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He Wants

Written by Alison Moore

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HE WANTS

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For Ian and Kay

‘We all experience within us . . . the desire to be transported from darkness into light, to be touched by the hand of that which is not of this world.’

NICK CAVE, *The Secret Life of the Love Song*

‘We are meant to be hungry.’

LIONEL SHRIVER, *Big Brother*

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

THE FRONT DOOR is mostly glass, a pane as tall and wide as a man. In town, at night, the shopfront windows are protected with steel mesh screens and metal shutters. Even the churches have grilles over the stained-glass windows. This café is not in the town, though; it is in the village and the owner has nothing like that, just a lock on the wooden frame of this single-glazed door. It is not nighttime anyway; it is broad daylight, mid-morning. The doorframe is painted yellow, a warm, bright yellow like sunshine or pollen.

There is a handmade sign hanging on the door, behind the glass. It says, 'WELCOME', but the lettering is small and the greeting appears tentative. It is the sort of sign that is hung with string and could be flipped around when your welcome was withdrawn. Underneath it, there is another, larger one saying, 'NO DOGS'. It is not the sort that can

be turned to say something different; it is stuck to the glass.

Sydney ties his dog's lead to a drainpipe. The dog settles down on the slabs, sighing through her nostrils as she watches Sydney walk away.

Inside the café, only one of the tables is occupied, by a young woman breastfeeding a baby. Sydney slips off the rucksack he is carrying, pulls out a chair and sits down opposite her. 'Hello,' he says, smiling, showing his teeth. 'You're Ruth.'

He has disturbed the baby, who is twisting around now, looking for the source of the deep voice, while the mother struggles to get the baby feeding again, her milk wasting.

'No,' she says. 'I'm not.'

Sydney regards her while he considers this, and then excuses himself. He scrapes back his chair and stands, looking around. He is ravenous, his stomach growling like something at the zoo waiting to be thrown some meat. He wants a McDonald's, or an all-you-can-eat buffet, but instead he is here. There is salad behind glass on the far side of the room.

He wanders over to the counter. Looking towards a doorway at the back of the café, he calls out, 'Hello?' The doorway is hung with a curtain of thin plastic strips. No one comes through. Sydney waits, looking at the plated salads, the mottled bananas, the *Death by chocolate* on the blackboard. 'Hello?' he calls again. A radio is on behind

the curtain. He can hear adverts, the jingles of a local station. He has begun to move towards the hatch via which he could get behind the counter, when through the curtain comes a man in a floral apron, his arms opening wide for Sydney, his smile broad, although there is anxiety in the straining of the skin around his eyes. He says to Sydney, 'So, you're back, are you?' Lowering his arms again, he leans his weight on the counter between them. 'It's changed a bit around here since you last saw it, eh?'

'Not that much,' says Sydney, removing his coat.

The man's gaze travels from the thinness of Sydney's silver-stubbled face down to the leanness of the body emerging from the shabby, gabardine coat. 'Are you hungry?' He waves a hand towards the fridge and says, 'What do you want?'

'I don't want salad,' says Sydney. 'I need a bowl of water for the dog.'

'You've got a new dog?'

'It's my old dog's puppy,' says Sydney. 'She's old herself now though. A friend of mine's been looking after her while I've been away.'

The man finds an empty ice cream tub and fills it with cold tap water. 'I'll take this out to her,' he says. 'You have a think about what you want.'

Sydney wanders back over to where the mother still sits with her baby, who is latched on again. Sitting down at an adjacent table, Sydney stretches out his long legs until

his feet are underneath the woman's table. 'You're not Ruth?' he says.

'I'm not Ruth,' she says, without looking up.

The man in the apron, having taken the water out to the dog, stops on his way back to the counter to take the woman's empty coffee cup away.

'I'll have another cup of coffee, please,' she says.

'I'll get this one,' says Sydney, putting his hand into his pocket and pulling out a pound note. The man raises an eyebrow at Sydney, who at that moment feels like a child trying to buy something with toy money. Shaking his head, the man goes off to fetch the coffee, leaving Sydney to put away his redundant bank note. Sydney turns to the woman. 'My name's Sydney,' he says, 'with a "y", like the capital of Australia.'

