It had already crossed Tim's mind that she had never intended to pray for him that evening - whatever that meant - and in fact, she was just keen to get his company.

“I got you something,” Mrs Marchant said, reaching into her bag. “I wanted to give it to you before the group started but I got a bit distracted with the wine and catching up with everyone.”

Mrs Marchant pulled out a package and handed it to Tim, who knew immediately what it was.

“I’ve noticed you don’t have your own.”

“I do. I just always forget it.” Sometimes Tim didn’t know where these lies came from.

“Well, now you can keep one in your bag so you never forget.”

Although it was possibly the most awkward present he’d ever received, Tim couldn’t deny he was full of gratitude. “Thank you. It’s very kind of you.”

“And you’d best come again next week,” Mrs Marchant said. “So I can pray for you like I said I would.”

“Yes, well, we’ll see.”

“Wonderful!”

## Chapter Eight

Tim found himself back in the church hall of St. Anne's Church Hall for August's parish meeting, an invitation he'd been happy to accept after not seeing Carol again since the last one.

"How easy will it be to add a button to the website so that people can make donations online?" Pastor Rob asked with a proud smile.

"Pretty easy," said Tim. "That's a good idea."

"I can't take credit for the idea myself. Carol suggested it." Pastor Rob said and by the close of the meeting, it was listed under "Items to action" that Carol and Tim should arrange a time to meet to discuss the donations button on the website.

As she tapped his number into her phone, Tim stood next to her noticing the same hairstyle, the same curves, but also something else: lipstick.

"When would be a good time to do this?" She asked.

"Well, I'm only really free in the beginning of the week. Mondays or Tuesdays are good." Tim said.

“Popular aren’t you?”

“Not really.” Tim felt himself blush.

“I’m joking.” Carol pushed her glasses back up on to the top of her head. “I can do next Tuesday.”

“Yeah, that’s good.”

“8 o’clock?”

“Great!”

“Let’s meet in The Angelic.”

“The pub?”

“That okay?”

“Of course. Can I help you put those away?” Tim pointed to the folders of accounts she was gathering.

“No, it’s fine.”

Tim still followed her into the church office.

“How come I don’t see you at service on Sunday?” He asked as she placed the folders on a shelf.

“Because I go to service on Saturday evenings.”

“Oh, I didn’t even know there was one here.”

“There isn’t.” She turned back to Tim. “It’s at a different church. In Highgate. I just do the accounts here because my pastor found out they needed someone and I’m happy to help.”

“Oh. So you do the accounts for two churches?”

“Three actually,” Carol shrugged. “It’s my job - I’m a financial officer - and church accounts are easy compared to the figures I have to balance during the day.”

“Still, that’s a nice thing to do. To give up your time.”

“Just my way of serving the Lord,” Carol said with a pretty smile, which made Tim feel both attracted to Carol and a little troubled by her.

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At three minutes past eight on the following Tuesday, Tim and Carol fought through a small crowd to get to the bar of The Angelic.

“What would you like?” Tim asked Carol. He was feeling hot and panicked, worrying about what they would do if they couldn’t get a table.

“I’m not sure.” Carol leaned over to study the contents of the fridges behind the bar.

“Oh, I’m sorry. You probably don’t drink, do you? I’ll find out what soft drinks they have.” Tim tried to get a member of staff’s attention.

A barman with a bushy black beard approached them. “I’ll have a glass of the Soave, please.” Carol said to him.

Tim added a pint of lager to the order and paid the barman. They went upstairs and stood in a corner while they waited for a free table. Tim realised he hadn’t asked the barman for the WiFi password for his laptop, but neither had Carol.

“It’s funny that you thought I didn’t drink.” Carol stood on her toes so she could talk into his ear.

“Well, some Christians don’t...” Tim began.

Carol frowned. “So, did you use to go to a dry church?”

“No, not exactly.” Tim again surveyed the room for a table. As he did he thought about how he must look like a normal young man, out on a date with a attractive girl in a busy London pub. This made him very happy.

"I understand why churches are like that. The not drinking thing. But it doesn't make sense to me. Jesus turned water into wine in the Bible. Monks used to be master brewers of beer. Catholic churches drink wine as part of their Mass. There's nothing in the Bible that says you shouldn't drink."

"Right," Tim nodded.

"As far as I'm concerned, drinking is okay. But alcoholism is not." Carol said.

"Well, that's just common sense," said Tim.

"You've done well to join St. Anne's," she told him. Tim noticed she was wearing lipstick again. Or lip gloss, or something that made her lips look shiny and wet. He kept looking at them as she talked. "Pastor Rob has done a lot of good there, really brought life back to the church. Before him, there was an older guy and his family. They were a little bit more old school, from what I hear. Not as much about the community."

"Right... I like the community work that St Anne's does." Tim was keen to add. "Oh look there's a table..."

"No. It's too noisy here." Carol said, tipping her wine glass back to empty it. "Besides, I'd like to see where you live."



She put her empty glass down on the edge of a table, turned and walked down the stairs without waiting for Tim to follow.

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For the first time since Tim moved there, the brown carpet wasn't the first thing Tim noticed when he walked through the front door of his apartment. Instead he was watching the way Carol's hips swayed as she walked into the kitchen.

"There's a living room through there," Tim began to guide Carol through his home but she didn't seem to want his guidance.

"Would you like another glass of wine? I'm afraid I only have red in..." He stopped himself from explaining how he wasn't expecting company.

"That's fine. Yes, please," She called from somewhere in his flat. Was she in his bedroom?

Tim poured the wine very slowly so as to firstly not spill a drop as he only had enough for a glass each and secondly, so as to try and figure out in his own mind what he wanted to happen next.

When he turned to leave the kitchen he found her

standing just inches in front of him.

“Jesus Christ!” He said. “Sorry, you scared me...”

“You shouldn’t take the Lord’s name in vain,” she said, her smile a little lopsided.

“I know... I just...”

Carol laughed and took both glasses from him, putting them down on the coffee table. Facing him again she put her hands on Tim’s chest and grabbed two fistfuls of his T-shirt.

The kiss carried on for what seemed a very long time, long enough for Tim to feel very confused about what he should do next. Luckily for Tim’s brain, which was finding it increasingly hard to come to a decision, Carol pulled away.

“Tim,” she whispered.

“Yes?”

“I’d like you to fuck me.”

“Pardon?”

“Fuck. Me.”

“Really? But what about...”

“What about what?”

“Nothing.”

“Then what are you waiting for?”

“I have no idea,” Tim said before taking Carol by the hand and leading her into the bedroom where he really hoped he’d made his bed.

## Chapter Nine

The following morning Tim woke to the sound of Carol's breathing. He might have called it snoring, if he didn't like the fact it was coming from the pillow next to his.

His alarm wasn't due to sound for another hour and though he would rather have spent the time with Carol awake, he was not disappointed at the idea of filling that time by watching her sleep. After just a few minutes, however, her eyes flickered open.

"Good morning," Tim said and he hoped she would reply with a smile.

"Good morning." Carol moved to sit up. "What time is it?"

"It's early. There's time for... you know, if you want to."

"For what?" Carol squinted at him.

"For... for us to..."

"You're not very good at asking for what you want, are you?" She said before burrowing under the sheet in his

direction.

Half an hour later, Tim stood under a hot shower, singing.

“Shine Jesus shine! Fill this land with the Father’s glory!” He sang as loudly as he could. “Blaze, Spirit, blaze, la la la laaa...”

He didn’t care if Carol could hear. He didn’t care that he couldn’t remember the words. He felt exactly how Gladys must feel each Sunday: safe, free and happy to sing as loud as his heart desired.

As he cleaned his teeth he made the decision not to shave that morning, which would be a first since he’d started his new job. Maybe he would even start growing a beard like the one on the barman in the pub last night. Why not? He was all about trying new things.

When Tim walked out of the bathroom he found Carol fully dressed, sitting on his unmade bed, the duvet spilling onto the brown carpet below.

“What’s this?” She threw a book onto the bed.

Tim didn’t reply. It had been many months since he’d picked up that book.

*The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins.

“Why are you reading that atheist muck?” Carol shouted.

“A friend gave it to me...” Tim said, and that much was true.

“Oh, don’t bullshit me Tim.” She stood up and crossed her arms.

“It’s not mine.” And then the lies started.

“There are notes in the margins and huge sections highlighted. Just like your Bible should be!”

“But...”

“And look at the spine. You’ve read that book more than once, haven’t you?”

“Carol...”

“Do you even have a Bible?”

“Yes,” Tim thought about the one Mrs Marchant had given him, and how he liked to put it away in his bottom drawer as soon as he got back from Sunday service.

“I don’t understand.” Carol bent down to pick up her

bag and she threw it onto her arm. “Why would you own a book like that, let alone read it? And multiple times?”

“It’s not a bad book...”

“It’s an *evil* book... That man is despicable, the way he attacks anyone with faith!”

“Lots of Christians have read it too.”

“What does that mean?”

Tim suddenly felt very naked and unprepared. “Why don’t you go make yourself a cup of tea and I’ll just get dressed.”

“I don’t want to. I have to go to work.”

