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A man of soul

'We're having a baby, Ajay,' that's all she said. So I kissed her and hugged her and thought, 'What the fuck do I do now?'

I had lost my job the previous evening. I was going to break the news that morning, but morning came and she tells me this. So instead, I smile the fakest smile I had, which, in her equally demented state, she didn't pick, and I go upstairs and put on my uniform. Pizza Pot had my motorbike, but I made a big show of wearing my helmet and rattling my keys. They had my wage packet too. Dismissed for theft. I certainly wasn't going to tell her that. The truth is, I didn't do it, but that doesn't matter now.

We kissed again at the door. There were tears in her eyes, terror in mine. I thought about seeing a movie, but I had twelve pounds, no job, and a baby on the way, so I just wandered around Mile End. When the sun grew colder I bought a Travelcard and rode the tube to Ealing Broadway. I didn't get off. Just waited for it to go back. It took an hour and a half. I thought about them firing me, about how unfair it was. But most of all I thought about how I was going to be a father. I was angry, and desperate, and alone with a bunch of men in pin-striped suits with nannies and country homes and nothing to worry about but which restaurant to go to that night. I hated Pizza Pot, and I hated them.

On the way back I saw a discarded Evening Standard and began to flick through it.

One article in particular caught my eye. A man, a black man, had been arrested on two charges. First, destruction of public property. He beat up a security camera. Took a bat to it. Smashed the shit out of it. They captured him on film, so he couldn't complain. But it's the second charge that's the sick part. Get this...

racially aggravated crime...How could it be racial? It was a fucking camera, for Christ's sake.

Their logic...he was black; he was angry; he was guilty; he was racial. Fucking idiots. They had to drop the charge, of course. A camera doesn't have an ethnic origin.

So I look around me and we're in the city now and there are only suits on the tube and occasionally we make eye contact and I can see them laughing. They know I'm desperate, and they know I'm a pizza boy, and they know I'm a paki, and they think it's funny. So I think about the man in the paper I tell myself, Ajay, whatever you do, make it. If you're going to break the law then use your head, don't just smash up a fucking camera.

And here's what I came up with.

I would get off at Liverpool Street and I would go to a bar and wait in the toilet until one of them was all by himself and I would pretend I had a knife, make my meanest face, and take all the cash he had.

That was Plan A.

I didn't know there would be B, C and D. Not then.

So I'm in the toilets and the place is crawling with suits and I know Plan A isn't going to work. There's too many of them, and they're bigger than me, and harder than me, and I'm the last person in the world they'd be afraid of. In any case, there's a surveillance camera above the urinals, staring at me like it knows.

So I go back upstairs and I order a drink. A martini. It cost seven pounds, tasted vile, looked expensive.

I found an empty sofa by the window and lay at full strength. There was a couple sharing an armchair to my right, spilling white wine. Their conversation made me sick. Four-wheel drives and conservatories. It struck me that a female suit might be an easier target, but I banished the thought. I am a man of morals, if nothing else.

Two men approached my sofa and I lifted my legs to make room. They sat with their legs apart, taking far more than their legitimate two-thirds sofa space. I felt like throwing up. There I was, all bunched up in the corner, practically thanking them for letting me exist. Everyone in the bar was bigger now, bigger than before. They had grown. To make matters worse, I was drunk, or beginning to be; I've never been good with alcohol.

And then it happened...Plan B fell on the floor, right in front of me. That's right... a suit had dropped his wallet...and not one of them had noticed. I stood, shivered, and drained my glass. The liquor helped.

Silent as a cat, I padded my way across the floor, dropped my keys, fell to my knees, and took the keys in my left hand and the wallet in my right, slipping them both into my trouser pockets. Operation accomplished, I headed for the bar, reluctant to change directions. My plan was to hang around, looking at my watch, then bolt, go home, see what I had landed.

That never happened. Plan C was waiting for me, leaning against the wall. The suit whose wallet I held captive in my trousers was attacking his body like a monkey in a zoo. He starts shouting in this squeaky voice.

My fackin wallet's gone. I've lost my fackin wallet.

His mates try to calm him down, but he doesn't want to calm down, though not one offers to buy him a drink.

Some fackin wanka'll have it, as well. You just know it. It'll be some fackin wanka.

How, I tell myself, am I supposed not to hate these fuckers? They hate each other.