'Sydney's not the capital of Australia,' she says.

Sydney sits back, withdrawing his limbs, his foot knocking against the leg of her table. The baby jerks its head back and the mother winces.

The man returns with the woman's cup of coffee. Looking at Sydney's trainers, and at his rucksack, onto which the flags of various countries have been sewn, he says to Sydney, 'You look like you're ready for a quick getaway. Are you off somewhere?'

'Not today,' says Sydney. 'I'm meeting someone here.'

'Who are you meeting?' asks the man.

'A lady called Ruth.'

‘You’re meeting her here?’ The man, glancing at the little plastic clock on the wall, says, ‘Barry Bolton will be here soon.’

Sydney reaches instantly for his coat.

‘Owe him money?’ asks the man, regarding Sydney with concern.

Sydney doesn’t reply but he is pushing back his chair, getting to his feet. He puts on his coat, picks up his rucksack and moves towards the door. As he ducks out, the bell over the door jangles like a town crier’s handbell and the ‘welcome’ sign swings as the door closes behind him.

The debt is decades old. He has no idea now of its size.

When the dog sees Sydney coming out of the café, she begins to whine for him. Sydney releases her from the drainpipe and hurries the short distance to a row of new cottages, slipping into the front garden of one. He does not know who lives here. He positions himself inside an open porch, peering at the nearby cars, which are all parked and empty. He does not know what Ruth’s car looks like but she does not seem to be here yet. He turns his head in the opposite direction and sees Barry Bolton walking down the hill, coming from the butcher’s towards the café. Sydney puts his hand to his chest, feeling a twinge in his heart.

Barry is a big man, although his feet are small enough that he can wear his mother’s shoes. He avoids stepping,

with his little feet, on the cracks between the paving stones. Reaching the café, he goes inside. In less than a minute, he is out again, holding an envelope. He crosses the road and sits down on a bench in the middle of the village green, across from the café. Planting his small feet wide, he opens the envelope, takes out a wad of bank notes and counts them. When he has counted them twice, he puts them back in the envelope and tucks it into an inside pocket of his coat. He continues to sit, though. He looks like a man who is waiting for something.

Sydney, loitering in the porch, wishes that the day was not so bright, that he was not so exposed. He would prefer shadow. He looks at his watch, wondering how long he will have to stay there, hiding like some scallywag.

There is a sign in the living-room window, advertising a vacant bed. 'Bed and Breakfast', it says. Sydney wonders whether anyone ever answers the advert, whether anyone ever comes to this quiet village to occupy that spare bed. Should the owner of the house come to the door and discover him standing in the porch, Sydney will ask about the room; he will express an interest in the bed.

It is chilly. He is seizing up from the cold and from standing for so long. The dog is lying on her belly again, on the porch's stone tiles. Sydney, slowly, stiffly, joins her down there, lowering his thin backside to the ground. The dog gazes at him with her big, brown eyes. It looks like love but she barely knows him. He only recently picked

her up from his friend, the friend with whom he had left his dog before going away. Technically, this is not his dog. Really, this offspring of his dog belongs to his friend, but this friend, having taken receipt of a dog, felt that a dog – rather than an empty dog collar, an empty dog bowl, an empty dog bed – is what needed to be returned to Sydney in due course. This friend knows Barry Bolton too and has perhaps learnt to avoid having debts. Sydney wonders if the dog is missing the friend who was, until this morning, her owner, or whether all she really wants is to know where her next meal is coming from.

When Sydney hears the door opening behind him, a part of him anticipates his mother coming to scold him, as she did when he was a boy and dared to sit on hard kerbs and cold walls; he half expects to hear her yelling, ‘Do you want piles?’

He turns to see a man of his own age standing in the doorway, staring down at him.

‘I’m here about the room,’ says Sydney.

‘I didn’t hear you knock,’ says the man. He looks at Sydney’s dog. ‘No dogs,’ he says.

Sydney’s knees crack as he gets to his feet, and the dog sighs.