“Let me get dressed and I will explain.”

She pulled her sleeve up, glancing at her watch. “Five minutes. I have to leave in five minutes.”

“Fine. Thank you.”

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The morning was drowning in the full throes of rush hour as they walked to the Tube station. Bumper-to-bumper

traffic kept them company along Upper Street and each of the stationary cars they walked past felt like a new audience to Tim's confession.

"But the things we do. Everything we do comes from the Bible," said Carol after Tim had finished talking. "You can't pick and choose the singing and dancing part, but not walk the walk."

"Well, I do have a Bible and I started reading it but... have you read the Old Testament recently? It says that men were living to over 900 years old and that incest and polygamy was rife. It's impossible to relate to any of it. I gave up..."

"You gave up?" Carol's jaw tightened.

They reached the station and a few metres in front of the entrance, with shoulders pushing past them, they stood facing each other. Tim took a deep breath in and reached for her hand. To his surprise she didn't stop him.

"Carol, I can't pretend I believe what you believe and I can't tell you that I think the Bible is a moral compass on how we should live our lives, because I really don't think it is. But I do believe in what St Anne's is doing. Isn't that enough?"

Carol was quiet for a few moments and Tim began to think that the anger in her eyes had burnt itself out.



“Carol... I really want to keep going to St Anne’s, to keep helping out at the youth club and working on the website. Do you think maybe we could keep this between us?”

“Tim...”

“Please, Carol. Can’t you forgive me?” He asked, commuters swimming all around them, reminding him that they both had to get to work.

“I need to...” Carol swallowed and looked away. “I need to pray about this Tim. I don’t know what else to do...”

“I understand,” Tim let Carol’s hand slip back to her side.

Tim followed her into the Tube station, but as she walked down the escalator he stopped walking and stood to the side, watching the knot of red hair on top of her head bounce down the steps.

After work, Tim called Carol, but when she didn’t answer, he wasn’t surprised.

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The following day he went to youth club a little earlier than usual because he wanted to cover the walls with paper. He’d promised Shane a more realistic

opportunity to practise his tags.

“Ah, Tim, it’s you! I was worried that the lights were on...” Pastor Rob jogged in, out of breath.

“I’m just getting ready for youth club. We’re going to do a bit of... err, street art.”

“Very good.”

“It’s okay, letting them use the walls like this? I mean, it won’t actually be *on* the wall, but...”

“Of course,” Pastor Rob bent over and rested his hands on his knees. “I trust you.”

Tim nodded and felt a heavy weight on his chest.

“We’re very grateful for your work here Tim,” said Pastor Rob, groaning to touch his toes. “You being such a successful young man, I know it’s inspiring to these kids. Not many of them have positive role models.”

“I enjoy it.”

“I can tell.”

Tim rolled the lump of Blu-tack in his hand between his forefinger and thumb. He checked his watch quickly.

“I’m not stupid you know...” Pastor Rob had spread his legs and he was leaning to one side, stretching.

“Sorry?”

“I’m not daft enough to think we can save everyone.”

Tim stopped playing with the Blu-tack.

“I know that some of the kids are sadly already beyond saving. But I also know that them coming here one night a week, rather than being out there... or even at home... well, that’s helping.”

Tim nodded.

“Lord help me, I need to stretch more!” Pastor Rob grimaced as he straightened his body out. “Time for a shower. I’ll pop back in half an hour or so.”

“Okay,” Tim called after him.

Carol didn’t answer her phone at Friday lunchtime. Nor did she pick up on Friday evening. Fearing the worst Tim didn’t go to Friday prayers. It was only after sitting down and putting the TV on that Tim realised it was the first Friday prayer group he’d missed in over two months. Tim told himself that having his Friday nights back to himself would be a good thing and so he should celebrate,

which he did by ordering three different dishes from the local Indian take-away. Half an hour later, the smells from the small tubs of brightly coloured concoctions filled his flat and Tim tried not to care that they would get locked into his brown carpet, like every other smell it had ever come into contact with over the years. He ate two thirds of what he ordered before putting the leftovers in the fridge. As he ate, he picked up the book nearest to him and flicked to a random page.

*"This is what the Lord says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfil my good promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.""*

Tim shut the book and texted Carol.

**"Please call me back. When you get a chance."**

He put his phone down on top of the Bible.

*"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to*

*give you hope and a future.”*

He picked up his phone again.

**“Sorry, Carol. I should have also asked how you are. How are you? I hope you’re well.”**

Tim checked his phone constantly as the film he was half-watching played out. He didn’t even notice when the credits were rolling. With no desire to watch any more television or to even read a book, Tim took a shower and went to bed.

He woke three times in the night. And three times his phone showed no response from Carol. On each occasion he struggled to go back to sleep, and found it very ironic that only opening up more pages of Mrs Marchant’s gift and reading passages at random helped him escape his worries.

In the morning, finally, there was a message.

**“Don’t worry Tim. You can still come to church.”**

That’s all her message said. Nine words sent at 8.36am on Saturday morning. Tim read it over and over again trying to interpret it from all possible angles.

Had she told anyone? Was she going to tell anyone? How had God answered her prayers?

Clueless, Tim walked to the fridge and retrieved the leftover curry, taking it back to bed with him. He picked up *The God Delusion* from under his bed and read it while finishing the food. He read and ate until he'd had enough of both. Then he rolled over and fell asleep again.

Tim woke to the sound of his stomach wailing and the feeling that its contents were trying to claw their way out of him. He ran into the bathroom and hovered in front of the toilet, unsure whether to sit on it or crouch by its side. Eventually he sat down and pulled the bathroom bin into his arms. Then he let go and winced through the pain.

And that was why, in spite of Carol's message, Tim didn't go to church the next day.

## Chapter Ten

The pain finally left Tim some time on Sunday afternoon. His stomach felt like it had been bulldozed flat, pulled tight across his hip bones, and his mouth tasted of acid mixed with the million spices he'd regurgitated, but at least he didn't feel the need to run to the bathroom. He rolled over to his side and checked his phone to see if anyone had noticed that he was missing at church, but a blank screen told him that this was not the case. He found himself going back to Carol's message and over-analysing whether she had revealed his secret or not. After some time his eyelids grew heavy and the phone slipped out of his hand.

He didn't wake again until his Monday morning alarm told him it was time to go to work.

Within ten minutes of returning home from work later that afternoon, Tim's doorbell rang. When Tim opened the door he was shocked to see it was Mrs Marchant but he quickly invited her in and guided her through to the living room. Tim heard the springs in his sofa sing as she sat down.

In silence, Tim made them both a cup of tea. He still hadn't figured out what to say to her when he handed a mug over.

“Don’t beat yourself up, Tim,” she said. “You know there are days when I’m not sure I believe.”

Tim’s shoulders sank, but somewhere inside him there was also the comfort of relief.

“She told you?”

“Carol? No, she told Pastor Rob, and he called me and well, here I am.”

Tim stared into his tea, his taste for it disappearing.

“It’s the logical way to look at things too, of course,” Mrs Marchant continued. “How can there be a God when so much bad happens in the world? We see so much of it out there on the streets of our own city. London has never shied from testing my faith, that’s for sure.”

“It’s funny I never really thought about religion like that,” Tim said, truthfully.

“Oh really?” Mrs Marchant sipped her tea. “So, why do you not believe then?”

“Well, I honestly think it’s because I was not taught to believe. My parents never discussed religion with me,” he explained. “I asked my dad once, when I started thinking and looking into it a bit more, you know as a teenager...”



"I'm not sure all teenagers think like that... you're doing your intelligence a disservice." She was still wearing her jacket and Tim realised he should have offered to take it.

"Dad told me that he was an atheist. He was an academic - a chemistry professor - and he'd read the Bible, the Koran and other religious texts, then compared them with historical evidence and more recent Theological studies. As a scientist he wanted to make an informed decision about religion. He told me his conclusion was that God didn't exist, but in the minds of people. He also said that maybe this wasn't a bad thing."

"Well, now we know where that intelligence comes from..."

"Actually, I'm more like my mother."

"And is she religious?"

"That's the funny thing. She used to be. She was raised a Methodist. But she has never once told me that. Dad told me though, the same time that I asked him about God. He said she has only stepped foot in a church twice since they were married and both occasions were for funerals."

"A Methodist, eh?" Mrs Marchant whispered. "I don't know much about them."

“You know, I have no idea if my mum still believes. I’ve never spoken to her about it. And I have no idea why.”

“It’s a dangerous game talking about religion. What do they say, the two things you should never talk about at a dinner party: politics and religion - and yet by not talking about it we become so ignorant of it?”

“That’s very true, Mrs Marchant.”

“Please, call me Jessica.”

“Okay... Jessica.”

“I don’t suppose you’re thinking about coming back to church? I did rather enjoy your company. Especially on Thursday nights. You sort of helped me understand young people again.”

Tim felt unable to give her the answer she wanted so he took the coward’s way out and changed the subject. “May I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“You said you have days when you don’t believe. Well, what do you do on those days?”

