

The train was late. The faint orange text on the board, mottled by rain, read 'Expected 19:26'. I checked my phone with vague annoyance, realising I hadn't had to run the last stretch to the station. I skipped a few Spotify tracks and cleared Twitter notifications without reading them. My cheeks felt flushed, and my shirt clung to my back like a damp tongue.

There were four or five people scattered under the rusted awning alongside me. A little boy was bouncing a yellow tennis ball at his mother's hip while she read a newspaper. I could make out the cartoon face of the Prime Minister on the front page, below the deep black text 'CABINET FALLOUT'; I wondered if he looked haggard because he was being undermined, or if he was being undermined because he looked haggard. Without conclusion, I glanced back at the boy in time for a wayward bounce to send the ball trickling towards the inside of my leg. He scampered over to me; his flat pink face moulded in contrition. I bent down, picking up the ball to hand back to him, when his mother snatched his arm. She heaved him back to where she had been standing, muttering downwards with scabrous exasperation. Compelled perhaps by a fraternal solidarity, I gave her a polite smile to say that I didn't mind, but she didn't see me. She seemed more concerned with punishing him than with whether he had caused any offence or not.

The rain had quietened by then, though the wind still whipped sparse moisture across the platform; I could see the train like a fat fly in the distance. The boy's mother had her fist wrenched in the hood of his waterproof, but his face was still fixed pointedly on the ball in my hand. As the train pulled in, I bounced it back towards him. It found his open palms, and we grinned.

The train quietly shunted its way towards town. Finding a free seat in the crowded carriage, I let my back sink into the warm felt, and my peeled eyes began to trail the passing scenery as if strung along by a rope. Only a few minutes had passed before I felt someone sit in the seat beside me, and heard a muffled voice. Turning over my shoulder, I removed the buds from my ears in a knot of tangled wire.

'Look at the state of those earphones,' she said.

'Hi Chloe.'

'Sorry to interrupt the picture of tranquillity – what were you listening to?' Her face had slipped into a placid smile.

'Green Day.'

'Isn't there a law somewhere against listening to Green Day whilst in a suit?'

'Only during work hours; I'm in the clear now.' She looked at me gently. Her eyes were like chocolate raisins in the fluorescent light. 'Besides, it's *Dookie*, so you've no grounds to slag me.'

'Slag you? Am I not a fellow Green Day apologist?' I smiled at that.

'I just didn't think you'd be brave enough to admit it in public.'

'I can shout it down the train if you'd like? I actually have my Billie Joe t-shirt on underneath this.' She pinched the yellow fabric of her jumper at the sternum; she still wore yellow when it rained.

'I think maybe everyone would feel better if you did that.' I said, peering over the chairs, teasing out my neck in a way I hoped might be funny. The train was almost full, with only a few empty seats punctuating the evening service; cricket sounds of skeletal suits still thrashing at keyboards; a group of teenage girls trying out the latest Snapchat filters and giggling scurrilously; the conductor by the door, waiting for the next stop, using the window as a mirror to comb his thinning hair. The sky outside was like cracked charcoal.

'And then they all confess to loving him too? And we burst into a song and dance?'

'No, I wouldn't go that far – it's never ended well, any time we've burst into song and dance.'

'Ah, you've a lovely voice. You know you do.' I gave my customary look of polite repudiation: reddened cheeks, smile with a flash of central incisor, eyes panned downwards.

'Mind, you can't dance for shit.'

'Right. I didn't pay £3.80 just to have my dancing slagged.'

'£3.80?!' Chloe said, feigning convulsion. 'Don't think the trains are supposed to charge you extra for being a crap dancer.'

'Some of us aren't students anymore, remember?'

'Oh God, the horror.' she said. I heard Kurtz in the jungle, murmuring spoonfuls of death.

We had slowed into the next station. The conductor was still peering out the window, met with the same scene as the previous stop, and the stop before that. The same faces, huddled jackets, hands in pockets. The blue light of the ticket machine shone piously between the bodies. Recognising myself in the crowd, I felt a cold disgust. Beside me, Chloe had taken her jacket off and folded it over her knees.

'What were you doing back home?' she asked, running her hair back behind her ears.

'I just had to pick up some things from the house.' The new crowd passengers shuffled through the doors and began searching wearily for seats. Some stayed standing, newly naked in the bright light.

'Ah, ok. How's your mum?'

'She's fine, thanks. She's recently discovered a Youtube page with all these old Eastenders clips, so that's been keeping her busy.' Both of us broke the same exhale of laughter, which hovered in the space between our shoulders.

'Jesus – that can't be good for her.'

'No, not at all. I think there's far too much of that these days.'

'Too much...?'

'Too much life on film.' Chloe seemed half a yard from convinced, so I continued: 'It worries me actually, the inability to escape the past, now that every second of it is recorded. Surely it can't be a good thing? To be confronted with the scenes of your own life over and over again.' I caught her glance then; we looked at each other. I had either forgotten who I was speaking to or remembered exactly who it was. She spun her head forward, but returned in a second.

