

# Our Worlds



# Our Worlds

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## Chapter 1. By a thread

‘So what the hell do we do now??’

It was a good question, on point and matter-of-fact. Really rather beautiful in its simplicity, asking only that which was necessary and nothing more. It was the sort of question one would expect in a situation where what one was doing has failed and what one is going to do is as of yet unclear, though no less important because of it. Yes, a truly fine question.

Ezzie didn't know the answer though. Try as he might, his brain simply wasn't built for this kind of situation. He had always been more of a *'let's think things through and formulate a plan'*-type of person. One who approached a problem calmly and examined it from every angle through a lens of objectivity while leaving all emotions behind. It was something that had worked wonderfully throughout his entire life. That is, until recently. Ezzie closed his eyes and tried to steady his breathing at this particular thought. Life had seemed so calm and dozy not that long ago, hadn't it?

‘Okay, you can do this!’, he thought, ‘Just relax and figure out all the angles.’

‘I said, what the hell do we do now? Or do you have some sort of well thought-out plan B? In which case you might've mentioned it beforehand’, Blythe's voice sounded from somewhere down below. Ezzie looked down and could only barely see the outline of his friend's body, dangling about four feet further below, but he needed no sight to catch the sarcasm that drenched his last comment.

‘Alright, alright! Keep your pants on, will you? Just let me think...’

‘Why in the world would I take off my pants?? That seems like a really silly thing to do right now... Besides, to be completely honest, I wouldn’t even know how I would go about doing it... I mean, I guess I could maybe hook my leg in or something’, Blythe pondered out loud. ‘That would free up my arm so I can undo my belt and take my right leg out. But then I’d be stuck with the other leg! On the whole, I’d be no closer to fully removing my trousers... Honestly, if you’re not going to take this seriously I’m going to have to take charge of the situation. I take no pleasure in usurping your authority, I assure you, but I’d rather you focus on a plan instead of thinking about clothing.’

Ezzie rolled his eyes and gritted his teeth, desperately wanting to tell him off. But no, there were more important things to deal with right now. ‘Think, think! There must be something we’ve overlooked, something we can use to get out of this mess. Okay, status check. Where are we?’

Looking around, he saw nothing but darkness. The only bit of light came from the small torch he’d left on the ledge directly above their heads. Sixty-seven feet above them, to be precise. In hindsight, Ezzie thought, it might have been better if he’d taken it with him. (He had shone it down the dark tunnel shaft but the light hadn’t even come close to reaching the bottom. Fiercely hoping there would be a light source down there somewhere, he’d left the torch on the ground as a sort of beacon in case they needed to go back up again.)

‘Fat lot of good that’s done us..’, Ezzie continued thinking, ‘Alright, what happened and how.. What and how, what and how..’

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The *'what'* part was clear enough. They'd looked over the edge and found a rope ladder that appeared to go all the way down. While Ezzie was still guessing distance, judging tensile strength and hypothesizing their best course of action, Blythe's excited face had already dipped below the edge, leaving Ezzie with no other choice but to follow. Audibly muttering something about being too rash, too impulsive, about the myriad of ways death could be waiting for them, he begrudgingly climbed down only to find that the going was even harder than he'd calculated.

At once, the light from the torch diminished tenfold, making it near impossible to see what he was doing. Forced to move only by touch, their descent was agonizingly slow. Clinging to the rope, they awkwardly stepped down, kicking their feet in mid-air as if participating in a football match for the visually impaired just to try and feel where the next illusive foothold might be. Each new step creaked louder than the one before, protesting against this heavy incursion on their otherwise easy life. It hadn't been more than ten minutes but already they were both sweating profusely from the sheer effort of holding on.

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Ezzie stopped to take a breath and said, 'I'm- I'm not all that confident this thing will hold. I don't-, I mean it's making that noise you always hear in the movies right before something gives way. As if it's been hanging here for years, like it's ancient... may-, maybe we should go back...'

'Naah, you worry too much', Blythe wheezed happily, 'Just don't think about it!.. And whatever you do, don't talk about it or you run the risk of jinxing it.'

'I must've told you a hundred times..', Ezzie sighed in exasperation, momentarily distracted from their predicament. 'There's no such thing as a jinx!'

Blythe squealed. 'Don't say that! Saying that is like asking for

things to go sour!...', he urged before addressing the darkness around them, 'He didn't mean that, Universe! Really, he didn't!!'

Ezzie had been nearing his breaking point all day and this final remark made him snap. He opened his mouth, ready to vent some anxiety by dispensing some angry logic when he realised there had been a literal snap, a sharp twang now bouncing off the walls and back into his ears from a thousand different angles. Mouth still open, he looked up in the direction where the sound had seemed to originate from. Luckily, darkness prevented him from seeing the rope up above, frayed and almost cut through entirely. The sight would have almost certainly made him panic and panic always causes stupidity. But he could hear something, a sound that most resembled someone sharply plucking at piano wires as the individual strings of the rope broke one by one.