Jessica Marchant placed her half full mug on the coffee table in front of her. In her jacket and scarf, which

was only slightly loosened, she looked as though she was sitting in a doctor's waiting room. Tim regretted not making her feel more at home.

“What do I do on those days? Well I suppose this is the biggest irony of all. Because on those days I curse, I shout and I cry. And then when all those things don't work, that's when I start praying.”

Mrs Marchant finished the last of her tea in one swig. She then asked for another one and Tim stood up to put the kettle on again, but before he walked away he turned to her.

“Jessica,” he said. “May I take your coat?”

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A few days later, on Wednesday, Tim was again debating whether he should keep helping out at youth club as he walked aimlessly down the biscuits aisle of the supermarket. Ahead of him he saw a figure he recognised instantly. She was stood staring at the shelves with two plump arms pitched against either side of her waist and a basket by her feet. Tim walked up to her.

“Hello, Gladys.”

“Oh, Tim. Hello,” she said in a quiet voice Tim hadn't heard before. “How are you?”

"I'm okay. Well, you know..." The narrow aisles forced them to stand close so others could get around them.

"We've missed you at St Anne's."

"Didn't you hear?"

"Yes, I heard. Are you not going to come back?"

"Well, I don't think it's right. Mrs Marchant said that Pastor Rob said I could, but... I don't think it would be appropriate."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't believe..."

"So what?" Gladys said. "Do you think everyone in that congregation believes 100%? Do you think we're all brain-washed to believe exactly what we're told? Do you think we believe that 2000 years ago this happened and that happened exactly like it says in a book that's been translated more times than we know?"

A woman carrying a toddler and a shopping basket pushed past Tim forcing him to step closer to Gladys.

"I thought... I don't know. I thought that was the basis of your faith, Gladys. I've never seen you without your Bible."

“Yes. And it’s here with me now, in my bag. And of course I’m a believer. I won’t deny that. I believe that Jesus walked on this Earth and he tried to do good things and that he died on a cross so that we may be saved. That’s what I believe.”

“But you don’t believe in other parts?”

“I don’t know, Tim. I used to believe it all, but the older I get the more time I have to think about it. You see, I used to believe in all sorts: ghosts, spirits, magic, horoscopes. Good Lord above, I used to believe I could lose weight by just drinking milkshakes. But now, my life doesn’t have as much magic anymore and when I read my horoscope, well, let’s just say, I once read Pisces by mistake one day and I found just as much truth in it as my own!”

“So, you’ve become more cynical,” Tim offered.

“Perhaps. I just think faith is much more than the Bible. It’s about what you hope for in your life, in the future, for the whole world, rather than what happened 2000 years ago.”

“Then why carry a Bible around with you all the time? Why pore over it every Sunday and sing hymns and do the church’s flowers?”

“Because my faith is strong and I believe this is what

I must do. I feel connected to something - to God - when I sing, when I hold my Bible and when I make the church bloom with the colours of each passing season.”

“It was the connection to you all that I liked the most,” Tim said.

“But what about God, Tim? Do you feel Him anywhere? Do you feel anything at all?”

“I’d be lying if I said yes.”

“Well that’s a huge shame, Tim. But you know what I’m going to do?”

“What?”

“I’m going to pray that you do Tim, maybe just one day. Then you’ll realise it’s not about a book or a set of rules that must be followed. It’s about much more than that... and yet it’s also much less complicated than you think.”

Tim smiled down at her. “Thank you, Gladys.”

“You’re welcome, Tim. Now would you please reach up there and pass me a packet of hobnobs? The chocolate covered ones.”

## Chapter Eleven

When Tim arrived at youth club the following day he was surprised to find someone waiting for him on one of the old sofas.

“Hi Tim!” Mr Rindshaw stood up.

“Hello. Have you come to volunteer?” Tim did wonder if maybe he was there to replace him.

“Not exactly. I just wanted to catch you, to have a word.”

“I’ll put the hot water on for tea.” Tim motioned to the kitchen and Mr Rindshaw followed.

“I was sorry to hear about all the drama with that young girl,” Mr Rindshaw said.

“Carol? Well, I’m afraid it’s true, Mr Rindshaw. What she said...”

“That you’re an atheist?”

“Not exactly.”

“So, you’re agnostic?”

“Maybe. I don’t know what I am at the moment.”

“Let me tell you what I am, Tim.” Mr Rindshaw said with a level voice. “I am an atheist.”

Tim turned away from the sink.

“I don’t believe in God. Any God. And I haven’t for thirty-seven years.”

“But you’ve been coming to this church all your life...” Water was flowing over the top of the urn and disappearing down the sink.

“All my married life, yes.”

“Why don’t you believe, Mr Rindshaw?” Tim finally turned the tap off.

“I don’t know if I ever really started. But one day, thirty-seven years ago, my brother told me he was in love with a man called Perry and I had a choice to make. Either reject my brother for the way he lived his life, or I could support my brother who already had the whole world against him just because he had fallen in love.”

“What did you do?”



“Stuck by my brother, of course.”

“Of course.”

“But I did it in the cowardly way,” Mr Rindshaw’s eyes seemed to sink. “I’ve never told anyone at church about him. And even though it hacks away at me, I never stand up and say anything when people say ‘It’s Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve’. I should, you know, I really should tell them how wrong they are. That none of us can help who we fall in love with...”

“But I don’t understand. Why do you still come to church?”

“For the same reason. Because I couldn’t help who I fell in love with! Who I’m still in love with, though she’s sadly... She passed three years ago,” Mr Rindshaw took a step forward and leaned back against the kitchen counter next to Tim. “My wife was a believer. Loved this place. She never missed a Sunday here. She did the flowers with Gladys, she spent her Saturdays making cakes and biscuits for people to eat with their cups of coffee after service and she was parish secretary for a while too. She poured her heart and soul into this place and so it’s where I come to find her again.”

“What about your wife and your brother? Did she... were they close?”

“Very. But we never really spoke about it, you know,

what the church would say about him. And I didn't want to upset her." He looked down at the floor. "You know my brother always comes to church with me now when he's staying with me. He comes for exactly the same reasons I do. To feel close to her."

Tim nodded and chewed his lip.

"Mr Rindshaw, can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Can we still meet up? Away from church, perhaps?"

"Of course. You know I would like that. In some ways, I think it would do me good too."

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Mr Rindshaw had just left when Tim heard footsteps approach the kitchen. Thinking it was Mrs Marchant, Tim continued to arrange plastic cups on a tray and pour dashes of orange squash into them.

"What are you doing here?"

"Jesus, Nick! You startled me."

"What are you doing here?" He said again, shaking his

head to the side to keep his long fringe from falling over his eyes. "You shouldn't be here."

"Nick..." Tim put the bottle down. "I was hoping we could talk."

"I sort of knew it, you know," Nick said, his voice raised. "You always seemed so distant in prayer group. It all makes sense now."

"Well, I'd like to think I contributed something to youth club at least." Tim nodded to the church hall behind Nick who didn't move an inch. His eyes stayed fixed on Tim's.

"How could you do it?" Nick asked with another head flick. "Fool us like that."

"Well, it's not really exactly as it sounds. I wasn't doing it for any other reason than I really enjoyed being part of St Anne's."

"You made us believe you were one of us!"

"I am... Listen, Nick. I've not told anyone else this but there's a reason I walked into St Anne's that first time. It sort of happened out of desperation. I'd just moved to London, I didn't know anyone and I was walking around feeling really down about it. Then I took a wrong turning and found myself outside St Anne's and I heard all this

laughter coming from this building and... I just wanted to feel part of something..."

"But you can't just pretend to be a Christian. You either are or you aren't!"

"I didn't pretend. I never actually said to anybody that I was a Christian..."

"But you came every week and you did youth club and you did the website. You made us think you were something you weren't!" Nick was grinding his teeth.

Tim stood to the side and looked past Nick's head hoping to see someone else arrive.

"You were the one who told me that youth club wasn't about being Christian, that we weren't to talk to the kids about God anyway, so I didn't see any harm in my being a volunteer."

"Harm? You made us look like idiots Tim! You made me look like... like a bloody dickhead!" Nick's bad language suited him much better than Tim had expected. "I trusted you. I prayed with you for G- ....for crying out loud. And the whole time you just thought I was a mug, didn't you? You were laughing at me!"

"No, Nick, no. That's... nice, that you prayed for me. I'm grateful. I just don't really... I can't explain it." The water

urn clicked telling Tim the water was hot enough. "I guess it's just not my cup of tea."

Nick opened his mouth and snapped his neck right back, sending his hair flying off his face. Tim waited for another outburst. Instead, Nick clamped his mouth shut and closed his eyes. After looking Tim up and down one more time, he turned and walked away.

"Nick... I am really sorry about all this," Tim called after him.

Nick turned back and put his hands up, the same way he did when he tried to quieten the kids at youth club.

"You can stay tonight," he said quietly. "But I'm not sure it's a good idea for you to keep volunteering at youth club."

"But..." Tim began but thought better of it. "Fine."

"Good." Nick tucked his fringe behind his ear. "I'll keep praying for you, Tim."

Tim thanked Nick, even though it sounded more like a threat than a promise.

