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Published by Michael Joseph

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After You

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First published 2015
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Typeset by Penguin Books
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HARDBACK ISBN: 978–0–718–17961–8
OM PAPERBACK ISBN: 978–0–718–17701–0

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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For my grandmother, Betty McKee

Chapter One

The big man at the end of the bar is sweating. He holds his head low over his double Scotch, but every few minutes he glances up and out, behind him, towards the door. A fine sheen of perspiration glistens under the strip-lights. He lets out a long, shaky breath, disguised as a sigh, and turns back to his drink.

'Hey. Excuse me?'

I look up from polishing glasses.

'Can I get another one here?'

I want to tell him it's really not a good idea, it won't help, it might even put him over the limit. But he's a big guy and it's fifteen minutes till closing time and, according to company guidelines, I have no reason to tell him no, so I walk over, take his glass and hold it up to the optic. He nods at the bottle. 'Double,' he says, and slides a fat hand down his damp face.

'That'll be seven pounds twenty, please.'

It's a quarter to eleven on a Tuesday night and the Shamrock and Clover, East City Airport's Irish-themed pub, which is as Irish as Mahatma Gandhi, is winding down for the night. The bar closes ten minutes after the last plane takes off, and right now it's just me, an intense young man with a laptop, the cackling women at table two and the man nursing a double Jameson's waiting for either the SC107 to Stockholm or the DB224 to Munich – the latter has been delayed for forty minutes.

I've been on since midday, as Carly has a stomach-ache and went home. I don't mind. I never mind staying late. Humming softly to *Celtic Pipes of the Emerald Isle, Vol. III*, I walk over and

collect the glasses from the two women, who are peering intently at some video footage on a phone. They laugh the easy laugh of the well lubricated.

'My granddaughter. Five days old,' says the blonde woman, as I reach over the table for her glass.

'Lovely.' I smile. All babies look like currant buns to me.

'She lives in Sweden. I've never been. But I have to go and see my first grandchild, don't I?'

'We're wetting the baby's head.' They burst out laughing again. 'Join us in a toast? Go on, take a load off for five minutes. We'll never finish this bottle in time.'

'Oops! Here we go. Come on, Dor.' Alerted by a screen, they gather up their belongings, and perhaps it's only me who notices a slight stagger as they brace themselves for the walk towards security. I place their glasses on the bar, scan the room for anything else that needs washing.

'You never tempted, then?' The smaller woman has turned back for her scarf.

'I'm sorry?'

'To just walk down there, at the end of a shift. Hop on a plane. I would.' She laughs again. 'Every bloody day.'

I smile, the kind of professional smile that might convey anything at all, and turn back towards the bar.

Around me the concession stores are closing up for the night, steel shutters clattering down over the overpriced handbags and emergency-gift Toblerones. The lights flicker off at gates three, five, eleven, the last of the day's travellers winking their way into the night sky. Violet, the Congolese cleaner, pushes her trolley towards me, her walk a slow sway, her rubber-soled shoes squeaking on the shiny Marmoleum. 'Evening, darling.'

'Evening, Violet.'

'You shouldn't be here this late, sweetheart. You should be home with your loved ones.'

She says exactly the same thing to me every night. 'Not long now.' I respond with these exact words every night. Satisfied, she nods and continues on her way.

Intense Young Laptop Man and Sweaty Scotch Drinker have gone. I finish stacking the glasses, and cash up, checking twice until the till roll matches what is in the drawer. I note everything in the ledger, check the pumps, jot down what we need to reorder. It is then that I notice the big man's coat is still over his bar stool. I walk over, and glance up at the monitor. The flight to Munich would be just boarding, if I felt inclined to run his coat down to him. I look again, then walk slowly to the Gents.

'Hello? Anyone in here?'

The voice that emerges is strangled, bears a faint edge of hysteria. I push the door.

The Scotch Drinker is bent low over the sinks, splashing his face. His skin is chalk-white. 'Are they calling my flight?'

'It's only just gone up. You've probably got a few minutes.' I make to leave, but something stops me. The man is staring at me, his eyes two tight little buttons of anxiety. 'I can't do it.' He grabs a paper towel and pats at his face. 'I can't get on the plane.'

