

The Stray

The ink had smeared where the paper had been wet, whether by rain, or tears, or dishwater, it was impossible to say. But you could still read it.

It was a shopping list, not long or out of the ordinary. EGGS, MILK, CAT FOOD. The writing was even and deliberate, penned by an arthritic hand that, resentful of its own infirmity, refused to wobble. BACON and BLEACH and CIGARETTES, the hand had insisted. And CEREAL, FOR ANNIE.

Lying there on the sidewalk, it might have been anyone's shopping list. But from the shadows of the wynd, the young man in the grey jacket had been watching when it fell. He had seen who dropped it.

His view of the adjacent street was only a few metres wide and dimly lit by a flickering streetlight. Most passersby who walked across this narrow stage left behind only their absence. Men in suits bellowing into mobiles, tired-looking mums pushing prams, teenagers laughing loudly and lewdly: for a few seconds they were his entire world, and then they were gone, *pop*, out of existence, never to be seen again. They were too wrapped up in their own lives to notice their audience in the alley. None of them saw the shopping list flutter to the ground. None of them saw him pick it up and pocket it, a souvenir.

The beads of moisture on the young man's forehead had nothing to do with the weather; he could see his breath in the December air. Instead it was the cool, slick sweat of the prima donna on opening night at La Scala. Not that the young man was any opera aficionado—had you asked him, he might have told you, uncertainly, that La Scala was one of Italy's lesser known football teams. But no one asked him.

He'd been waiting a long time, and his eyes ached and his shoulders were sore. Warily, he leaned against a trash bin, until the smell got the better of him and he pulled away. He stuffed his hands in his empty pockets.

No, not empty. In one, there was the shopping list. In the other, the gun.

The old man was sweating too, his coat stifling under the too-bright shop lights. Outside, the clouds had begun to gather, swollen with rain, and sure enough he felt a rheumatic ache in his left arm. He scowled and muttered under his breath, but these were just theatrics.

He didn't mind the rain, not really. If anything, he hoped it would buck up the pathetic little tomatoes growing in the garden he'd been diligently neglecting. When his wife had been alive, she'd spent all her time out there, darting from seedling to seedling, coaxing the dirt into neat lines, humming to herself. Now that she was gone, the garden had turned defiantly wild, sprouting things that had never been planted. It didn't matter to the old man, who never so much as set foot there. It had been her garden, not his, and now he wanted nothing to do with it. He paid it no mind.

Still, the tomatoes had been looking a bit peaky.

He was stirred from his reverie by the girl at the till. She smiled expectantly at him, the light catching her nose piercing. He hadn't heard whatever question she'd asked. She repeated it. No, he didn't have a savings card, no, he didn't want one, yes, he needed a bag, make it two. What was this, an interrogation? He was relieved to finally step out into the cold evening air.

He made his way down the city streets, pensive. He'd been daydreaming more and more these days; on the bus, in church, at home eating alone, he found himself turning inward to his own mind, dwelling on his days at university or watching war flashbacks like old serials. As he passed an alleyway, he paused to shift his grocery bags to his other, equally arthritic arm. Then he dropped the bags, feeling a sharp jab at the small of his back. A hand pulled him roughly into the shadows by the collar.

'Give me your wallet.'

Slowly the old man turned to face his attacker.

At the other end of the gun was a disappointing sight. A shifty little punk, lean, hair buzzed close. They were near enough to each other that he could smell the nicotine on the kid's breath.

‘Don’t be—I mean, don’t try anything, er, heroic,’ said the young man, not nearly as smoothly as he had planned, and immediately he wished he hadn’t said it at all. *Who do I think I am, Daniel Craig?* he thought to himself. *Just take the money and get out.*

The old man felt the strange urge to suppress a chuckle, of all things. *Who’s this kid think he is, Sean Connery?* The chuckle caught in his throat and burned. *Damned indigestion*, he cursed, as though it were a malicious entity all of its own and not the result of too many rashers of bacon at breakfast. He added it to the list of things that were damned that day: damned weather, damned politicians, damned economy, that damn cat, this damn kid.

He lingered for an instant on that damn cat, which he thought of often and cursed with great relish. One day it had just turned up at his front door, scrawny, feral and missing patches of fur. It refused to be shooed until it had got a can of tuna, then it scampered off, never to be seen again, the old man hoped. The next day it had come back. Every morning the old man steeled himself against its pathetic mews, determined not to feed it. And every afternoon it left fatter than the previous, now cheeky enough to slip past his feet and eat in in the kitchen. His carpet and coat were covered in its fur. One of these days he should get it to a vet, he thought absently, just in case it had worms. Damn cat.