## Chapter Twelve

Tim's first summer in Angel was soon over and it wasn't long before the reds and browns of autumn sneaked onto the trees and the wind felt cooler on his skin. Tim found London's slow waltz into his second winter in the capital a gentle one and he made the most of the milder days by being outside as much as he could, getting off the Tube a few stops earlier in the evening so he could walk home. It was on one of those walks that he noticed a homeless shelter on City Road. Two nights later he was signed up as a volunteer for their Saturday morning soup kitchen. When he struggled through that first session cringing at the smells some of the men and women carried with them and finding his vision mist over when he heard some of their stories, he felt like he was where he was supposed to be.

Tim never did go back to St Anne's. He set his alarm a few times, even got dressed and made the walk there one Sunday morning, getting so close he could hear Gladys singing louder than everyone else, but he didn't go any closer than that.

But he did meet up with Pastor Rob. It was a few weeks after his last Thursday at youth club and they met for coffee one evening in the same chain coffee shop Tim had sat in before he walked through St Anne's doors the first time.

“Pastor Rob,” Tim began but he thought that sounded odd suddenly. “Rob... I’m truly very sorry if you felt I was wrong in attending your church when I didn’t believe in God.”

“Tim, you have nothing to apologise for.” Rob leaned back into his chair. “In fact, you’re precisely the type of person I want to come to my church.”

“You want atheists to come to your church?”

“Of course!” Rob said before changing his tone. “Do you really think you’re an atheist?”

“I think so,” Tim said, thinking of all the other books he’d read in the last two weeks. The religious texts and historical research he’d got his hands on to fill the hours he no longer spent at St Anne’s only served to prove to him that he was his father’s son in more ways than one.

“Then why did you attend Christian worship every week for months?”

“I liked being part of the community at St Anne’s. It was nice to feel part of something.”

“Again, the perfect reason to go to church. I wish all my parishioners felt like that when they came to worship!”

“But I don’t believe in the Bible. I don’t believe that Jesus was the son of God. And I don’t believe that there is a God in charge of our fate,” Tim said firmly, wanting to make it very clear because there was nothing to be gained from deceiving Rob who Tim knew to be a kind and generous man.

Pastor Rob placed his mug on the table that stood between them. “So, what do you think of us who do believe? Do you believe that we are making it up? That deep down we know that God isn’t real and we’re pretending to ourselves and to each other?”

Tim heard nothing but genuine curiosity in Rob’s question. It was then that Tim realised Rob didn’t know it all, and that he too had unanswered questions.

“No. I have never, for one second, thought that.” Tim said. “I believe that you believe.”

Rob nodded before picking up his cup again. “That is good enough for me. If St. Anne’s made you comfortable with the idea of believing, that means something to me.”

When they parted ways Rob shook Tim’s hand with both of his and told him that he would always be welcome at St. Anne’s. Tim nodded but was quick to change the subject.

“Rob, would you mind if I joined you on one of your runs every now and again?”



“Mind? I would love that. I need all the encouragement I can get!”

And that’s how Tim became running partners, and friends, with a man of God.

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At first it was just Mr Rindshaw and Tim. They sat together one Wednesday evening in a local pub, drinking a pint each and talking.

Then one week Mr Rindshaw’s brother came and the three of them enjoyed an evening of beer and countless stories about Mr Rindshaw’s wife.

A few weeks later, Gladys popped down for a gin and tonic and she asked the young woman behind the bar if they had any board games. There followed a two hour game of Monopoly that only ended after Mr Rindshaw started yawning and deliberately landing on Gladys’ Pall Mall.

The following week Gladys brought a game of Scrabble and a young man who seemed a little embarrassed to be there. He was her nephew, Tyler, who Gladys said “fell in and out of love with the church.” A long game of Scrabble began, and ended only by Mr Rindshaw yawning and taking too many letters out of the bag when it was his turn. That evening Tim invited Tyler and Mr Rindshaw to join him

volunteering at the homeless shelter on Saturday mornings. This meant that the three of them had something to talk about on Wednesdays so they didn't need to rely on Gladys' board games.

The week before Christmas they decided to meet for dinner instead of drinks and to Tim's surprise Mrs Marchant showed up at the Italian restaurant with Gladys. She brought with her a card and a small portion of Christmas cake for Tim.

"Are you going home for Christmas?" She asked.

"Yes, I'll be at my parents' for a week actually." Tim replied.

"Wonderful!" Jessica Marchant said.

When Tim returned to London in the New Year, he met with Mr Rindshaw. Because Tyler was staying with family in Birmingham, it was just the two of them.

"Tim, I have something to tell you." Mr Rindshaw cast his eyes down into his near empty pint. "I went to St Anne's on Christmas Day."

"Really?" Tim said, more surprised at his need to confess rather than the confession itself.

"I thought I was using it as a crutch. That I was using

it to feel close to my wife, and that that wasn't very healthy. But then my daughter came to stay and on Christmas morning she was up and awake before me, saying she wanted come to church with me - which she hasn't done for years - and when I said I didn't go anymore she got very upset with me and couldn't understand why. So we went together. You know when she sang the hymns it sounded as though my wife was back beside me."

"I think it's great that you went back, I really do."

"But it doesn't change anything, you know, how I feel about it all. But Pastor Rob is so good, he never forces anything on you and he lets me keep helping out with the Golden Oldies mornings even though I'm not at Sunday service every week." Mr Rindshaw paused and turned his glass around in his hand. "I can't really explain how I feel when I'm there. It's not even about my wife anymore. It just feels like it's a good place for me to go. The same way that meeting up with you here does."

Tim didn't think he had anything to add to that. Instead, he raised his drink in a toast to his friend Albert Rindshaw.

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When Tim got a promotion at work, he sent out an email to everyone at the company he had spoken to at least once. He invited them to join him for celebratory drinks that Friday evening after work, and that he would pick up

the tab. Of the thirty-seven people he emailed, fifteen came down and they sat in two small groups in the corner of a pub by the Thames. For a few hours they talked awkwardly about things that Tim wished they'd talked awkwardly about twelve months ago.

Following his pay rise, he quickly calculated how much he could save each month so that he could replace the carpet in his apartment, and by the time April had arrived, he was looking at samples and emailing his landlord to say he would pay for it, as long as he gave his approval, which predictably he did.

Tim was also reaping the benefits of his new year's resolution to join a squash club. He'd been relieved to learn that he wasn't the worst player there and he welcomed the opportunity to play in a Monday night local league that was as much about after-match beers as it was winning games. The only downside was that it was an all-male league and what with running with Rob on Tuesdays, Wednesdays' gatherings, Saturday volunteering at the shelter and occasional beers with people from work on Friday nights, he was running out of time to meet women, which is why Tim took the plunge and set up an account on the dating site London Loves.

Within weeks Tim had a few dates under his belt. Dating in London - travelling on Tubes and hopping off buses, crossing zones and the river to meet women who wanted to meet him - transformed Tim. Mr Rindshaw was quick to tell him this.

“Look at you! You look like a different man.” Tim was told as Mr Rindshaw folded away the Evening Standard to make room for his friend. “It’s only a matter of time before you meet The One.”

“I’m not sure I want to.” Tim said. “I’m having far too much fun!”

But Mr Rindshaw was right; it wasn’t long before he did meet a girl he really liked. She had brown hair that turned gold when the sun shone on it, she was really good at snooker and on their third date she offered to help Tim pick out a new carpet. Which is why one early May evening Tim was cooking dinner for two in his flat when there was a knock on the door.

Tim turned the heat on the stove down and opened the door.

“Hello Tim,” she said with a wide smile.

“Hello Carol,” Tim said, after just a moment’s pause. “Come in.”

“Thanks.” She stepped into the kitchen. She looked different. Her hair was shorter and hung down around her shoulders. Her glasses were a different style too, and she was wearing slightly baggier clothes than she used to.

“How are you?” Tim asked.

“Oh, you’re making dinner...” Carol said nodding at the saucepan on the stove.

“Yes, I’m expecting... a friend over in a few minutes.”

“I won’t stay long.”

“It’s okay. Would you like a drink? Wine? Water?”

“Water is fine.”

As Tim poured some of the expensive fizzy water he’d bought for the girl he really liked, Carol sat at the kitchen table and started stroking the carpet samples.

“Are you well?” Carol asked to his back.

“Okay, thanks. You?”

“A little under the weather. Got that cold that’s going around. But apart from that I’m fine.”

“How’s church?”

“Yes. Okay.” She took the glass he offered her.  
“Thanks.”

“Good,” Tim said. “And work?”

“Yes, fine.”

Tim realised that was all he had to ask her.

“How are you?” She asked, again.

“I’m good. Work is busy and well, actually, I’m really busy.” Tim said. “Which is nice.”

“I heard that you still see people from church.” Carol said. “Is it true you go running with Pastor Rob?”

“Yes. He’s a good running partner.”

“And you have this little club in a pub, on Wednesdays?”

“It’s not really a club.”

“It sounds like it’s a club.”

“Well, no it’s just a group of us who get together regularly.”

“Like a club...”

“Like church?” Tim said before he could think how she might take it.

“It’s not like church though, is it?” Carol said.