Not a second too soon they realised what was going on and both of them grabbed the right side rope as the one on the left gave way and snapped completely. Apparently, its presence was also the reason why most of the steps had stayed on. Steps that, with the absence of the rope, now happily gave in to the fatigue that had been building up for years as they came tumbling down, gleefully hitting the two men on the head as a sort of farewell high five. The noise was absolutely deafening.

Not knowing where the rope would end was now the least of their concern as both men held on for dear life. Panting heavily, Ezzie's hands were already starting to ache from the strain of holding up his entire body.

'Blythe? You still there?... Blythe?!'

'Yeah, I'm here. Bruised and a bit ruffled, but here. You okay?'

'More of the same, though I might be a bit more bruised. I

think I shielded you from most of the debris...'

'Thanks for that, mate. Guess we're even now!'

'Fair enough', Ezzie answered. 'Any chance you can see the bottom?'

'Apart from yours?', Blythe joked as he started to regain his composure, 'Nope, just more black nothingness down here I'm afraid.'

'Ow, why did this happen?!', Ezzie blurted out.

'Well, short answer: the rope snapped. The long answer... that's open to interpretation I guess', Blythe giggled, making the rope sway a little. 'So what now?..'

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Ezzie was at a loss, he couldn't think of a solution if his life depended on it. And it certainly started to seem like it did depend on it pretty heavily. He tried his best to look at all sides of their problem but that was proving to be difficult when it's too dark to see.

'I've got it!', Blythe suddenly shouted, his outburst echoing up to assault Ezzie's eardrums. He jumped – well, figuratively of course – and nearly lost his grip as he slid down a few inches. Taking in sharp, quick breaths to steady the drum solo his heart had begun to perform, he said feebly; 'Wh-what is it? Did you figure out a way to get us out of here?'

'What?... No, no, don't be silly. No, I just realised that if I take one leg out and then hook *that* leg onto something, this would free up the other one which would allow me to take my trousers off entirely! Isn't that great?'

'Wh-... No, that's not great you bloody fool! How in the world is that supposed to help us?!'

'Whoa, whoa... don't get angry with me just because I found a solution to your weird little problem. You're the one that started talking about taking off our clothes, remember? I'm just

trying to help, is all... Besides, how am I supposed to help if you withhold crucial information? Like, why do we need to take our trousers off in the first place?', he said in quite serious tones.

'I mean, I suppose we could tie them to the rope to extend it a bit but what if that's not enough? What then? Use our sweaters? Our shirts? I'm perfectly willing to use my underwear but I don't think it would do much good, it doesn't really add that much length now does it..'

'Wh... Underwe-? HAVE YOU GONE COMPLETELY MAD? WE ARE HANGING OVER AN ABYSS THAT MIGHT AS WELL BE A HUNDRED FEET DEEP FOR ALL WE KNOW AND YOU WANT US TO TAKE OFF OUR UNDERWEAR???'

'Sheesh, calm down. No need to get your panties all in a bunch...'

'YOU THINK THIS IS SOME KIND OF JOKE OR SOMETHING? WE ARE LITERALLY MOMENTS AWAY FROM FALLING TO OUR DEATHS AND YOU'RE HANGING ABOUT MAKING JOKES!'

His shouting reverberated up and down through the shaft, diminishing in volume at every pass until there was only silence left. Blythe said nothing but Ezzie felt a steady vibration move up the rope, getting stronger and stronger.

'Are-, are you.. *laughing?*', he asked incredulously.

Biting his lip to try and stop shaking as best he could, Blythe replied with immense difficulty, 'You said hanging about... Get it? *Hanging* about?'

Immediately the shaking intensified.

Dumbstruck, Ezzie was at a total loss for words. This man was his best friend, his oldest friend. They'd known each other almost their entire lives. Nothing would ever cause Ezzie to stop loving him but sometimes he genuinely worried for his friend's

mental well-being.

'Don't you – don't you understand what's going on here?', he asked weakly. 'Do you really not grasp the severity of our current predicament?'

'O'course I do', Blythe replied dryly, 'I'm not an idiot.'

'Then why are you making jokes when we are in some serious danger?!'

'Ow nonsense, we're not in that much danger as far as I can see... not that I can see much but that's beside the point really. Just relax, let it go! You worry way too much, you always have.'

'I - ... what?? In case you haven't noticed, there's actually a fair number of legitimate things to worry about!', Ezzie said in heated tones. 'In fact, I'd say the amount of peril we are currently faced with is rather more than what one would face when, say, reading the Sunday paper! So excuse me if I don't "relax"... And the only thing', he continued, 'I can let go of at the moment just so happens to be the one thing that is keeping me from plummeting to my inevitable death!'

'Well, that's a matter of interpretation, isn't it? I'm in the exact same situation but I don't see the dangers you're talking about. Why d'you think that is?'