'Especially if you're Phil Mitchell.' she said, grinning. I could have kissed her.

'Especially if you're Phil Mitchell. Where you headed tonight?'

'Um, it was Liam's birthday the other day, so we're going out for dinner.'

'Oh, ok, very good.' I kept my features doused in geniality. 'Where is it you're going?'

'Vivaldi's. In the West End?'

'Aw yeah, I've been in there before. Very romantic. You'll have an aneurysm looking at the pasta menu though.'

Her face splayed itself in amazement. 'Stop. I spent half an hour this afternoon looking at it online.'

'Yeah I don't doubt that – I'm pretty sure they do those little tapas dishes as well?' The anagram didn't occur to me until long after her reply.

'They do, yeah. But I don't want to look at them, 'cause I'll just end up ordering six, and they are not cheap LOL.' It amazed me that she still spoke 'LOL' out loud, albeit with histrionic irony; it never bothered me, as it would have with almost anyone else, but I realised then that I hadn't ever given any thought as to why that was. *Exceptio probat regulam*, maybe.

'No, I've realised, especially living in town, there's depressingly little can be classed as "cheap".'

'At least you get paid half decent money.'

'True, but I think that's just given me bigger holes in my wallet. Have you been back in the shop over summer?'

'You know it.' She shook her thumb and pinkie in a gesture rappers make, perched with false languor on the waxed bonnet of a Ferrari; I pictured her instead in her apron at the tills, politely wishing elderly customers a good day. 'I feel a bit of an impostor actually, turning up for three months of the year and being given all the responsibility again. Ordering around the younglings.'

'I'm sure they don't resent you. Not like it's your fault you're a natural at grocery shop management.'

'It's not like I get paid any more either.'

My brow furrowed itself defiantly. 'Come off it – Alice isn't still paying you the same shite, is she?'

'Well, minimum wage still, yeah. It went up this year though.'

'Christ, what a bitch.'

'No, she's not really. They just can't afford to pay me more.'

A man at the table across the aisle began to wake up; he had been sleeping since I boarded the train. His mouth creaked into a yawn, as if pried open by the hooked fingers of a ghost. The train had entered one of the tunnels that snake their way towards the George Street platforms, slowing almost to a halt. Passengers began to listlessly drop items into bags and fiddle their pockets for tickets. I could see between the chairs in front a woman reapplying makeup, unfavourably, in a little rose gold hand-mirror.

'How's the big boy job going anyway?' asked Chloe.

'Yeah it's not too bad, thanks. Early mornings are still a bit of a struggle.'

'Ha. They were never your favourite, were they? Wait, don't tell me you're still staying up 'til 3am every night?'

'Jesus, no. There'd be no getting away with that. It's lights out by midnight most days now. Doesn't seem to help much though; eyes like dead-weights.'

'Poor boy. Well, you look very smart in your suit.'

'Thanks.' I said, pulling at the grey lapels. 'You should have seen the state of me suit shopping. I'd have bought a bright pink one if it meant I could've gotten away from that tailor earlier.'

'You know, I can picture that exact scene. Remember the time you were with me when I was sorting makeup for prom? You were sheet white the whole time.'

'No wonder – those shops aren't exactly geared for the dutiful boyfriend. I swear one of the girls was eyeing up the perfect shade for me.'

'Didn't I say you could have gone somewhere else to wait?!'

'Call it morbid curiosity.'

A sandstone glow began to slip through the far windows as the train pulled out of the tunnel towards the platform. At the doors, a pug-jawed old woman stretched and strained to see which side would open, subtitled, in white text: 'I fought the war for your sort.' Chloe and I watched as passengers rose and began to insistently line the aisle. She put on her jacket, almost slapping me across the face in her contortion, before whipping her hair back over her shoulders. It had been dark and straight when she first appeared – the effect of tardy showering, rather than the rain – but was now drying into waves of light butterscotch.

The platform shimmered with the mosaic of the evening commute. Queuing at the barriers, I felt the weight of all those people, all they carried; following departure boards, sunken eyed, checking watches; snorting stale, sterile apologies down the latest Apple microphone; slaving and starving over raw, bony sandwiches; sketching filthy texts to emetic mongrel lovers. Here we were, all of us, scuttled like rats under the throb of time.

Chloe waited for me on the other side of the barriers.

'You headed that way, yeah?'

'Yeah, I'm off home.'

'Alright. I'm off down to the subway.'

'Ok, cool.'

'Listen, it was nice to see you. Give my love to the boys in the flat.'

I let her turn and walk four paces, off towards the lower platforms, before calling out to her back.

'They don't deserve it, you know.'

'I know. None of yous do.' I couldn't bear to see if she might turn her golden head, so began making my way towards the far side.

In the corner of the station, beside the exit, a heap of brown clothes loosely fingered a piano. Chopin's *Raindrop*. Somewhere within lurked his face, the colour of sour milk, trying to remember the notes. An empty cup sat on the lid, into which I relayed the quiet contents of my back pocket: two twenty pence pieces. Heading through the door, I spat under the glass canopy, and went out into the night.