

## **Smoke and Mirrors**

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You rouse from a deep sleep, with a parched mouth and a thick head. The sort of head that feels like someone is stood on it, the pressure of their weight making your eyes pulsate out of the orbits. Of course, then the first thing you crave like a drug is a cup of the brown stuff to shake the fuzzy feeling.

You fill the kettle with water only up to the one cup capacity mark and flick on the power. It always confuses you why most people insist on filling it all the way to make a single drink. It's inefficient in time and energy resource. Just thinking about it frustrates you, they are idiots.

Out into the fields, beyond your perfect and meticulously mowed back lawn, the sun is perched in the middle of the sky. You look at your mobile and it confirms that it's nearly noon. You have slept all morning. You are disappointed with your lack of self-discipline. Your mother would “*get you*”, for this sort of thing when you were a kid. Still, it's probably for the best though, three bottles of red usually can take a stretch of time to work its way from your blood, doesn't it? The reduced form of ethanol is ethanal and it's that which gives you the hangover. You can convert it back to ethanol by oxidation. The easiest way to achieve this is to simply drink more wine. It's certainly something to consider presently given how you are currently feeling. Then again, hair of the dog isn't something which is a good idea for you right now with work still to do.

The tea is wonderful, that first cup always is when you're hungover isn't it? Have you noticed that the second cup never quenches your thirst as well? It has lots to live up to. Even if you standardise all variables and make the brew in the exact same mug, under the precise preparation conditions, it still isn't comparable to the first.

*Nothing is good as the first. But you still crave the experience again none the less.*

After your thirst is dealt with, the second primary urge kicks in.

*To feed.*

The call for fried bacon, eggs and toast is almost too much for you to handle.

You consider putting on fresh clothes but settle with the scruffs you had on last night. A pair of black running joggers and a matching baggy hoody. You can smell the smoke from the fire saturated on the fabric. It has all the notes of Barbeque. Strangely enough, it makes you want that thinly sliced fried pig even more.

You do, however, change yourself into fresh bra and knickers. What would your mother say wearing the same undies twice in a row? ‘*Heaven forbid, disgusting girl*’, she would come down on

you like a tonne of bricks. You grimace at the thought. You have been in that position, feeling those bricks slam you down on multiple occasions.

You sit down at your dressing table and notice your hair is incredibly greasy. Probably from all the digging you did yesterday. Before the wine took its course and you grew tired of it. You tie it up into a top knot, so people won't notice as much. Usually, you would take much longer putting on your make up, but today you are almost going over yesterdays, like tracing a drawing when you were a child. You were always great at art even though it was never noticed.

*Not once.*

The front door slams a little too loudly as you leave the house. The noise reminds you that the intoxication is still very much present. You have to squint, as the daylight invades your eyes unpleasantly. You hold up your hands to block the sun, but it doesn't really help. Your fingernails have dirt under them. That repulses you, but just before you can obsess over, you nearly trip over the broken spade propped up by the front door. You vaguely remember putting it there last night whilst drunk, next to the recycling tub and wheelie bin to go with the rest of the rubbish at the end of the week. It reminds you to pop into Wilko's and pick another one up. You regret only buying the cheap twenty pounds shovel and not getting the premium one that looked far better quality. *'Buy cheap buy twice'*, as mother used to say.

"Good Morning! A wonderful day isn't it?"

You immediately recognise the squeaky voice of Mrs Willbury from over the road calling over to you. She will be watering her flowers and pulling minuscule weeds from her garden like she does every day. With the additional duty of being the world's most nosey neighbour. You realise that it's too late to pretend you didn't hear her and therefore put on your usual mask for the first time today. The smile is bright to the outside world but painful for you. "It really is! Wow, those flowers look wonderful, they are really coming on now." Your own words sting like grabbing a handful of nettles as they come out of your mouth. Your fake smile and forced eye contact make you hate yourself a little. What's more, the old bat is coming over now to waste your life. You can't think of anything worse than having a chat with this grotesque, overweight, old woman right now. So, you pre-empt her and say. "I can't chat Jane, I'm meeting Mother. Terribly sorry my dear."