'I'm not in the mood for one of our quasi-philosophical discussions, if you don't mind. This is hardly the time or place!' Ezzie was becoming painfully aware of the fact that the muscles in his hands were starting to cramp up.

'Instead of thinking about your outlook on life, could you *please* just help me figure out a way for us to get out of this mess?!'

'Fine...', Blythe grumbled, '..don't have to bite my head off. As it so happens, I do have a plan.'

'R-really? Why didn't you say so, that's-.. What is it?'

'Okay, so this is the plan: I'm going to inch down as much as I

can, let go of the rope and jump. Then I can estimate how far up we are and, once I'm down, create some sort of make-shift ladder or scaffold or staircase to get you safely down as well. Jump, land, zip, zap, and Bob's your uncle.. What d'ya think?

'... We don't know how high up we are, you – could – die!... That's the whole bloody problem now isn't it?'

'Ow, I reckon I'll be alright.'

'O really, and why is that?', Ezzie demanded. 'Is that how you've.. – he nearly added physical air quotes – .."interpreted" the situation? Huh? Or is it because you're *sooo* relaxed that when you hit the ground, your bones will simply bend and bounce instead of shatter into a thousand pieces?... Well?'

For a moment, Blythe stayed quiet.

'You know, there's really no point in this if you're not going to be serious about it...'

'No, *pleeeaaase*', Ezzie mocked, 'enlighten me with your dazzling newfound wisdom. Stun me with your brilliance and blow me away with your wit, the likes of which has never been equalled in this lifetime....'

Ezzie couldn't help himself. He knew his outburst was unproductive to say the least, but he still felt angry over the whole trouser situation. Blythe, on the other hand, seemed to think Ezzie was being sincere.

'Well, if you put it that way... I didn't say anything about it before 'cause, you know, it might come across as boasting but I...', he paused for dramatic effect, '... am immortal.'

The rope was vibrating violently again but not from silent laughter this time. Ezzie was banging his head against his hands out of pure frustration and lack of a comeback. If he hadn't regretted going down the road and the rope that led him here before, he was certainly regretting it now.

'How did this happen?', he thought, 'How did I get to this

insane point in life??'

Thinking that, however, did nothing to change their situation so he gathered himself as best he could, furiously hoping his friend was speaking metaphorically, and said: 'Okay, so you're immortal. What proof do you have? What makes you confident enough to state something so... *unorthodox*?'

'Throughout all my years of living and with all the things I've experienced, I can conclude that I am still here. I am still alive and well.'

So, not as metaphorical as Ezzie had hoped.

'... But... that's not proof!...'

'Yes it is! See, the only way for me to be wrong would be to die, right? And seeing as how I am still very much alive, the theory stands... I am immortal', Blythe stated.

Ezzie let out a very, very deep sigh. Trying immensely hard to keep the level of sarcasm in his voice as low as possible (and failing miserably at it), he replied through clenched jaws: 'But that would mean that everybody alive at this moment could be immortal, now wouldn't it?...'

'Pff... I merely pointed out my hypothesis. I never said I was special...', Blythe replied as if stating the obvious. 'Silly mortals', he added under his breath.

Ezzie gave up, right then and there, and decided to make peace with his lot in life. If he was going to die, he at least wanted to understand what had led him to such an untimely death.

'You would agree with me, you really would, if you'd only change your point of view. It can change your life, I'm telling you. But we can talk about that some other time.'

'Yeah, sure, fine', Ezzie replied, not really listening. 'Some other time. Do what you must, I can't stop you anyway.'

'That's the spirit!', Blythe said cheerfully. 'Right, I'm off. I'll have you down in no time, no time at all!'

Ezzie's brain was already reviewing the last couple of years, looking for the cause and effect of their actions and decisions, when Blythe took a deep breath, shouted 'Allons-y!' and jumped towards an ink-black, unknown fate.

## Chapter 2. By the waterside

Ezzie exited the shop, looked left, then right before taking in a lungful of crisp pre-rain air. He held it for a moment, letting the process of oxygen-carbon dioxide exchange run its course until a tingle started to spread from his forehead all the way to the back of his neck at which point he slowly released it in a small, barely audible sigh. There had been an instance of casual flirtation after the cashier had asked for his identification, something that didn't happen all too often anymore.

Ezzie'd watched the cashier's cheeks flush when calculating his age and the stuttering apology that followed gave him the perfect opportunity to flash his most winning smile while saying that it was quite alright and no harm done. It was probably due to his inability to grow a decent patch of facial hair, he charmingly joked. They laughed, albeit awkwardly, and exchanged a few lines of trivial small talk before saying their goodbyes.

'Must remember to go back there', he thought.

And so he walked out, a slight bounce in his step that hadn't been there before he'd gone in. The encounter had not only succeeded in lifting his spirits but it had also given him the perfect idea for a joke.

