

Cappuccino

I glanced out of the window to my right - the smell of freshly cut grass drifting up from the lawn below. A vast sea of fields stretched out just beyond the glass; the sun penetrating the wall of trees that sat on the horizon.

I ran my fingers through my chestnut hair and began tugging at the collar of my faded black suit, tightening my tie in the process. After a brief moment, I rested my head on the table; I couldn't keep pretending everything was alright. My eyes flitted between the various toys and trinkets littering my desk until my eyes drifted toward the picture of my sister and I from last year. The picture had sat next to my computer since she had it printed for my birthday, complete with polished wooden frame. Stuffed into the corner of the frame sat a coffee-stained napkin with a simple note, scrawled in biro next to the bright orange *Coffee Caravan* logo. The handwriting was unmistakably scruffy, simply saying 'Jeff, IOU one coffee. - Cathy.'

Much had changed in a year - my hair was much longer and thankfully I had put on weight, no longer the scrawny pencil-pusher with a pair of thick black glasses. My sister Cathy still looked like she did when we were kids - broad shoulders, a tight blonde ponytail and the stubby nose she had adopted from our father. It hurts to think how much I miss seeing her.

Cathy took another sip of her cappuccino, giggling as she wiped away the froth from her top lip with her furled sleeve. She stared across the table at me, her blue eyes ablaze with equal parts joy and mischief.

'Tell me again why we keep coming here, Jeff?' She said, running a finger across the worn wooden table and showing it to me - a thin film of dust gathered on her fingertip.

'Sorry, your highness,' I said, bowing mockingly, 'would you prefer your table made of polished gold, ma'am?'

'Shut up!' She giggled, punching my shoulder lightly. We had come to *Coffee Caravan* almost every month since Cathy had moved to Lincoln - whether it was the splendid Victorian architecture,

the moist homemade carrot cake, or even just the quiet creaking of the old building, something kept bringing us back without fail every time. I took another sip of my flat white, breathing in the bittersweet aroma of Peruvian coffee that filled the cozy cafe and drifted through the door, enticing anyone who passed by.

'I've never noticed these photos before,' Cathy chirped, pointing at the canvases dotted along the walls, each portraying one of the many seaside towns across the eastern coast of England, 'who do you think took them?'

Tha'll be me, dearie,' piped in a rough voice from across the room. The owner of the cafe was leaning proudly over the polished wooden counter, chewing gently on his gums.

'They are beautiful, I don't know why I never noticed them before!' Cathy grinned, her eyes lit up like a cat in a tuna factory.

'I only put em ou' earlier today, they been in my loft fer a while'

'Would you sell one of them to me?'

'Sell one?' He pondered for a moment, scratching away at his goatee with one stubby finger, 'I don' think I could sell one t'you, they're ruddy priceless!'

'Oh...' Cathy's face dropped, her bottom lip trebling slightly.

'But,' he paused, a glint of mischief in his eyes, "'fer a lovely lady such as yersel', I'm sure a'can pry me'self away from one.' he said, a grin creeping across his rosy cheeks.

'Really?' Cathy began glowing, her voice squeaking with delight, 'how much would you like for this one?' She pointed instantly to one in the centre - a vivid landscape of deep blues and pale sands set behind the rolling cliffs of Scarborough; a small wooden bench adorned the foreground, staring out over the bay.

'Nowt, dearie,' he shouted, his belly wobbling as he chuckled lightly. 'Yer both 'ere so of'n, its the leas' I can do!' He shuffled out from behind the counter, tucking the brown pinstripe shirt which fit snugly around his pot belly into his trousers. He reached up and lifted the canvas from the wall,

taking care not to knock my chair as he went. As he passed it over to Cathy, he threw us both a warm smile.

'Thank you so much, Mr...!' Cathy paused for a moment, a look of panic in her eyes.

'Arvey Rogers,' he smiled warmly, 'at yer service!'

'Mr Rogers, thank you. I'll treasure it.'

'Come on then,' I piped in, glancing at my watch, 'Annabelle will have my hide if you're late again!' I paid Harvey for our coffees, putting an extra note into his tip jar by way of thanks.

'Can I put this one on my tab, Jeff?' Cathy looked up at me, her eyelashes fluttering.

'Fine,' I sighed, 'but you owe me!' I smirked across the room, knowing she wouldn't be paying me back any time soon. As I meandered back to the table, I plucked a napkin from the dispenser on the side table.

'What's this for?' She said, staring quizzically.

'Normally drying your chin, you're the only person I know who can spill more coffee than she drinks.'

'Shut up, you!' She giggled, slapping my shoulder playfully, 'what's it ACTUALLY for?'

'A contract dear,' I pushed my chin up and pulled a stern face, 'an IOU to be precise!' I handed her the napkin and held my ballpoint pen outstretched.

'Seriously?' She glared at me.

'Seriously.' I forced an evil laugh as she scrawled the note, sticking my tongue out when she eventually handed it over. I slipped it into my pocket smugly before hoisting our bags onto the table. I helped Cathy to her feet, grabbing her crutches from beside the table.

'I'm fine, Jeff. Really.' She shrugged her shoulders, swatting away my hand gently.

'Are you sure? You know it's gotten worse recently.'

'I know, Jeff,' Her voice trembled slightly as she pushed her chair away from the table, 'but I can't rely on you like this forever.' She pushed herself to her feet, resting herself against the crutches

and wincing as she moved. She reached down, straightening her trouser leg which had become tangled in her bulky leg braces.

'Come on, Annabelle will be wondering where you are. Has she been looking after you?' I asked, folding my arms.

