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Good News, Bad News

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1

Heads, tails, heads, tails.

It was an ordinary coin. Worth ten ordinary British pence. Enough for half a phone call. Enough for a penny chew or two, a finger of fudge.

The two men watching it spin through the air knew better than this. The value of this particular monetary unit was more than anyone at the Royal Mint could have imagined. The difference between heads and tails . . . well, it was a lot.

The first man flipped the coin expertly onto his right wrist, burying it under a sweaty left hand. A passer-by, hearing the audible *click* of metal against wedding ring, shot them a glance over her glasses and was gone.

She had been to Tesco Metro, the men noticed. The bulge in the side of her carrier bag suggested she had bought a baguette. The takeaway coffee she was holding was from a different chain store altogether, however – and this led them both to deduce that she was a very picky consumer who was prepared to shop around.

The two men regarded each other for a second. Behind them, London's rush-hour ritual evolved. Buses belched past, motors churning, exhausts disgorging into the chill evening air. Commuters sighed back into stations. Collars were up and mouths blew vapour trails, the cold draining all colour from their faces.

All of them unaware of the coin.

All uninformed of its import.

All unconcerned that whatever the result, heads or tails, one of these men was going to die.

All that mattered now was *who*.

'Good luck,' said the first man.

'And you,' replied the second, who wasn't wearing a ring. But a closer look would have shown a faint scar on the finger that could have worn one.

The men smiled briefly and turned their eyes downwards. Queen Elizabeth the Second flicked a sidelong glance back up at them. Scarfinger nodded and unconsciously began cracking his knuckles.

'Right then,' he muttered, venturing a thin smile. But when he tried to swallow he found his throat was dry.

'Sorry,' said Wedding Ring.

Scarfinger shrugged, feigning the diffidence of a Parisian waiter. *Don't worry about it*, he seemed to be saying. *People die every day*.

The phone booth was innocuous enough. Dirty, rusting, sulking in the centre of a deserted square. As he lifted the receiver and began dialling the number that would change everything, Wedding Ring found himself

having a thought; an unconnected conceit that had shoved its way to the front of his brain and demanded to be dealt with.

You enjoyed that thriller, the thought was saying to him, *the one you read recently. It was really good*.

He kept dialling the number, but the thought would not go away.

Strangely reassuring, the thought continued. *Because despite all the unknowables, all the twists and turns, all the while there was always the absolute certainty that you could skip ahead a few pages just to see how everything turned out*.

The number connected. A small conversation ensued, nothing fancy, a functional exchange, a curt verbal handshake. A voice told him to stay on the line. So he did.

Another noise soon distracted him. A Yamaha motorcycle roared out of a nearby alleyway. Two seconds later its wheels were smoking in a half-turn. A second after that it hoved broadsides alongside the booth. At that point, the thought, which had previously left the building, was back.

Very different to now, it went. *Because now, anything is possible, this is real life, and when you're dangling from the cliff there's no skipping ahead. The only way you'll know how it all turns out is by going through it alone, one second at a time*.

The motorcyclist pulled the portable rocket launcher from his side bag, shouldering it quickly in one smooth move.

What a tragedy, went the thought in finale, *to feel there's a final twist needed in your life. And it never comes*.

The rocket grenade hissssssssssssed angrily from the gaping mouth of the barrel, the impact flashing white hot and hellfire, incinerating the booth, smelting the coin slots, liquefying the pavement down to the sewage pipes and mushrooming a plume of flame and smoke high into the London sky.

By the time the dust had settled, there was nothing on the street but rubble. Tears. The distant sound of sirens.

2

Two days earlier

The cold seeped in through the window, through the gaps in the panes and the holes in the sill. It crept over the carpets, threadbare and beer-stained. Past the discarded socks, up over the unwashed duvet and onto the exposed shoulder blade that lay there gently twitching. Then, slowly, it eased the man awake.

Charlie rubbed his feet together. Counting to five he made a dash for the electric fire. An autopilot *flick* and he was back under the covers. The smell of burned dust filled his nostrils. The grey bars of the fire turning slowly orange in the grate. In ten minutes the room would be fit for human habitation. In five minutes it would be warm enough for a Scotsman.