I wait.

'I'm meant to be travelling over to meet my new boss, and I can't. I haven't had the guts to tell him I'm scared of flying.' He shakes his head. 'Not scared. Terrified.'

I let the door close behind me. 'What's your new job?'

He blinks. 'Uh . . . car parts. I'm the new Senior Regional Manager, bracket Spares close bracket, for Hunt Motors.'

'Sounds like a big job,' I say. 'You have . . . brackets.'

'I've been working for it a long time.' He swallows hard.

'Which is why I don't want to die in a ball of flame. I really don't want to die in an airborne ball of flame.'

I am tempted to point out that it wouldn't actually be an airborne ball of flame, more a rapidly descending one, but suspect it wouldn't really help. He splashes his face again and I hand him another paper towel.

'Thank you.' He lets out a shaky breath, and straightens, attempting to pull himself together. 'I bet you never saw a grown man behave like an idiot before, huh?'

'About four times a day.'

His tiny eyes widen.

'About four times a day I have to fish someone out of the men's loos. And it's usually down to fear of flying.'

He blinks at me.

'But, you know, like I say to everyone else, no planes have ever gone down from this airport.'

His neck shoots back in his collar. 'Really?'

'Not one.'

'Not even . . . a little crash on the runway?'

I shrug. 'It's actually pretty boring here. People fly off, go to where they're going, come back again a few days later.' I lean against the door to prop it open. These lavatories never smell any better by the evening. 'And anyway, personally, I think there are worse things that can happen to you.'

'Well. I suppose that's true.' He considers this, looks sideways at me. 'Four a day, uh?'

'Sometimes more. Now, if you wouldn't mind, I really have to get back. It's not good for me to be seen coming out of the men's loos too often.'

He smiles, and for a minute I can see how he might be in other circumstances. A naturally ebullient man. A cheerful man. A man at the top of his game of continentally manufactured car parts. 'You know, I think I hear them calling your flight.'

'You reckon I'll be okay?'

'You'll be okay. It's a very safe airline. And it's just a couple of hours out of your life. Look, the SK491 landed five minutes ago. As you walk to your departure gate, you'll see the air stewards and stewardesses coming through on their way home and you'll see them all chatting and laughing. For them, getting on these flights is pretty much like getting on a bus. Some of them do it two, three, four times a day. And they're not stupid. If it wasn't safe, they wouldn't get on, would they?'

'Like getting on a bus,' he repeats.

'Probably an awful lot safer.'

'Well, that's for sure.' He raises his eyebrows. 'Lot of idiots on the road.'

I nod.

He straightens his tie. 'And it's a big job.'

'Shame to miss out on it, for such a small thing. You'll be fine once you get used to being up there again.'

'Maybe I will. Thank you . . .'

'Louisa,' I say.

'Thank you, Louisa. You're a very kind girl.' He looks at me speculatively. 'I don't suppose . . . you'd . . . like to go for a drink some time?'

'I think I hear them calling your flight, sir,' I say, and I open the door to allow him to pass through.

He nods, to cover his embarrassment, makes a fuss of patting his pockets. 'Right. Sure. Well . . . off I go, then.'

'Enjoy those brackets.'

It's two minutes after he has left that I discover he has been sick all over cubicle three.

I arrive home at a quarter past one and let myself into the silent flat. I change into my pyjama bottoms and a hooded

sweatshirt, then open the fridge, pull out a bottle of white and pour a glass. It is lip-pursingly sour. I study the label and realize I must have opened it the previous night, then forgotten to put the top on the bottle, and decide it's never a good idea to think about these things too hard. I slump into a chair with it.

On the mantelpiece there are two cards. One is from my parents, wishing me a happy birthday. That 'best wishes' from Mum is as piercing as any stab wound. The other is from my sister, suggesting she and Thom come down for the weekend. It is six months old. Two voicemails on my phone, one from the dentist. One not.

