

## Under The Paving Stones, The Beach

I'd met Scott just once before – at a warehouse party in San Francisco's Tenderloin district – but it was dark enough and I'd been drunk enough to remember almost nothing of the encounter. That which I did recall (his enormous hands, great hulking shoulders and teeth flashing purple under the UV light) left me feeling decidedly uneasy, so it had been something of a shock when the email from Mike, our mutual friend, had come through the day before.

Scott was in London on business, it said. He'd never visited before and was hoping I'd be able to show him some of the sights. There was a mobile number and the address of a hotel just off Piccadilly Circus, where I was instructed to meet him at 3pm the following afternoon. Ordinarily I would have refused on the grounds of short notice, but the truth was that I'd hit a wall with my latest commission – a short story based around a series of surreal beachscapes by a Portuguese photographer – and anything seemed preferable to another afternoon spent cooped up in the flat, repeatedly boiling the kettle to avoid staring into the creative vacuum.

I arrived twenty minutes early, so to escape the Saturday scrum of European school children squealing and splashing their way around the statue of Eros, I retreated to a nearby Starbucks. There I sipped a scalding latte and pored over the desolate beaches in those photographs, their horizon lines broken by displaced objects and illuminated by an otherworldly aura that defied the pitch black canopy above. There was something strangely familiar about those images, and I became so absorbed in trying to place it that I barely registered when a great shadow passed over my papers and shuffled into the chair opposite mine. It was only when he coughed politely that I looked up and saw Scott beaming over the rim of a veritable bucket of coffee.

"Thanks for being on time," he said in a thick Californian drawl. I forced a smile and he offered his hand over the table, his grip vice-like. "It's good to see you again."

"You too, Scott." I slid the pictures back into my bag. "How did you know that I'd be here?"

"I didn't. My hotel is next door." He took a long slurp of coffee and smacked his lips so loudly that I saw an elderly lady at the table next to ours shudder involuntarily. "How long has it been?" he asked. "Five years?"

"To the day, give or take. You look well."

Actually, he looked terrible: unshaven and bleary-eyed, his thick blonde hair bounding off at illogical angles from where it had been slept on. At one corner of his mouth I saw the crusted remains of what I guessed had been his lunch, which I found it hard to stop staring at. While we finished our drinks, he told me that he'd spent the previous night clubbing and had taken what he called a 'delicious young hottie' back to his hotel room, not sleeping until she'd left for work around 8am. I tried to sound impressed, but his bravado and the sheer volume of his voice left me feeling embarrassed, like I was a teenager being once again dragged around town by my irritable old man.

It was a feeling that came to a head on the tube, which was packed. He'd insisted on knowing exactly where we were going, so I pulled out my map and traced our planned route along the page, my finger running unsteadily from Ladbrooke Grove station down the slender white snake of Portobello Road.

At the sight of the latter he'd leaped out of his seat, causing a ripple of alarm to spread through the carriage. "Portobello Road!" he sang in a bellowing drunkard's voice. "Portobello Road! Street where the riches of ages are stowed!" A group of young girls in matching pink tracksuits began giggling hysterically in one corner, which only encouraged him to pitch it up a notch for the final, devastating flourish. "Anything and everything a ... duh duh duh duh ... is sold off the barrow on Portobello Roooooooooooooad!"

This last note was accompanied by such gusto that the girls in pink responded with a storm of localised applause, although the majority of passengers stared fixedly at their shoes.

"Sit down, Scott," I mumbled. "You'll get us arrested."

His face, when it bore down on me, hurled me headlong back into that dense, drunken evening in the Tenderloin warehouse: the slick sheen of sambuca on the palm of my right hand; the sonic wash of electronic breaks and basslines; a stranger's whispered proposition hot against my ear. Amid the noise and static of that night I felt the edges of something jarring, like a shard of glass.

"Is that what you're afraid of?" asked Scott, no longer smiling. "Getting arrested?"

But at that point our train pulled into Ladbrooke Grove, so I simply grabbed my bag and dragged Scott out onto the platform as the doors closed behind us with a sigh.

On Portobello Road we turned into the crowd that flowed through the market, its high frequency chatter sweeping us up like floodwater. Cold clung to the afternoon air, but the sky was a brittle pane of blue flecked with feathers of cloud, and the low sun lent the scene a giddy glow, as though it was already a memory tinted with the perfection of passing time.

Scott seemed enchanted by the many stalls along the way, flitting like a hyperactive child from one side of the road to the other as his eye was caught by a flash of gold here, a leather bound book there. His manner was brash and abrasive, and he clearly irritated those people whose trunks he rifled, whose books and records he flipped through frantically, whose mountains of pin badges and boxes of old magazines he browsed. At one of the more upmarket antiques stands he slipped a replica medieval knight's helmet over his head and made a huge show of cavorting around the street like a man possessed, swinging at invisible foes with an imaginary sword. The owner was so upset that I ended up spending £35 on a 1940s fountain pen and ink well just to placate him. After that I took Scott by the arm and dragged him into a nearby pub, sat him at a window seat and told him to keep still while I went to the bar.

