

A person in a dark hoodie stands with their back to the camera, looking out over a city skyline at sunset. The sky is a mix of orange, red, and blue, with a starry night sky above. The city skyline includes a prominent clock tower on the left and a large Ferris wheel on the right. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

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**M. H CHOU DHURY**

Δ TIME TO  
LIVE SAMPLE

**M. H CHOUHURY**

ARTFUL NARRATIVES

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For any soul that has ever loved and lost.

# 2,376: TIME

*Time – it winds away silently, consuming us, but does it truly exist? My father once asked me that, and now I want you to think about it.*

*Time as we know it, sorted into units: seconds, hours, days, weeks, years. A lifetime, is a human conception, so that isn't what time is. When we look up at the sky on a clear night, we see light from stars that have been dead for billions of years. The past is staring back at us, guiding us through the present. What does that tell us about time?*

*It is elusive and slippery, that's for sure. Dad would say it's like trying to hold on to water. All you're left with are wet palms, and eventually even that dries up. You won't remember most of it and I can prove that to you. Think back to this time last week. Where were you and what were you doing? Can you remember? Maybe you can, but what about ten days ago, two weeks ago, this time last month, or last year? You can't remember, can you? No one can.*

*The truth is, most of your life, it will just bleed into itself, and that's why you have to savour the moments. I don't mean the big ones; they usually stick around without much effort. I'm talking about the everyday stuff like enjoying a nice view, a good meal, or conversation. Having a snowball fight with family or riding bikes with friends. Taking a walk with the love of your life or relishing a lie down when the rain is falling outside and you are safe and sound, tucked into your blanket. Those moments too—trust me, they are worth so much.*

*Should I tell you something else about time? The biggest trick it plays is convincing you that you will have some of it left to spare. You won't. Time is like rolling a snowball up a steep hill. It can feel like it takes ages on the way up, but once you reach the top—and I can't tell you exactly where the top will be—it flips and tumbles down faster and faster until you're left scratching your head, asking, "where did it all go?"*

*Don't worry, though. This doesn't mean that time is broken. Time is time. What it does mean is that you should be mindful, like right now, wherever you are, however you're experiencing this moment. Now is all that matters because now is the only space from which change can be made. The past is done with and the future doesn't exist yet. The present is what we have.*

*I think that's what time is then. It's not the past or the future, but just the present, the here and now, this bubble that we are living inside. Every once in a while remind yourself to breathe it all in and ask yourself: how incredible it is to be alive.*

# PART ONE

ARTFUL NARRATIVES

**"The wound is the place where the Light enters you."**

— Rumi

## 2

The mobile beeps.

Jase snaps the spacebar, pausing the live news broadcast playing on his laptop screen. He picks up his phone from the bed and reads the WhatsApp message.

UNC:

Outside in 5

JASE:

Ok

Sliding the phone into his pocket, Jase throws on a jumper and his hooded coat.

The laptop screen displays a still shot of the Prime Minister, hair dishevelled, fist raised, his expression lost somewhere between stern and sympathetic.

*'Mise-en-scène.'* Jase can hear Mr Deeda's voice in his head. *'Everything filmed for the screen is staged, so learn to ask yourself why: why the outfit, the lighting, and angle?'*

The Prime Minister is seated at a desk, illuminated from behind by a table lamp. To his left, the corner of a fireplace is visible, and on his right, not one but two Union Jacks hang limply.

Why two Union Jacks?

Schools will be closed again. That part of the announcement affects him the most. Mrs Atwood had warned them that this could happen before they broke up for Christmas break. What a way to begin 2021 and not a bad omen he hopes.

From the shoe rack inside his wardrobe, Jase pulls out his boots and slips them on, tucking in the laces instead of tying them. He switches off the table lamp and heads downstairs, the heels of his boots thudding against the new floorboards that Steve installed.

From the narrow corridor, he peers into the living room. Mum and Steve are seated in their usual spots, eyes glued to the TV.

'Schools are closed,' Mum announces.

'I heard.'

She glances up, noticing that he is dressed to go out. 'Is Carl outside?'

'Yeah, a few minutes away.'

She smiles. 'Have fun.' Then looking at the TV, adds. 'At this rate, you might not get another chance.'

'A bunch of rubbish!' Steve snarls. 'Tier four, tier five, who understands these rules?'

'Has school emailed?' Mum asks.

'Not yet.'

'Make sure you go online this time. I don't want to get a call from them again.'

'I will.'

The Prime Minister is saying something about more sacrifices needing to be made, which looks like it's about to set Steve off. Jase holds up his phone. 'See you guys.'

'Have fun, love.'

From the row of coat pegs in the corridor, Jase pulls his scarf and ties it in a knot around his neck. Staring into the mirror, he tries to comb his hair with his fingers, annoyed that he didn't cut it last week when he had the chance. Now he will have to bear the dreaded Bieber fringe for..., well, who knows for how long. He sighs and checks his pocket for his keys, then opens the door and steps out into the night.

The air is cool and damp. Lampposts cast triangular spheres of light, revealing tree branches and misty drizzle swirling in the air. He waits on the pavement. Cramped terraced houses with cramped front yards flank him on both sides. Worth over a million pounds according to Steve. Some still have Christmas trees displayed in their living room windows. They got rid of theirs two days ago. Holding each end, he helped Steve drag it through three streets to the local park, where the council had designated a dumping ground.

Phone in hand, as if it were an extension of his limbs, Jase opens Instagram. Three new likes on the photo he posted yesterday and one comment from Holly.

*Love this pic*

He responds to her comment with a double tap, then scrolls through epic shots of waterfalls and cityscapes, tech reviews, football news, photography tips, and of course, memes reacting to the Prime Minister.

Boris Johnson, pale-faced, eye sockets darkened, cigar in one hand. The caption reading: Tier ten; stay in your daddy's nutsack!

It makes him smile, so he double-taps the screen.

Headlights peek around the corner and creep towards him. A few seconds later, the dented grille of Carl's Honda Pilot comes to a stop. Jase puts his phone away and opens the door.

'Wa gwan, big man.' Carl throws out his hand. 'Happy birthday.'

'Thanks.' Jase claps it while moving an empty water bottle from the seat. He straps on his belt, noticing the dog with a muzzle in the back. 'Who do we have here?'

'That's Sally. I'm training her in-house for a few days.'

'How you doing, girl?' He is about to reach out when Carl holds his wrist.

'Better not.' Carl eyes the dog in the mirror. 'She's mostly harmless, but we had a minor incident.' He lowers the volume on the radio, which is broadcasting the Prime Minister's public address. 'You're off school then.'

'Yup.'

'It's okay for some.'

'I actually like school, Uncle Carl.'

'Right.' Carl nods. 'Forgot. How's your mum?'

'Good.'

Carl tilts his head. 'What about good old Steve?'

'He's okay.' Jase looks over. 'How's the channel?'

Carl smiles. 'Just hit twenty K.'

'That's sick!' Jase pats the pocket that has his phone. 'I've been sharing with my friends.'

'Nice one.' Carl drums the steering wheel with his fingers. 'So, how does it feel to be a man, big man?'

He Googled it the other day. Turning eighteen in the United Kingdom means he can now vote, buy alcohol, own a car, and get married. He could even get a tattoo if he wanted. He shrugs. 'It's okay.'

‘Okay.’ Carl makes a face of dismay. ‘Do you know how chuffed me and your dad were when we turned eighteen? We got garmed up and hit the town.’ He winks. ‘Met a couple of lovely ladies.’

Jase raises his eyebrow. ‘Does Mum know about that?’

‘Your pops behaved himself. Me, on the other hand.’ Carl grins, then shakes his head as if freeing himself from the memory. He goes back to drumming his fingers. ‘Anyway, my point is you should be psyched.’