They hate themselves. So far as they're concerned, the next man is always a facking wanka. Makes sense.

So his mates tell him to look for it, but he isn't having any of it. It doesn't occur to him that it could still be on the floor, where he's left it. He gets himself so worked up that he leaves, just like that.

I leave too. Plan C.

I will follow him home and knock on his door. I'll say, Mate, I saw you drop your wallet and your address was inside (hope you don't mind me looking) and here you are. And he will say, Good Lord, you are indeed a Prince among men. You people put us to shame. You make savages of us, you really do. Do come in, my friend, teach me how to live. And I would go in and drip regal splendour all over the motherfucker and when I leave...he will feel like shit, and I...?

I would go home and tell Preethi. I would tell her that whatever happened we would walk this earth like children of god. Our child would be proud and tall, a warrior, a lover, a saint. And she would know that I was still the man who had so disarmed her all those years ago. Mighty, righteous, above all that material shit. A man of manners. A man of morals. A man of soul.

So I follow the cunt. It's easy enough. I was afraid he would jump in a cab, but he doesn't. He walks fast, cursing the fucking wanka who's got the only thing he's ever cared about.

His place is near Spitalfields, fast becoming another yuppie den, and his building is the sort of place where princes should live, but don't.

When he goes inside I slip in after him. I half-expected a doorman to put his hand through my chest, but all I see is a row of mailboxes, all neatly numbered and full of letters. He's about to take his mail but he changes his mind - he's too pissed off - and he bounces upstairs like a petulant child. I follow at a regal pace, like there's rose petals under my feet.

I hear the door click shut and I wait a few minutes before I knock. He looks seriously pissed off. Before I can open my mouth he tells me he didn't order any fucking pizza. That's what he said, fucking pizza. I hold my temper, and give him the wallet. But the words don't come out right. I rush it, and mumble, which I do when I'm nervous, His eyes light up as he takes his wallet and...I'm waiting for

it...but it never happens. I can fuck off as far as he's concerned. He's got what he wanted.

I'm his boy, his delivery boy. Today it's wallets, tomorrow it'll be anchovies with extra cheese. A pizza boy...a colonial wallet wallah.

I follow him in. He looks surprised, but what can he do? He can't turf me out after I've given him the happiest moment of his putrid little life.

And you know what he does? He pours himself a beer and doesn't so much as look at me. Doesn't offer me shit. Not even water. I'm standing there shaking with the humiliation of it all, and he doesn't even notice. He's turned on the telly and he's drinking his beer and he's waiting for me to leave. So I sit down.

The phone rings and up he gets and he starts telling Jeremy, or whoever the fuck it is, about the stock market, so I stand and go to the kitchen and get myself a fucking beer. And then I think, While I'm here, I may as well have a look around. I've never been in a place like this.

So I wander about the apartment, and yeah, it stinks of money, and I wind up in the bedroom and I'm looking at this painting of a naked woman with this sword raised above her head when my eyes run over the dressing table and I stop. Plan D. Jack...fucking...pot.

There is a gold bracelet lying on the dresser. It is studded with diamonds. They are very big. The man (he still hasn't told me his name) is still talking on the phone. I think, Don't think. Do it. And I pick up the bracelet, give it a kiss, and put it in my pocket.

I am sweating. I check to see if the outline is visible in my trousers. It isn't. And I go back to the living room. He is off the phone now, and when I say I'm going he looks happy. The smug bastard.

But just when I'm going to leave, the door opens and his wife walks in. And get

this...she's Asian. She's fucking Asian. And she's, you know, fit, princess-style, long hair, enormous eyes, good body too (not that I cared; I wouldn't do that to Preethi) and she introduces herself, and I tell her what happened, and she says, 'Will you have some tea?'

I'm struggling, fumbling, mumbling like a fool, and she offers coffee, beer, food, and at last I ask for tea. She looks at him, and he, the wanker, goes off to make the tea, cursing under his breath. Glad to see she wears the trousers, at least, but I mean, why did this stunning creature have to marry this, this...? It makes me sick. I could see the look on his face. Look at me. I'm an ugly fucker with nothing going for me but my prospects and I'm with this gorgeous paki bird and there's nothing you can do about it.