'I'll tell him that the situation warranted us to lift our "spirits" so I bought a drink that's old enough to buy its own alcohol... yes, I bet he'll like that.'

Softly humming a few light hearted notes, he turned and strolled down Park Way, repeating the joke over and over again in his head. 'Lift our "spirits"...', he chuckled as he envisioned himself ringing the doorbell, being buzzed in and walking up the stairs to find the door to Blythe's apartment standing slightly ajar

as usual. By the time Ezzie joined the bus queue, he was imagining himself walking through the door to find his friend playing videogames or preparing dinner or something like that. In his mind, he told the joke at least ten times, changing the wording slightly to get the delivery just right, before finally deciding on a version he figured would get the biggest laugh.

The number 9 arrived just as his daydreaming reached its inevitable comedic crescendo and Ezzie got on, smiling broadly at the grumpy bus driver as he paid for his ticket while his head filled with raucous laughter. The driver in turn shot him a weary look of suspicion, reluctantly handed back the freshly stamped ticket and watched him take a seat somewhere in the middle of the bus, letting his scrutiny linger for longer than was necessary. On any other day, this less than courteous welcome might have sent Ezzie into a fit of shallow depression, fearing he had inadvertently offended the man and racking his brain to try and figure out where he went wrong. Today however, he entirely failed to notice it, which was precisely why the man was scowling at him in the first place.

See, Ezzie's elation over having come up with such an exquisitely bad joke had manifested itself on his face in the form of a broad smile but his mental wandering had the unforeseen side-effect of causing his eyes to gloss over as he stared off into the distance. On the whole, the combination of the two facial features resulted in an expression that could only be described as that of a hopped-up, spaced-out toad.

Ezzie, of course, was blissfully unaware of his resemblance to a stoned amphibian and continued to stare wistfully out the window while the bus driver barged onto Charlemagne square with about as much spatial awareness and depth perception as a cyclops with an eye infection. Ruining other people's good mood

was the only thing in life that brought this man any semblance of happiness – really the only thing he was good at and, in fact, the sole reason he became a bus driver in the first place – and now this hoodlum had robbed him of the satisfaction! Well, there were other ways in which to achieve his goal...

A quick touch of the brakes and a rapid change of lanes to the left meant the bus was suddenly serenaded by a symphony of piercing honks and shouted disapproval. The driver grinned as he surveyed the ripple effect of vehicles forced to swerve out of each other's way. He filled with a savage contentment as one of them nearly parked itself in the midst of a group of pedestrians and chuckled when a few of them jumped up against each other in what was most likely a desperate attempt to avoid higher insurance fees. A swift glance in his rear view mirror showed toppled grocery bags, bruised knees and disgruntled faces. Surely *that* would wipe the grin of that idiot's face, he thought.

A couple of seats behind him, Ezzie sat rocking and shaking in his seat feeling equally satisfied, though for wholly different reasons. How could he be anything but happy, he thought. The world outside was beautiful and he was a part of that world so why shouldn't it affect him?

The bus – and therefore Ezzie – was flying towards the edge of the city and onwards, whizzing past the constantly moving outside world so fast it seemed more like a stream of photographs; static images showing a couple of seconds out of a stranger's day. Ezzie observed them scrupulously, peaking behind the curtain of something otherwise veiled, and fantasized about the lives these unnamed individuals might have. The entire thing felt wonderfully forbidden. It had an air about it of being intensely private, which only made this secret pastime all the more enticing.

In truth, it was all harmless of course, just something to do while travelling from A to B. Ezzie knew deep down that he wasn't in a good mood because the world around him had suddenly become exceptionally pretty, that would be silly. No, it wasn't beautiful, not really. Rather, it was the other way round. A good mood will always make the world around you *appear* more beautiful than it actually is and today was no exception. It was the sort of thing people knew full well to be true, an innocuous little lie to fool ourselves with because the truth is simply too mundane. And why not? It's a harmless bit of voluntary self-delusion that makes life more mystical. A bit of soul to offset the cynical, so to speak. So Ezzie, though well aware of this fact, let it slide all the same. In truth, it was just the right amount of functional silliness that even he could get behind.

And so, as the weather steadily turned, he watched the fun house mirror effect of rain drops travelling down the other side of the window with an appropriate amount of curiosity when he noticed that the people outside didn't seem to mind the downpour. No one huddled over against the wind while clutching umbrellas, no swift side stepping of puddles that started to dot the pavement, nobody trying to jump over them as some of the smaller ones swiftly coalesced into sizeable bodies of water. It was as if all of them were collectively saying "*Well, a bit of increased wetness once in a while is a necessary part of life. Can't do much about it anyway. Besides, looks like it's clearing up already!*"

Ezzie followed his own interpretation upwards and glanced at the clouds above.

'Yes..', he mumbled, a bit louder than intended, '...clearing up nicely.'