‘Psyched?’

‘Sorry.’ Carl glances over. ‘What do you kids say these days?’ He makes an exaggerated face. ‘Gassed!’

‘Kind of hard to be gassed at the moment, Uncle Carl.’

‘You know what I mean.’

He does know. As a kid, just thinking about Christmas or his birthday could make him giddy with excitement, and even trips to the cinema or McDonald’s were reasons to jump up in joy. But that was in a different time and a different life. ‘They don’t call us Gen Z for no reason.’

Carl offers a sympathetic shrug. ‘I get you couldn’t celebrate properly, but I got something to make up for it.’ He motions his head to the back seat, his tone turning serious. ‘Something special to give you.’

Jase twists his body. The dog, panting softly, sits next to a bulging rucksack. ‘What is it?’

‘Let’s park up first.’

His eyes linger on the rucksack, then he looks back to the road, noticing Uncle Carl’s fingers drumming on the steering wheel. ‘You okay?’

‘Me?’ Carl lets out a nervous laugh. ‘I’m good. You good?’

‘I’m fine.’

They drive in silence, the radio in the background doing all the talking. The Prime Minister's announcement has ended and now the news reporter reads off the daily statistics. Thirty thousand new infections reported in the past twenty-four hours and over a thousand deaths, bringing the toll since March to just over eighty thousand, with the global figure exceeding two million. Though they are in the middle of the storm, the doors coming off at their hinges, it feels distant when read out like that.

The news shifts to the immunisation rollout programme. Oxford University's AstraZeneca vaccine has shown promising results and is set to be made available from next week. That's when Carl reaches over and switches off the radio.

'Rollout begins next week.' He nods to himself. 'Things will get better.'

It's the same thing Mum keeps saying, but dystopian worlds of mind control and government surveillance pop into Jase's head whenever talk of the vaccine comes up. 'Remember that film, Children of Men?'

Carl indicates, then turns right into Aylestone Avenue. 'With Clive Owen.'

'Yeah.'

'Good movie that.'

Jase looks out of the window. The houses here are larger, detached and spacious, looming imperiously behind iron gates and dim lighting. 'Sometimes I wonder if that's how the future will turn out. Like, what if something's wrong with the vaccine and it has massive side effects?'

Carl chuckles. 'Not an expert, Jase, but I don't think vaccines work like that.'

‘But vaccines are supposed to take years to make.’ He read that point in an online article two weeks ago.

‘Yeah, but they’ve thrown everything at this one, including the kitchen sink.’

Jase considers this. How much money and resources, exactly? He will have to Google that when he gets home. ‘Are you taking it?’

‘Don’t know.’

Jase grins. ‘Thought you’d be at the top of the list, you know, considering your age and that.’

Carl grins back. ‘Okay, Jason Bieber, just don’t forget I’ll make you look foolish on the pull-up bar.’

Jase throws up his hands, conceding the point.

They arrive at Tiverton Green, a medium-sized park tucked into an affluent residential neighbourhood off Kensal Rise.

Carl switches off the engine, and they get out of the car. The rain has increased to a light drizzle, so Jase throws on his hoodie. Carl pulls the rucksack from the backseat and straps it on. Sally hops out a second later, eager to go.

They enter through the north entrance. The park is deserted; the gentle incline offers an unobstructed view of the wet lawn, the rows of trees at the far end, the houses along the street, and beyond them all, the sprawling city twinkling with lights like a three-dimensional circuit board.

Carl puts Sally on a leash, holding it loosely. They do a quick lap around the park, talking about Carl’s waiting list of clients, which has grown massively over the past twelve months. After years of just making ends meet, one viral dog training video—liked, commented on and reposted by an A-list celebrity—changed everything.

‘I’m serious about my job offer,’ Carl says, kneeling to undo Sally’s leash. ‘I’m turning down work at the moment.’

Jase massages his neck and the knot that mysteriously appears whenever the topic of his future comes up. School was a refuge from the outside world. While enrolled within its institutional walls, he felt safe and didn't need to make any big life decisions. 'Can you give me some more time?'

'Yeah, but I'll have to put an ad out soon.'

'Okay.'

Carl ruffles the dog's neck. 'You've been a good girl. Go on, run free.' Sally lowers her head and scurries off into the darkness. Carl nods towards a bench in the corner, sheltered by the sloping branches of a tree. 'Over there. Let's move from this rain.'

They make their way through the muddy grass, which squelches beneath their feet. Carl points towards the fenced-off outdoor gym in the distance, where they would sometimes train, but is now off limits.

'That didn't take them long.' Jase says.

'Don't slack.' Carl knocks him on the shoulder with his knuckles. 'Press-ups, sit-ups, squats. Three sets of twenty every day; throw in a couple of planks and you're solid.'

'Roger that.'

'Stop faffing about and get a pull-up bar, will you?'

'Yeah, got to sort that.' Jase steps onto the seat of the bench and perches on the thin backrest. Carl takes off his rucksack, then wipes the wet bench with his gloved hand before settling his frame down. He unzips the bag and takes out two bottles of beer, dripping with condensation. 'We can finally break bread.' He pops one open; the hiss is followed by a wisp of steam.

Jase takes the beer; the cold bottle against his fingertips suddenly makes him thirsty. 'That's with food, isn't it?'

'You know what I mean, smart Alec.' Carl opens the second bottle. 'Now I ain't naive to think this is your first beer, but it's your first beer

with me, so...' He raises his bottle and they clink heads. 'To being all grown up.'

Jase takes a sip. The stale taste and smell remind him of a warm summer night from two years earlier at Mel Everton's house. They had finished their last GCSE exam, and Mel's parents were away, so she invited the class over for an end-of-year party. Kendrick Lamar, Stormzy, and Ed Sheeran blasted from the speakers as his classmates lounged around Mel's patioed garden, drinking and smoking, laughing and chatting about the future.

He woke the next morning feeling like death and hasn't touched a drink since.

Carl puts his hand on Jase's shoulder. 'Ryan would've given anything to be here for this.'

Jase looks down at his boots.

'After you were born, he stopped coming down to the Dynamite, and whenever he did, all he would do was ramble on about you. Spent most of the bloody time showing pictures.'

Jase tries to imagine the Dynamite Corner in the early 2000s. Smoke drifting in the air as a boxy TV plays in the background and slot machines ring out. Steve in one corner with his drinking pals, Uncle Carl in another, Dad hovering between the two, holding toddler pictures in his hand. 'To Dad.' Jase raises his bottle, and they clink heads for the second time.

They sit in silence, the lawn before them shrouded in darkness, except for Sally's collar blinking blue and yellow in the distance.

'No point dragging this on.' Carl puts his bottle on the bench and rummages in his rucksack, this time bringing out a box. 'Happy birthday, Jase. Your mum said you needed a lens, and the guy in the shop said this is a good one.'

Jase examines the model number. It's an excellent lens. 'This is expensive.'

Carl taps the side of the box. 'I got it second-hand, but it's got a two-year warranty, and the guy promised me he barely touched it.'

'Thanks, Uncle Carl.' He says brightly. 'I love it. This will help me get those close-ups.'

'Can't wait to see them.'

Jase rests the box on his knees and reads the spec.

'That's not all.' Carl reaches into the bag again. 'I got one more thing for you.' He takes out a wrapped object and holds it with both hands.

'What is it?'

'This Jase.' Carl pauses. 'Is from your dad.'

'My dad?'

'Yeah.' Carl pushes it towards him. 'It's yours. Take it.'

Jase puts his bottle down and takes the wrapped object. It's rectangular in shape and slightly larger than A5 in size. He gives it a gentle shake. 'What is it?' He repeats.

