

Laverne awoke to a loud buzzing. She rolled over to catch sight of her smartphone, illuminated, dancing on the hotel nightstand. She looked at the name emblazoned on the screen: Mom.

Laverne muttered into the phone. "Hello?"

"How are you, dear?"

"M'fine, Mom. How are you?"

"Great, wonderful. Are you okay? You sound off."

Laverne's eyes widened, eliminating the remaining drowsiness. "I'm, uh, I'm fine. Just caught a small bug."

"Oh, would you like some company? I wanted to talk to you anyways. I think it'd be better in person."

"No! No. That's okay, Mom. It'll probably be gone by tomorrow. I think I'll just go to bed early."

"Well, I hope not immediately. Going to bed at four in the afternoon. Don't slow down before your time, dear."

Laverne glanced at the nightstand's clock; the red digits just ticked midnight. "Right, Mom."

"Alright, well, I'll speak with you later then, dear. Feel better. I love you."

"Love you too, Mom."

Laverne hung up and launched herself out of bed. Shaken by the fear of being caught, she began to take inventory of the room. She padded the large desk for the room keys, all three of them, having bought out the adjacent rooms for adequate space from other guests. She checked her wallet for the cash she received at the currency exchange,

about six hundred pounds, and double-checked her phone for the balance in her checking account, a sizable sum, courtesy of her parents.

She paced to the window to throw back the shades. The opposite side of a London street filled her eyes. Buildings lined every bit of it, with faces carved from centuries-old masonry and multiple pairs of eyes, now dark in the middle of the night, staring out at Laverne, framed by painted windowsills. Their mouths and cheeks rested on the sidewalk and were smattered with neon lights, which Laverne stared above to avoid. She turned from the view to quickly get dressed. Then, she ventured down into the lobby.

She grimaced walking by the hotel's late night bar, lit with a nauseating electric blue. Middle aged couples, people Laverne's age, sat around at the bar chortling over mixed drinks, a sad attempt at living lives long past. Outside, the diffused glow of neon lighting vomited from the hotel and other establishments onto the city street. All the buildings were bathed in the sickness. Laverne looked back to check the hotel's name, "The Old Ship," and then sped down the lane.

She stayed on cozier, dimmer streets as she walked. She drank in the night air and exhaled chilled, translucent wafts. She entered a bar situated on a quiet street. Inside, it was dim and warm. Well-worn wooden pillars and nicked bricks held the room together, forming an earthen den in which to rest. Most of Laverne's peers probably vacated the place hours ago, if they came here at all. Young people dispersed around the room in small groups chatting. Laverne sat at the bar to order a beer.

She had just received her drink when a young man sat himself down next to Laverne, flashing a toothy smile at Laverne.

"Evenin'."

Laverne eyed him coolly while sipping her beer, only nodding. She replied when she set the glass down. “Good evening.”

“Well, I’ll be! A visitor of our fine coun’ry! What brings you ‘ere, miss, and on your own, if I may add?”

“Just taking in the sights.”

“Oh yeah? Enjoy what you’re seein’ so far?”

Laverne narrowed her eyes at him.

The bartender returned to the bar. “What’re ya havin’?”

“Whate’er she is.”

The bartender nodded and walked over to the tap.

“Haven’t seen many things. Just got in.”

“Well, when you get the chance, there’s plenty to see o’er ‘ere in Hackney. We’re a nice little corner o’ London.”

Laverne nodded as she read the labels of the assorted liquors lining the back of the bar. The barman brought the youngster his booze, and he took a sip.

“What’s your name, miss?”

“Laverne.” She said, sacrificing that knowledge to keep the boy at bay.

“Well, Laverne, my name’s Tom. If you ever need a guide,” he rested his hand on the back of Laverne’s shoulder, “all you need ta do is ask.”

“Please don’t touch me.” Laverne shook his hand off her shoulder.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to be off putting. Just tryin’ ta welcome yah to our town.”

“Well, you’re not making me feel welcome, kid, so stop bothering me.”

“Kid’?”

“That’s right, boy. I’m twice your age, easy. I didn’t ask for a guide and I don’t need one. I was enjoying myself fine before you showed up.”

“Enjoy being alone, eh?” Tom sneered with his broad smile. “Well, aw’ight then, I’ll let you get back to it.” He plucked his glass off the bar and walked down to the corner, where the bartender stood idly to avoid conversation. Tom now began chatting away at him. The bartender nodded and faked a smile at Tom’s jokes, if only for a better tip. Laverne paid him the small kindness by pulling him away to pay for her beer. Leaving him a considerable tip, she slipped back out into the night.

Laverne continued her trek through the London borough. She kept to small, sleepy streets, avoiding ones with traffic lights, shop lights, anything that would dilute the beauty of the town by painting it a different color. The tall buildings funneled wind down the narrow streets. The wind reminded Laverne how underdressed she was for tonight’s temperature, blowing chilled air into her bleary eyes and down her thin sweater.

She hunched her back, wrapped her arms about her, and trudged down the cobblestone road until it joined the thoroughfare. The humble, stony row houses transitioned to squat, ugly stores, but they invigorated Laverne’s newfound pursuit of warmth. She checked entrance after entrance, just looking for somewhere warm for a moment. She looked into the entrance of a Burberry outlet. Designer jackets hung from infinite racks, mocking her predicament. She pressed her face against the glass to trace the detail of a nearby coat, imagining it wrapped tightly about her with warmth.

