

A little spilt Milk

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'I'm sorry, but we knew this time would come soon enough.' Rashid's weak smile seemed to struggle to convey both sympathy and the impression that it wasn't all a big deal.

'Yeah,' Hugh mumbled, 'any severance pay?'

'A week.' Rashid's broke eye contact. 'It's all we can do.'

Hugh unclipped the nametag from his shirt and placed it on the counter. He walked along the snack food aisle toward the exit. The shelves were nearly barren. He thought about snatching a Twix as he walked by, but decided against it. He was better than that. Still, Rashid could've given him the news over the phone rather than letting him come into work and informing him on arrival.

'Oh!'

Hugh turned at Rashid's cry.

'I'll need your uniform back. Sorry.' Rashid removed his own red cap. A final act of solidarity.

Hugh snatched off his own cap; tossing onto the nearest shelf which used to be full of packets of Doritos. He began to unbutton his shirt.

'Uh, tell you what; keep the shirt,' Rashid said quickly, wringing his cap in his hands.

Hugh turned and pushed through the shop door, out into the night. On the forecourt Rashid's brother was turning off the lights at the petrol pumps. He'd put out the 'closed' sign in the place of the one which had read 'Emergency vehicles only.' Even they would have to get their fuel elsewhere now. If there was anywhere else.

Rashid's brother nodded in Hugh's direction. Hugh dug his hands into his pockets and marched on. Rashid's family had lost their franchise business. They were probably ruined, but Hugh knew he definitely was. He had nobody to turn to. No savings. No hoard of supplies.

He quickened his pace; wanting to put distance between himself and his past as quickly as possible. His armpits soon moistened and his shirt clung to his back. It seemed summer weather came a little earlier every year. Weather reports always seemed to declare each month as either the hottest, driest or wettest on record. It seemed like nobody really knew. Perhaps the records didn't go back very far. Weather forecasters had never been accurate. One thing all meteorologists, news reporters, scientists and politicians seemed to hint at yet not dare to say was that the world was in fact screwed.

He stopped at the curb. Looking left and right before crossing. You couldn't be too careful; traffic was rare at night, but solar cars made a lot less noise than their soon to be extinct counterparts. A whiff of sea air stirred him. He looked toward the river Plym, hidden in the darkness. He could tell by the smell that the tide was out. The rotting scent the sea left behind was somehow emancipating. Indicative of a

world outside the city. A world he'd never seen. Away from the concrete jungle. A ferry boat could take him south to France; from there he could go anywhere. Of course, a ticket on any kind of fuel-driven transportation was likely to be well out of reach of his bank balance.

Streetlights ahead acted as a sign of the outskirts of the residential area. He stopped himself from turning back toward the petrol station. He wasn't sure why he wanted a last glimpse into that past. It wasn't a good job, it barely paid the bills. Besides, he knew without looking that the past behind him would be submerged in blackness.

The streetlamps were a beacon too. Three youths in tracksuits- hoods up, circled the third lamppost. Occasionally one of them would kick the post; as if resenting that the light which attracted them didn't provide the entertainment they must've felt it promised. One of the hoodies nudged another. They fanned out in a line along the pavement. Hugh looked at his feet as he approached them. It was too late to cross the road. Best to just press ahead.

'Hey, mate.' One of them called out- seemingly over loud in the otherwise silent night.

Hugh pressed on. They broke ranks as he reached them, letting him pass by. He glanced up. They all wore scarves covering their mouths and noses despite the warmth. He kept looking ahead as their footfalls flanked him.

'Mate,' the hoodie repeated.

It was best not to engage them. Hugh learned that the hard way at school. If you just kept your head down and kept yourself to yourself, the predators would generally overlook you. But, he was the only gazelle on this plane, and he'd walked straight into their hunting grounds.

'You got a light, mate?'

Hugh shook his head.

One of the hoodies rushed ahead a few paces then stopped right in Hugh's path. Hugh went to walk around, but the other two closed in on his flanks. A simple manoeuvre, but they'd trapped him. He could turn around and walk back the other way, but that would show weakness; then they'd definitely pounce.