Carl shrugs. 'I don't know.' He lets out a long breath that causes his entire body to sag. 'I can't tell you how long I've been waiting to get this off my chest.' He takes a swig from his beer and turns to face Jase. 'I told you that Ryan asked me to keep an eye on you.' He places his hand on his chest. 'God knows I tried my best.'

'You've been great, Uncle Carl.'

'I hope so.'

'You have.' Jase repeats, realising that he has never explicitly let this be known.

'So, Ryan calls me over one day, saying he needs a favour. This was around a month before he passed. He hands that over to me.' Carl points with his eyes to the wrapped object. 'Never seen him so serious.'

He made me promise that I would hold on to it until you turned eighteen. Made me promise like ten times, and I wasn't allowed to tell anyone, not even your mum.' He shakes his head. 'I've kept it in a safe place all these years. When I got Covid last year, I got so paranoid that I ended up making a will and put it at the top of the list.' He takes another swig from the bottle, then looks up at the night sky. 'But it's done now, and I can finally relax.'

Jase tries to swallow, but a lump has formed at the back of his throat. The object in his hand suddenly feels heavy. 'You don't know what's inside?'

Carl wipes his palms on his knees. 'Ryan never said, and I never asked. I figured it was between you two. I've just been keeping it safe for you.'

His eyes stay fixed on the object, but his mind has gone blank, as if a sinkhole has formed within his brain, swallowing his thoughts.

'Ryan went through a rough patch when he got back from Afghanistan, but he got his life in check. It was all going good until....' Carl puffs out his cheeks. 'It was crap luck, but he took it on the chin. You all did.' Carl looks at Jase. 'There was a whole load of stuff he wanted to tell you but you were young. I remember he kept saying that, so I'm guessing this.' Carl juts his head at the present, 'has something to do with that. He just kept repeating over and over. Wait until he turns eighteen. Wait until he turns eighteen, and here we are.'

Jase squeezes the object. Its solidity brings his mind back into focus. A wooden box maybe? But what could be inside? 'This is crazy!' Is all he says.

'Yup.'

He wipes the wrapping paper, smudging the small raindrops. 'Should I open it now?'

'It's up to you.'

He takes a breath as his hands begin to tremble. 'I don't know.'

'Forget it then. Look, let's head back.' Carl takes one last swig from his beer, then empties the bottle onto the wet grass. 'Probably better to open it in your room anyway. It's been waiting long enough.'

What has? The question creeps through but Jase doesn't want to ask it out loud. He nods. 'Okay.'

Carl stretches his legs out and leans back on the bench, looking out to the view of the glittering city tucked behind the leafless trees. The spiralling arch of Wembley Stadium is visible in the distance, along with the city's other heavyweights— the Millennium Wheel, BT Tower, and The Shard. 'I miss him.'

Jase puts a hand on Carl's shoulder. 'I miss him too, Uncle Carl.'

They sit in silence, then Carl says, 'Why was six scared of seven?'

'Don't know.'

'Because seven eight nine.'

Jase sniggers.

### 3

The Honda pulls up outside 44 Cavendish Way. Jase holds up the wrapped object, which has been gripped firmly in both hands the entire journey home. 'I'll let you know what I find.'

Carl bites his bottom lip. 'Listen, don't tell your mum about this. She'll want to be there when you open it.'

'So?'

'You don't even know what's inside. I knew Ryan better than anyone. He didn't do things for no reason.'

Jase turns his whole body. 'Should I be...?'

'The gift was meant for you,' Carl cuts in, 'not your mum. That's one thing Ryan was clear about. He wrote her letters and said what he wanted to. This is for you, so check it first, then decide.'

It makes sense but also raises questions. He nods with a sigh.

Carl offers a sympathetic look. 'You cool, big man?'

How could he be? In his hand is something he never expected in a million years. How do you prepare for something that you never expected in a million years? Forcing a smile, he nods. 'Yeah.'

Carl puts a hand on his shoulder. 'Keep me posted.'

'Will do.' Jase gets out of the car, holding the camera lens under one arm and the wrapped gift in the other. 'Thanks again, Uncle Carl.'

Carl nods. 'Later, big man.'

'Bye.' He shuts the car door and turns towards the house. His room which faces the street is dark, and he left the curtains undrawn. Though he only took a couple of sips of beer, he can feel its heaviness lingering over his brow.

At the front door, he slides Dad's present into the inside pocket of his coat. He wipes his feet on the doormat and opens the door quietly.

'You scared me!' Mum gasps.

'Sorry,' he says, peering in from the living room doorway.

'Didn't hear you come in.'

'You take your shoes off?' Steve asks, his eyes fixed on the TV screen, which is showing a repeat episode of Top Gear.

'Yeah.'

'That was quick,' Mum says. 'How's Carl?'

'He's good.'

She smiles. 'What do you have there?'

His free hand reaches for his coat pocket, where Dad's wrapped gift is nestled inside. Mum looks at his pocket. He deflects, realising she is asking about the box in his hand. 'Uncle Carl got me this sick lens.'

'Aww.' She shifts her gaze. 'What a wonderful present.'

'Yeah.' He smiles.

'Now you have everything you need.'

'Yup.' Jase turns towards the door. 'Just gonna wash my hands.'

'Don't forget to sing happy birthday to yourself.' Steve chuckles at the same joke he has made for the tenth time.

'Think I'm gonna get an early night. I have classes in the morning.'

'Okay, love, goodnight.'

'Night.' He heads upstairs with steady steps. Inside his bedroom, he throws off his coat, puts down Uncle Carl's present on the shelf, then goes into the bathroom to wash his hands, a habit that has become

automatic over the past few months. While drying his hands, he stares at the mirror.

When he was younger, he would examine photos of his father—that handsome oval face with dark features, usually framed by a week’s worth of stubble, then staring into the mirror, he would will his own features to take a similar form. It seemed to be working because people always commented on how much they looked alike, which made him stare longer and harder.

Back in his bedroom, Jase closes the door. Flicking on the table lamp, he takes Dad’s present from his coat pocket and sits at the desk, looming over it as if it were an ancient artefact. Five years it has been sitting idle, but what could be inside? Only one way to find out.

He glances again at the door, then swallows nervously as he turns the present on its side. Using his fingernails, he picks at the tape until he can pull it off cleanly. The wrapping paper unfolds neatly to reveal a wooden box, just as he suspected. The surface is well polished, with a smooth, shiny finish, and the cover has an elegant engraving of five concentric circles. He examines it in the light, running his finger over each line until he reaches the centre. There is no latch, just a clean break where the two sides perfectly align.

Fingers tingling, he pulls open the cover, leaving it to rest on the hinges. Inside is an envelope with his name on it. He picks it up and untucks the flap, which has been left unsealed. He peeks inside, then turns it over, tipping the contents onto the table.

A birthday card.

Some old photographs.

One folded sheet of paper.

One flash drive.

He presses his palms against the desk, feeling and hearing his heart thumping in his chest. Spreading out the items, he picks up the card

first. It has a simple ink sketch of a teenage boy and the words; **Happy 18th** printed in bold letters. He opens it to find a fifty-pound note, secured with a paperclip, along with a short message.

*To Jase,*

*I wish I was there to see you. May all your dreams come true.*

*Love Dad.*

The swell of emotion almost lifts him from the chair. Eyes closed, he runs his thumb over the words until the feeling passes. He puts the card down and turns his attention to the photographs, three in total. He spreads them out like a hand of cards. The first is a very old sepia-toned black-and-white picture of Grandad as a teenager, standing outside a house shaded by trees. On the back, two words: one written in a foreign script, Urdu, and the other in English—Timorpura, the name of Grandad's town.

He puts it down and picks up the second photo, which shows Dad standing in a similar pose outside a terraced house. He appears to be around the same age, and the two could easily pass as brothers.