Tim poured himself a glass of wine before asking Carol why she’d come to see him.

“Gladys told me I should apologise to you.”

“Really?”

“Yes. At last night’s parish meeting at St. Anne’s. She’d asked me if I’d seen you and I said not since... Anyway, she sort of guessed what happened between us... You know, the last time I was here.” Carol looked through the doorway and into the living room. “I don’t know how. She said she has this sort of sixth sense when it comes to what she calls ‘affairs of the heart’.”

“Good old Gladys,” Tim smiled.

“So, that’s why I’m here. It seemed the right thing to do.”

“It’s okay, Carol. It was a long time ago. And it was silly of me to think that I could keep going to church... I’m just sorry for upsetting people. And I do worry that I let Pastor Rob down.”

“He still thinks you’ll come back. He still *wants* you to come back.”



“Yeah, he tells me all the time. Says the kids even ask after me at youth club.” Tim shrugged. “I’m still thinking about it. I just don’t want to make it awkward for Nick. He wasn’t best pleased about me going back. In fact, he was pretty angry about it all.”

Carol gazed into her water watching the bubbles rise to the surface. “Nick’s a bit like that,” she said.

“Oh?”

“We’ve been on a few dates recently.”

Tim waited for the kick in the guts, but it didn’t come. “Going well?”

“Not really. I don’t think he’s my type.”

“He’s probably more your type than I was.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, he’s a church-goer for a start... And he actually believes.”

“Yes, but I just don’t fancy him.” Carol said. “And I really fancied you.”

Tim laughed and felt a little heat rise in him. “You know, I’ve always wondered how that worked. Why you came on so strong... I mean if you’re a Christian, shouldn’t you be waiting until you’re married?”

Carol smiled to herself, as if she had a secret to share. “I used to think that but one day, when I was reading the Word I had this sort of strange epiphany that the Bible condemns sexual immorality, but it doesn’t condemn sex before marriage specifically. Believe me, I’ve looked very hard for it. My God gave me the gifts of intelligence and free will; so if I am consenting, and you are consenting, how can that be immoral?”

Tim glanced at the clock on the oven.

“Are you sure you don’t believe?” Carol asked, looking up at him.

Tim sighed. “I just don’t know how I can. It doesn’t feel right. It’s probably the same way that it doesn’t feel right to you *not* to believe.”

Carol nodded slowly and took another sip of water. “I understand.”

Tim wasn’t sure what to say next, if there was anything to say next. “You can join us, you know,” he said.

“Join what?”

“Our ‘club’ as you call it. All we do is get together in the pub, every Wednesday night - at The Drapers Arms on Barnsbury Avenue - and we talk, play board games sometimes, share what’s going on in our lives. That’s all we do. And on Saturday mornings a few of us volunteer at the shelter on City Road. I don’t know if you know it? You’re very welcome to join us, then or on Wednesday nights. All welcome.”

Carol finished her water and stood up, placing the glass in the sink next to where Tim stood. Turning to him, she smiled in a way that reminded him why he liked her in the first place. “Maybe I will.”

“Great.” Tim said.

“Good luck with your dinner,” said Carol and she leaned in to kiss him on the cheek. Her lips felt warm and welcoming, but it wasn’t enough.

“Goodbye, Carol.”

Tim stood staring at the closed door for a while, before reaching for two plates and putting them in the oven to warm up. As he laid the table, he thought how funny it was that even though Carol had come round to apologise, the words “I’m sorry” hadn’t actually been said.

But it didn’t matter; he forgave her.



“In London we give ourselves a pat on the back, rightly, for not killing one another, for our prejudice being subtle rather than lethal.”

Martin Freeman

“London is like any other kind of addiction, really. You get 5 per cent entertainment out of it, and that makes you suffer through the other 95 per cent of it.”

Rob de Groot, Antiques Dealer & Londoner  
(as quoted in *Londoners* by Craig Taylor)

# **Routines**

## **Monday**

### **Mr Bojangles**

If I'm really clever I can eat three times in one day. I'm not greedy and I don't eat a lot – I mean, I'm not a dog – but it's nice to shop around, have some choice.

The old man is my first port of call. I trot over there when I see a light go on. He's the only one up early enough and he always responds to my pleas to let me inside. That comes in handy when it starts to get cold.

I have to say the food he puts in front of me leaves much to be desired, but as a starter, it suffices.

He's rather fond of me. He knows that I like to be scratched behind my ears and under my chin, so I ignore the fact that he says "good girl" or "pretty lady". If I'm in the mood, I reward him by returning again after I've popped back home

to eat the breakfast my owners put out for me.

And later, after I've had my nap and done the rounds of nearby gardens and roofs, I'll go back home when the little girl who has moved into my owners' house has her dinner. She's so small and stupid she has no idea how to eat, and half of it falls on the floor. Her mother is too slow to tidy up, so I may as well do the job for them.

Sometimes I think about popping back to see the old man on an evening, but I can't be too needy. I am a cat, after all.

## **Philip**

The first thing I see is darkness. Even in the summer. I always beat the sun to it. I need less and less sleep these days.

But the first thing I hear is the cat. She's the only one I know who will be awake before me. I hear that whine of a meow, as she dances in figures of eight outside my back door. The only thing that shuts her up is a saucer of milk and a few spoonfuls of canned tuna. That and a gentle pat on the head. She's not mine, of course. I've no idea who she belongs to. One of the neighbours who ignore me, no doubt. I don't think they feed her, that's why I do it. You hear about people neglecting animals; that's not right.

She's one of only three or four living beings that I talk to every day. The second person I speak to is the woman at the newspaper shop. A real chatty one she is. Always got lots of questions and comments about things I have no interest in. She's even started to offer me a cup of tea. I've never accepted. Why would I? It's a paper shop, not a bloody cafe. Besides, I've got tea at home. You can call me rude – you can call me whatever you like – but I like drinking my own tea in my own house.

Besides, sometimes the cat will still be hanging outside my door when I get back, and if I'm in the mood I'll let her in.

## **Maria**

My first job in the morning, after I've opened up and turned the lights on, is to bring the stacks of newspapers inside and unpack them in piles that are in the same place every day, so customers can walk in and grab the one they want from the top of the pile. That early in the morning they don't want to spend too much time looking for what they want and I like to help them with that. Then I organise the papers for delivery and put them in Kyle's bag. If I have to, I then sweep away the leaves that have gathered outside and quickly dust the shelves. After that, I can take up my position behind the counter and wait for the kettle to boil for my first cup of tea of the day. As I do, I like to read the headlines and make some sense of what's happening in the world.



My son, Tony, says that you can tell a lot about a person by the newspapers they read. He said he learnt this from the paper rounds we made him do when he was growing up. He hated them, of course, but we wanted to teach him the value of hard, physical work before he left to enter a cocoon of studying. I always knew he was going to be a man who worked with his mind, not his hands, but I didn't expect him to be so successful, and so established, or for that brain of his to take him so far away from me.

I asked Tony once what newspaper he read, and what that said about him. He told me that he didn't read any newspapers, which sort of surprised me.

The old man is always my first customer. Sometimes he even beats me to it and that always leaves me a bit flustered, like I'm late for work. After it happened the first time, I set my alarm fifteen minutes earlier, but a week later he was there again waiting for me to open up. I'm now getting up thirty minutes earlier than I used to, but thankfully it's always before the old man arrives.

I have his newspaper folded, ready and I hand it to him with the change he needs from the pound coin he'll place in my palm. I don't know why he never has change for me, but it's not up to me to dictate in what form I receive the money, as long as I receive it.

He shuffles away and often opens the door to let Kyle in. Kyle's our paper boy. He's good enough, well behaved, but

very quiet. Barely says a word to me most mornings, which I find a bit peculiar. And lonely. I find chatting warms me up in the morning, but I'm guessing both Kyle and the old man aren't really morning people. So I make myself a cup of tea and put the radio on instead.

## Kyle

I walk outside the bathroom and stare down into my mother's tired eyes. She's still in her uniform and I can smell the fried food that is cooked every day in the old people's home she works in.

"Eat something," she says.

"No," I reply.

"You should eat breakfast!" she shouts, a big voice for a small woman.

"And you should go to bed." I brush past her as she pinches her eyes at me and purses her lips together. That must have been the look she gave Dad before he left.

"Jack!" I call to my brother who still hasn't emerged from our room, no doubt still in bed. "You'll be late!"

I grab my bag and I cross the living room floor to get to the

door.

"You are a rude little shit!" Pa shouts at me in Mandarin. He's sitting in the chair he never leaves, in front of a television that is always on but he never actually watches. Instead, he reads his newspaper and fills out hanzi puzzles, all day, every day. A tired old man filling our house with nothing but noise and a language we don't speak.

"I must get it from your son!" I shout back.

"He couldn't be taught. He didn't know a good thing when he had it. Just like you..."

"Well, maybe I'll just get up and disappear one day too then."

I don't think about Mum until after the door slams. I'll apologise later, if I remember.

"Why is it so fucking cold?" I say to no one, though it's my own fault I didn't grab my jacket. I pick up my pace and run through the estate.

