

*Prologue.*

*Devon*

The dog's morning walk has morphed into my daily pilgrimage and now the dog is slowing me down. I tug at the lead and with a whimper it tows the line. Poor dog - a casualty of my guilty habit, like all addicts I can think of nothing else, I *have* to see her. Sprinting the footpath I leap the sty into the meadow, then double over, palms on knees. I'm only twenty-four, I need to kick smoking.

Sometimes she doesn't come; these are wasted days, miserable days but make the days when she does show the special days. If she's coming she'll be here between 11.30am and 11.40am. The minutes tick by and my cigarette burns down to the filter. I don't remember taking it from the packet, I don't remember lighting it, I don't remember smoking it; all I remember is stubbing it.

11.42, one of *those* days. I glance over my shoulder in desperation more than hope. A white fleck climbs the hill, a flutter against a canvas of clay cliffs and grey sea. Her crumpled package is tucked beneath her arm, and she settles her old frame on the bench beneath the Oak. I need to get closer I need to see her face; that is vital.

She slips the contents from the bag and rests it on her lap. Her tongue wets her lips, her mouth yawns open and with one indulgent chomp, half of the iced bun is gone. As she chews, time seems to stop and nothing else matters - it's just her; her and her bun, her, her bun and me, a reminder of how good life can be, a snatched second of undiluted joy. Beauty is mortal. Seconds later she totters back down the hill. I don't know where she goes and I don't care; I've had my fix and she has served her purpose. Today is an excellent day.

When I turn away from the empty stage, the life drains from my veins: someone's there. Has he been watching me? Did he see me sharing her precious moment? Does he know that the highlight of my day is stealing a portion of the highlight of her day? I feel empty, I feel stupid, before I had always felt above her, possibly because all she has is pastry, but now...

I'm not doing this again, that is it, enough! What am I doing with my life? This is awful, this is the worst day of all and... shit. Where's the dog?

At midday the phone rings, and I dither over to it hoping I'll be too late; I don't want to hear that question, not today, not after what I've been through. It doesn't ring out so I'm forced to take the call.

"Hi Tom."

“Hi.”

“What are you doing with yourself these days?”

I can't tell her about the bun, no-one must ever know about the bun.

“Ah you know, keeping busy.”

For a while I flirted with “in between things” then switched to “this and that,” until people started asking me to elaborate. What does the phrasing matter? It's all variations of “nothing.” Ask a lot of questions (attack is the best form of defence) and soon the conversation is over. I know everything she is doing, all she knows about me is that I'm keeping busy - and that is a lie. I switch on the computer; all I have is my savings and a germ of a plan.

When the phone rings again two weeks later I claw at the receiver before the second ring.

“Hi Tom.”

“Hi!”

“What are you doing with yourself these days?”

I reply coolly, enigmatically, “I'm taking a train.”

“Where to?”

“I'm taking a train to Thailand.”