

5:54pm

His coffee was cold.

Time seemed to stop within the grim roadside café. The world rushed past outside the window. He looked down at the mug, staring at the brown liquid inside it. He didn't even like coffee, but it was something to look at, to think about, even if he'd never had any intention of drinking it. His eyes wandered across the table, over the stains and patches of stick from spilt cokes and lemonades, travelling up, around the almost empty room. There was only one other customer, and that girl at the till who kept looking over at him with a glare that said 'that coffee took thirty seconds of my time to make, you better drink it'. With that thought, his eyes returned to the grey-white mug in front of him, and he sighed. Em had known he hated coffee. She often used to tease him about it, pretending to ward him off with the jar of granules, like he was one of those evil ghosts from the horror films she'd loved so much. Or the time she'd given him a slice of cake she'd made, only telling him after he had taken a bite that it was coffee. With that wide, mischievous grin he'd adored spreading over her face, her bright auburn hair hanging in her eyes. Turned out that was the same grin she gave the other guy.

But she was gone now, the happiness of those memories with her, leaving him with shells. He doubted that Em would even recognise him in the street. The only thing she had ever really cared about was Charlie, their – no, *his* – daughter. Even that wasn't enough. "Stop it," he thought, "that was years ago, it's over. Go and visit Charlie and get this over with." He wrung his hands before drumming his fingers on the table, trying to distract himself. His wizened nineteen year-old wouldn't approve. She'd tell him that Em wasn't worth it, that being alone with a load of crap memories is better. But the worst part would be that she'd be right, which would hurt. Still drumming on the table, he looked around again, and began to understand why people only stopped in those places when in desperate need of food or a shit. He didn't blame them. The ash sky outside had become jet, with rain beating down on the windows, making the room even darker. He looked at his watch, which read 5:57pm. He was going to arrive at Charlie's house even later if he didn't make a move now; there were still three hours of the drive left to go until Sheffield. The rain outside told him it wasn't going to be the easiest of journeys.

But he didn't want to go. It wasn't that he was avoiding Charlie, but in recent years she had looked more like her mother. So much so, that when Michael had last visited, he had greeted her with a cold look, mistaking her bright green eyes and wide smile for Emma – they'd laughed so hard afterwards. That had been a good night, beer, Charlie and Michael. Father, daughter, uncle; watching *Star Wars* together. He smiled as he rose from his chair, checking his watch as he heard the café door open, glimpsing the digits of 6:00. He looked up, as the others did, and saw the man in the doorway, the wires running around his stomach, to the rectangle on his chest. The stranger smiled. Everything flashed. Then black.

The shards of a white mug lay among the rubble.

5:57pm

I scribbled on the piece of receipt on the counter, sighing. The day had been miserable. Again. The sky outside was a murky grey, the only colour being the cars that drove underneath it, and even they were just a blur. I looked around the café, examining the two customers. One was a guy who looked like he would rather die than drink his coffee, and the other was shrouded in a red waterproof jacket, unidentifiable as male or female, mulling over a map. I thought about how I should go over and point out that if they wanted to spend a ridiculously long time working out how to get to wherever, then they probably ought to order something. But I couldn't find it in myself to be mean.

I thought back to why I had taken the job in the first place, convinced that there had been some sensible reason behind it. But there wasn't one. Apparently I'd just been a bloody idiot and gone for the most boring job possible. Apart from working in an office maybe. I doubted anything could be worse than that. It wouldn't have been so bad if the café had been more popular. Instead it was a drab, medium-sized building on the edge of London, not quite in the zone where traffic started to block up like a cancer that forms in a person's throat. Yet at the same time, it was in an awkward turnoff that made most people think 'nah, I'll just keep going and get some food when I arrive at my actual destination'.

My eyes rolled round to the clock on the wall, and I made a face at the time. I checked my phone instead. I didn't know why I took it with me; there was never any signal in that God-forsaken place. But at least it could tell me how long I had to endure the boredom for. 5:58pm. Oh joy. I used to think my lessons at school passed slowly, but this was getting to the point of unbearable. I needed to find a new job, I could afford to quit this one now, with all the money I'd saved up for the past two years. I could find something better, something that needed some brain work, rather than putting on a fake smile for the miserable sods that I had to serve.