It doesn't deter her. She makes her way over to you and grins sarcastically. You return one saturated in good vibes. You are good at those now.

"I will let you get away. I don't want your mother waiting. However, I must say the fire you had in your back garden yesterday did fill the road with smoke. My clothes on the line had to be rewashed. Can I ask you the next time you have one to let me know?"

You can feel your hand tightening into a fist. Your knuckles about to burst through the tightened white skin. Just when you start to feel your heart beating in your palm, you smile enthusiastically and respond apologetically. “Oh, I am so sorry. As you know I am doing my back garden and I was burning the cuttings. In future, I will certainly tell you.”

The old woman smiled showing her aged yellow teeth. “You have been coming in rather late haven’t you these last few weeks. You should be careful with this mad man on the loose.”

You have had enough of her and cut her short, “I am sorry Jane, I have been working late every night, this last couple of weeks, it’s busy down the station. I have to get off now as I mentioned, it won’t happen again.” You get into your car quickly and speed off towards Middlesbrough town centre.

You can’t decide which radio station to listen to so just leave the news on. Every day the same. Women abducted, Brexit, Love Island gossip. It’s all Pathetic. When will they learn? Idiots. It’s a shame that you are pulling into the carpark now. Because “Little Red Corvette” by Prince has come on and you won’t be able to listen to it all. It has a great beat and a catchy chorus. Like all great pop songs should.

*Prince was so cool.*

You park on the rooftop of Captain Cook’s Square. At this time of the day, it will be the quietest. You don’t want to have to look at any more people’s faces, it will turn your stomach. Your eyes are drawn to the Transporter Bridge that frames the skyline. What did Horn describe it as in *‘Ironopolis? A ‘Giant Blue Dragonfly’*. To you it looks like a giant malevolent Spider, with its prey hanging in its web, struggling to escape yet waiting to be devoured. *‘We built the world. Every metropolis comes from Ironopolis’*. Sure Ian, but no one appreciates it still.

Thankfully, the café on Linthorpe road is quiet for a lunchtime. You are not in the mood for lots of background noise. You just want your breakfast and your serenity. The girl behind the counter is on her phone scrolling social media. She is fully aware that you’re stood waiting but still chooses to check on her notifications than serve you. It’s this sort of thing that triggers you. You feel a wash of warmth over your skin as the blood reaches the surface and tightness in your stomach. A bubbling, like you are about to explode, and all your fury will be released into the world at once. A burning effigy walking amongst the general population.

“Can I help?” she says breaking your spell.

You order your food through your false face and take a table in the corner of the room. There is a copy of yesterday’s Evening Gazette laying there, that looks to have already being thumbed multiple times. You look at the headline, ‘Fourth abduction,’ it screams, and the article interests

you immediately, but you don't have a chance to read it as your food is put down in front of you without care.

"There's some mad man about the area. Grabbing women. You need to be careful." The chef had kind eyes and appeared to be genuine. His intentions are good, so you let him in a little.

"I'm a DI with the Police. I can assure you, sir, we are doing all we can to catch him. I can't go into any details of course. Just know, this is our top priority down at the station." You tell him, then start to eat your breakfast and hope the man leaves you alone.

"That's great to hear thank you, inspector," he replies.

You nod a few times at the man while masticating, he gets the hint and wonders off back into the depths of the greasy kitchen.

The food is amazing, you lash HP sauce all over your plate. The tanginess of it sets the food alive in your mouth. The hangover is reducing with every bite. The coffee too is waking you up making you feel more human.

*If that's what you can call yourself anyway.*

You stand up to leave and notice the woman on her phone again when she should be serving customers. You stare at her with an expressionless face, your mask slipping. She looks up and meets your dead gaze. Like a flipped switch your smile and bubblyness returns.

"Thank you. I will see you later." You say, hoping that she really heard you as you leave. You may see her sooner rather than later.

Walking back towards the carpark, you notice a rotisserie chicken roasting in the window in a halal food supermarket. You watch the carcasses spin in unison like a line dance on the spit. The grease from the bodies spitting and sizzling on the window. It jogs your memory of your own fire you had last night. Just like a barbeque.