I'm bristling, I can feel the anger in my blood, but this girl's so lovely, so gentle, that I can myself and find I am enjoying her company. We talk about films, and parents, and a little about food, and my tea comes I glare at him and he fucks off into the bathroom. Ajay, I tell myself, man, this girl is deprived. She needs a man who'll understand her, and she's gotta come home to this bastard.

I don't feel resentment. I just feel sad. This girl is one of me and I want her to be happy, but she's miserable and I can feel it. But at least I can relate. At least someone understands. I suggest she comes round sometime to meet Preethi (telling her, with my eyes, Don't bring that fucker if you can help it). And then I remember. I've got this poor girl's bracelet in my pocket. And I know, I know. Her mother gave it to her. It's all she's got. It means the world to her, and there's no way I can do it. No way on earth.

So now I have to get the bracelet out of my pocket and back to her. This won't be easy. She staring at me, chatting away with this childlike voice and each word is like a drop of dew, floating through the air until it hits my heart and turns to acid. I'm writhing in pain and it's no surprise when, a few minutes later, she asks if I'm

all right and can she get me anything. I say no, then realise, too late, I should have said yes. I'd do anything to get her out of the room so I can dump this damn bracelet some place where she'll find it.

I'm sweating like a camel now. My eyes are wide open. I know I look insane, but there's nothing I can do about that. I try to listen to what she's saying, but it's all words now, words, words, words. Each one makes me worse.

At last, I succeed in easing the thing out of my pocket, holding it in my fingers. She's still talking, and I'm smiling and nodding, but I begin to push it under the sofa cushion. But my fingers are running with sweat and, as if trapped inside a dream, I watch it fall to the floor, roll across the carpet, and stop by her feet. She doesn't notice. It's lying there, right by her foot, grinning at me. But she doesn't notice. I stare. It feels like hours. When I come to my senses I say, 'Could I have a glass of water, please?' She smiles and says, 'Yes, you don't look well.' And I say something about the flu, and she goes to the kitchen.

I throw myself on top of that bracelet, then stand in the middle of the room, wondering where to put it. I find myself turning, round and around, until I see a flower vase on the sideboard. I walk over to it, then think, What if it's months till she finds it?

The poor girl will drive herself sick with worry. So I consider going back to the bedroom, and I'm turning the bracelet round and around in my hand, when, before I know it, she's back in the room, with my water.

I rub some over my face and gulp the rest down with stopping for breath. She's looking at me with tremendous concern, and I'm ready to cry now. The whole world hates me. No, it's worse. I hate myself. And for good reason. But then I have an idea, and I say, 'You know what, I've got to go. But can I use the toilet first?' And I think, I'll just leave it on the sink. Easy. Easy as pizza.

But you know what? The fat fucker's still in the bath. And she asks him how long

he'll be and he says, like the irritable twat he is, 'Don't know. I just got in, didn't I?' And I smile And say, 'Oh well, never mind. I'll go in the pub round the corner,' and she looks really apologetic, and we hug, we actually hug, and for one horrible minute I think I'll never let her go. I hold her tighter and tighter and tears fill my eyes, but when I feel her growing tense I let her go, wipe my eyes, and leave.

The door closes behind me. I shut my eyes and lean against the wall before climbing down the stairs. When I get to the bottom, I see Plan E.

The mailboxes. Why didn't I think of it before? One for each flat. All open. Just trays really. I see theirs at once and I thank god for saving me an eternity of selfloathing. I'm reluctant to drop the bracelet in there though, just like that. As that fucker in the bathtub would have said, 'Some wanka'll nick it.' So I pick up an envelope, tear it open with my index finger and drop the bracelet in, when I see a word on the letter inside that makes me take it out and read it. It is from the landlord.

Owing to the recent spate of mailbox thefts I have installed a closed circuit television camera above the main door. Apologies for the inconvenience.

I turn, and look. There it is, hard and cynical, white and clinical, staring at me with its shiny eye. I stare back, hating the world, hating the fucker who'll watch that tape and think I'm a thief. I clench my fists, shut my eyes, and when I open them the world is red, as if drenched in blood.

There's a fire extinguisher in the corner, by the door. I walk over to it, lift it above my head, and smash it into the camera's side, four, maybe five times. The camera

falls, wrenched from the wall. It watches me with its broken eye, sneering. I raise my boot and crush its ugly head, stamping again and again until nothing remains but rubble.

Bowing to an invisible audience, I opened the door and left the building.