'Of course, Jeff. What else do I pay them for?' She chuckled gently. I wrapped my arm under hers and began walking her back to through the centre of York to the nearby car park, occasionally stopping to let Cathy catch her breath. 'It's not getting easier. I'm sorry for snapping at you earlier.'

'Don't be, I know it's hard.' I lowered my head, rubbing the back of my neck gently.

'It looks like the bus is already here, I guess Annabelle must be eager to get me back for tea.' Her head sunk; loose strands of hair hanging below her shoulders, which now began to shake gently. I could hear her sobbing quietly, just as she did every month in this very spot.

'Don't cry, Cath. You know the month will just fly by.'

Two weeks passed by before the call came through.

'J-Jeff?' A weak voice came from the other end of the phone, 'how fast can you get here?'

'Mum?'

'I'm sorry, I didn't want to wake you but-'

'It's fine, what's going on?'

'It's Cathy,' she whimpered, a sense of urgency in her voice, 'just get here as soon as you can, OK?' She paused for a moment, 'and Jeff?'

'Yeah Mum?'

'I love you. Never forget that.' She hung up shortly after, leaving me in stunned silence. I dropped the phone into my jeans pocket and slung my tattered leather jacket over my shoulders, bolting through my apartment door and down the off-white complex halls.

I stood at the dusty white door of Cathy's home, my hand frozen against the brass handle. I took a deep breath; my stomach sinking lower with every tick of my heart. As I pushed open the door, the bitter winter air was brushed away by the wave of heat from inside - the clean, clinical smell washing straight through me.

The narrow hallway felt like a marathon, each stride taking me closer to one of hundreds of scenarios cycling about my mind - each more worrying than the last. The floral cream wallpaper whizzed by as I darted to my left and into the living room.

I paused to catch my breath, glancing around the room at the small group that had gathered. My mother sat on the green fabric sofa which backed onto the far wall, her mascara streaming down her face as she spoke to Annabelle who took the seat next to her. Looking at them both, you could have sworn they were twins; both of them had rich locks of curly ginger hair and warm, rounded faces. I continued around the room until my eyes met with Cathy, her blue eyes glazed with tears as she saw me. She no longer sat on her cream reclining chair, but instead was propped into a large black wheelchair - her head leaning to one side as tears gently rolled down her cheek.

My mother leapt from her chair and pulled me out of the room, walking me across the hall into the cosy kitchen. The vinyl floor was littered with shards of broken glass; a pool of water gathered in the corner of the wooden units.

'Jeff, I'm sorry,' her voice was shaky, worn thin from sobbing, 'Cathy f-fell this morning.'

'What? How come?'

'The doctor said he was surprised she could still walk at all.' She tiptoed her way across the kitchen, pouring a glass of water. 'Everything below her shoulders has just seized up - we knew it was coming, Jeff.'

'Yeah, but I didn't think it would happen so soon.' I whimpered, choking back the tears. My mother handed me the glass, but the hard water tasted sour. I made my way back to the living room, sighing deeply as I made my way through.

'Wait,' My mother gripped my shoulder firmly, holding me back, 'she's lost more than just the use of her body, Jeff.'

'What do you mean?'

'The doctor said something about motor neurones in her eyes and mouth too. they've deteriorated so much that she-'

'She can't see me?'

'No. But she will definitely hear you, please make sure she knows you are there.' She smiled at me, her rosy complexion draining away, 'She needs you now more than ever.'

I stepped back into the living room, kneeling onto the soft brown carpet by Cathy's feet. Her hair hung down to her shoulders, brushing the top of her thick blue jumper.

'I knew you'd c-come' She stumbled over her words, wincing with every breath.

'And miss the chance to see you? Of course not.'

'Thank-' She stopped suddenly, coughing harshly. Her face was pale and thin, a ghost of her former self.

'Don't say anything.' I grabbed her limp hands in mine; her palms felt cold to the touch. As my eyes wandered around the room, a single picture stood out among the trinkets strewn across her mantle.

'I can't see much,' she paused, catching her breath once more, 'but I can still see that.' Her eyes moved lazily toward the canvas. She chuckled weakly and rolled her head slightly. 'See that parcel?' She nodded gently to the walnut coffee table. 'Open it for me.'

I picked it up gently, bringing it between us and began tearing open the spotted silver paper, revealing a polished wooden frame with a delightful photo of us both together outside the familiar wooden doors of *Coffee Caravan*.

'Happy b-birthday, Jeff. I know it's early, but-' I hushed her, wrapping my arms gently around her shoulders.

'It's perfect.'

My door latch opened, waking me from my trance; a flood of tears ran down my face as I glanced one more time at the photo in my hands. I hung my head for a moment before my mother's voice cut through the silence.

'Are you sure you're ready, Jeff?'

'I never have been, Mum.' I mumbled, placing the frame back on my desk.

'None of us have - not even her.' She rustled my hair, kissing me gently on the back of my head. 'Here, she wanted me to give you this,' She handed me a small, flat package wrapped neatly in spotted silver paper. 'I'll be downstairs when you are ready, they said they can hold the funeral procession as long as you need.' Just hearing that word cut through me.

'I'm sorry, I shouldn't have snapped at you.'

'Don't worry, son. It's tough for us all.' She opened the door, stepping through into the hall.

'Wait, Mum.'

'Yes, Jeff?'

'I love you, never forget that.' She smiled, closing the door gently behind her. I stared for a moment at the parcel in my hands, the neatly folded paper taped cleanly and wrapped up with a piece of knotted string.

Attached to the parcel was a small note, scrawled in biro on a scrap of lined paper.

'I hope this covers for that coffee I owe you. - Cathy'

As I tore lightly at the package, my heart fluttered as the deep blue ocean peered through the paper, the unmistakable seaside views of Scarborough shining through.