The driver shot him another accusing glance and added "*talks to himself out loud*" to the list he'd been constructing. His eyes were

locked on Ezzie's image in his rear view mirror and he wondered whether it might be indicative of some sort of mental disorder... That would certainly explain why his efforts thus far had been in vain.

'If that's the case', he thought, fooling himself into the role of potential heroism, 'he might even be dangerous..'

So, determined not to miss any possible warning signs, the driver unblinkingly stared down Ezzie's reflection and instead quite splendidly failed to notice a signpost marking the edge of the city until it was nearly too late. A panicked right-left-right of the steering wheel, a flash of "*Thank you for visiting, drive carefully*" in an unnecessarily happy font and several carefully selected curse words later, he concluded it was perhaps better to keep his eyes on the road ahead while desperately trying to convince himself that this lunatic passenger must somehow be to blame for the near-collision.

Oblivious to the unspoken accusation, the only result of their s-shaped deviation from an otherwise linear path was that Ezzie's mind jumped to a parallel line of thought. Having passed the city limits only moments ago, they were already crossing the boundary of the town of New Plains, their final destination. A fact travellers were alerted to by yet another sign, though the bus missed this one by a somewhat larger margin.

While a physical collision was avoided, the words on the sign slammed themselves into Ezzie's wandering mind with force. This was the sort of silliness he could *not* endorse. In big bold lettering the sign read '*Welcome to Nuadh Ma'gh*' with the explanation of '*New Plains*' in parentheses below it.

Ezzie scoffed, '... pointlessly flashy.'

The bus screeched to a halt some distance after its stop at the entrance of High Street. Ezzie got up and was about to disembark when he was somewhat violently confronted by a

large poster stuck to a shop window directly opposite. He snorted loudly at the advertisement that called for people to *“join a walking tour past all eight of New Plains’ wonderful historical sites”*.

‘That’ll be a short walk then’, he muttered.

He hopped out onto the pavement under the piercing gaze of the driver who was still checking for signs of nefarious behaviour with about as much poise and grace as a car alarm with Tourette’s. Failing to find any, he decided it was time to act and twisted around in his seat with his arm pulled back, ready to punch a devastating comment towards Ezzie.

‘Now you listen here you little sh-.. Fuck!!’

Ezzie jumped like a startled cat at the loud thud of the driver’s body hitting the floor and looked back to find him half in his seat, half on the floor in such an angle as only a seasoned contortionist should have been able to achieve.

‘Are you alright, sir?’, Ezzie asked, looking down into a pair of seething eyes.

When the driver saw him extend an arm, moving as if to step back onto the bus, he started wriggling around with all his might. Before Ezzie could comprehend what was happening, he’d gotten back to his seat, growled something about a lack of respect and slammed the door shut in his face before angrily choking the gearbox, making the bus lurch forward as he struggled to find the correct gear. Sounding like a rusty chainsaw, it sped down the road leaving Ezzie frozen, his arm still extended in front of him.

‘Wow..’, Ezzie mumbled, dropping his arm, ‘what an absolute loony..’

He watched the bus skid away until a shiver shook him out of his reverie. With a sigh, he zipped up his coat and crossed the road, entering the newly appointed “historical” district via Saint

Jacobs Avenue. After a few minutes of walking past dilapidated two- and three-storey apartment buildings, he rounded the corner and headed towards a block of larger, yet basically similar, greying flats that had been called a lot of things over the years but historical had never been one of them. Nevertheless, an archway had been erected, bearing the imposing name 'Orphan Court Estate' in thin, swirling letters. This eyesore of early nineties construction, formerly known simply as The Emancipation Estate, was re-named after an orphanage that had once stood at its centre. The original was long gone, having been bombed to bits during the war, but parts of its courtyard still remained and that, apparently, was a solid enough link to the past to justify changing its name. Ezzie rolled his eyes as he passed underneath, feeling sour as he wondered about how much money must've been wasted on committees and marketing agencies. He shuddered at the thought of what useful things it could have been spent on otherwise.

He felt a bit restless as he approached the entrance to the nearest flat, not realizing he had subconsciously fed the ever present nagging beast in his belly with his growing agitation. Why was this monster so easily provoked? It didn't used to be like that, he figured, but lately it had become almost second nature to awaken that slumbering feeling in his gut. He took a moment to breathe while looking up towards the heavens, letting the last refreshing drops of skywater splash merrily on his face. After sufficiently cooling down his hot head, he wiped the rain from his eyes and let his fingers wonder past the doorbells until he found the one he needed. He pressed and held it down for a moment, released it, held it down again, released it, then pressed the bell three times in rapid succession and waited. The speaker next to the row of bells, names and numbers crackled as somewhere in the building a phone was picked up but no voice

answered. Instead, the door buzzed as it swung open and Ezzie entered.

Breathing heavier than he'd done a minute ago, he reached the sixth floor and turned into the hallway towards the open door of number 5. He closed it behind him as he yelled 'Hello!' and hung up his jacket.