Hi, Louisa. It's Jared here. We met in the Dirty Duck? Well, we hooked up [muffled, awkward laugh]. *It was just . . . you know . . . I enjoyed it. Thought maybe we could do it again? You've got my digits . . .*

When there is nothing left in the bottle, I consider buying another, but I don't want to go out again. I don't want Samir at the twenty-four-hour grocery to make one of his jokes about my endless bottles of Pinot Grigio. I don't want to have to talk to anyone. I am suddenly bone-weary, but it is the kind of head-buzzing exhaustion that tells me if I go to bed I won't sleep. I think briefly about Jared and that he had oddly shaped fingernails. Am I bothered about oddly shaped fingernails? I stare at the bare walls of the living room and realize suddenly that what I actually need is air. I really need air. I open the hall window and climb unsteadily up the fire escape until I am on the roof.

The first time I came up, nine months previously, the estate agent showed me how the previous tenants had made a small terrace garden up there, dotting around a few lead planters and a small bench. 'It's not officially yours, obviously,' he'd said, 'but yours is the only flat with direct access to it. I think it's pretty nice. You could even have a party up here!' I had

gazed at him, wondering if I really looked like the kind of person who held parties.

The plants have long since withered and died. I am apparently not very good at looking after things. Now I stand on the roof, staring out at London's winking darkness below. Around me a million people are living, breathing, eating, arguing. A million lives completely divorced from mine. It is a strange sort of peace.

The sodium lights glitter as the sounds of the city filter up into the night air, engines revving, doors slamming. Several miles south, the distant brutalist thump of a police helicopter, its beam scanning the dark for some vanished miscreant in a local park. Somewhere in the distance a siren. Always a siren. 'Won't take much to make this feel like home,' the estate agent had said. I had almost laughed. The city feels as alien to me as it always has. But, then, everywhere does, these days.

I hesitate, then take a step out onto the parapet, my arms lifted out to the side, a slightly drunken tightrope walker. One foot in front of the other, edging along the concrete, the breeze making the hairs on my outstretched arms prickle. When I first moved down here, when it all hit me hardest, I would sometimes dare myself to walk from one end to the other of my block. When I reached the other end I would laugh into the night air. *You see? I'm here – staying alive – right out on the edge. I'm doing what you told me!*

It has become a secret habit, me, the city skyline, the comfort of the dark, the anonymity, and the knowledge that up here nobody knows who I am. I lift my head, feeling the night breezes, hearing laughter below, the muffled smash of a bottle breaking, the traffic snaking up towards the city, seeing the endless red stream of tail-lights, an automotive blood supply. Only the hours between three and five a.m. are relatively peaceful, the drunks having collapsed into bed,

the restaurant chefs having peeled off their whites, the pubs having barred their doors. The silence of those hours is interrupted only sporadically, by the night tankers, the opening up of the Jewish bakery along the street, the soft thump of the newspaper delivery vans dropping their paper bales. I know the subtlest movements of the city because I no longer sleep.

Somewhere down there a lock-in is going on in the White Horse, full of hipsters and East-Enders, and a couple are arguing outside, and across the city the general hospital is picking up the pieces of the sick and the injured and those who have just about scraped through another day. Up here is just the air, the dark and somewhere the FedEx freight flight from LHR to Beijing, and countless travellers, like Mr Scotch Drinker, on their way to somewhere new.

'Eighteen months. Eighteen whole months. So when is it going to be enough?' I say, into the darkness. And there it is – I can feel it boiling up again, the unexpected anger. I take two steps along, glancing down at my feet. 'Because this doesn't feel like living. It doesn't feel like anything.'

Two steps. Two more. I will go as far as the corner tonight.

'You didn't give me a bloody life, did you? Not really. You just smashed up my old one. Smashed it into little pieces. What am I meant to do with what's left? When is it going to feel –' I stretch out my arms, feeling the cool night air against my skin, and realize I am crying again. 'Fuck you, Will,' I whisper. 'Fuck you for leaving me.'

Grief wells up again, like a sudden tide, intense, overwhelming. And just as I feel myself sinking into it, a voice says, from the shadows, 'I don't think you should stand there.'

I half turn, and catch a flash of a small pale face on the fire escape, dark eyes wide open. In shock, my foot slips on the

parapet, my weight suddenly the wrong side of the drop. My heart lurches, a split second before my body follows. And then, like a nightmare, I am weightless, in the abyss of the night air, my legs flailing above my head as I hear the shriek that may be my own –

Crunch

And then all is black.