The man leads Sydney down the hallway. Coming to a stop before the stairs, he says, ‘You’ll have your breakfast in the dining room.’ He opens the nearest door and Sydney sees a chintzy dining table set for breakfast even though

it is not breakfast time, as if, like Miss Havisham, the man just keeps it that way all the time.

‘What do you like for breakfast?’ asks the man. ‘I can offer you Sugar Puffs, Coco Pops, Chocolatey Cheerios, Golden Nuggets, Golden Puffs and Honey Wows.’

‘All I really want is a fag,’ says Sydney, ‘first thing.’

‘Oh,’ says the man, closing the door of the breakfast room.

They climb the stairs, and when they get to the top, the man opens a door and shows Sydney into a front bedroom. Sydney thinks at first that he has been shown the wrong room because this is a child’s bedroom, a young teen’s bedroom, with an astronaut on the single duvet, but the man says, ‘Everything’s clean. The drawers and the wardrobe have been emptied for now, so there’ll be space for your things, but I don’t want to change too much in here in case Martin comes back. If he came back and wanted his room, I’d need to ask you to leave. You’d get your deposit back.’

Sydney nods and goes to the window, looking out at the village green, at Barry who is still on the bench.

‘It’s cold out,’ says the man, ‘but that radiator’s on.’

Sydney, standing warming his legs, asks the man about the rent. He keeps him talking about the bills and the cost of living, but still Barry does not move away, and in the end Sydney has to say to the man, ‘Is there a back garden?’ The man looks delighted.

He takes Sydney out through the back door, next to which, on the patio, there is a rabbit hutch with a young rabbit inside. The hutch looks brand new. 'Martin's always wanted a pet,' says the man.

He indicates an empty flower bed at the near end of the garden. 'Sweet peas,' he says. 'They're his favourite.'

'It's not the right time of year for planting sweet peas,' says Sydney.

'I put them in last spring.'

'Well, if they've not come through yet,' says Sydney, 'I don't think they're going to.'

The man gazes down at the cold soil as if watching it. 'We'll see,' he says.

They make their way down an increasingly muddy path to the vegetable patch in which the man has planted rhubarb. 'Martin loves rhubarb,' he says, surveying this plot in which, by March, he should have six square feet of the stuff.

'If you don't mind,' says Sydney, 'I'll leave through your back gate.'

'Oh,' says the man. 'Of course.' He walks with Sydney to the gate, where he jots down his phone number and hands it over. 'Call me,' he says to Sydney, who will not.

The gate brings Sydney into an alley. He walks down to the far end, coming out well away from the house and the village green, and then he remembers his dog, which is still waiting outside the man's front door. He can't walk

up the street to the front of the house because Barry will see him. He turns around and goes back down the alley, retracing his steps. When he arrives at the man's gate, he peers over it, scanning the garden, the patio, the rear of the house. The man is not there. Sydney leans over and lifts the catch, letting himself into the garden. He walks up the muddy path, in between the well-tended plots, watching the back windows. The man is not in sight. Only the rabbit in the hutch is watching him. He could knock, but it would be a whole lot easier to just get in and out without having to explain himself, without being noticed. He can see – through the patterned glass in the back door – that the kitchen is empty. He tries the handle. Finding the door unlocked, he goes inside, back into the warm house. The man's boots, muddy from the garden, are on the doormat. The kettle is boiling beside a clean cup, inside which a dry teabag, a shiny teaspoon and the tiny white dot of a sweetener are ready, waiting for the hot water. Sydney stands still for a moment and listens but hears no sounds from inside the house. He steps into the hallway, making his way past the closed dining room door and down to the far end where he quietly opens the front door. The dog looks up, wags her tail and gets to her feet. Sydney brings her into the house and closes the door again, but the closing is louder than the opening. He can hear the man moving around upstairs now, in the front bedroom. He hears the man call out, 'Hello?' and after a pause, 'Martin, is that you?'

Sydney leads his dog back down the hallway, through the kitchen and out of the back door, which he closes behind him, leaving a trail of mud from his boots all along the hallway carpet for the man to find and puzzle over.