'Okay, so listen. I know you think it's too soon', Ezzie said loudly as he moved into the kitchen, 'but come on... You've handed in the thesis, we know it's going to be marked well so the actual graduation is really just a formality. It's not rocket science...'

He giggled a little.

'.. You would know all about that now, wouldn't you? Anyway, we can call it celebrating your unofficial graduation. You can whine about it as much as you want but it's happening. I mean, after four long years of hard work your head must be ready to burst with important facts so the sooner we start drinking, the faster you'll get some more room to think, if you know what I mean.'

Ezzie chuckled at his own comment, covering up the fact that the only thing coming from the next room was a lone, cold breeze. The wind swirled around the kitchen, gently displacing a half empty bag of crisps on the kitchen counter, toppling it into the sink.

'D'you mind closing the window? It's a bit chilly in here', Ezzie said, brushing the stale crisps back into the bag before tossing it into the bin along with a few half eaten sandwiches and three crushed cans of lager. Ezzie wiped down the kitchen counter for good measure, then opened the cupboard to try and find two clean glasses.

'Not only that, I do believe it is also tradition to celebrate by getting absolutely sloshed!', he said, picking up the bottle and

moving towards the living room. 'And what better way to do that than by lifting our spirits with something that's old enough to buy its own alcohol...'

'What is it? What's wrong?? You're as white as a sheet!'

Blythe was sitting on the sofa, phone in hand, looking completely disconnected from the world. He looked up at Ezzie, still standing there with the bottle in his one hand and the glasses in the other. Seconds passed as Blythe's eyes focussed, not really having registered the presence of his friend. It took a full minute of silence before he managed to force out an answer.

'... mum's dead...'

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'Have you been eating properly? What am I saying, of course you haven't... Have you?'

Blythe turned his head to see Ezzie intently staring at him, unconsciously scanning his face for the answer to his own question.

'You do *look* like you haven't been eating.. Let's get a sandwich or something.'

'M'fine, not hungry.'

'No, you're not. You're wasting away before my eyes and I won't have it!'

'I'm fine, really... I'll... I'll go round the shops before going home, alright?'

'Make sure that you do or you'll have me to deal with', Ezzie said half-jokingly, half-serious.

Blythe sat back and watched as a small sail boat went by, a regular view from their usual bench alongside the canal. And when the weather turned, there was always the option of letting yourself get hypnotized by the endless spectacle of water steadily flowing past. Today though, he couldn't enjoy either of them. Ezzie's scrutiny wasn't letting up so Blythe, feeling self-

conscious, started tracing the markings that had been carved into the bench with his fingers.

‘So... on a scale of zero to ten, zero being a peaceful Summers day and ten being your mum dying, how are you doing?’

With his back on the bench seat and his feet up in the air, Blythe was trying to find a specific mark on the underside of the wooden slats. For a couple of seconds, he lay there motionless, staring at the clouds overhead while pondering the question.

‘...’Bout an eight, eight and a half I think. Not as bad as when dad died but still...’

‘Hmm, so no change at all then?’

Blythe shot Ezzie a reproachful look, a look that turned to disgust as he tried to shake off the gum his inquisitive fingers had unintentionally found.

‘Don’t look at me like that, you know what I meant. I was only hoping things were.. a bit better, that’s all. Obviously I wasn’t expecting you to be all happy-go-lucky after only two months.’

‘Well’, Blythe sighed as he re-positioned himself to investigate the back of the bench, ‘two months isn’t that long, now is it? Not when you’re forced to completely overhaul your view on what life is.’

‘How do you figure that? I mean, don’t get me wrong... I’m not trying to say that what happened wasn’t utterly horrible and devastatingly cruel but life itself is still... life, you know?’

‘Life has changed because *I* have changed’, Blythe simply said.

Another sail boat drifted by, an offensively big one this time. So big, Ezzie thought it likely that if any extra-terrestrial beings were to land right then and there, they’d probably mistake it for Earth’s most dominant organism. And the people scurrying

around on its surface would likely be classified as parasitic beings of some sort which, Ezzie had to agree with himself, would be the logical conclusion. He couldn't fault the aliens for that, not really. Why they would land here of all places, was another matter entirely.

Ezzie quietly observed these newly classified parasites. The males donned what appeared to be white polo shirts and khaki shorts, while the females wore sun dresses and hats large enough for a small pony to use as shelter. Huge sunglasses covered a third of their faces, giving off the impression of having bug eyes when viewed from a distance, causing Ezzie to wonder which phylum, class and family they'd be grouped in. Meanwhile, the men were laughing jovially in a ritual designed to admire each other's ostentatious displays of wealth, wrapped around their wrists. The women were sipping champagne and simpering at one another in what was clearly supposed to be a warm and winning manner but which made them look rather more like haughty magpies. Magpies wearing hats and sundresses.

