

He was consistent—absolutely incomparable to anyone I ever met— ceaselessly strumming his guitar and huffing his harmonica. I remember exactly when it started; back in December, in the days following Christmas and preceding New Years. *I've watched him for years, though we never conversed, not even when I give him the grandest, tastiest premium cup of coffee I can find, every six days.*

Though we never exchanged words, I knew we understood the ambience. Without speaking, he interpreted my feeble kindness and I received his silent gratitude.

Only a few months after first sighting him, such a particular and bizarre event occurred, it quaked the very foundation of my life. How something so insignificant can change course, I cannot fathom. It is strange how regular a day can begin, without any knowledge how significant it will end. The April air unusually chilly, and it gusted through the Underground as I descended the stairs. I strained my ears for hints of his music. I checked my watch; it was already 6:30. Still, the absence of sound pressed upon me like a lead x-ray bib.

Where could he be?

My chest tightened. My breath escaped my lungs, as though I were deflating. What was happening? Despite the increasing weakness throughout my knees and ankles, my skin blazed. I continued to walk, though it took a great deal of effort. My footsteps echoed like thunder in canyons. Where was he? I pulled my coat tighter around myself and spun in circles, frantically searching.

Hurried footsteps resounded through the Underground. I turned to look—
Every, single bone in my body seemed to melt.

He jumped the last three steps, and stumbled into his usual spot.

“I’m sorry—I’m late—” he panted. He finished tuning and pulled the harmonica out of his pocket, adeptly hooking it to the device around his neck.

We never spoke—this was completely out of order. I gazed at him; we—we weren’t supposed to speak. This was wrong.

He smiled at me and it hit me how esoteric it seemed.

I stepped back in surprise. No, this wasn't right either. He was not supposed to smile. He was supposed to tune his guitar, and then start playing his g minor half-step. It was day eleven.

I stared at him, still clutching my jacket to my chest.

"Wot, you gonna stand there dumb?" His voice was just as enchanting as his music. The subtle husky tones mingled with the twang of guitar and falsetto of harmonica. I was mesmerized. "Well?" He expected an answer.

How could I possibly reply? I wasn't used to this. A creature of habit, I could not be asked to improvise—it wasn't my nature. I had to leave. I was late for work. I turned and hurried away from him. The sound of his music faded as I strode toward my platform.

Why did that happen? That wasn't supposed to happen—it wasn't in the routine. How was I to react? I enjoyed his music and showed my appreciation through coffee. Verbal exchanges were out of the question. There were unspoken rules to uphold; I thought he understood that.

Change is not proper. Change is unnatural.

The strangeness of the encounter affected me more than I thought possible. It made me restless. I ambled about, confused and disoriented, unable to concentrate.

"Miss Marlowe?"

I raised my head. A coworker stood in the doorway.

"Yes?"

"Is everything okay?"

I forced a smile. "Yes. Why?"

"This draft doesn't have any corrections on it"

I went back to my papers.

"Which author?"

"Zachary Rank."

I blanked. I couldn't remember proofing it. "When did I receive the script?"

"Why, just this morning."

My lips pursed. "Give it to me. I'll look at it during lunch. Terribly sorry about that." I rose from my desk and took the script from him.

“Miss Marlowe, are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, yes. I’m fine. I’ll be back soon.” I left.

Something was terribly wrong. I was usually so careful about ingoing and outgoing scripts. I strove for perfection, and unable remember proofing the script of one of our most innovative authors was a crime, punishable by death. What’s worse, I turned the wrong way on the street—the complete opposite direction of the café I dined at every day for lunch. Fantastic, more changes.

I was sure the staff acknowledged how uncomfortable I felt upon entering the business, though if they knew, they didn’t let on—all were welcoming enough. The place was virtually empty. I chose a seat at the bar.

I read the script as an effort to distract myself—I didn’t want to be in an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar people and unfamiliar things. Again, my efforts were futile.

“—ternoon, Miss.”

A heat unfamiliar to my senses filled my body. There was no need to glance at the greeter to know who he was. But how—how was it even possible? I kept my eyes on the script. What do I do? How do I respond?

“You know, I was pretty shocked when you ran away from me. I thought for sure today was the day.” He paused. “How wrong I was. Poof, you were gone.”