The third picture is a family photo. Dad is on the right, Mum on the left, and a seven-year-old Jase stands in the middle. A wet, sunny day in the Lake District. He remembers when it was taken: Dad stopping a stranger, asking if he wouldn't mind, the stranger happy to oblige, the scent of damp earth and leaves; he was shivering or is that just him shivering now?

He picks up the third item which is a folded sheet of paper with a scribbled note that reads, *one of my favourites*. Jase unfolds it. Six coloured crayon lines, starting from each corner of the page, converge in the middle to form a colourful and symmetrical, though slightly wonky, geometric pattern. As a child, he would see them whenever he closed his eyes at night to sleep: dazzling displays of electric colours, dancing and merging as they zoomed past in the darkness. Sometimes

they were so vivid that when he woke, he was able to recreate them on paper.

Jase puts the drawing down and leans back in his chair. A tear trickles down his cheek as he inhales deeply and breathes out a full lung of air. There is one item left. He picks up the Kingston flash drive, grey in colour with 32GB printed on the side.

He reaches over and presses the spacebar, bringing his laptop to life, then inserts the drive into one of the ports. A few seconds later, a USB icon appears on the desktop. He clicks on it to find two folders. With a tremble in his hand, he hovers the cursor over the first folder and double-clicks.

Files. MP4 files to be precise.

He scrolls down, over thirty files, each one is numbered, has a title and a date. 'Vlogs,' he murmurs under his breath.

He exits the folder and clicks on folder two. A password screen pops up. He pauses for a moment, then types in his birthday.

Rejected.

He thinks for a while then reaching for Grandad's photo, types in TIMORPURA.

Rejected.

He tries a couple of variations, then gives up and re-enters folder one. Scrolling through the library of entries, he notices they vary in length, ranging from three to eighteen minutes long. The first video is titled.

Vid1.My\_dear\_son.13.04.2015

When he was eight or nine and they were living in their old neighbourhood, the council had marked out a site for a new playground. He would pass it every day on his way to school, watching it take shape and feeling excitement build. Then, one sunny morning—either a Saturday or Sunday—Dad woke him up. 'It's ready, son.'

Jase rises from his desk and paces the cramped space of his room. He picks up his phone and highlights Unc but doesn't press the dial button. Uncle Carl can't help him. No one can. He chucks the phone onto his bed and paces some more, thinking he could wait until tomorrow, but that would mean spending the night tossing and turning in bed.

He walks to the door, making sure that it is closed, then sits back at his desk. He reaches for his headphones and plugs it into the laptop. He hovers the cursor over the first video and double-clicks. It takes a few seconds for the video app to load the file, and there he is: Dad sitting outside, looking healthy and strong, stares into the camera while his outstretched hand makes an adjustment. He leans forward, then moves back until his face and upper body are in the frame. A backpack rests to the side, and there is a notepad on his knee, which he looks down at. He clears his throat and speaks into the camera.

"Hi Jase,  
How are you? Hope this video finds you  
well..."

It hits him like a knee to the gut. Rolling the chair back, he crumples, hands covering his face, plunged into the sinkhole that had earlier swallowed his thoughts and is now swallowing everything. Nothing is physical; the world is black and soaked in tears, but the feeling passes quickly, and he feels himself become solid again.

He reaches for a tissue, blows his nose, then faces the screen with renewed resolve. He drags the video back to the start and presses play.

"Hi, Jase,

How are you? Hope this video finds you well. It must be strange, it's strange for me too, but drastic situations call for drastic actions. I get it, videos from beyond the grave is a bit clichéd but you know me, I like a good cliché.

Woke up at dawn and felt like going for a run. Can't remember the last time I did either, but I might as well make the most of it while I can. The doctor said I don't have much time.

Do you still come to this place? I remember the first time I brought you. It's changed since then. I don't know if this will be here when you're watching this, but I'm leaving it for you anyway.

So, where do I begin? If you're watching this, Carl has given you my present. I don't know how it's going to play out, but you're hearing my words, and that's the most important thing.

It's been a long time for you, so let me remind you; I love you, son. You and your mum mean everything to me. Love is one of those strange things in life that can bring you joy and pain equally. No

one is guaranteed to find it, so if you do, you're lucky.

What else?

Happy birthday, of course. Look at you, eighteen years old and all grown up. Man, I wonder what you look like. You're probably taller than me, right? There are so many questions I want to ask, but I can never know the answers, so is there any point?

Keep it positive, Ryan.

Let me tell you how I remember you. Wide-eyed, that's what pops to mind. When we went somewhere new, I loved watching your eyes take it all in, then came the questions, always the questions. It made me want to see the world how you did. I hope you're still that curious. Never stop asking questions.

You're shy, but only at the start. Once you get going, well, you remember the incident at Thorpe Park.

Lastly, you're strong, stronger than you know. When we told you the news, I saw the pain in your eyes, but you held it together for your mum, for me.

The hardest thing is knowing that I'm going to leave you guys but when I look at you, I get this feeling, everything will

be okay. That's the best gift that you could ever give me.

How is your mum? I hope she's healthy and happy and getting on with her life. You're probably wondering if you should tell her about this. I can't answer that, Jase. I'm dead, so it doesn't make sense I have a say.

I'm dead.

Wow!

I'm dead.

Keep it together, Ryan.

Anyway, it's your decision, and I trust you'll make the right one.

So, what's this about? That's probably your main question. I'm not fully sure. Like I said, I don't know how this will play out, but I had to do something.

The future, this cancer will rob me of it, and of watching you grow up. We think we have time. It made me so depressed and angry, but then I got an idea. It doesn't have to be like that. Okay, I won't get to see you grow up, but I can have my say. I can tell you some of the things I would've told you if I were around and you can see me at least, even if I can't see you.

You know that saying about your life flashing before your eyes before you

die? It's been happening to me, but it's not a flash; it's more like drips and drabs. It's hard to explain, my dreams are clearer than ever and sometimes when I'm waiting, it happened the other day in the coffee shop, it's like time slows down and I get these intense bursts, memories from the past, playing out in front of my eyes in perfect detail. It has let me take stock of my life. That's what I've been doing these last few weeks, really taking stock and it made me realise that I have so much to share with you.

I lost my dad when I was ten. Jesus... it feels like history is repeating itself. I felt cut off from him and his world after that, then we moved from Birmingham, and that was it.

There was so much about him I never knew. I don't want that to happen to you. You're older than I was, but we still haven't had enough time. There's a whole side of you, Jase that you don't know anything about, but it's important you do. Important for you and me, and there are other things, messy and complicated things. I don't know how this will play out, but I had to do something.

I'll be honest in these recordings; that's the only way this will work.

Tragedies can blind people, making them remake memories in the perfect way. I want you to know who I am, uncensored and from me.

It might get hard and even feel like a burden, but you need to stick with me until the end. Make that promise to me, Jase, you'll stick with me until the end, no matter what you hear.

I'm a bit nervous about this thing, so let me stop before I start rambling. I've said enough and there is so much more to tell you, but all in good time.

One final thing before I go and I need you to know this, Jase, really know it.

I would never have left you guys if I had a choice. Never."

The screen goes blank. Jase pulls out his headphones and inhales deeply as if surfacing for air. His thoughts swirl, scattered thinly across time and space and memories that are stark and punchy and invasive. He stands and paces in a circle, aware of the thudding noise his footsteps are making on the floorboards. Dad looked strong and healthy, a far cry from the image that is burned into his memory, gripping him now.

A hospital bed, a thin man with sunken eyes beneath the covers, beeping machines and monitors in the background— the sound effects of death. A few days later, at home, sitting at the dining table eating noodles with Mum. The phone rings, they exchange glances,

Mum answers, a hand goes up to her mouth, then she collapses to the floor.