Lost in thought, he had almost forgotten he was being mugged, and his hesitation had panicked the young man. ‘Wallet. Now!’ he urged, waving the gun for emphasis.

Rousing himself, the old man patted his pockets as if looking for his wallet. Then, quicker than you’d have guessed he could move, he grabbed the young man’s wrist and twisted. The young man dropped the gun, gasping more from surprise than pain, his expression comically betrayed.

The old man grimaced. ‘I served in Korea.’ *You little shit*, he didn’t add, but he was pleased with himself.

Then he collapsed to the pavement.

This is not how a mugging is supposed to go, thought the young man as he hauled the wheezing old man to a nearby bench, fanning him frantically. At least he was breathing. Never

mind unorthodox, it would be downright humiliating to have to perform CPR on the guy he'd been trying to rob.

He hadn't *meant* to try to rob the old man at all. He'd made rules this morning over breakfast, comforted by the familiarity, the discipline of it. He reviewed them now. Some were practical: no groups, no tough-looking guys, no one on a mobile. Others were to keep him from becoming a monster: no kids, no one old, or sick, or visibly skint. When the old man had passed his hiding spot the first time, the young man had ruled him out. Greying hair, bit of a limp, wouldn't be fair.

But after almost an hour, he was becoming desperate. The streets were beginning to empty, yet he stood paralysed, dismissing target after target, inventing new rules to excuse each prospect: too tall, walking too fast, too many tattoos, too sad-looking, probably drunk. Each woman with an enormous wedding ring became a widow bravely going home to raise eight children alone. Every man wearing an expensive watch had been sacked that morning and was off to pawn it for food. As the young man stood, helplessly watching, he knew he was going to return to his dingy, unlit flat with empty pockets.

No, not empty. There was always the gun.

By the time the old man passed his hiding place a second time, hands full of groceries, the young man had become desperate, afraid to go home, and there had been an easy target, just inches away. His self-disgust, his conscience, his throbbing Catholic guilt—they all bowed to opportunity. He reached out and grabbed the old man's collar.

The old man continued to cough.

The young man was fanning him now with a limp scrap of paper, too small to make a proper breeze. The old man waved it away scornfully.

'It's yours, anyway,' the young man mumbled, holding the shopping list out without looking at it. There was no need. It was etched in his memory. The old man took it.

‘Wondered—where that—went,’ he said between gasps. ‘You—little creep—when I get my—breath back—’ He didn’t finish, because he didn’t have enough air to but also because he wasn’t sure what he would do. Give the kid a sound beating? Call the police?

‘We should get you to hospital,’ the young man said uneasily. Hospitals were full of nurses with questions, forms with blanks to be filled in. He considered making a run for it.

The old man shook his head, panting. ‘No hospital.’

The young man still wasn’t sure. He stood up and walked off, but, to the old man’s surprise and his own, he returned, moments later, carrying the old man’s groceries. One of the bags had split when it fell. The young man quietly began putting things right-side up. “You forgot the cereal,” he said, just for something to say.

The old man leaned back onto the bench and looked dumbly down at the list. CEREAL, FOR — the paper had torn in the excitement.

But the young man hadn’t forgotten. ‘Who’s Annie?’

The old man gave him a long, hard look. ‘Where did you get the gun?’

Neither answered.

The young man kept his eyes on the ground. ‘What now, then?’ he asked, pulling a cigarette from his jacket. He held the box out to the old man, who took one but declined the lighter. He rolled the cig between his fingers, watching the young man smoke. He looked about mid-twenties. In the half-hearted light of the street lamp, you could see the bags under his eyes, the tiny scar on his cheek, probably a childhood injury. There were grim lines around his brow and mouth, lines that belonged to someone much older.

‘You do this often, hm?’ the old man asked. ‘Make a good living this way?’

The young man didn’t look up.

‘Maybe I should get into this line of work. I’m retired now, but times are tough—as I’m sure you know. Has it been getting harder, taking other people’s money? People not carrying as much these days? Having to put in extra shifts?’ The old man could hear the bitterness

creeping into his own voice. 'Still, must be easier 'n a shop job, just need a gun and the nerve, am I right?'

'I didn't want this,' said the young man quietly.

'You're your own boss, too, and get to pick your own hours, that must be nice.'

'I've never done this before!' the young man said, louder than he'd intended, his voice breaking and fingers trembling as he took a lengthy, desperate drag on the cigarette. 'I can't get a shop job, all right? I've tried everywhere, nobody's hiring.'