You don't know how long you are fixated on it when you feel the touch of another human on your shoulder. You turn to face them slightly startled at being touched.

It's your mother, with your father following her behind like a scared puppy.

You feel your knees go weak. She won't approve that you are out in public looking this way. You are a stupid woman. She is going to be furious with you.

"What the hell are you wearing?" She has that face. The one that terrified you in your youth. The one of sheer disappointment. The one you still have nightmares about. It's in the eyes.

*She can see into you.*

"What are you doing here?" you manage in shock. But know that question won't be tolerated by her, so then jump in with, "I am poorly mother. I have been off work since yesterday. I must

go to the doctors now. I'm sorry mother." You kiss her on the cheek and walk off rapidly to get away. Hoping to god she doesn't say anything. You get a few feet away and she shouts.

"You stink of smoke, get a wash, I haven't brought up a slob have I Peter?" You hear your dad agree like the mindless robot he is and your mother starts laughing. That evil laugh. The one she always uses when she makes fun of you. Like she always has.

*Evil.*

You get into Wilko's and grab the premium spade. This one immediately feels superior quality in your hands. You go to the check out to pay for it and the man frowns at you behind the counter, like he recognises you. "Back again? Didn't you buy a spade the other day?"

You did. But you can't be bothered to entertain another conversation, you don't have the energy. You give him that beautiful vibrant smile and simply say. "No, you have me confused."

He apologises for his mistake and rings the tool through the till. He is polite and thanks you for the purchase. His name tag says "Jamal". You feel like he has done a good job and that he deserves a farewell greeting. "Thank you, Jamal. Have a wonderful day." He smirks and you can tell it's genuine. You see, it's easy to make someone's day, if they deserve it. You can accomplish it from time to time, if it is warranted.

You pull up to your house. Your nice safe house, away from the busy town centre of Middlesbrough. You consider how long the town will last? Before its swallowed by time. Nothing lasts forever. When will the rot set in? Making it just a pile of rust and dust, being scattered randomly by the wind. Just a thing that briefly happened in history. *Forgotten.*

Thankfully, your hangover has all but disappeared. You get your new premium purchase from the boot of your car and again are pained to hear Mrs Willbury behind you.

"Back so soon? More gardening today?" her voice really does grind on you. Like it's pulling you down to the floor and scraping your face across the concrete, waring away the flesh down to the bone painting the curb red. You force a chuckle and it sounds like someone else. *Extraneous.*

"Yes, going to finish that garden tonight." You turn your back on her and try to escape.

"Are you not working tonight? I would've thought all police would be working trying to find out where are all these missing women?"

You face her again. "I can assure you Mrs Willbury, myself and the other detectives are working around the clock to bring this guy in and find those ladies. It's why I have been working so late these last few nights, yesterday was my first day off in two weeks."

The fat old hag seemed satisfied by that answer, "I know you will find him. You're a good police detective. How is your mother?"

The question makes you feel sick, her even mentioning mother. You place on your mask for the final time today and simply say “Great thanks. See you later.” You move up your drive swiftly and get inside the house, slamming the door behind you. You place the spade stood up gently against the door. Your mobile phone starts to vibrate in your pocket. You take a look, It’s a message from your boss down at the police station.

“Hi, I’m so glad you’re back from your couple of weeks off tomorrow. Did you go anywhere nice on holiday? No one has heard from you. You have probably read about these women being abducted and we are struggling to find leads. We need a fresh pair of eyes on it. It will be good to get you on the case.”

You don’t reply, you just put the mobile phone down slowly on the sideboard and peer into the mirror in your hallway. The face you have worn for the benefit of all the people today has gone. It’s evaporated away. Melted into the ether. All that’s left is the empty vessel that is your body. You are void of any emotion. You stare into your own cold eyes and see the darkness you carry inside yourself clearly. You are confused by what you are.

*It was you. It was always you.*

You don’t dwell on it any further though, you have bones to bury.