I kept my eyes fixed on the text in front of me. How do I react?

“Well, Miss, what’ll you have?”

I closed my eyes. At last, a question I knew how to answer.

“Surprise me.” I raised my eyes out of habit, and found him leaning on the counter, a familiar abstruse smile playing about his lips. It seemed to be the one singularity I could not completely comprehend. No matter how fiercely I told myself to turn away, I could not. I now understood how insidious his face could be—if I watched too long, my world would flip. I knew that, and yet my eyes locked themselves on his amiable countenance.

He seemed to understand my demeanor and released me from his spell.

“So, why did you run off?”

I came to my senses and stared hard at the script. No distractions. Eat. Read. Correct. Improve.

“You still ignoring me?”

I wished more than anything to tell him no, but I could not, for the life of me, sum up the courage to get my voice to cooperate.

“That’s okay. I can talk enough for the both of us.” He chuckled to himself. “I saw you straight off, you know, in the Underground. You walk by so blissfully, soaking up every sound. Every six days you buy me a coffee, but you never throw change in my hat. You always walk by at exactly 6:30 in the morning and take the 6:47 train to Bedford Square. You return on the very last train, each and every night.”

He awed me in such a way that something stirred, deep in depths of my soul. I didn’t even realize the words spilling out of my mouth. “How do you know so much about me?”

He looked over his shoulder and smirked.

“Don’t be thick. It is basically the same way you know so much about me.”

How could he know that?

“You know, you’re an open book. Anyone ever tell you that?” He said. I pursed my lips. “Yes, yes, I saw *that* straight away. But you’re different. Different than anyone I’ve ever met.” He faced me. “Whenever we saw each other, there was some unspoken connection between us. Like electricity.”

My mouth fell open. He felt it too.

Our exchanges, though nothing more than slight eye contact and a simple nod, were what I looked forward to each day. Like the two of us operated on the same wavelength. Even after several years, these were the best moments of my days.

“Do you know what I’m talking about?” He asked. I nodded slowly. He grinned. “You operate on a different wavelength, don’t you?”

I looked back on my script. “A lot of people don’t understand.”

He set a plate of food in front of me, still grinning. “I do. We get on, you and I.”

I clasped my hands together underneath the bar and squeezed them together. I focused on the plate. With tremendous difficulty, I replied. “Please forgive

me. I have some difficulties interacting with others. I'm not sure how to respond to changes in my routine." I explained slowly. He said nothing; I looked up and found him gazing expectantly at me. "Er...I have a very regular routine, that is. And...erm...I get extremely uncomfortable, panicky even, if things change suddenly."

"Well, you're obviously not doing so terribly in here. This is the first time I've seen you come in." He smiled.

"Yes, well, that's because you were late this morning."

"You're blaming me?" He was positively enthralled.

I backpedaled. "Of course not, that's not really what I meant. Uh, it's just, we aren't supposed to speak. We have a dynamic to uphold, you see? When you spoke to me, my mind went blank and I didn't know what to do. I haven't been able to concentrate all day because of it—and so I turned the wrong way leaving the office for lunch and this was the first place that sold food."

"Blimey, I'm only joking." He smirked. "It's okay, I'll leave you to eat."

The words were out of my mouth before I'd even thought them. "Wait!"

His brows rose so high, they were in danger of disappearing beneath his hair.

"What's this? You want me to stay?"

I held his gaze so easily, it made me doubtful of what exactly I felt just then. He must've glimpsed something in my eyes, though, because the next minute he was untying his apron and rounding the bar to take the seat next to mine. He leaned on his elbows, set his chin on his forearms, and beamed at something I could not perceive.

"Pure, unadulterated, happiness." He murmured. I blinked for a moment. He gazed at me from the corner of his eye. "That's what you're feeling right now. There's no use denying it."

The food was cold by now, but I did not feel much like eating. He was right: I couldn't deny it. The air was thick with sensations I never experienced before.

"What's your name, anyway?" I asked.

He smiled. "Winston. Winston Rosier. 'nd you, Miss?"

"Marlowe Kingston."

"Well, Miss Kingston, could I buy *you* a coffee this time?"

I glowed.