Jase shudders as the memory kicks feelings into the air like dust, and suddenly he is back there, five years ago, stranded and powerless, as if no progress has been made at all. He sits on the bed, but the weight forces him to lie flat on his back, arms at his sides, grief cocooning him from the world yet somehow offering comfort. Tears roll down both cheeks, and for the first time in years, he doesn't try to hold them back.

# 4

The distant wail of a siren.

*I would never have left you guys if I had a choice. Never.*

Dad!

Jase jerks upright, the phone alarm blaring beside him. He swipes it off and drops his head back onto the pillow, squinting while trying to grip the images from the dream. Not only images but shapes and colours, rippling through his mind in kaleidoscopic concentric circles. Through the fog, he recalls a playground, the one the council built outside their old flat, or was it a different one? He was on a swing or was it a seesaw? Words were shared. It was something about... something about...

*Notepad.*

Jase opens his eyes, noticing the morning light creeping through the curtains. He doesn't remember falling asleep.

*Notepad.*

The word lingers like the afterglow of a bright flash. Dad was holding a notepad in the video. Was he holding one in the dream?

'Notepad,' Jase mutters the word under his breath, hoping his mind will make a connection through the murk. Nothing.

The phone beeps three times. Half abandoning the thought, Jase wipes the crust from his eyes and picks up his mobile. The screen is

stacked with notifications. Flicking them away, he opens his school email to find three messages from three subject teachers, all flagged red with priority. He opens the first from Mr Khalil, his business teacher, and reads,

‘Dear students, please note that classes will resume as usual, blah, blah, go over term plan and arrange work schedule, blah, blah. Yours sincerely, Mr Khalil.’

He reads through the next two emails, which say the same thing. Last March, when it was announced that schools would close for the first lockdown, all the students celebrated. Then Easter break came and went, and so did Half Term and still no school. The nights and days blurred into a recurring stream of mundane actions and soon it stopped being fun.

He was glad to return in September, and the first term of his final year of school had gone well. He caught up on his work, hung out with his friends and got to see Holly every day. But here they are again: one step forward, two steps back.

After confirming receipt of the emails, Jase checks WhatsApp. Two messages from Uncle Carl.

UNC:

Did u open it

Call if you need to chat.

Two messages from Andre.

ANDRE:

You finish the holiday work?

wana do same arrangement as last time.

One hundred and twenty-six messages on the Gamer's Life Group. Aqeel and Clayton argue over the PS5 versus the new Xbox. Raj plays it neutral while Jermaine makes a case for Nintendo. Martin, as usual, fans the flames.

Bing! The phone lights up with a new message.

HOLLY:

Wakey wakey

R u coming online for class

JASE:

Will b there

HOLLY:

Lovely, spk then

JASE:

Cool

During last lockdown, they spent most of Mrs Waylon's online English lessons chatting on WhatsApp. It was their version of exchanging notes in class, only with a zero percent chance of getting caught, which oddly never took away from the thrill.

'I'll see you after the holidays.' Were her final words to him before they broke up for Christmas. Who knows when he will see her now.

*This cancer has robbed me of having a future, I won't let it rob me of having my say.*

Jase drops the phone, the weight of last night suddenly pressing heavily on him. What does it all mean, and what is the point of anything? He closes his eyes as the droning tinnitus stirs inside his head.

'No!'

He throws off the blanket and in one fluid motion, hops out of bed and drops to the floor, palms pressed against the carpet. 'One, two, three, four, five, six, seven.' He struggles with eight, stops at nine, and loses resolve by ten.

Back on his feet, he is energised enough to resist the temptation of his bed and strips down to his boxers. He had fallen asleep in his clothes again. Damp bathrobe wrapped tight, he shivers his way to the downstairs bathroom, thinking about Holly's message and the conversation they will have to power him forward.

He relieves himself in the toilet. The packets of toilet roll stacked to one side make him grin. Steve must have gone shopping late last night.

During the national toilet paper crisis last March, he and Mum drove around for hours in search of the one commodity that had become as rare as precious gems. As a last resort, he went online and typed into the trusty Google search engine.

Where can I buy toilet paper?

To his surprise, a list of live threads appeared. Sifting through the messages, he discovered that Lidl in Cricklewood had toilet paper.

'That's not far from here,' Mum said.

'This message was sent four minutes ago.' He showed her the message. 'Says they're restocking.'

‘Fantastic.’ Mum stepped on the gas. Google Maps said twelve minutes, but she got them there in nine and a half.

They parked up and headed for the entrance, feeling as if they were on a treasure hunt. The doors slid open to bright lights, messy floors, and beeping cashier registers. They approached a member of staff who directed them to aisle fifteen without being asked a question. Upwards, they ambled past emptied shelves of pasta and canned goods until they reached aisle fifteen, which was overflowing with customers. The woman in front of them turned with a smile and said, ‘they’re just bringing out another batch.’

‘Great!’ Mum returned the smile, then turned to face him. ‘Perfect timing.’

‘Yup.’ He felt pleased with himself.

The back door opened, and a member of staff dragged out a pallet on a trolley. The crowd began to stir and something in the air changed. When the worker manoeuvred the pallet onto the shop floor, that’s when it happened: pandemonium.

The calm single file erupted from all sides as people rushed for the pallet, scooping up four, five packs of toilet paper, shoving them under their armpits and running off without shame. It was like a feeding frenzy from one of those nature documentaries.

Steam from the shower indicates that the water has heated up. Jase loads his toothbrush with paste, then shedding the bathrobe, steps into the small cubicle. He brushes his teeth vigorously, using the shower water to gargle and spit. Head beneath the deluge, the hot water blasts away any last residue of sleep. The dream is now a complete blur, but notepad lingers in his mind. Maybe he needs to find the notepad that Dad used. Maybe it contains important information, like the password for folder two. Dispensing shower gel, he quickly washes his body. What’s in folder two, and why does it have a password?

*I would never have left you guys if I had a choice. Never.*

That droning tinnitus returns, like the distant purr of giant turbines vibrating through his skull. He reaches for the red tap and twists, cutting off the hot water supply. The drop in temperature is slow, then sudden. He stands against the icy deluge, fists and teeth clenched until the droning inside his head fades and he can feel the floor again—cold, hard, and wet against the soles of his feet.



‘Devon, Devon, are you there, Devon?’ Mrs Waylon’s expression shifts from probing to annoyed until she realises she is on camera and forces a smile. ‘I guess another one bites the dust.’ She leans forward, her face growing larger on the laptop screen. ‘Sandra, are you there?’

The noise of static is followed by Sandra’s muffled voice. ‘Yes, Miss.’

‘Good, can you answer the question, please?’

‘What’s the question again, Miss?’

The sigh from Mrs Waylon is quickly disguised. ‘What is Dickens trying to convey with his description of Thomas Gradgrind?’

More static, this time sounding suspiciously like a piece of paper being crumpled up next to the mic, then Sandra’s voice. ‘Didn’t catch that. I’m having problems with the sound.’

‘Right.’ Mrs Waylon keeps her composure. ‘Of course you are.’

JASE:

Hope she don’t ask me.

Don’t even knw what chapter were reading.

HOLLY:

Lol

‘Holly.’ Mrs Waylon says in a resigned voice. ‘Can you answer, please?’

JASE:

I bet you a school lunch

U can’t get her to close her eyes and whisper yes like last time

HOLLY:

Deal

Holly’s voice, clear and composed comes through the laptop speakers.

‘Through the character of Thomas Gradgrind, Dickens is conveying the effect of industrialisation. This can be seen in how the students under his tutelage describe things. For example, the boy Bitzer and his mechanical description of a horse: “Quadruped. Graminivore. Forty teeth, twenty-four grinders....”