I pulled the cloth from the cabinet beside the counter and began to wipe down the already pristine surface. As I did so, I took a minute to look at my two precious customers again. The guy with the coffee looked over a couple of times; with the expression on his face you'd have thought I was some kind of psychopath. His faded blue jacket seemed tired, as miserable as the wearer. I couldn't blame it, the world sucked, and there was nothing either I or the jacket could do to change it.

Movement outside caught my eye. For one minute, I thought I'd been sprung from my cell, but the figure was only a smoker from the petrol station across the car park. They often drifted over to the café, wanting to sneak a cigarette without blowing the tanks of highly flammable liquid sky high. I threw a judgemental glare in their direction; I'd never been fond of smokers. Most people thought I was one, a stereotypical twenty year-old with a terrible smoking habit that I'd developed at a shockingly young age. They usually assumed it was down to peer pressure, which would gain me some sympathy and a patronising 'motivational' comment. But sadly for those old dears who enjoyed their gossip, no, I didn't smoke. I'd even gone as far as dump a guy because I found out he was smoking. I despised it. The stench that clung like a cloak over everything you wore, an invisible, skin-tight vest. Then there were the fingers, the yellowed skin, stained by the nicotine; a permanent mark of the revolting habit. The thought made me shudder.

Then it started to rain. Great. I dropped the rag down on the table and began fiddling with the tassels on my uniform; stuck on which sitting position could best display how bored I was. My

eyes glazed over the room again, having already taken up all the detail possible. The clock; the face, hands, ticking. The blinds, yellowed, stained and broken. The furniture; marked, sagging and tired. The whole room, summed up in just a few thoughts. No wonder we so rarely had customers. All the while the clock ticked; slowly, too slowly. The rain continued to knock on the windows with its tiny fists, as if they were demanding the time to pass faster. I shifted again, feeling restless, wanting to move, to go home, to get out of here. But it wouldn't end. My shift would be over soon, I knew, yet I felt like I was trapped in a prison, feeling almost claustrophobic as a car pulled into the car park. "Phew, I thought "Anna's here, I can go! So long, boredom". Only it wasn't Anna. I watched him open his car door, at first thinking the stripes were a pattern on his jacket. His face was gaunt, pale, though it may have been the rain. I stepped back as he approached the door, wanting to run. I could see it, the thing. A *bomb*. But I froze. In the corner of my eye, I could see the coffee guy getting up, and noticing the stranger as well, his eyes widening. The person with the map slumped, as if resigning, as if they knew. I looked at the clock above the door, it was 6:00pm. "No," I panicked softly, "this shouldn't be me, it *can't* be me. I don't want to die." The bomb flickered briefly and I felt myself being thrown backwards into the wall, the pain. The silence.

5:51pm

You smothered your face in your hands, pulling the skin of your cheeks down, clawing at your eyes in frustration. The map, sprawled out on the table, continued to mock you, refusing to show a route. Instead the roads seemed to spell 'lost'. Not just once, but four, no, six times – preventing you from denying it. You reached for your phone, but there was no signal. How typical.

Your numb pink hands stung as they began to thaw in the slight warmth of the café, clashing with the crimson of the sleeves surrounding them, yet they kept trembling. You tried to hide the constant tell of your fear, masking your face within the darkness of your hood. It seemed safer in there. Your eyes glanced over to the waitress, watching, waiting for a sign that she was about to walk over, but instead she remained behind the counter, reluctant to do anything other than hopelessly stare at the clock.

The map complained as you folded it up, ripping through some part of eastern London whilst the light flickered above. Your eyes followed the cracks in the table, making a maze or dot-to-dot. Still silence in the café, you didn't want to disturb it. A plan came to mind, a route you took a long time ago, one that might be able to get you back out of this dreary, damp hell.

The door opened, a man stepped through. He was tall, but thin. Really thin. Rain dripped from his nose and face, leaving his hair flattened. He was only two metres from you, so you saw his face, his age. In turn he sensed your fear. He smiled, his teeth shining in the dull light, but it was his eyes, his *eyes*, that scared you most. The smile twisted them, and the darkness emphasised a brightness that could be called madness. Those eyes met yours.