The old man began to scoff at this, but the young man cut him off. 'I mean nobody's hiring *me*.' Something about the way he said it, the shame as he looked away, stopped the old man from retorting.

'Annie is my granddaughter,' he finally said.

Eyes never leaving the young man, he began digging through his pockets, producing a small black leather wallet. A few notes peeked out of the top. The old man fished out a photograph of a girl, maybe six years old, in a blue dress.

'Lovely, isn't she?' The girl's smile was too wide for her face, and no two teeth seemed to point in the same direction.

'Oh, well, sure,' said the young man, unconvincingly. The corners of the old man's mouth twitched upward against his better judgment.

There was a long silence. It felt, against all odds, like a first date.

'Comes to visit, second Sunday of every month.'

'Does she,' replied the young man glumly, but it wasn't a question.

'Her mum brings her.' He didn't add that his son, the girl's father, never came, hadn't in years. He cleared his throat. 'She's a bright little thing. Got a lot to say, doesn't matter much who's listening. Likes Frosties, so I try to pick them up when she's due to come round.'

'Do you,' the young man said, and this wasn't a question either.

‘Real chatterbox. “Grampa, did you know the earth goes round the sun,” or “Grampa, look what I’ve made you.” Brought me more macaroni pictures than I know what to do with, really.’

The young man buried his face in his hands and tried to remember the last time he had cried. Surely it hadn’t been as long ago as primary school, but he couldn’t think of a time more recent. Two tours of duty in Afghanistan and he hadn’t, not once. There had been nights when he would wake up panting, skin drenched with sweat, hair dripping, bed sheets soaked. There were still nights like that, come to think of it. His eyes, though, were always dry.

Now he sat *weeping*, Christ, actually *weeping* into his hands like a kid because some old codger’s granddaughter brought him macaroni pictures.

‘Now, now. Steady on.’ The old man’s voice was gruff but kind, and the kindness, the impossible generosity, was what set off a new wave of hysterics.

There were a few rough pats on the back and then a long wait. When he surfaced, the young man was gratified to see that the old man seemed just as embarrassed as he felt.

‘I’m sorry,’ he choked out, but it wasn’t for crying, or for the attempted robbery.

The old man sighed and thought, not for the first time that day, of that damn cat. He’d remembered to buy the tuna, at least. At last he turned to the young man.

‘How are you at gardening?’ he asked.

A week later, the young man knocked on the door of the house after triple-checking that the address matched the one written on a scrap of paper in even, fully formed letters.

It was a sweet neighbourhood, farther away from the city centre. The homes were small but they had gardens and though there weren’t any to be heard, in between the slams of car doors you might imagine birds chirping.

There was no answer. He knocked again, then sat on porch steps and wondered if he’d got the time wrong. A cat wandered over and snaked around his legs, eyeing his grocery bag.

‘No fish, sorry,’ he told it, but it pawed at the plastic suspiciously.

Rolling his eyes, the young man reached inside and pulled out the box of Frosties to show the cat. ‘Not for you.’ The cat miaowed reproachfully and curled up next to him.

After a few minutes, the kitchen window of the house next door opened, releasing the smell of something savoury cooking, steaming as it hit the cold air. He caught the eye of the woman who had opened it. She was middle-aged, with a mouth set in a permanent scowl on an otherwise benevolent face. She took in his freshly washed hair and his coat, not the grey one, which was worn at the elbows, but a black one, the nicest he owned.

‘Not here for the funeral, are you?’

The young man searched for his voice but failed to find it.

‘Because you’ve missed it, you see. It was yesterday.’

‘I think I may have the wrong address.’ He handed her the paper over the fence, and she scanned the name on it.

‘No, that’s right. You didn’t know? Oh, you poor dear.’ She hummed sympathetically. ‘It was very sudden. They had to rush him to hospital in the middle of the night, but it was too late. Heart attack. He died in the ambulance. Such a shame. He was a nice man.’

The young man could only gape at her.

‘Just a week ago now.’ She answered his unasked question.

She nodded at the cat, which was brushing his ankles. She lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. ‘I think he knows, that one.’

The cat yowled in a manner more suggestive of hunger than sorrow.

There didn’t seem to be anything left to say. He heard the woman tutting under her breath as he walked to the gate.

‘You’ve left your bag,’ she called after him, but he kept walking, leaving the Frosties on the porch. As he reached the street, he hesitated. He put his hands in his pockets. They were empty.