'I like magpies', Ezzie found himself thinking as he watched them float out of sight. When they were gone, he shook his head to empty it from the last bits of nautical distraction and watched Blythe, still searching, while trying to wrap his head around what his friend had said.

'I don't understand... How has life changed just because you've changed?', Ezzie went on, 'As far as I can tell the earth still revolves around the sun, the seasons still change. Water's still wet and stubbing your toe on the coffee table still hurts like hell!', he tried to joke.

Blythe halted whatever he had been searching for and looked him straight in the eye, just long enough for the silence to become an entity in its own right. It hung between them as it

grew, conveying that deep sense of 'Really?... Really?!' that can only develop between two people after knowing someone for a sufficiently long amount of time. Eventually, the silence dissipated by which time Blythe had continued his search. He was now reaching over the back of his seat, teetering close to the point where he would topple over into the bushes behind them.

'I've changed so how I experience things has also changed', was his slightly muffled response. 'Something happened that changed the way I feel, that changed my view on... on everything. It altered the way I experience my thoughts, my feelings and the world around me. Basically, life is different now because I *experience* it differently. It's not that difficult.'

'No, I... I get what you're saying, that's not the problem. The problem is, what you're saying is wrong...', Ezzie stated. 'Again, *you* may have changed but life itself is still the same.. Isn't it?'

'Life's just a word humans invented to indicate their state of unexplained consciousness... Scoot over, will ya?', he added while shooing Ezzie to the side of the bench he'd finished examining. 'There's no such thing as a Life that encompasses all living beings, that remains unaffected by those beings yet affects all beings equally. Life is different for every one and so it's only reasonable that life changes when they themselves change. That's why you can't change the world, only yourself.'

'I, well.. That's just wrong..', Ezzie whispered defiantly.

He sat chewing the inside of his cheek for a minute while Blythe meticulously repeated his prior search pattern.

'You know', Ezzie said, watching a pair of swans float by in an elegant display of majestic superiority, 'I've always thought life was like folding ten thousand paper cranes... It takes a lot of practice, patience and perseverance. But in the end, if one is lucky enough to succeed, you will have made a grand monument to your life.'

One of the swans glided towards the bank of the river.

‘...a token of your toil and hardship, if you will...’

Blythe glanced over his shoulder as Ezzie gestured towards the snow white bird while it hopped out of the water and onto the grass.

‘...evidence of your efforts in the form of ten thousand perfectly folded birds of elegance.’

The swan gawked rather rudely at that and started gnawing its own tail feathers.

‘Yes, I see what you mean’, Blythe replied, ‘simply... enchanting.’

‘At least my explanation is easy to understand’, Ezzie huffed.

‘Yeah, it was. However, *I* was talking about how I personally experience life. Not what it might or might not be *like* in general.’

‘Well what, generally speaking, do *you* think life is like then, hmm?’, Ezzie prodded.

Blythe thought for a moment, resting impossibly with his feet in the air and his head near the ground, creating a sort of scalene triangle with the wooden bench.

‘Life.. life is... like a kiwi, y’know?’

‘A kiwi?’

‘Yeah’, Blythe said, ‘like a kiwi.’

‘Uhm, okay.. I can figure this out, give me a second...’, Ezzie said while Blythe slid down an inch or so.

‘Life is like a kiwi..’, Ezzie pondered, ‘because... if you eat a kiwi before it’s ripe, it will be massively sour. And if you wait too long, its insides turn to a mushy, fermented goo... but... But with discipline and observation, you can select the exact moment when it’s sweet and nourishing! That’s it, isn’t it? As long as you’re patient and mindful, life can be sweet, yes?’

‘Naah’, Blythe said, wriggling like a snake in reverse to stop his syrup-like momentum towards the ground. ‘I just meant it’s kinda hairy, to be honest...’

‘Ohw..’

‘Yeah, like a pair of hairy testicles.’ Blythe thought for a bit before adding, ‘That works better actually... I amend my previous statement; life is like a pair of testicles! It might be ugly as hell but you wanna protect it all the same ‘cause otherwise it’s excruciatingly painful when you get hit with a problem.’

It was a good thing Ezzie had held on to Blythe’s earlier look of intense exasperation for he was making good use of it now.

‘I was being serious..’

‘Alright, alright.. Well, in that case.. life is like a pinball machine, I guess..’, he said with a deadpan expression, dropping his voice half an octave. ‘You desperately try to keep the ball rolling but, eventually.. inevitably.. every ball will fall into the black pit and stop... forever.’

With that, he ducked his head back underneath the seat, leaving Ezzie to try and figure out whether or not he’d been serious this time.

‘Ha!’, Blythe triumphantly shouted a few minutes later, ‘found it!’. He jabbed his finger at a carving of four tiny letters. ‘*E.D. & B.C.*, I knew I carved it into this one.’

‘Oh yes, that’s right. Wow, can’t believe it’s still there. Must’ve been twenty years ago, maybe even more!’