I returned to find him seemingly asleep. "Mike mentioned you were here on business," I said loudly, placing two pints of overpriced Belgian lager on the table between us.

His eyes snapped open. "That's right."

"Some sort of conference?"

"Not exactly. I'm here to visit a client." Scott tapped twice on the window and flashed a smile at a group of passing girls, who looked startled and sped up. "Do you know what a life coach is?" he asked.

"Some sort of therapist, right?"

"My job is finding people who are trapped by their lives and setting them free. Usually that involves nothing more than showing them what slaves they've become to their fears and offering them an alternative, but the alternative varies from person to person. Making the right offer is the hard part."

"And you have overseas clients? Doesn't that make it difficult to form lasting relationships?"

I'd barely touched my drink, but Scott had drained the last of his and was now wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Cities are the same everywhere," he said. "Despair permeates like a disease. Everyone wanders around in these superficial bubbles of so-called security, but they're too scared and miserable to catch a stranger's eye on the bus. I teach people to emancipate themselves from this modern pestilence and fulfil their dreams."

"Is that where the song on the tube came from?"

He lit a cigarette, and the last rays of the afternoon sun picked up the smoke that circled his head like rings around some heavenly sphere. "The song came from *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*," he said, standing up and seeming momentarily so tall that I couldn't believe he hadn't punched a hole in the old wooden ceiling. "Now, what are you drinking?"

By the time we emerged from the pub, the sun had set and the stalls had packed up their wares, leaving the streets empty save for the drifts of litter that lined the pavements. It wasn't until we reached Notting Hill, however, that I was hit by the extent of the desolation: no people, no cars, no buses. Not a soul walked abroad in the city. "I've never seen it like this before," I said, as we turned left onto Bayswater Road and through the creaking black gates of Kensington Gardens. "It's like a ghost town."

In the moonshadow of the Albert Memorial I decided to get my goodbyes over and done with. "Will you pass on my best regards to Mike? It's been a long time."

But Scott just stood there, slowly shaking his head. I saw silver steam rising from his hunched shoulders and noticed that his feet seemed almost to hover in the strange glow that clung to the earth beneath us. "I haven't spoken to Mike in years," he said.

“But the email...”

“I wrote the email. It was the only way we could be sure you’d come.”

“We?”

“My boss and I. You’ve met him before: he was DJing that night in the Tenderloin. After his set, the three of us propped up the bar and knocked back flaming sambucas until we were falling off our stools. You don’t remember?”

I shuddered as fragmented images of that evening rose to the surface: his friend’s long black fingernails as he gripped the bar; his high, childish voice and pale face. There’d been something not quite right about that face, as if the eyes and mouth had been hurriedly painted on. I remembered his flawless animal impressions: one moment a chicken, the next a dog, now a screaming goat. Another round of sambucas and suddenly the ceiling had been wheeling overhead, my stomach lurching and my stool clattering to the floor as I clawed my way along the blood red warehouse walls and out the door into the car park.

“Why me?”

“Because you expressed interest. You said you wanted to be a famous writer and we said we could help. You told us to give you five years to make it on your own, and then to come and find you if you’d failed.” He cocked his head and frowned sympathetically. “You have failed, haven’t you?”

The temperature seemed to be rising rapidly; the steam I’d seen rising off Scott turned out to be smoke. “I don’t believe this,” I said.

“Reviewing children’s theatre? Reporting on the opening of leisure centres in the Elephant and Castle area? Your great novel unpublished and gathering dust?”

Above us, the black sky was pinned up with nothing – no stars, no moon, no shifting clouds – and my mind turned to the dead heavens in those eerie Portuguese beachscapes. With a sudden jolt, I realised what it was that they’d reminded me of. “This is a dream. I have to wake up.”

“We can help you.” From inside his coat, Scott pulled a few sheet of paper. “Sign this, and from tomorrow morning your paltry manuscript will be the centre of a bidding war between every major publisher on earth. Your phone will be off the hook with calls from newspaper editors begging you to write regular columns on whatever takes your fancy. You’ll have wine and women and the world will hang on your every pathetic word.”

I looked around frantically, but there was nothing left. No streets, no stairs, no Albert Memorial. I listened, but the silence was like a thick blanket: no planes hummed overhead, no birds or distant sirens sang. Even the colourful stone slabs at my feet had disappeared, replaced by a stretch of soft sand that faded into darkness on all sides.

“And what do you want in return?”

Scott shrugged his broad shoulders. “Let’s jump off that bridge when we get to it.”

He handed me the contract and I scanned its meaningless ream of numerals, symbols and calligraphic Latin script. I recognised only my own name, scrawled in red above a dotted line. Stapled to the back were three pages of fine print so small that I couldn’t even tell what language they were written in.

“I don’t have a pen,” I stammered, suddenly aware that I was shivering uncontrollably despite the intense heat.

“Yes you do,” he said, and his teeth flashed purple when he smiled.

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