

The Text Message

I lay on my back, watching the glow of my phone on the ceiling, outlining in stark relief the pits and crenulations. I barely dared to look. The time is 02:30. The knives in my stomach twist and turn as I desperately try and focus on the sounds coming from the room above me. He's awake. I lie there, stiff and unmoving, as I hear his slow tread, the boards creaking and groaning as I listen for the tell-tale squeak of the opening door. Nothing happened, and the man went back to bed. His words hang in my brain like a bad taste. My thoughts turn to the text message, the one that had started all of this.

It had come early in the evening of the previous day- just 8 hours ago, though it felt like longer. Brief words. Words of encouragement and hope. And with it, came something I could never have believed could come to me: courage. With that courage, I had braved yet another rant from the man, his black-filled teeth sticking out of his mouth, as his eyes stare straight into mine. He had woken me, and that hours' sleep would be the only one I would have that night. I was vulnerable, standing to attention in my pyjamas like a frightened dog, pressed next to the creamy whiteness of the wall, trying not to dig my head into the thermostat as I'm backed further and further up. This time, it was an ultimatum. An ultimatum I planned not to be there to comply with. He said things he had often said before, and some things he hadn't. Spouting rhetoric; spewing his own special mix of garbage and piety. His face contorts into a hideous parody of himself as he spits out one final proclamation before his face turns soft, and assumes a look that passes for compassion. He turned, and began to tread heavily up the narrow staircase. For the first time, inwardly I laughed at him. Nervously and with apprehension, but nevertheless with a sweet taste of derision.

My mind wandered as it tried to while away the ticking of the clock, as it tried to bury what I was about to do. It was heresy. I had to leave everything, everything I had worked so hard for. Every morning for two years, I had gotten up at 5:30 to trudge through the rain, wind and snow to pick up a back breaking load of tabloids, to be delivered to houses kilometres away from each other. The pay was minimal, the work hard. Seven days a week, two days off a year. After I was finished, I made my way to my second job at a construction site, bending and flexing my back as I mixed the wet brown sludge of concrete and gravel, to be dumped into waiting holes in the ground. Half of the money I earned went down the dark throat of the man, in the form of baked goods and expensive soft drinks. Trivial luxuries. The other half went towards the bills. To heat rooms I never entered. To pay for water and fried eggs, and microwaved meals I never had. Whatever was left over, I used to buy food for myself. And so I hungered, whilst he was full. Tired, when he was rested. And yet there was still loyalty. *Loyalty* to the man who had reduced me to this.

Every so often, I heard the creak-creak of the man moving around before going back to bed, doing what I don't know. My mind, with avid punctuality, went crazy every time as my pulse quickened, and I heard the blood in my head pump harder as I waited for him to come down. He never did.

Three o'clock rolled around, and with it, came the need to get moving. I gently stood up on my thin mattress, letting the worn coverlet fall away, and quietly moved the brown wicker screen that was my only privacy from prying eyes. I stepped onto the cheap brown fibrous carpet, and made my way to the broom cupboard, the place where I kept all my earthly possessions. I quickly gathered a bin liner roll and some old carrier bags, and began taking my carefully folded clothes from the cheap Ikea shelves, trying not to bang my head on the low, sloping ceiling, focusing with rabid intensity on any sounds from above me. Despite my attempts to remain absolutely quiet, the rustling of the bags, a slight sound which seemed startling loud in such silence, sent me into a panic attack, rendering me half-functioning from fright, as I cowered in the relative safety of a bathroom. My thoughts wildly theorised what I would say I was doing if caught, and then since there was no tangible explanation to what I was doing, packing my bags at 3:00 in the morning, what would happen to me afterwards.

Despite the incoherence of my thoughts, 20 minutes later I still found myself walking, with only a pair of socks on, over the wet concrete slabs outside the back door, depositing two bags at a time, out of sight behind the mottled dustbin. It soon formed a pile, a satchel here, refuse bag there, bright neon orange carrier bag on top. I was dressed, and ready to go, now in the guise of preparing to go on my daily paper round. I was taking everything, except the one thing I couldn't. He lay in the clay-filled soil next to the thin, clapboard shed where my bike was. I remembered laying his small, white body, fur wet with tears, in a deep hole I had dug with only a small garden trowel. In my heart, if not in my head, I had demanded just retribution, to be dealt solely to the man.

In silence, I gathered my tatty trainers, all worn into virtual rags from months of wet, mud and asphalt, into a bag, and prepared to leave the shed, my dirty, broken down bike in tow. And then- a ghastly flood of yellow light. It lit up the sharp blades of the grass, and traced the outline of the doors upon the lawn. It took all my strength to keep off the grass-strewn chipboard of the floor. My knees still buckled, as I dropped the bag of trainers and prayed that my bags were sufficiently hidden. I desperately tried to rescue the pieces of my brain from among the spare bike tyres and old coats as I lurched around drunkenly.

The rattle of the door handle turning uselessly and the booming shake of a fist on a pane of glass brought me out of my stupor. My safeguard had worked. The key, left 'absentmindedly' in the lock, had prevented him coming out before I could react.

His hands were pressed against the glass as he tried to see out into the dark, as he watched me walk up to the door, as casually as I could. In my head, I was panicking. He

stepped back into the gloom of the kitchen as I opened the door. An outline spoke to me, harsh words rendered in a whisper, piercing their way through the darkness. A simple question.

“What are you doing?”

I explained how my boss wanted me to go to work early. He stepped forward, slightly. I could now see his face, brows knotted, face clouded with suspicion.

“At four in the morning?”

Again, I replied respectfully, saying that that was when the newsagents opened. His face cleared, and went back to the look of almost benign geniality that he showed to nearly everyone outside of house. If only they knew. He turned on the heel of his ever-present slipper, the dark blue of his trackie bottoms swishing.

Fifteen minutes later, after an intense struggle loading all the bags onto a single bike, a satchel for each handle, bin bags ungainly balanced across the frame, I found myself walking out into the street, all in the painful knowledge that if the man decided to look outside his window for even an instant, I'm in full view, slowly pushing my bike across the black, newly-laid tarmac, dotted with powdered mortar and bits of brick.

Streets I knew, and he didn't. I lost myself beyond the chances of being caught, aware that at any moment, I could hear the slap, slap of pursuit. Under the intense cloud of fear, I thought of two things. The grave I had dug next to the shed, and the house, the place I was heading to, the house where the text message had come from.

When I sit and think about that night, I find it difficult to put into words the fear I felt, the apprehension. In my mind, being caught was almost a certainty. As I explore the interior of that house in my head, and remember all the things that happened in each of the rooms, my mind continues to wander, always going outside to that wet patch of ground next to the shed, with no grass or vegetation growing anywhere near it. Bare, uncared for and alone. It is difficult to look back without feeling a sense of regret.