Charlie rose six minutes later and dressed in a balletic frenzy, keeping as close as possible to the heat as common sense would allow. Soon he was looking at himself in the mirror and attempting to put in his contacts. At least that was the plus side of living in a bedsit. Everything was so close at hand.

His shirt was chafing his neck again and he reasoned

it was only a matter of time before people presumed he slept in a noose.

Then it was out into the frost, down the stairwell, to slot into the condemned as they trudged towards the Underground in a scene that always reminded him of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Charlie pulled his tatty overcoat around him and tried not to look at the pavement. He looked at the rooftops instead, squinting up at the chimneys and the birds keeping watch. He'd learned this from a homeless man who'd bumped into him on one such morning. 'Watch where you're going,' Charlie had snapped, before feeling guilty. The homeless man had fixed him with a smile.

'I was,' he'd said, 'I was.'

After that, Charlie had always tried to look up as much as he could. Particularly as so much of his life was down. And sometimes, up there, up, way up, for a fleeting moment, he could see the sun.

Today it resembled a small saucer of grey.

Charlie descended into the Jubilee Line and sought out a space at the far end of the last carriage. Three Japanese men in beige suits were sitting in a row, staring up at the adverts in silence. Each of them sported a small laminated clip-on tag on the breast pocket of their jacket. The tag said simply, 'VISITOR'.

No-one on the Tube carriage looked at him. No-one even really noticed he was there at all. Charlie had that effect on people. And he liked it that way.

He arrived on time, of course.

Charlie always did.

Always had done.
Ever since.

It was a soulless place to work, full of paper cuts, clingfilm, the faint whiff of ozone. When people passed, they looked in with the same piteous expression. It went: *rather them than me*.

Charlie worked in a photo-developing 'station'. Technically it was a booth, but the company that he and his colleague George both grafted for liked to call it a 'station' in their corporate literature and so 'station' it was. The fact that they were already *in* a station seemed to be lost on their senior management. Ten yards above them, London buses swerved suicidally around Oxford Circus on their way down Regent Street. Down here, in the ticket hall of the Underground, a cupboard near Exit Six served a double function as their place-of-work and place-of-arguments. Still, people waited around at stations and Charlie and George did a whole bunch of waiting around at theirs too.

There wasn't really much of a point in having two people working down here. For one, the actual job – taking people's films and developing them in a large dual-capacity machine – was an increasingly obsolete endeavour that could be done by a trained monkey. And for two, the place was so elbow-foldingly small that even a trained monkey would put in for a transfer after a month.

George and Charlie had been there just over a month.

'I'm putting in for a transfer,' George said again. He was facing the escalators, but Charlie presumed the statement was aimed at him. Particularly as George had now said it four times in the past ten minutes.

'Too stressful, all this,' continued George, with a vague hand gesture towards the ticket hall. 'It's too much.'

Charlie turned slowly to face him.

'I mean, my cousin dropped dead last week,' continued George, making a face that suggested he was waiting for some form of sympathetic noise from Charlie's direction. Charlie did not oblige, but George sallied on nonetheless. 'Quite a shock. Heart of a lion.'

Charlie blinked a couple of times and returned to his paper.

'Aorta of a gnat, unfortunately, as it turned out,' continued George. 'Had a bit of a valve *issue*. You know.'

He was walking over to the counter where he plucked a biro from the brim of a stolen Starbucks mug. 'When they opened him up the doctor said his arteries resembled the inside of a calzone. Which I thought was particularly insensitive seeing as how he loved Italian food.'

Charlie wasn't sure whether George had meant him to laugh at this or not. He decided not. He reasoned George's endless and near-psychotic amiability might just draw the line at jokes about the deaths of close family members. Then again.

He turned away to the photographs that had been

troubling him. Charlie sat in silence for a minute, leafing through them one by one, thumbprints greasy in the corners, hoping that now, at last, the conversation was at an end.

He was mistaken.

'New one for you,' ventured George. 'A man is found dead in the bath. He's been stabbed. The water is still warm. The only footprints the police can find are the victim's. And the bolt lock of the bathroom is pulled across the door from the inside. How did the murderer get away with it?'

Charlie escaped to a part of his brain he kept aside for moments like these, when pain and frustration meant there was no place to go but *in*.

George was still looking at him expectantly. 'Any ideas?'

'Suicide.'