'Got a light?' The lead hoodie persisted. Although they were a similar height, the hoodie hunched his shoulders and bowed slightly to look into Hugh's eyes in an obvious effort to try to look taller than he was.

'No.' Hugh said. His throat was dry and the word came out as a squeak. He cleared his throat, but it was too late. The hoodies were laughing. They'd weighed him up as easy prey.

'Well, what else ya got?'

In a moment Hugh weighed his options. Run. Negotiate. Surrender. Fight. They'd all end up the same way. He couldn't outrun three of them. Couldn't negotiate with thugs. Surrender wouldn't spare him whatever they planned. He might as well go down fighting.

'I got this.'

He took his right fist out of his pocket, making a display of his middle digit. He saw the lead hoodie's eyes widen; perhaps momentarily afraid that Hugh was flashing steel. The eyes locked with Hugh's. After a second the eyes narrowed; they'd detected weakness in what Hugh hoped was his defiant and steely gaze. Or maybe the lead hoodie just noticed the quavering of the hand holding aloft the offending middle finger.

He felt the first punch. It came out of his peripheral vision; connecting with his cheekbone. The power behind it took him off-guard and off-balance. His palms stung as they slapped the pavement, breaking his fall. Blows stormed down on his body as he moved his arms to protect his head and neck. The hoodies laughed. It was over in what seemed just a few seconds. He had no idea how many times he'd been struck. He wasn't sure where most of the hits had landed. It was only as he heard their trainers grazing the pavement as they walked away chuckling and congratulating each other on their victory that he began to register the alarms of his cuts, grazes and bruises.

They hadn't even bothered to rob him. Maybe he didn't appear to have anything worth stealing. Maybe they just wanted to 'duff' someone up. Or perhaps they just about had enough intelligence to know that until the fuel crisis was resolved, money was barely worth burning for warmth.

Hugh sat upright, taking a look in the direction he'd heard the hoodies retreating; making sure they'd gone. A ringing sound filled his stinging right ear. He rubbed the appendage while reflecting that despite the beating, the enemy had left him in command of the field of battle. Perhaps in a strange way he had won. The coppery taste in his mouth said otherwise.

He pushed himself to his feet. A light from across the street caught his attention; the black silhouette of a person stood in a window with arms stretched like Jesus on the cross. The next instant the arms jerked together, yanking curtains closed. Nobody wanted to get involved in anyone else's business. The fuel shortages had effected even Police response times. Scum like the hoodies were becoming ever more emboldened.

Hugh licked his cut lip and walked on. His legs muscles twitched nervously. He wasn't badly injured but somehow he felt like crying. He hadn't cried in years. Was it the adrenaline? Whatever it was, he wasn't going to let those thugs provoke a visible emotional response, even if nobody was there to witness it.

Shaking fingers struggled to fit the key into his front door. He steadied himself with a hand against the wall as he made his way up the steps to his flat. Closing the apartment door behind him he fumbled for the light switch. The illumination came as a dim glow which failed to reach the corners of the studio flat. He paced to the kitchenette and poured water into a misty, fingerprint stained glass.

The cold water stung his lip, but he gulped it down, finishing with a satisfied gasp. Setting the glass down heavily on the kitchen worktop he took the five steps to the sofa and fell back into its comfortable embrace. His hand found the remote control without his eyes having to search for it. The TV flashed to life; seeming providing more radiance than the twenty-watt lightbulb.

News-24 was, as usual, all about the fuel shortage. Familiar graphs showing how long the remaining oil would last the world if certain measures were taken. The next report was about possible US intervention in the South China Sea conflict. A few billion barrels worth of oil under the sea around the Spratley Islands had been enough to make China invade Vietnam, now a few years later that same oil was enough to encourage the USA into action.

'Keep us out of it, bloody warmongers,' Hugh grumbled to nobody in particular. His cut lip protested the effort of speaking.

The irritatingly immaculate presenter broke into a smile while switching to an article about the boost in jobs with Network rail. Despite mass redundancies in most sectors, with fewer cars on the roads more people were travelling by train. An image of hundreds of people crammed onto a platform, staring with forlorn expressions at a digital sign which read 'delayed' against several different times was accompanied by narration from the presenter that suicides by train were at a record high. Hugh wondered if those records went back any further than those of the weather department.