Mrs Waylon closes her eyes and nods, repeating, ‘yes’ to herself.

JASE:

U win

Looks like she’s about to O

HOLLY:

Loooool

‘That’s exactly right,’ Mrs Waylon exclaims once Holly is done.  
‘Fabulous answer.’

JASE:

Superstar.

HOLLY:

How many school lunches

Do u owe me now

JASE:

Thought we were starting from 0

HOLLY:

Didn’t agree to that

JASE:

That’s six then

HOLLY:

U better pray we go bk soon

At this rate

You'll be buying me lunch

Till the end of school

Mrs Waylon looks at her watch. They have ten minutes left, but most teachers are happy to end classes early. She mentions the pages to read for the next lesson, then sets an assignment with a deadline. Jase jots down the key points on his whiteboard. Mrs Waylon wishes everyone a good day, then signs off the call, making the screen go blank.

HOLLY:

What do you have next?

JASE:

2 free periods

HOLLY:

Lucky you

I have a double dose of Mr Conlon, yay

JASE:

Hit me up if you get bored

HOLLY:

Will do. Gotta go. Dad's calling

JASE:

Spk later

HOLLY:

Sure x

Jase puts his phone down and scans the timetable on his desk. Media and Film Studies starts in ninety minutes, but he will give it a miss and get the notes from Andre. Their deal last lockdown was to attend classes on alternating days and share notes. Holly wouldn't approve.

Swivelling on his chair, the bed and its rumpled blanket entice him back to sleep. He resists and swivels back, eyeing the wooden box on his desk. He strokes the cover, feeling everything from last night ripple through his mind and body.

*There's a whole side of you, Jase, that you don't know anything about, but it's important that you do.*

Uncle Carl's unopened present on the shelf catches his eye. It had completely slipped his mind. They spoke on WhatsApp earlier. Uncle Carl didn't have a clue about the password for folder two but thought it would come up in one of the videos, which made sense.

Jase stands and using his house key, cuts open the box, which has been sealed with brown tape. He pulls out the instruction manual and the lens, noticing that it has a nice weight to it. He examines the sturdy build, feeling the urge to get outside and unleash it on the city. Somewhere elevated would be ideal, so two spots spring to mind: Primrose Hill or Roundwood Park. Both are close enough to cycle to and offer panoramic views of London.

Then there's Gabriel's Pier, but that would mean going into Central. Lifting the lens to his right eye, he imagines the heart of the city. Lights, camera, action. Buildings and bridges, staggered in contoured layers, the square frames of their windows dusting the scene with flares

of illumination. And penetrating through it all, the dark currents of the River Thames, slithering like the leathery back of a giant serpent.

The aroma of coffee drifts into his room, followed by the sounds of tinkering from the kitchen. Jase puts the lens down and heads downstairs.

The living room door is closed, but Steve can be heard on the phone. It will be off-limits until 6 p.m. when Steve logs off work.

‘Morning,’ he says, inhaling the aroma of freshly brewed coffee.

‘Good morning,’ Mum replies, not taking her eyes off the tablet in her hand. The mug beside her billows steam. ‘Did you go online?’

‘Just finished double English.’

‘How was it?’

‘Okay.’

She glances up. ‘It won’t be for long. Do you want a cup?’ She gestures towards the coffee machine.

‘I’ll get it.’ He picks up a mug from the rack and pours in the hot, dark liquid, adding some milk and a spoonful of sugar. Coffee has grown on him over the past year. At first, it was the novelty, a symbol of being all grown up, but now he enjoyed the taste, although he still couldn’t stomach it without milk and sugar.

Mum clicks her tongue. ‘It’s kicking off in America.’

‘Again.’

She shakes her head. ‘Trump is refusing to leave.’ Her lips move as she reads on.

He doesn’t remember her being so into politics when Dad was around. She took a strong stance against Brexit, forcing him and Steve to attend two protests, and she watched the BLM marches in America with focused attention. When a police officer knelt on George Floyd’s neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds, she called Uncle Carl and cried about the injustice.

‘Do you want some toast?’

‘No, I had cereal earlier.’ He sits on the stool by the bench and sips his coffee.

*I want you to know who I am, uncensored and from me.*

What did Dad mean by that?

‘Mum.’

‘Yes, love.’ Her eyes remain fixed on the tablet.

‘You know the letters that Dad left you.’

She looks up. ‘What about them?’

‘Errm.’ Her gaze is strong and he wonders irrationally if she knows. Maybe Dad mentioned it to her. ‘Was just thinking about them.’

‘He had a way with words.’

‘That’s what Uncle Carl said.’

She glances up.

‘Last night.’ He pauses. ‘We were talking about Dad and... um...’ He could tell her now.

She gives him a puzzled look. ‘Yes.’

‘And how we miss him!’

‘Oh.’ She lays down the tablet and walks over to him, resting her hand on his shoulder. ‘He would’ve given anything to see you grow into such a handsome young man.’ She sighs, and the weight of it, transferred through her hand, settles on his shoulder.

*Dad recorded some videos for me. Let’s watch them together.*

That’s what he wants to say but instead replies, ‘I wish he was here.’

She kisses him on the side of the head. ‘He would be so proud of you.’

‘Tell me something about him.’

She sits on the stool beside him. ‘Like what?’

He shrugs. ‘Anything.’

She rests her chin on her hand and looks up, nodding to herself.

‘Ryan used to bake?’

‘What?’

‘Yeah,’ she says quietly.

‘Really?’

A nod.

‘Never knew that.’ He leans forward, intrigued.

‘He worked at this bread factory for a while. They used to supply baked goods to cafés.’

‘When was this?’

‘You were young, around four or five.’

‘What did he bake?’

‘All sorts of things.’ She pauses as an unclear expression crosses her face.

He lets out a laugh. ‘How come I’m only hearing about this now?’

She shrugs but doesn’t offer an answer. Instead, she says, ‘he was good at it.’

‘Why did he stop?’

She considers the question, then shakes her head as if dismissing a thought. ‘He got busy with other things.’

It doesn’t explain anything, but there is something in her tone. ‘Wish I could have tasted his baking.’

She stays silent, staring into open space. He lets her linger there, wanting more details but sensing her hesitation. She didn’t hide her pain but never let it take over, at least not in his presence. Even at the funeral. Her eyes streamed tears, yet her voice remained steady as she coordinated the mourners and funeral arrangements.

‘Do you ever wonder...’ He pauses, thinking how to frame the question. ‘If it will ever go away? The feeling, I mean.’

She does that thing with her lips when thinking about something deeply. 'I don't know. It's been over five years, and I think about him every day.' She smiles. 'And to be honest, I don't want to stop, so a part of me hopes not.' She squeezes his shoulder and repeats, 'he would be proud of you.'

He opens his mouth then pauses.

*You need to stick with me until the end. Make that promise to me.*

*Why would Dad need him to promise?*

She tilts her head expectantly. 'You okay.'

He nods.

She reaches over and using her thumb, rubs beneath his right eye. 'Thought you went to bed early. Your eyes are red.'

Something in her tone triggers that swell of emotion from last night. His eyes water.

'What's wrong, Jase? Don't worry; this lockdown won't last forever.'

'I know. I'm fine.' He stands and blinks rapidly. 'Must be the onions.'

She chuckles. 'What onions?'

'I'm fine,' he repeats, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. 'I should get back online.'

'Okay.' She nods. 'I'll be making lasagne for lunch. Will leave it on the stove, so help yourself.'

'Okay.'

'I'll probably pop down to see your aunt and gran before lockdown starts for real.'

'Give them my love.' He leaves the kitchen. From the corridor, he can hear Steve ranting about a spreadsheet that wasn't formatted properly.