When I get to the newspaper shop, I smell curry. Every time. Does she have it for fucking breakfast or something?

The papers are ready. Jack says he has to sort the papers before his round, get them in the right order so the right paper goes to the right house. He's learnt most of the round

off by heart now, but at first he kept fucking up. He says I'm lucky because I don't have to do that. But his fancy chain newsagents doesn't smell of curry, and they gave him a bonus at Christmas. All I got was a box of fucking chocolates.

She's alright though. She doesn't bollock me when I'm late. And she pays me in cash, which is something Jack's place doesn't do. He had to put his bank account details and his NI number down on a form. And he only gets paid once a month. Every week I get an envelope with notes inside and it goes straight in my pocket. That's why I can pretend I earn less than I really do.

The old man's there already this morning. He reminds me of Pa with his sagging eyes and the way he can't stand up straight. He's really fucking grumpy. Never talks to Mrs Mendes when she tries to start a conversation. Miserable git. He gives me dirty looks when he leaves. He doesn't like me 'cause I'm Asian. Yeah, he's definitely a racist.

I leave my school bag behind the counter and lift the bag Mrs Mendes has got ready. I'm used to the weight now. I put my headphones in and press play to start the music. I hear Mrs Mendes' voice but the bass line drowns out what she's saying, which is what it's supposed to do. I'm close enough to the door to get away with not turning around.

My first delivery is to the guy on a bike. He waits for me outside his front door. He looks like a fucking poof, all yellow Lycra, and these stupid shoes that clip-clop on the

ground, as if they're high heels or tap shoes or something. His bike looks fucking expensive though. I know my mate Esh would be able to get a lot for that.

I hand over his Telegraph.

"Thank you, Kyle," he says tucking the newspaper into his backpack and zipping it up. I don't remember telling him my name, but I know I must have because how else would he know. Sometimes I say 'You're welcome', sometimes I don't. Today I don't.

## **Marcus**

My daughter is better than any alarm clock I'll ever buy. Though I imagine her batteries will run out eventually and at some point before her teenage years she'll prefer her own bed to the small space between Clara and me.

Clara is terrible in the mornings. Truly. I'll get several grunts and groans before anything remotely like, "Good morning" leaves her lips. But that's okay. I have perfected the art of reading books to Amy in a whisper; voices and all.

"When will I go to big school, Daddy?" Amy asks.

It's one of possibly a hundred questions she'll ask before 7 o'clock in the morning.

“You’ll go when you’re old enough. How old are you?”

“Three!” Amy shows me two fingers and a thumb.

A groan from Clara. Good, she’s awake. I can get in the shower.

“So, you’ll start big school in one more year... How old will you be then, Amy?” I ask.

She looks down at her fingers. “I’ll be... four!”

Clara rolls over and grabs hold of our daughter, pulling her away from me and into her. I kiss the tops of two blonde heads and jump in the shower.

Twenty minutes later, I have made my wife tea, I have put the cat’s food where he can find it, and I have dressed. I am standing outside my house, checking my bike’s breaks and gears as I see the newspaper delivery boy approach me out of the corner of my eye. He’s a sullen young man and I always feel rather sorry for him.

“Thank you, Kyle!” I say as he hands me my paper, which I tuck into my backpack. He doesn’t even look me in the eye today.

And off I go, winding my way down Lloyd Baker Street, a breeze in the morning but a bugger on the way back. At the

bottom of the hill, I'm thrown into the madness that is early morning traffic in London, almost literally, thanks to a silver Mercedes that doesn't give me the courtesy of letting me inch out while he's in stationary traffic. Cars are the least of my problems, however. It's the bus drivers, the taxi drivers and the white van men that are all fighting to be my biggest enemy. Them and the other cyclists. We've all been here and done this a hundred mornings and we know the rules of the road; namely there aren't any. I took a two-week holiday a few months ago and that first morning back on the bike, all I could think about was how angry everybody was. I hadn't noticed before, probably because I was so busy being angry too. And that's the key here; it's not personal. We're all just trying to get where we need to be and when there are too many peoples for these old roads that means some of us are going to have to go a little slower than others.

But none of us want to be one of the slow ones, do we?

Today is a relatively easy journey. Only two car horns, one finger from a black cab and a tap of another bike's wheel against mine. And guess what? He apologises. That's a first. I tell Dale about that. He's the guy I buy fresh orange juice from on the corner outside my office. He stands by his converted tuk-tuk with a smile on his face and a fresh OJ waiting for me. He's from Australia. I told Clara once that if all Australians are like him, no wonder so many people want to move there.

## Dale

By the time the dude in Lycra's arrived, I've been set up an hour and I'm selling juices to the good folk of Holborn. I'm really pushing it, because the air is cooling down and as soon as the leaves fall off the trees, it's only a matter of time before people start wearing scarves and gloves, and all they want is a hot drink in their hands, not fresh juice. Not that I blame them. Whatever gets you going in the morning, you know? Thing is I can't really afford a coffee machine right now. Do you even know how expensive they are? Too expensive. So yeah, I'm not sure what I'm going to do when winter comes. Apart from want to go home. I'm a wimp when it comes to the cold and my memories of winters where the sun shines are beginning to fade.

I hand the Lycra Dude his OJ and I think about asking his opinion on selling juice in winter, but he seems in a bit of a rush. I like this guy. He runs like clockwork. Literally. I use him as my clock, because I don't really like to wear a watch and I don't have time to check my phone once it starts to get busy. But the Lycra Dude always tells me that it's 8.30am.

That's the time that Shelley gets into bed. In seven hours she'll wake up and we'll have a cup of tea together, we'll talk as our therapist tells us to, and then if we both have time and the energy, we'll make love. That's what we have to call it now. Our therapist uses words like "slow" and "deliberate" and "full of love" too, which isn't how Shelley used to approach sex. We've made great strides in recent months. Since Shel' moved in and I got the bank loan



approved, we're doing really well. We're both happier in our jobs and we're starting to feel good about ourselves, without relying on the other to do that for us. I don't need to drink and Shelley doesn't need to have sex with strangers. We're working on it.

I text Shelley. It's how she likes to go to sleep, a message from me being the last thing she sees before she closes her eyes.

"Good morning and good night, darling. I love you. Sleep well."

Message sent, I go back to juicing.

## **Shelley**

I receive his text while I'm brushing my teeth. I'm always relieved when I see his name light up my phone. Not because he remembered, but because it still excites me. That's really important to someone like me.

A girlfriend once said my relationship with sex is like a man's relationship with sex, but how can I ever know what a man feels about sex. Believe me, I've tried. I've pushed myself up against the salty, sticky skin of so many men, trying to drill my way into their thoughts, to understand their satisfaction, to learn if it was as hot, and sweet, and

short-lived as my own. For me, sex started as a really good hobby, an activity I liked to spend time on. And when you do the job I do, you need a good hobby. Thinking about sex helps me forget everything else. It takes me away when I'm mopping up vomit and doing what I can to heal the wounds that people make to one another and to themselves.

It's funny now to think that's how we met, me sewing up a gash that began at his hairline and travelled all the way down to the tip of his left ear. I did such a good job that only I know exactly where the scar starts and ends. And I know why I did such a good job. I used it as a focus, joining the two sides together, rather than thinking how much I wanted to push his body down and thrust mine on to it. Even the smell of days-old alcohol oozing out of his pores didn't put me off. I cleaned him up, washed my hands and led him to the staff toilets. He didn't know what was happening until I unzipped his fly and forced him back onto the closed toilet seat. In that moment I saw him sober for the first time; a boy-like fear and vulnerability swimming in his wide eyes. That spoke to me, so afterward, when he asked for it, I gave him my number. I thought he'd lose it, toss it away as soon as he had the next bottle of vodka in his hand. But he called and the next time I saw him, he was dried out and lost and I didn't want to tell him it wasn't going to work out. So we dated, we fucked, we realised we both had addictions. He told me that I could keep him sober. I told him that I wanted to stay monogamous to him. We made a deal and we shook on it.

Spitting out toothpaste and rinsing, I read his message five times.

As I pull the curtains on the daylight outside, as I climb into the bed he always makes in the morning, and as I put my ear plugs in, I read his message, reminding myself how far I've come. As I close my eyes to sleep, it's the last thing I see.

# Tuesday

## Mr Bojangles

I start singing for my breakfast outside his door, seconds after I see the light go on. I pad around on the spot to keep myself warm. He'll think I've been here for hours.

He's extra stingy with the portions this morning, but it's not like I can complain. He's not my owner.

I stick around outside his back door to see if he'll let me in again. I've no desire to go back home in a rush. Same old food, same old whining child who pats me like I'm a dog and is no use to me until she's throwing food on the floor.

## Philip

The first thing I see is darkness.

The first thing I hear is the cat.

I open the door. I feed her. I pat her head. She's not mine.

I walk to the newspaper shop. That woman asks me three questions: *How are you? Can you feel the air start to cool already? Would you like a cup of tea?*

I ignore them all.

At home the cat's still outside the door licking between her claws. I open the door a little bit, in case she wants to come in.