‘Yeah, twenty years already..’, he said, tracing his finger across the wood with an odd fondness. A tiny smile formed at the corners of his mouth. ‘Our world was so small back then, just you and me and whatever grand adventure we could come up with. Exploring unknown lands – a hitherto unvisited dark alleyway a few blocks down the road – or building our own fortress – basically just an old mattress, stuffed unceremoniously

in the yew bushes behind the chapel. Ready to take on any challenge, to defeat any foe...'

His smile dwindled.

'Guess we were just being naïve and foolish.'

'Maybe... I mean, we we're definitely naïve and foolish. Well, I was naïve, you were the fool, but still.. How's that a bad thing? Looking back through your current point of view is a bit unfair, don't you think? After all, you're the one going on and on about life and perspective or whatever. So it's fair to say your perspective was way more positive back then. So come on, I bet if you try hard enough you can think of something fun that happened that's still funny today!', Ezzie urged.

'Well', he hesitated, 'I do remember this one instance I rather enjoyed but I think you might not agree...'

'Oh really?', Ezzie said arching an eyebrow, a simple move that never failed to motivate his friend to push on. 'Then why don't you tell the story and afterwards I'll decide whether or not it's a good memory for me...'

Blythe turned around and sat down, squinting at something below the surface of the murky water as he delved into the depths of his mind, trying to recall details of events long passed.

'I guess we were about ten, eleven years old', Blythe started. 'It was a Wednesday, I think, somewhere during spring. Mid-April, if I had to guess. We had the afternoon off from school and so we were roaming around the neighbourhood, trying to find something to do. It was one of those days where everything you could think of seemed boring and dull.'

'Yeah, the kind of day when your ill-conceived plans present themselves as quaint, quirky ideas. We had our fair share of those, I reckon!', Ezzie interjected.

‘That’s a matter of interpretation, really’, Blythe said in a faux high-and-mighty tone. ‘Anyway, we decided we might as well go look at the sheep-..’

‘Oh! I remember that! *You* decided, not me.’

‘D’you want me to tell the story or not?’

‘Not if you’re just going to blatantly alter the facts!’

\*

It took some time to reach a consensus, negotiating who had done what and why, before they finally reached a version of the story they could both agree on. They *had* been struggling to find something to do and they *had* gone to the pasture to watch the sheep, an activity that wasn’t unusual for the children in the neighbourhood during springtime. Having lost most of their winter fleece coats, the animals looked a bit like strange white dogs than sheep but that wasn’t the attraction. By mid-April, the ewes would have gone through lambing which meant that there was the added bonus of watching the new-borns frolic in the grass. Still curious and not yet indifferent to humans, they would gambol up to the fence to inspect the tiny creatures observing them. If you were really lucky, they would even allow you to pet them!

That day, however, Ezzie and Blythe weren’t so lucky. No matter how much cooing noises they made, no matter how many fresh, crispy tufts of grass they offered, the little lambs just weren’t that interested. Ezzie, disappointed that their one idea didn’t pan out, was ready to give up and go home when Blythe had his moment of brilliance.

‘If they won’t come to us, we’ll just go to them!’, he exclaimed and before Ezzie could even blink, he ran off.

Most of the pasture was surrounded by an electric fence, low enough to reach over but high enough to stop the sheep from escaping. But it was only placed around three quarters of the

field because of a ditch that ran along one side. The ditch served as a natural barrier the animals could not cross, yet it also meant a way in. At least, Blythe thought so. He figured they could get to the other side by simply hanging on to the pole and then sort of hover-jump to the other side. And as if to demonstrate that his hypothesis was correct, he did just that. Clearing the ditch with ease, he turned around looking arrogantly triumphant and called for Ezzie to follow. Ezzie – who had been trying to figure out where best to place his hands, which patch of grass to kick off from and where he would most likely land – was snapped out of his analysis before he had fully developed his strategy.

‘I-.. I don’t think I should, what if I fall?’

‘You won’t fall! I just went and I didn’t fall, now did I?’

‘I suppose...’

‘Come on, it’ll be fine. Unless you want to wimp out and go home, then I’ll just pet the lambs all by myself’, Blythe said, hoping to coerce him into action.

‘a-alright, I’ll try..’

Edging over to the pole, Ezzie stood gathering confidence. Palms sweaty in anticipation, he figured there was really nothing for it but to jump and hope for the best. So he jumped. Within the space of a second there was a yelp, a splash and a groan. Standing in the smelly ditch water with one leg, Ezzie looked down and saw that his right leg was soaked up to his knee. Groaning and moaning, he put his left foot onto the grass and, with Blythe’s help, pulled himself out of the ditch.

After that, Ezzie was too annoyed to really enjoy playing with the animals. So they headed back after only a couple of minutes, their efforts of getting round the fence seemingly for nought. This time Ezzie went first, dead-set on not repeating his prior error.