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Opening extract from

Finding Violet Park

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ONE

The mini cab office was up a cobbled mews with little flat houses either side. That's where I first met Violet Park, what was left of her. There was a healing centre next door – a pretty smart name for a place with a battered brown door and no proper door handle and stuck on wooden numbers in the shape of clowns. The 3 of number 13 was a w stuck on sideways and I thought it was kind of sad and I liked it at the same time.

I never normally take cabs but it was five o'clock in the morning and I was too tired to walk anywhere and I'd just found a tenner in my coat pocket. I went in for a lift home and strolled right into the weirdest encounter of my life.

It turns out the ten pounds wasn't mine at all. My sister Mercy had borrowed my coat the night before – without asking – even though boys' clothes don't suit her and it

was at least two sizes too big. She was livid with me about the money. I said maybe she should consider it rent and wouldn't the world be a better place if people stopped taking things that didn't belong to them?

It's funny when you start thinking about pivotal moments like this in your life, chance happenings that end up meaning everything. Sometimes, when I'm deciding which route to take to, say, the cinema in Camden, I get this feeling like maybe if I choose the wrong route, bad stuff will happen to me in a place I never had to go if only I'd chosen wisely. This sort of thinking can make decisions really really difficult because I'm always wondering what happens to all the choices we decide not to make. Like Mum says, as soon as she married Dad she realised she'd done the wrong thing and as she was walking back down the aisle, she could practically see her single self through the arch of the church door, out in the sunlight, dancing around without a care in the world, and she could have spat. I like to picture Mum, dressed like a meringue with big sticky hair, hanging on to Dad's arm and thinking about gobbing on the church carpet. It always makes me smile.

Whatever, Mercy decided to borrow my coat and she forgot to decide to remove the money and I decided to

spend the whole night with my friend Ed in his posh mum's house (Miss Denmark 1979 with elocution lessons) and then I made the choice to take a cab.

It was dark in the Mews, blue-black with a sheen of orange from the street lamps on the high street, almost dawn and sort of timeless. My shoes made such a ringing noise on the cobbles I started to imagine I was back in time, in some Victorian red light district. When I stepped into the minicab office it was modern and pretty ugly. One of the three strip lights on the ceiling was blinking on and off, but the other two were working perfectly and their over-brightness hurt my eyes and made everyone look sort of grey and pouchy and ill. There were no other punters, just bored sleepy drivers, waiting for the next fare, chain smoking or reading three-day-old papers. There was a framed map of Cyprus on one wall and one of those gas fires that they reckon are portable with a great big bottle you have to fit in the back. We had one like that in the hostel when we went on a school journey to the Brecon Beacons last year. Those things are not portable.

The controller was in this little booth up a few stairs with a window looking down on the rest of them and you could tell he was the boss of the place as well. He had a

cigar in his mouth and he was talking and the smoke was going in his eyes so he had to squint, and the cigar was bouncing up and down as he talked and you could see he thought he was Tony Soprano or someone.

Everybody looked straight at me when I walked in because I was the something happening in their boring night shift and suddenly I felt very light headed and my insides were going hot and cold, hot and cold. I'm pretty tall for my age but them all staring up at me from their chairs made me feel like some kind of weird giant. The only person not staring at me was Tony Soprano so I kind of focused on him and I smiled so they'd all see I was friendly and hadn't come in for trouble. He was chomping on that cigar, working it around with his teeth and puffing away on it so hard his little booth was filling up with cigar smoke. I thought that if I stood there long enough he might disappear from view like an accidental magic trick. The smoke forced its way through the cracks and joins of his mezzanine control tower and it was making me queasy so I searched around, still smiling, for something else to look at.

That's when I first saw Violet. I say "Violet" but that's stretching it because I didn't even know her name then and what I actually saw was an urn with her inside it.