## **Maria**

I unpack newspapers. I stack them. I sweep up the new autumn leaves. I get Kyle's bag ready. I don't bother to dust the shelves; they look fine. I turn the kettle on.

I think about Tony. I feel proud about Tony.

The old man comes in and I talk to him. He doesn't reply, just waits for his change and takes his paper. One day we'll strike up a real conversation, I tell myself.

I make a cup of tea, put the radio on and read the headlines.

Kyle walks in swaps one bag for another. I turn the radio down just in case. One day we'll strike up a real

conversation, I tell myself.

## **Kyle**

Walk out of the bathroom and see Mum come through the front door. She's done the shopping on the way home, and I should probably help her with the bags she's carrying, but I don't.

I grab my school bag, and am two steps from the front door when Pa calls out from behind a newspaper.

"It's cold. Take your coat."

I don't reply but I grab the coat anyway.

He was right. It is cold.

I can smell the curry from outside.

The old man pushes past me as he leaves. What's his fucking problem?

One bag down, one bag up. Let's get this over with. Mrs Mendes smiles at me. Always smiling.

Man on the bike. Telegraph. Thank you, he says. I'm not in

the mood.

## Marcus

Amy bounces on my bed and I'm awake. Her hair is extra messy this morning and I wonder what kind of dreams she has, which keep her dancing in her sleep.

"Will I get a little brother or sister?" So that's today's big question. Clara's grunt is louder than usual.

"We're trying, Amy," I say. "Soon!"

"Don't tell her that!" Clara is suddenly awake. "She'll tell everyone at nursery..."

With Amy trying to sneak under her mother's arm, I jump in the shower.

In the kitchen, I put food out for the cat, make my wife a cup of tea, then I go outside to check my bike's brakes and gears. Young Kyle catches my eye as he hands me the paper, but doesn't say a word as usual. He looks tired.

I race down Lloyd Baker Street, straight into a traffic jam. There follows a fairly standard journey; three car horns, the beep of a double-decker bus and an emergency stop thanks to a teenage schoolgirl who doesn't look before crossing the

road. I must make sure Amy looks both ways. Always.

Dale is singing to himself when I arrive. I vaguely recognise the song and I think about asking him what it is, but I need to get changed and get to a meeting. And I hate being late. Instead, I tell him to have a good day and he shouts the same back to me, calling me “mate”.

## Dale

Lycra Dude has got a real sweat on today. He’s already got his helmet off and pulled the zip down on his top. His hair is messier than usual this morning.

I’ve got a headphone in my left ear and I’m singing along to *Forever Now*. It’s the song my Mum used to play for us in the car when she would take us to the bottle-o. I try not think about the last part of the memory.

Lycra Dude smiles at me in a weird way. I smile back and instinctively reach for the phone in my pocket.

“Have a good day, Dale!” he says, putting coins into my hand and pushing his bike away.

“Have a good day yourself, mate!” I call out, but I’m already tapping letters on my phone.



“Good morning and good night, Shelley, my love. Hope it was a good shift. I love you. Sweet dreams.”

I go back to juicing.

## **Shelley**

Beep, beep. It's him and it's a lovely message. I stop plucking my eyebrows to read it once, twice.

He's made the bed for me. It's one of the recommendations by our therapist I appreciate the most. It reminds me that the bed is a place for rest and sleep, not just...

In return, I've stopped checking his hiding places and I've started cooking again. I ripped out a new recipe for cookies in a magazine in the staff room. I'll bake them later.

I brush my teeth, close the curtains and put my pyjamas on. I read the text message again. It's the last thing I close my eyes to.

# Wednesday

## Mr Bojangles

Light goes on. I'm there in seconds.

Meow, meow. It's tiresome, but necessary.

Oh, my! Tinned salmon today. What a treat.

I should stick around and keep him company, but it's warmer at home, even if the child is there.

## Philip

Darkness. Meow. Cat. I bought the salmon especially from the supermarket yesterday.

She's grateful, I can tell.

The woman in the newspaper shop is late today. I have to wait outside. She starts talking as soon as the door opens.

The cat's not there when I get back and as I open up a canister in the kitchen, I find out that I've run out of teabags.

Bugger.

## **Maria**

I unpack. I stack. I sweep. I dust. I get Kyle's bag ready.

Then the kettle boils, the tea brews and I read the headlines.

I spoke to Tony last night. He's going to New York for the weekend.

The Old Man arrives and I ask him if he's ever been to New York. He seems quieter than usual, which should be impossible.

I drink my tea. I listen to the radio.

I welcome Kyle. So quiet, so sad.

## **Kyle**

Mum isn't home yet.

"Did Mum call?" I ask Pa.

"No. No one call." Same newspaper as yesterday. Old fool.

Walk out front door.

Shit. Forgot my jacket again.

Mrs Mendes. Curry. Old Man. Arsehole.

Telegraph to man on bike. He says thank you. I say 'you're welcome' and it didn't even hurt.

## **Marcus**

Amy, Amy, Amy.

"What's for dinner, Daddy?"

Clara grunts, my beautiful grumpy wife.

"Shall we have pizza?"

"YAY!" says Amy and I can imagine Clara both smiling and frowning into the pillow.

Shower. Kitchen. Cat food. Bike. Brakes. Gears.

Two car horns, one white van cuts me up and a bike courier pushes past me while undertaking a bus. I call after him to watch where he's going. He turns back and shouts out "Fuck off, you fat wanker!" I spend the rest of the journey holding my stomach in.

"Good morning, mate!" Dale almost sings and he gives me a cookie with my OJ. I try to pay him for it but he refuses. "My girlfriend made them. I can't eat them all, or I'd get fat. You need it more than me, mate, you cycle every day!"

I ask him what song he was singing yesterday morning but he can't remember. We laugh and I'm still smiling as I wheel my bike into the garage of my office building, chewing the cookie he gave me.

## **Dale**

Lycra Dude looks a bit stressed. I give him one of Shelley's cookies. I like it when she bakes for me. He doesn't want to take it at first but I insist.

He asks me about a song I was singing yesterday. I sing so many songs a day, I haven't got a clue which one he means.

He laughs, leaves, calls me mate.

8.30am.

“Good morning Shelley. Sleep well darling, I look forward to seeing you later.”

Juice. It's going to get cold one of these mornings soon.

## **Shelley**

Beep, beep. No 'I love you'. That's weird. Isn't it?

No made bed either. I shouldn't look into it. We made love last night. It was wonderful. Not like sex; it was like love. I told him I'd make cookies more often.

Don't bother to brush my teeth. I hold the phone to my chest, hoping for another message as I close my eyes.

# Thursday

## Mr Bojangles

Well, this is embarrassing.

I've got stuck up a tree.

It would appear it's true what they say; we always want what we can't have. At least, that's where I'm hanging the blame for my poor decision to chase a squirrel up the large oak tree at the bottom of the neighbour's house. It sort of backfired as soon as I realised that squirrels can jump significantly further than cats who eat three meals a day. And now I have no idea how to get down.

The real problem, however, is nothing to do with me. The real cause for concern is the lack of effort put in by my owners to find me last night. *She* opened the door to their pokey yard and called out my name a few times. *He* looked under the shed and then put a bowl of milk outside before he turned off all the lights. And that was it. The child didn't even come outside and look. Honestly, they hardly bothered.

So here I am sitting in the darkness of early morning, and this branch is becoming increasingly uncomfortable. I wait for the old man's light to go on five doors away. Maybe he'll

notice I'm missing. I'm sure he'd make much more of an effort to find me if I was his cat.

## **Philip**

The first thing I see is the sunlight and that tells me something is not right.

My first thought is of the cat, who I can't hear. Not that I'm surprised. I wouldn't hang around either if my food didn't show up.

How did I sleep in like this?

I kick off the covers and swap pyjamas for the clothes I wore yesterday. I feel in a sudden rush to get to the newspaper shop. What if they've sold out of my paper? I'm hardly in the mood to go all the way to the supermarket, not again. Twice in one week is enough for me.

There is a real chill in the air and I should have put a scarf on. I'll probably get sick now. Maybe I already was coming down with something and that's why I slept in.

The woman in the newspaper shop looks shocked to see me, but she is quick to offer me that daft smile that crunches up her eyes.



"You're here!" she says. "I thought you'd forgotten."

"Slept in," I mumble. I'm relieved to see there are a few Daily Mails still left on the pile.

"Oh I hate that," she says. "Makes you feel all out of sync, doesn't it?"

I put my hand in my pocket looking for change, but there is none.

"It's okay," she says. "You can pay me tomorrow."

"I want to pay now."

"But you're here every day. I trust you," she says.

I don't take the newspaper from her. I tell her I want to pay my way.

"Well, I'll keep hold of the paper for you, back here," she pats the paper, lying on top of the bank of chocolate bars that line the front of her counter. "Honestly, you don't have to go home to get your money," she says again.

"I live close," I say and turn away from her.

## **Maria**

I don't know why he won't just let me take twice as much money tomorrow. It seems ridiculous for him to go back home just to walk here again. He's not exactly a young man. I don't want to be responsible for him overdoing it.

After he's gone, I gaze at the front page of the newspaper he likes to read.