(1,900)

I sat on the plane, already feeling sick with claustrophobia. I'd been ok going through security, but the minute I'd stepped onto the plane the fear had grasped me, clinging on like a piece of mucus in my throat. I paused and tried to breathe, but it didn't help much. The narrow aisle seemed to constantly shrink as I moved down it, squinting at the numbers on the chairs to find mine. It seemed to stretch forever, one long corridor stretching into the distance, with the doors, the exits, the *air*, moving further and further away. I began to doubt whether I could stand the suffocation for three hours. Thank God we weren't going to America. A lack of land beneath the plane, no matter how far, just made my paranoia worse.

I found my seat, next to the window. At least I was able to see the sky, the clouds: an open space. The only problem was that I was going to be trapped in by two other people. But I knew that if I sat in one of the aisle seats I wouldn't even make it one hour, let alone three. I slumped down into my chair, foraging for my iPod in my rucksack. If I was planning to remain even slightly sane in this then I was going to need to listen to something. The pills I'd taken earlier were also meant to help.

"Alice, are you ok?" My mum peered over from the seat in front of me, trying to assess how well I was coping with the situation. "I'm fine." I repeated the same response that I must have given almost a hundred times over the past half hour. It's not as if her pestering would make it any better. No I couldn't actually tell if the pills were working, no, I'm not bothered about who I sit next to, unless of course if they're telekinetic and can lift the plane up if it falls. There we go. The big issue. Whenever I told someone that was the reason why I hated flying, they told me "It's statistically safer that travelling by car", as though that would make a difference. I knew how unlikely it would be for the plane to explode, but that knowledge never consoled me. It still seemed like a rational fear to have.

"Are you sure you're fine?" Mum persisted. She never let things go. I rolled my eyes at my feet and nodded, not bothered enough to answer properly. Instead I tried to concentrate on my music, listening to each lyric and chord. But no matter what I did, I could still sense the fear niggling away at the back of my mind. It felt like elastic that I had pulled taught, to breaking point. It kept springing back. And every time I pulled the elastic away again, it became more and more liable to snap. I exhaled.

The air hostesses began closing the hatches above, flashing their bright teeth at the passengers as they asked them to sit down and put their seatbelts on. Like a seatbelt would save you in a fall from several thousand meters in a metal can. I shoved my bag under the chair in front of me and took a quick glance at the safety sheet, memorising the brace position and what to do with the life jacket. I then twisted in my seat, trying to see who was behind me. Thankfully it was only a kid. I'd never forget the death of a character in a book I'd read. He'd died in a plane crash, but was already crushed by the force of an overweight person being smashed into the back of his chair.

The announcement dragged me away from my distraction, demanding my attention. I straightened up in my seat as the air hostess started demonstrating the safety procedures. Brace position, don't interlock your fingers. Don't inflate your life jacket inside the plane. Put your own oxygen mask on before helping others. Lastly, your emergency exits are here, here, here and here, the same speech that took place on every flight, everywhere. It made me wonder exactly how many air hostesses drove themselves insane by repeating it over and over again. The image of an insane hostess, locked in a cell with their hair ruined and their once-perfect nails cracked and damaged, constantly muttering "here, here, here, here, here, here" made me smile, briefly distracting me from the paranoia.

And there I was again. One small link and it was back, refusing to be expelled from my mind. I shifted in my seat, wanting to stretch, growing impatient. I wasn't sure how much longer I could stand being in that cramped metal tube, and we weren't even in the air yet.

An annoying buzz passed through the speakers, followed by a tired voice that wanted to be somewhere else. The captain's drone faded into the background as I double-checked my seatbelt, ensuring it was tight enough, without cutting into my stomach. Mum's face peeked through the gap in the chairs once more, and I nodded before the question passed her lips. It wasn't a satisfactory answer, I could tell from the look on her face. But my expression stated the it was not the time to talk, so she withdrew.

My eyes drifted to the free, open air of outside, as I heard the rumble of the engines. It was starting. I clenched the arms of the chair in my hands, trying to squash myself back into the seat, wishing I wasn't there, yet it made no difference.

I shut my eyes as we started to move.

The plane was on the runway, picking up speed.
The wheels lifted off the ground.

We were climbing.

I opened my eyes.

We were up.

(972)