Throughout the years, I've come to realize how fickle life can be. As soon as you think you've got it under control, it throws you some obstacle you'd never expect. Even so, such an unexpected event can be the best thing that's ever happened to you. It can also be the very thing you've been dreading. These feelings don't last, though. Humans are temporal—life is limited. Though I know, at the bottom of my heart, how sadistic and merciless life is, as it rips happiness right from your heart.

The day started like all days. By the time I woke up, Winston was already gone, probably headed towards the Underground. I got ready and made my way down to the station as well, my spirits high. As I descended the stairs, however, I was unable to hear the subtle tones of Winston's guitar. Instead, there was shuffling and hushed whispers.

His impeccable attendance in the Underground was remarkable. Even after several years, I can still find him standing in the same spot at the same time every morning. His schedule being so regular, I was shocked when I descended the Underground stairs one morning—in fact, the first morning in all the years I've come to see him, to find I was unable to hear the subtle tones of his guitar and harmonica harmony.

Was he here yet? I stopped and checked my watch. Yes, it was 6:30.

Suddenly, a clash and clang of musical noise disrupted the crisp, morning air. Winston's voice crescendoed, though I was still unable to distinguish what was said. I hurried down the stairs: his tone made me anxious. As I rounded the corner, Winston yelled. My feet stopped dead in their tracks.

"Oi! Wot the bloody hell d'you think you're doing!?"

Winston stood, his hands held up in surrender, guitar at his feet and harmonica still around his neck. His expression was cold with fury. Simultaneously, Winston and the man assaulting him turned to face me.

I was shocked: the man had a knife and the tip of it pressed into Winston's stomach. I gaped at the two of them as Winston's face faltered into fear.

"Marlowe, get out of here!"

I didn't move. I wanted to run and shove the attacker away, but my legs wouldn't budge. The attacker's eyes widened. In fear, he pulled the knife back. For a millisecond, I truly believed he would run. How naïve of me to think so.

The knife plunged into Winston's stomach.

His scream echoed off the concrete walls. The spell on my legs broke and I lunged forward to his side. The attacker was gone; Winston lay crumpled and bleeding upon the floor. I pressed my hand to the wound. *Blood seeped through my fingers.*

"Oh, god, Winston," *Traitor tears fell from my eyes.*

"Marlowe," he coughed. *Blood splattered my blouse.* "Why didn't you leave? You could've been hurt."

I sobbed his name over and over. How could he worry about me when he was the one in this condition? *Why did I feel as if a part of myself had been harmed?*

"Winston, you need the hospital. C'mon, I've got you." I pulled him to his feet and dragged him to the street above.

"Marlowe, you should've left," He groaned. I pressed my hand even harder to his wound. As soon light was within reach, I screamed for help. *People stared, confused and disgusted.* "He's bleeding! Can't you see? He needs medical attention!"

Everything blurred together. At last, aid arrived. The ambulance appeared. Police arrived. Winston hauled off. Myself questioned. By the end, it was already past noon. I wanted to see Winston. Why did I leave him? *He needed me. I needed him.*

I was left on the street, alone, bloody, and crying. I desperately pondered the nature of our meeting: if things would've happened differently, had Winston and I never spoken. *I solemnly wondered if things would've happened differently, had he and I actually spoken.* Would he be safe? *Do events happen, regardless of preceding occurrences?* He might have left the city after a while, and this would not have happened. I sat on the curb, my head in my hands, confused and disoriented. Would I rather know Winston and allow him to be stabbed, or the two of us never meet and this wouldn't happen? *Was this man doomed to mortal injury? Was I doomed to*

witness his demise? Do our actions affect the outcome of our lives, or is there a choice to change the course?

There are many that are convinced there is divinity behind each separate action, or that everything happens for a reason. Each choice made has a significant impact in the grand scheme of things, and it is through these choices and actions that define one's purpose in the world, I speculated. Maybe these actions are superfluously over-complicated. *I called into question the validity of the common perceptions surrounding fate. Is control over what path life follows merely a byproduct of human feelings of insignificance regarding position in life? Is our track already built for us?* Simplicity, even in the face of humanity, will be forever questioned.

Still, what if it is not the outcome that changes, but rather the choices we make? Are there endless numbers of forks in the road that lead to the same end point? I knew it in my heart, though it stung to admit. *A path cannot be altered. I mean, just take a look at the Underground.*