Back inside his room, Jase leans against the door. He needs to get a hold of himself. He wipes his eyes again and sits at the desk, thinking about the story he just heard. Dad used to bake. How come he didn't know that? He glances at the flash drive protruding from his laptop. What else doesn't he know?

He snaps the spacebar, bringing the laptop screen online. On YouTube, he scans the algorithmically tailored selection of videos for a distraction. He watches a photography tutorial, then halfway through switches to a video game review of *Amongst Us*. Two videos later, he picks up his phone and checks WhatsApp.

137 messages in the Gamer's Life group. Aqeel and Clayton's debate about the PS5 versus Xbox has expanded into a comparison between Sony and Microsoft. Jermain isn't giving up his argument for Nintendo.

Having nothing to add, he switches to the chat with Holly, re-reading their conversation from the morning, measuring his responses, hoping they sounded cool and witty to her. He wishes she would message him now and thinks about messaging her. What he really wants is to see her, but that isn't happening anytime soon.

He puts the phone down and stares at the wooden box. There's no point trying to ignore it. He rubs the surface, then flicking it open, goes through each item again, wondering if they are connected to the videos. He removes the fifty-pound note from the card and the family photo, then puts everything back inside the box.

He turns to the laptop and minimizing the YouTube window, clicks the USB icon and opens the second folder. The password screen stares back at him. He types in NOTEPAD

Rejected.

He thinks for a moment. TO INFINITY AND BEYOND

Rejected.

He drums his fingers on the table. Uncle Carl is right; it will most likely come up in one of the videos. He exits folder two and enters folder one, his heart rate speeding up as he scrolls through the list of entries, trying not to linger on the titles or infer any meaning. He plays video one again.

It's early morning, but Dad's eyes are full of life. He is at Paddington Basin, sitting on a wooden deck facing the canal. His hand is busy marking something on the bench.

"I don't know if this will still be here when you're watching these videos but I'm leaving it for you anyway..."

Jase pauses the video. What did Dad leave for him? A message? Instructions about the password? He knows both are unlikely, but the room suddenly feels claustrophobic.

He closes the video and folder, then dragging a box around folders one and two, transfers everything from the flash drive to his laptop's hard drive. It takes a few minutes, so he signs into Google Drive and once the folders are copied, uploads them from the hard drive to the cloud. Now he has multiple backups. He ejects the flash drive, puts it back into the wooden box, and stows the box deep in his desk drawer. While the files upload to the cloud, he picks up his phone and messages Andre.

JASE:

Not coming online for media.

Send me notes plz. I'll cover u 4 tmmr

He changes clothes, throwing on jogging bottoms, a hoodie, and black trainers. Once the files are secured on the cloud, he logs into Google Drive on his phone and downloads the next three videos. He folds the fifty-pound note and slips it into his wallet. As for the family photo, he puts that inside his battered copy of *Hard Times*. Back on his phone, he opens Maps and punches in Paddington Basin. 24 minutes.

‘Just going for a ride, Mum,’ he says, popping his head into the kitchen.

‘What about classes?’

‘I’m done for the day.’

‘Already.’

‘Pretty much.’

She gives him a sceptical look, but he doesn’t flinch. She rolls her eyes. ‘Lunch will be on the counter.’

‘Thanks.’ He blows her a kiss. ‘See you in a bit.’

‘Ride safely.’

‘Will do. Bye



# 5

*“Turn right on to Brondesbury park”*

The terrain is flat so Jase sits on the saddle, letting the bike do most of the work. It’s a mild day for January; fragments of a blue sky creep through clouds that are layered in wispy folds of greys, whites and even some yellows. Now out in the open, puddled streets and the horizon expanding in all directions, he lets his mind wander to folder two, what’s inside and why the password? Notepad! Will I need to find it? And what did Dad mean by ‘complicated?’ Could the engraving still be there?

*“At the roundabout, continue straight for eight hundred meters”*

The terrain dips as Brondesbury Park becomes Salusbury Road, the main thoroughfare into the neighbourhood of Queen’s Park. The bike picks up speed. Jase stands, hovering his fingers over the brake levers as residential housing gives way to commercial outlets: a gym, some shops, cafés, hairdressers, a bookshop, and all the other amenities that inflate narrow terrace houses like 44 Cavendish Way to over a million pounds

Beep!

He moves as a silver BMW speeds past, only to slow down at the traffic light ahead.

Jase zigzags his way to the front and seeing it clear in both directions, shoots through the lights, gaining leverage on the BMW. His best rides are when he is in constant motion, gliding through vehicles and pedestrians while his feet never touch the ground.

*"Slight left onto Carlton vale B/413"*

He ignores the direction and heads straight after the Marks & Spencer's on the corner.

*"After one hundred meters, at the roundabout, take first exit"*

He swings left into Shirland Road. Tightly parked cars and London style Brownstone houses line the path up to Maida Vale. He hunkers down, clicks up a few gears and speeds through, the cool wind stinging his eyes.

*"Turn left into Clifton Villas and at the second roundabout take third exit"*

He slows down through Warwick Avenue as the canal emerges just over the bridge with a surge of green around it.

*"You have arrived at your destination"*

Jase dismounts at Little Venice and takes out his earbuds. Cycling has warmed him up, so he unzips his jacket. Pushing the bike, he enters the canal. Squawking seagulls hover in the air, and to his left, there is a small island with a willow tree, its withered branches dangling over the water like dead hair.

He knows the canal well because their old flat used to be next to it. Westwards, it disappeared beneath busy streets and housing estates before re-surfacing into the leafy pastures of Regent's Park. South, it passed through Ladbroke Grove, where their old flat was located, while Northeast led it to Paddington Station and the new development area.

He heads that way now, walking beneath a narrow bridge to emerge into the most gentrified part of the canal. The Westway dual carriage-

way cuts the view in half and boats, doubling as restaurants are moored by the water.

It's quiet, with all the bars, cafés, restaurants closed and shrouded in darkness. The large futuristic office block ahead looks just as abandoned; its floor-to-ceiling windows reveal empty rooms illuminated by halogen lamps with desks and chairs left vacant.

Are we on the cusp of something huge? The Great Reset! A new New World Order! Back in March, Boris Johnson declared that the pandemic was the gravest challenge the nation had faced since the Second World War. At eighteen, Jase's experiences with national challenges were limited. September 11th occurred before he was born, and the following wars took place while he was learning to walk.

The Fukushima nuclear plant explosion in Japan was a big deal, but he was ten at the time, and it was so far away. A year earlier, in 2010, there was the Arab Spring but that was foreign too until Ameera joined his class in Year 8. For the first six months, she sat quietly in the corner, withdrawn, speaking only when spoken to.

Three years later, when Mrs Hobson conducted the end-of-year English speaking exam, each student had to present a piece of personal prose to the class. Ameera stood up and fearlessly read out a detailed account of her family's journey from Syria to Greece, then Dover and finally London. The class was blown away, and Mrs Hobson gave her an A star.

After Paddington Station, Jase takes the overpass to cross the canal and continues walking. The water, filtered by pumps, is clean and clear and everything has a well manicured feel just like he remembers.

On sunny Sunday afternoons, they would stroll this way, usually picking up an ice cream from one of the vendors. He hasn't been back in years. There are quite a few places like that, consciously or unconsciously avoided, as if haunted by a memory, the spectre of their

previous selves occupying new forms, like the couple with a child in front of him.

As Jase reaches the end of the canal, he spots the wooden deck where Dad was sitting while recording the video. His heart sinks. A metal railing cordons it off from the public.

He stops in front of the deck, rests his bike to one side, and glances around. A security guard stands on the opposite side of the canal, facing away from him.