In the depths of the store, a silhouette materialized. It neared to Laverne, pushing something. Some custodian was vacuuming in the middle of the night. It was a woman; she was small in stature and wore short, frizzy hair. Laverne tapped rapidly on the glass,

but the custodian did not notice. She knocked on it with her knuckles. Still, there was no response. She knocked harder still, shaking the whole of the glass pane. The janitor stopped to look at the door. She approached the door and shook her head.

“No.”

“Could I buy a jacket?”

“Closed. No.”

Her vocabulary seemed a bit limited, so Laverne tried communicating differently. She pulled out her wallet to flash the large sum that she possessed.

“I have money.”

She peeled a smaller bill and slid it through a gap in the doors.

“That is for you.”

The woman took the bill, smiled, and slid it into her pocket. She pushed open the door to let Laverne enter. She shook as she entered and nodded her thanks. As she thawed, she shopped for a jacket. These clothes were made for women far younger than her, younger than the janitor. Women like that were more concerned with fashion more than function, she surmised. They never had to experience struggling along on a cold night. They never had to work horrid jobs like the janitor. She came upon a shortened trench coat her size and checked the price tag: £500, marked down. Warmth and comfort came at a steep price tonight.

Laverne returned to the janitor, still standing by the front of the store, and showed her the price of the coat. She then counted each individual bill to her and laid it next to the register. Most of the money she had on her was gone, but she could get more from the

exchange later in the day. After the woman accepted the transactions, Laverne nodded her thanks and left the store, rejuvenated from the respite and added layer.

She walked for a while now, unabated by the wind and cold. She returned to smaller streets to search for the undiscovered, cherished bits of London, not the tourist traps to which every hapless American was drawn. She watched as the older parts of the city protruded through the new, unable to be contained. After almost an hour of walking, Laverne found an ornate fence surrounding a park. “Abney Park Cemetery,” the sign read.

Laverne neared the gate, which swung ajar in the night wind, either by vandalism or lack of caretaking. She pushed its wrought iron poles back to enter the park. The scenery was lush. Dense, ivy-covered trees blocked part of the sky, and grass grew tall wherever people didn’t continuously tread.

Only every so often would Laverne be reminded she trotted amongst people’s remains. Men would stand, immortalized in bronze, pointing and posing, their placards proclaiming their worth. Crosses and tombstones cropped like weeds. Faint laughter echoed through the canopy, probably belonging to whoever opened the gate. The gravesites became more frequent as Laverne wove through the park. Everywhere, death surrounded her. The disembodied laughs cackled at her dwindling life. Laverne could count the seconds, slowed by the stagnant air that hung heavy with death. Her breath quickened as she hastened her tour through the grounds. She came to an exit, where civilization regained its hold on the land. Laverne escaped out of another opened gate.

She looked around to get her bearings. Nothing looked familiar, so she retrieved her phone to search the hotel’s address. The battery was almost depleted, and she needed it for something more important. Farther down the sidewalk, a homeless man lay propped

up against one of the stone columns lining the cemetery, as if waiting for admittance to the place. Laverne slowly approached him. His face slightly clenched, as if in pain, but he slept undisturbed. Sheets of newspaper formed a blanket over his lap.

“Hey...”

“What? Eh?” He lurched from his spot, catching his hefty upper body as it tipped towards the sidewalk. His eyes darted back and forth several times before they recognized Laverne’s presence.

“Are you... alright?”

“Eh, well, I could use some money if you could spare the change.”

“Well, I don’t have any change on me, sorry.” Laverne took a step back while thumbing the pocket lining of her new coat.

The homeless man huffed and settled back down.

“I can offer you a place to stay, though.”

The man squinted his face, revealing his teeth: crooked rows with numerous gaps.

“Where’s tha?”

“‘The Old Ship.’ Do you know where it is?”

“Nuh.”

“It’s on, uh...” Laverne tried recalling the address. “Mare Street! Do you know where that is?”

“Yeah.”

“Good, okay.” She pulled out a key for one of the extra rooms. “Here’s your room key. It’s a separate room. Somewhere you can sleep peacefully.” She handed it to him.

“Thank you, mum. Why are you doing this?”

“I just need a guide is all. Excuse me a second. I need to make a call.” Laverne walked away from the man as he stared at the key. She dialed her mother’s number.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Mom. How’re you?”

“I’m fine dear. Are you feeling better?”

“Yeah. A lot better, in fact. I just wanted to get back with you. You said you wanted to tell me something earlier?”

“Well, uh, we don’t have to discuss it now if you don’t want to.”

“No, it’s okay.”

“Well, I have been discussing things with your father, and...” Her voice became distant. In the background, Laverne’s father encouraged her mother to continue the conversation. “And we’ve decided that it’s time for you to support yourself.”

Laverne remained silent, listening intently.

“For... for the time being, we’ve put a hold on any transaction with the bank until such time that we can discuss things further. Maybe we can come by tomorrow and talk?”

Laverne searched around the street, in the cemetery, hoping her house would suddenly materialize.

“We’re not trying to punish you dear. We just—“

The phone died.

Laverne lowered it from her ear. She looked back at the homeless man, who had just managed to pick himself up from off the street.