'Nope.' George was enjoying this now. 'Book's called *The Postage Stamp Murders* by the way. That's not a clue, I'm just, you know, telling you.'

'I don't care. Is that the answer?'

George shook his head. 'The killer,' he smiled, 'committed the murder wearing the victim's shoes. He then walked backwards to the door and used a powerful magnet to bolt the door from the outside.'

'George?'

'Yes.'

'I still don't care.'

George's locked-room anecdotes had been part of life down here ever since Charlie began the job. For

some reason George had committed nearly all of Robert Adey's *Locked Room Murders* to memory. Almost the first words George had ever uttered to Charlie were to inform him of the ingenious remote-control arson of a fishmonger's shop in *Flashpoint*, a novel by Hugo Blayn. Not 'nice to meet you'; not 'what part of town do you live in then'. Instead, a cup of cold tea and a five-minute monologue on the ingenuity of leaving a block of frozen nitroglycerin for the fishmonger's hammer—

Charlie felt himself leave the reverie as

—clackclackclack—

Three film canisters appeared in a neat row on the counter.

And there she was.

There are many beautiful people in London. Some of them come out during daylight hours but very few use the Tube. The London Underground is mostly a troglodyte empire, beauty doesn't last long down there, and that's why beauty is usually taking a hackney carriage somewhere along Old Brompton Road.

But the woman now standing in front of Charlie was of a different breed. And the fact that she was here, below ground, in the land of the ugly people – it somehow added to her mythology. She was practically a unicorn.

She stood slightly taller than George, five-eight, a sheen of hair spilling down over her Donna Karan.

Charlie, being nearer six foot one, could see that her roots were perfect. Either she used a cotton swab to apply her peroxide or she was a natural blonde. Her hands, clasped in front of her, revealed a life of moisturised bliss. A holiday tan. And a ring. Not a wedding band, not an engagement rock. Somewhere in the middle. A mystery to Charlie but also a glint in the darkness.

The woman locked eyes with Charlie. That was another thing. The eyes. They had a certain irony about them, a sparkle of pure and mischievous intelligence that Charlie found utterly irresistible.

'I need these by tomorrow morning,' she said.

'No problem, madam.'

Charlie moved a small distance to a pile of A4 sheets assembled with more or less no thought under a stapler. But as he turned back he saw that George had already usurped his spot, form in hand, leaning over the counter with a smile.

'If we could just have your name and address there,' he syruped, indicating the bottom of the sheet. He removed a biro from his top pocket and presented it to the woman. Gripping it as close to the nib as possible, she wrote her name.

'I'll be back first thing,' she smiled.

And then she was walking away.

But George was still talking – mouth curled in a gently expectant half-smile.

'Absolutely no problem whatsoever.'

She didn't turn back as she left.

If she had, this is what she would have seen: a man in his late twenties and a man in his late forties staring silently back at her. Their faces pallid, frozen in ill-disguised awe. Charlie, the younger man, had short cropped hair that was beginning to recede, albeit tastefully. His arms were a little longer than seemed comfortable, anglepoise and mozzarella-white, ending in bony fingers and guitarist's fingernails on the left hand. One of the fingers sported a Band-Aid. Next to him slouched a baked potato of a man with flint eyes that glistened amiably under a haphazard sweep of hair. George's jowl was dotted with curls of untended beard, less a conscious effort at style than a complete unwillingness to shave. His purple fleece was from a surfing company despite the overwhelming visual evidence that he would surely scupper any ocean-going surface he stood on.

Their silent meditations lasted till the final strands of hair had disappeared into the sea of scarves and umbrellas teeming up the stairs to the outside world.

It was Charlie who broke the moment.

'She is,' he said.

'She is *not*,' sighed George.

For the next four hours, neither man said another word.

The impasse continued through lunch. Charlie had retired to an inner recess of the booth, away from prying eyes. George had moved to the counter to read the paper.

Despite the distance, however, George knew exactly what Charlie was looking at and he knew what was coming. The facts were these. Every fortnight or so, the beautiful woman known to them both as Carrie Watson would pitch in front of them, bronzed, glowing and weather-beaten. And every fortnight she would have three or more rolls of extremely boring photos to be developed. At which point Charlie would corner George with said photographs – and his theory.

'Here we go again. See?' said Charlie, triumphant.

It was a long-distance shot of landscape. A closer inspection revealed some hills and a tree.