It's now or never.

Jase gently nudges the railing with his foot, then squeezes through the gap. He steps onto the deck which creaks loudly, forcing him to freeze. The security guard moves his head but doesn't turn around.

Treading lightly, he scans the bench, which is about three metres long, trying to work out exactly where Dad was sitting when recording the video. The new-build flats were visible in the background, so it must have been..., he moves a few paces and glances over his shoulder, satisfied to see the flats with their shiny balconies lining up in the frame.

The security guard still hasn't turned around. Jase takes out his phone and opening the camera app, starts recording, slowly panning the lens over the surface of the bench. He is about halfway through when he hears a voice call out.

'Excuse me!'

He doesn't glance up, just moves faster, swooping the camera across the bench, hoping he has covered all the sections.

'Excuse me, sir!' The voice repeats, louder this time.

He sees something, but the guard is standing next to his bike, pulling away the barrier. 'You're not allowed in there.'

'Sorry,' Jase says, standing up straight and trying to steady the camera. He doesn't turn to face the guard.

'New rules,' the guard says as if making an announcement.

'Of course.' He fiddles with the settings then taps the screen until the engraving comes into clear focus. He takes a few snaps, aware of the security guard huffing loudly. He turns around, smiling and slips his phone into his pocket. The guard steps aside, giving him space to exit. Jase slides through the gap and takes a hold of his bike.

'If I let you sit there, I gotta let everyone sit there.' The guard says.

'I understand. Have a good day.'

The guard responds with a suspicious look, tightens the barrier, then stands in front of it like a sentry.

Jase walks away and finds a concrete wall to lean against. He scrolls through the pictures. If only he had another minute. He stops at the one with the best focus and pinches the screen to zoom in. There it is:

R. H 2015

AMOR FATI

A tremor travels through his body and like last night, time and space collapse, opening a vortex to the past where he stands frozen, as if existing in two places at once.

It was a Friday. They had just finished dinner, which was unusually quiet, but he hadn't paid it much attention. He was about to get up when Mum gently placed her hand over his.

'We have something to tell you.'

Her eyes began to water. Then Dad took over and dropped the news. It was like being split in half by a meat cleaver. He hasn't been whole since.

Jase shakes his body, trying to free himself from the memory and the feeling, but they linger like a bad odour. He looks back at the bench. The security guard doesn't look like he is about to move anytime soon.

He touches the words on the screen, then opens Google, where he types in: *what does amor fati mean?*



# 6

Vid2\_Where\_I\_Am\_16.04.2015

“Today is Thursday, the 16th of April, 2015. The weather is sunny with clear skies and highs of 21 degrees.

The headlines are:

NFL superstar Aaron Hernandez was found guilty of murder.

David Cameron was not invited to share his thoughts on TV debate.

X Factor star finds himself in a predicament.

That’s where I am. What about you? What are the headlines? Please tell me Arsenal are in the Champions League.

I can’t say what the world will look like in 2021. It doesn’t always look so bright here in 2015, but that’s how things have always been. Here’s the secret. It will pass; it always does. The good, the

bad, and the ugly, it's all on a conveyor belt, and nothing lasts forever.

It's been a few days since my last recording and I feel good. I want you to know that. Since I got this idea, my spirits have been up, less hopeless, I guess. I know Carl will get these recordings to you, and one day in the future, you'll be listening to my words.

The future. It's weird when I say it out loud. It's the future for me, but the present for you, and eventually, it will be the past for both of us.

We're all going to die one day but it's strange when you're given a rough timeline. It's like everything has become HD overnight. The sky is bluer, coffee tastes better, hot showers, a soft mattress, fresh air, all those little things are just that much sweeter.

Wherever you are, take in a long deep breath for me, will you.

I hope you're looking after your mum, not giving her a hard time or stressing her out. You are the true love of her life, so don't take the mick.

Do you still dream like you used to, the clear ones? It was amazing, all the details you could remember. What about dreams in the real world? You need to

have some of those too. And if you have a passion, that's rare, so take care of it.

I kind of had a passion for writing. I never wrote stories or poetry, just my thoughts, and I figured no one was going to pay to read that. If we had Internet back then, it might have been a different story; I could have started a blog or something. Oh well, it doesn't matter.

One of the easiest things in life is to feel sorry for yourself. To sit there and list all the things that didn't work out or go your way, and all the people who let you down and blah, blah, blah. It can even feel good, but in the end, it's pointless. Your life is your responsibility, no one else's. People can help you or slow you down, but in the end, all the big stuff is on you.

Do you remember that morning in the Lake District? When the water was so still, then I threw in the stone. Remember how the ripples kept spreading, and we tried to count them, but they moved too fast? In life, your actions are like those ripples; they can stretch far and wide. This doesn't mean you second-guess everything; it just means you are connected to a whole load of stuff and people and what you do matters.

Let me share a memory with you. You would've been about six or seven. We were in the park, late autumn, leaves scattered everywhere, and you were obsessed with puddles. Not just splashing through them, you wanted to claim them. I remember calling you, "come on, Jase," but you stood there in the middle of this giant puddle, ankle deep, grinning and refusing to budge. You looked up at me and said, "I'm not done."

I've been thinking about that moment a lot lately.

As kids, we lived in the moment and every puddle mattered, but then we get older and start chasing, looking forward or back, forgetting the thing that's in front of us. I'm not sure when we lose that ability but hold on to it for as long as you can.

The next time you find yourself in a puddle, stay a little longer, even if the world is telling you to move on."



# 7

Jase peers through the viewfinder of his camera and adjusts the tripod, using the roof of the stadium to frame the shot. Voluminous sunlight casts a dusty golden sheen over one half of the scene, leaving the other half in darkness. Stark, angular shadows invade sprawling networks of roads and corners before clashing with soft rays of light. The contrast creates definition and makes everything pop.

He zooms into the stadium, centrally framed, and admires the crisp details captured by the new lens: the panelling and intertwining strips of steel forming the stadium's arching spiral, the cables he hadn't noticed before that hold the structure together.

Happy with the angle, Jase adjusts the aperture to suit long-range then sets a low ISO number; 200 to 300 usually works best when the light is soft and orange. He fiddles with the settings to balance the contrast, then steadies his aim.

Click. Click.

*Sublime City, Roundwood Park, Wednesday 13th of January 2021.*

Gustav, a YouTuber he follows, said it was good practice to give names to your pictures and mark them with a location and date.

“Pictures don’t just tell stories,” Gustav would say. “They tell your story too.”

Jase zooms out again, clicking, changing angles, clicking some more, trying to capture the magnification process and how in the process, different layers of the composition are revealed.

Once done, he unlocks the camera from the tripod and flicks through the pictures on the mini monitor. The lens compression is the first thing he notices. Buildings in the distance look larger and more imposing, giving the space around the stadium a more stacked feel. The shots look decent, but he won’t know for sure until he sees them on his laptop.

How did they do it back in the day with reels of film and no idea of what a picture would look like? The hefty, leather-bound photo albums at home were filled with shiny, postcard-sized pictures with fuzzy faces. When Mum showed him the negatives—strips of blackened squares with white, ghostly figures—he kind of got it. There must have been a special feeling, excitement mixed with torment, in not knowing the results of a shoot, then watching it take form before your eyes.

Clouds roll in from the north, dimming the brightness of the scene. He is running out of time. Taking a handheld approach, Jase leaves the tripod and scouts for a new location. From his vantage point at the top of the hill, he has a panoramic view of Roundwood Park. The mini compass attached to the camera strap indicates that Willesden Green Cemetery lies to the east. He points the lens in that direction, and through the leafless trees and black iron fence, grey-weathered headstones can be seen jutting out of the ground like crooked shark teeth.

Click. Click.

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