Hugh's eyes flicked toward the fridge. He knew the contents without opening it. Between synthetic food supplements and real food, he had enough food to last about two weeks. Thank god that instant noodles still seemed to be available in decent quantities. With his severance pay and the few pounds in his bank account, he'd need to find a new job pronto.

Forcing himself from the sofa, Hugh made his way to his computer desk in the corner of the room. Shuffling around some papers he found an old ring binder. Snapping it open he found he still had a copy of his CV. It was a couple years old, slightly yellowed, but all the information on it was still current until the point of his recent unemployment. He ripped it from the binder and folded the paper into quarters, stuffing it into his pocket; he'd write it up again later.

He glanced at the clock; he was used to the nightshift; he wouldn't sleep now if he tried. Maybe he could get one of those railway jobs. Perhaps if he got there first thing... He walked to the bathroom; his reflection looked like his ghost. His eyes were ringed dark from too many late-nights. Or maybe it was from the beating. He was pale and gaunt; a vampire. He'd stopped caring about his appearance when it became too expensive to keep up a decent appearance. Who would employ such a zombie?

He took a shower. The water stung some of his more tender spots. He remained in under the warm spray for a long time, not much caring about the cost of the water bill. Then he searched his wardrobe and selected a blue Nike polo shirt. Another look in the mirror showed a zombie trying to disguise itself as a human. A pair of sunglasses completed the disguise.

At dawn he left the apartment. Marching in the direction of the train station. A few joggers, dog-walkers and early-shift workers passed by. He watched them from behind the shield of the sunglasses, but none of them even glanced his way. Not even the dogs. Perhaps even dogs were above him in society now; while families struggled to put food on the table, dogs were still well looked after. What would it take their owners to consider them an emergency food source?

Even at a little after six am the train station was busy. Commuters shuffled along with hunched shoulders and bowed heads; too ashamed of their personal predicaments to look each other in the eye. There was no point asking about a job. Nobody cared about anyone else; he'd already seen that. He stood still among the press of people, unseen by all. No point going back home. There was nothing for someone like him. He pushed through the crowd; a few cast momentarily irritated glances in his direction as they bumped. His target was the foot bridge between platforms A and B. A digital timetable display showed that a train from Truro was due in at platform A shortly.

The bridge's iron steps vibrated with the weight of each commuter, purposefully intent on their journey, like bees- oblivious to why they act; only that they must. Hugh stopped near the middle of the bridge.

Someone tutted as they were forced to walk around him. Hugh looked down at the track below; the fall alone might kill him, but he'd wait for the train. It felt somehow significant that his death would delay the service; that the inconvenience might provoke an emotional reaction from the drones. How selfish of him, they would think. Perhaps only those who took the same desperate measure before him would truly understand.

Someone screamed. Many gasped all as one. Hugh blinked. He'd been too lost in his own thoughts to see the body fall, but there on the track beside platform B lay a body. The jumper's head twisted at an unnatural angle. He hadn't even waited for the train. Perhaps the jumper had seen Hugh waiting, and didn't want him stealing the limelight. Instantly Hugh was annoyed. How could he now jump? The incoming train would be stopped; he could jump but death wasn't guaranteed at this height. What if he was just paralysed?

Then he noticed the jumper's red shirt. A red cap lay a little further down the track. Rashid.

Hugh's fingers tightened around the iron railing. Black uniformed station officers were pushing people back from the platform. A transport police officer jogged down the track toward the body. Hugh closed his eyes.

'For god's sake!' someone growled; one of the station guards, Hugh fancied. 'Who the hell's gonna clean this up?'

Hugh's eyelids shot open. His hand dived into his trouser pocket; yanking out the yellowed CV.

'Me!' Hugh held aloft the parchment like it was a badge of office.

The guards scowled up at him.

'Alright. Go to the station master's office, lad. Ask for an application form and a mop and bucket. We're a janitor short anyway so I'm sure he'll take you.'

Hugh blinked. Taking a couple of seconds to register his turn in fortune. Then, smiling, he pushed back through the crowd the way he'd come. He had a purpose, he was one of them again; a mere drone, but at least he was human again.