'I do see. I see a tree.'

'And again.'

Another picture. This time, deep snow, an urban *banlieue*, bleak and grey. Some squat buildings. A road sign in Cyrillic.

'Very pretty,' said George, trying to prise his paper out from underneath Charlie's hand – which was now pressing hard on the print.

More images followed in quick succession. Blighted beaches, uniform countryside, rotting urban centres, all with one thing in common. They were all very dull indeed.

'So where d'you think that is, then?' Charlie was pointing to the latest print, a parched shot of scrubland, slightly out of focus.

'Vietnam?'

'Mosque in the background.'

George looked. It was true. Actually, it was the only thing in focus.

'Indonesia?'

'A Gulf emirate, I'd say.'

'You would, Charlie. You're the most likely person I know to say that.'

Charlie smiled despite himself, briefly and accidentally flattered by the comment. He held up another photo. Concrete office blocks and not much else.

'Croydon?'

'China. Look in the distance.'

Again, George peered. A red flag fluttering on a distant hilltop. 'So?'

'So,' sighed Charlie, 'quite a trip she's had. Again.' He was clearing up now.

'Lucky woman.'

'Egypt, Korea, China, Cuba, Saudi Arabia. Travel on that scale. To those countries. All the bloody time.'

George took a pen from the mug and chewed.

Charlie kept talking, 'And she's not in *one single picture*.'

George stopped and looked again.

All of the photos were long shots, wide, some telephoto. But it was true. Not only was Carrie not in any of the prints, none of them actually had any definable people in sight whatsoever. George cleared his throat.

'She's—'

'A spy, George. She's a secret fucking agent.' Charlie

took a triumphant step back, narrating as he flicked slowly back through the prints to make his point. 'She's in Egypt. Do I see the pyramids? No I do not. I see a small civic building. Hanoi. Another small civic building. Beijing. A slightly larger building, function unknown, taken at considerable distance, at night. Government facility, is it? Chemical plant? Do you know what an Aunt Minnie is? It's a photograph just like this. An ordinary scene, usually with a person in the foreground, but the real target's the background. It's a spy term. A *spy* term.'

'So how come you know it?'

'It's in my *Dictionary of Espionage*. And about every single spy novel I've ever read.'

George was facing something he hadn't considered before. Charlie had an argument. But it irked him. He sighed.

'If you were a spy, Charlie – and I mean *really, actually, a spy* – would you get your covert photographs developed in a shithole like this?'

Charlie glanced at a stain of mayonnaise still glistening on George's purple fleece. Reaching into his pocket, he handed him a tissue. George dabbed at the offending mark, nodding in thanks. 'Maybe,' said Charlie, 'if I liked the customer service. Or I fancied the good-looking young guy who worked there . . .'

George flashed him a sarcastic look and cleared his throat. 'Okay, then. Supplementary question. If you were planning a secret mission, a secret *spy mission*,

Charlie, let's say to China, why would you choose the tallest, sexiest, most beautiful blonde woman you could find?'

Charlie went quiet. 'So she can attract other agents,' he said after a few seconds, 'and then sleep with them to get information.'

'Charlie, how many tall blonde women are there in China?'

Charlie shrugged. He thought of a facetious answer but stopped himself. George was looking too serious.

'The answer,' said George, 'is *one*. Her. Whenever she's there. And she'll stick out like a priest with an erection whenever she goes.'

Charlie, defeated, gathered up the offending prints and began mucking in. Despite losing the argument he was vaguely lifted by the idea that the day was almost over. The two began to shut up shop, a rare ceremony of cooperation for both of them.

'Maybe Carrie has to be pretty.' Charlie was musing for his own benefit now. 'For cover.'

And suddenly George was in his face. The smell of stale coffee on his breath and a bloodshot tremble in his eyes that suggested this was the last he was going to say on the matter.

'Haven't you ever read le Carré? Deighton? Robert bloody Ludlum? Spies are nobodies, all right? Ordinary crappy people in ordinary crappy jobs.'

Charlie took in his frustration. The dust, the fluorescent glare from above, the time sheets, till receipts, the grubby smell of shared proximity.

A thought occurred to him. 'We're in crappy jobs.'

George folded his arms silently. 'Yeah, Charlie. Well spotted.'

Outside, the rush home had started.