The urn was the only thing in that place worth looking at. Maybe it was because I'd been up all night, maybe I needed to latch on to something in there to stop myself from passing out, I don't know, I found an urn. Halfway up a wood panelled wall, log cabin style, there was a shelf with some magazines on and a cup and saucer, the sort you find in church halls and hospitals. Next to them was this urn that at the time I didn't realise was an urn, just some kind of trophy or full of biscuits or something. It was wooden, grainy and with a rich gloss that caught the light and threw it back at me. I was staring at it, trying to figure out what it was exactly. I didn't notice that anyone was talking to me until I got the smell of cigar really strongly and realised that the fat controller had opened his door because banging on his window hadn't got my attention.

"You haven't come for her, have you?" he asked and I didn't get it but everyone else did because they all started laughing at once.

Then I laughed too because them all laughing was funny and I said, "Who?"

The cigar bobbed down towards his chin with each syllable and he nodded towards the shelf. "The old lady in the box."

I didn't stop laughing, but really I can't remember if I thought it was funny or not. I shook my head and because I didn't know what else to say I said, "No, I need a cab to Queens Crescent please," and a driver called Ali got up and I followed him out to his car. I walked behind him down the mews and out into the wider space of the high street.

I asked Ali what he knew about the dead woman on the shelf. He said she'd been around since before he started working there, which was eighteen months ago. Somebody had left her in a cab and never collected her and if I wanted to know the whole story I should speak to the boss whose name I instantly forgot because he was always Tony Soprano to me.

The sun was coming up and the buildings with the light behind them looked like their own shadows, and I thought, how could anyone end up on a shelf in a cab office for all eternity? I'd heard of Purgatory, the place you get to wait in when Heaven and Hell aren't that sure they want you, but I'd never thought it meant being stuck in a box in Apollo Cars forever. I couldn't get the question out of my head, felt it burrowing down to some dark place in my skull, waiting for later.

Thinking about it now, it's all down to decision making again, you see. My better self didn't get in the cab straight

away that morning. My better self strode right back in and rescued Violet from the cigar smoke and the two-way radio and the instant coffee and the conversation of men who should have known better than to talk like that in front of an old lady. And after liberating her from the confines of the cab office, my better self released her from her wooden pot and sprinkled her liberally over the crest and all the four corners of Primrose Hill while the sun came up.

But my real self, the disappointing one, he got in the car with Ali and gave him directions to my house and left her there alone.

My name is Lucas Swain and I was almost sixteen when this began, the night I stayed too late at Ed's house and met Violet in her urn. Some things about me in case you're interested. I have a mum called Nick and a dad called Pete (somewhere) and a big sister called Mercy, the clothes borrower, who I've mentioned. She's about at the peak of a sarcastic phase that's lasted maybe six years already. I also have a little brother called Jed.

Here's something about Jed. On the days I take him to school he always thinks up a funny thing to tell me. We are

always at the same place when he tells me this funny thing, the last stretch once we've turned the corner into Princess Road. You can tell when Jed's thought of something early because he can't wait to get there, and on the days he's struggling to come up with it he drags his feet and we end up being late, which neither of us minds. The punch line is my brother's way of saying goodbye.

The other cool thing about Jed is that he's never met our dad and he's not bothered. Dad went missing just before Jed was born so they've never set eyes on each other. Jed doesn't know him at all.

There's a lot of that with Dad, the not knowing. Mum slags him off for abandoning us, and I half listen and nod because it makes her feel better. But I worry that she's not being fair because if he got hit by a bus or trapped in a burning building or dropped out of a plane, how was he supposed to let us know?

I saw a film once about an alien who landed on earth in a human body in a mental hospital. He had all this amazing stuff to teach everyone and he kept telling the doctors who he was and where he was from and what he had to offer in the way of secrets of the universe and stuff, but they just thought he was mad and pumped him full of drugs and he stayed there until he died. Maybe something like that happened to my dad. He wants more than anything to call us and it's been five years, and wherever he's locked up he's not allowed to phone and he's just waiting for us to find him. This sort of thought, and other variations, occur to me at least once every day.

Like I said, it's the not knowing that's hard.