**"ENGLISH IS A SECOND LANGUAGE FOR 1 IN 7 PUPILS"**

Tony says that only racists read the paper that the old man buys, but I don't want to believe that. Perhaps it's written by racists, but it's hard to believe all those millions of readers could be racist. That's an almost unimaginable amount of hate.

I hear the beep, which tells me the door is opening. It was my husband's idea to install that alarm. He works evenings in the shop as he finds it hard to get up in the morning these days. This was his way of protecting me so nobody could startle me when I worked alone early in the mornings. At first I hated it, but now I forget it's even there.

I assume it's the old man returning, but it's actually Kyle returning an empty bag.

"That was quick," I say. "Any problems?"

“No.”

He dumps one bag and picks up another.

“Goodbye,” I call after him, but he has already gone.

## **Kyle**

I bump into him as I walk out of the door. It's as if he's standing there waiting for me. Our feet knock together and my head hits his shoulder. What's he doing here?

“Watch where you're going!” he says to me after I step back.

“You got in my way!” I say.

“Cheeky little shit,” he says under his breath, as if I'm not going to hear him when he's right in front of me.

“What did you call me?”

“You're a cheeky shit!” he says and I've never noticed how deep his voice was, like a real man. “You don't look where you're going and you don't even apologise when you get in the way.”

“I'm not in your way. You can move around me,” I shout

back. "What is your fucking problem, old man?"

He stares at me and I'm surprised to see he's actually taller than me. I always think of old people as being small.

He leans in so close I can smell his breath. It's not a good smell, like stale, old dishwater.

"Why don't you go back to where you came from?" he whispers. "You don't belong here."

Then he steps around me and into the newspaper shop. I march away, grinding my teeth, clenching my fists. Even when I reach the end of the road, I can still feel the blood pumping through my veins and I'm still talking to myself.

"He's dead. He's a dead man."

## **Marcus**

Amy woke me up in the middle of the night.

"Where is 'Jangles, Daddy?" she whined, trying to climb into our bed.

"He'll be back," I pulled her up. "He's just gone away for a while. Like you do when you stay at Nanna and

Granddad's."

"Oh," she said. "He's at Nanna's house?"

"Maybe, we'll phone them in the morning to find out."

"Phone now!"

"No, Amy. It's two o'clock in the morning. Nanna will be asleep."

"But what about 'Jangles!'"

"He's a cat. Cats are good at looking after themselves."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I'm a grown up and I know everything."

"That's not true," said Carla.

"Daddy, I'm scared. Will I ever see 'Jangles again?"

"Yes, of course. Now go to sleep."

It took Amy a long time to finally fall silent, and that's why all three of us slept in.

“Marcus,” Carla is smacking the palm of her hand against my thigh. “Marcus! It’s 8 o’clock.”

I skip the shower, throw some clean clothes in my bag and I don’t bother to leave cat food in the kitchen, though I quickly scan the back garden in case he’s there.

When I rush out of the door, bouncing my bike beside me, I end up kicking the newspaper that lies on my doorstep. I pick up my Telegraph and shove it in my bag. No time to check my brakes or gears.

I must have flown down Lloyd Baker Street at a record speed and I don’t slow nearly as much as I should when I see there are more cars, more buses, more taxis on the road than I’m used to. I ignore the yells of other cyclists as I cut them up, carving my own way down Chancery Lane. I hate to say it, but I’m having fun. I feel like a bike courier or someone who has more balls than the real me. I laugh out loud at how good it feels.

And that’s why I don’t see the bus pull out and clip my front wheel, pulling my bike down and throwing my body sideways into oncoming traffic.

## **Dale**

I bought a radio yesterday. I’m hoping it will keep me

company, attract new customers and add a bit of atmosphere to my juice cart. It was a bargain too. I saw a sign in a shop on my way home – *20% off all digital radios*. So that's why I was late coming home and that's why Shelley and I had a really bad row.

“Where have you been?”

“I went to Argos.” I showed her the shopping bag. “Look, I bought a radio for the juice cart.”

“Can we afford that?”

“I got 20% off.”

“That's not what I asked!”

“We can afford it.”

She was cleaning the kitchen, her elbow pumping hard as she scrubbed an already spotless counter top.

“What's wrong Shel'?”

“I have to get ready for work,” she pushed past me.

With her stomping around upstairs, I moved into the kitchen, refilling bottles and checking my fruit stocks for the following morning. Normally I would wait until Shelley

goes to work before I go shopping for more supplies, but I could feel this nasty atmosphere in the apartment and I wanted to escape. My default setting told me to go for the bottle, which is why I left quickly, before the local market closed. That way I wouldn't need to go to a supermarket that stocked booze.

When I got back, Shelley, her uniform and handbag were all gone.

I texted her.

“Have a good day, darling. I can take the radio back if you think it's best. Don't work too hard. x”

And then because I was tired and I still wanted to drink, I took a sleeping tablet and went to bed.

I'm not going to take the radio back. It's the only thing that has kept me smiling this morning as I serve up what feels like a lot less juice than usual. I try not to pay attention and instead I chop, I juice, I blend and I sing to myself and anyone else who wants to listen. That makes me think about Lycra Dude.

I check my phone. 9.10. He's not showed up yet.

“Fresh apple juice, please,” says a voice.

I put my phone away and get back to juicing.



## Shelley

I should have predicted that work would echo my mood. I can always trust the ward to throw up more drama than what's happening in my life.

I glance at the clock on the wall, the one the patients don't see unless they look for it. I struggle to believe it's 9.11 and I'm still at work.

I'm also finding it hard to explain why there's no message from Dale. I haven't heard from him since yesterday afternoon when I was walking to work, taking the long route, trying to get rid of that stress I felt following our row. But even that message didn't tell me what I wanted to hear. Why wasn't he telling me he loved me? Why didn't he say he was sorry? Doesn't he want to be with me anymore?

"Shelley, what are you still doing here?" Felicia says placing her hand on my shoulder.

"I'm leaving now," I say. "Do you need anything else from me?"

"No. Get out of here, we've got a stabbing coming in so get out before you get roped into helping that one."

I nod. And I don't feel guilty. I've mopped up my share of blood in the last twelve hours. I pull my phone out of my pocket as I walk to the staff room to get changed. Still nothing.

Walking outside of the hospital I'm hit with the noise of London at a standstill. Red buses, white vans, black cabs; they fill the road and I don't want to walk alongside them like I normally do to get home. Instead, I walk to the Tube station, but metal caging covers the entrance.

"Line's partially closed," says a man in uniform, standing at the gates. "Body under a train at Gloucester Road."

I wince and move on; looks like I don't have a choice but to walk. Unless I get the bus, but looking at the build-up ahead of me, I would walk faster.

"Where to, love?" A taxi has pulled up in front of me.

I think about Dale's radio. I think about getting out of here. I think about getting off, full stop. I have £10 in my purse.

I tell the driver this and after a short conversation about how Wimbledon is on his way home, he agrees to take me.

"You got lucky," the driver says and I look up at him trying to gauge how old he is. Fifty-something, I reckon. He has wrinkles in all the right places: in the corners of his eyes and in the valley between his eyebrows.

I get in and the cab pulls off into traffic.

“Night shift?” he asks and we talk about all the things I’m not really in the mood to discuss; how tired I am, how lonely night work is, how hard it is to work in A&E. I bury my phone in my handbag, to stop me looking at it.

Then he’s asking me how old I am.

“How old do you think I am?” I say back, an eyebrow raised.

“You can’t be a day over twenty-five.”

“Ha! You’re lying...” I say back. “Now, be honest. How old do I really look?”

He studies me in the rear-view mirror and it feels good to be looked at, assessed. He’s not overweight and he still has a full head of hair. I can even smell the fragrance of his washing powder through the gap in the window that separated us. Or maybe that was his wife’s doing? I look at his hands on the steering wheel; there’s no ring.

“Twenty-seven,” he says. “That’s my honest answer.”

“I’m thirty-three.” I shift to the edge of the seat. I’ve made up my mind about what’s going to happen next. “How old are you?”

## Mr Bojangles

The problem with being a cat – aside from being unable to jump from trees like a squirrel – is that you see a lot more than humans do and yet you can do nothing about it. This is truer than ever when you are stuck up a tree.

After my owners leave the house for the day, I stop meowing to save my energy. Not long afterwards I see the old man open his back door and look around for me. He even makes this strange clicking noise. So I start meowing again, as loud as I possibly can, but I am too far away. I'd also fathom a guess that he can't hear that well anyway. Just my luck, that the only person looking for me is a deaf, old man.

And yet he looks up in my direction and when I'm quite sure that he is staring right at me I risk standing up, because maybe this will make me more visible.

Then I hear his doorbell ring and he goes inside.

The old man does not come back. In fact, I never see him again.

He's not there the following morning at breakfast time when I am finally rescued. Nor is he there to see me being carried down a long ladder by my owner, who has his arm in

plaster and a horrid red graze covering one side of his face. Though many of the neighbours stand in their gardens and watch, the old man is not one of them.

It is rather disappointing. I had gotten used to eating three meals a day.

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