

Finsbury Circus

She was crying. Again. He didn't know why, but somehow they were sitting on the grass together one minute, chatting about work and friends they had in common, and then the next minute her eyes were glistening and she started to cry. He wasn't sure what to do, and he began to fumble in his pockets to see if he had a tissue.

He sneaked a glance at her, trying to gauge if they might be happy tears. The first time he'd seen her cry, last week, they had been sitting on a bench watching a white-trousered man in a flat cap curl his glossy black ball across the velvet-smooth bowling green. She had nudged his arm, knocking his drink as she pointed to a woman approaching fast from the Liverpool Street end of the park. Dressed in a pale grey trouser suit, she was carrying a pair of pink high heels in one hand and holding her phone to her ear with the other. Half skipping, half running, she was out of breath, her cheeks flushed and flyaway tendrils of hair escaping from her high ponytail. Standing still for a moment her eyes had roamed across the lunchtime crowds, finally alighting on the one person she wanted to see. She squealed and ran, stopping in front of their bench, standing opposite a man who had run from the other end of the park to join her.

As if they were in a movie, they eyed each other, she reaching out to touch his long hair and he drinking her in, his eyes flicking from her face, to her bare feet, and back to her face again. The string quartet playing in the bandstand seemed to be magically attuned to them, as the music swelled right at that moment, the sweet, mellow notes dancing across the summer breeze.

'You're home,' the woman laughed.

'I'm home,' he replied, then he wrapped her in his arms, lifting her up off the path as they stood and held each other, he stroking her hair, nuzzling her cheek, and she smiling so wide, eyes shut tight and oblivious to the rest of the park.

He remembered how he had felt both uncomfortable and yet joyful at this display of emotion, and he'd looked down to see his sandwich scrunched up in his hand, tomato pips splashed across his knuckles. Glancing across at his friend, he saw she had her arms wrapped around herself as she stared at the reunited couple, tears streaming down her face. Noticing him watching her, she'd laughed, wiping her tears away.

'Sorry, couldn't help it,' she shrugged. 'I love a happy ending.'

There was no happy reunion today though. Should he say something to her? Or was it best to ignore the tears, focus on his lunch and change the subject? During the time that they'd worked together they hadn't been close, but he'd always liked her. Women were a bit of an unknown, if he was honest, the same way that *Sex and the City* scared him and he had never quite got the hang of the offside rule. He had struggled daily in what to talk about when he saw her, but somehow, after she'd left the firm, it had been much easier to open up to her over email. After a few weeks they'd begun to meet for lunch in the park, to chat first about colleagues and work and then, as they'd grown more comfortable around each other, to talk about books that they'd read, films that they'd seen or wanted to see, or the trashy TV that

they far too often found themselves slumped in front of after a long day at work. He didn't like to admit it to himself, but these lunchtimes in the park had become the highlight of his slow, monotonous weeks.

Although they had become friends over time, they weren't intimate and rarely spoke about personal matters. She was normally so cheerful, buffeting his occasional gloom with her breezy sunshine smiles. She would make him laugh, mimicking her evil boss at work or imagining out loud the lives of the people they watched stroll by them in the park. Once, after he'd had a disastrous morning at work, she had brought along a pair of fluffy pink deely boppers and made him wear them all through lunch. Remembering his embarrassment, he heard again the chug of mopeds parking outside the gates, the roar of the underground beneath them, and the snort of her laugh every time she had looked at him. But now she was hunched and weeping against a backdrop of sunburned faces and picnics, laughter and sunshine.

London could break you sometimes. Perhaps that was why she was crying - that suddenly the grey, dirty, rude and exhausting side to this frenetic city had just become too overwhelming. Some days he would go home and shower, standing under the stream of water for half an hour scrubbing away at the layer of grime over his body, unable to reach where it had crept under his skin, into his heart, threatening to smother him entirely.

But now he had Finsbury Circus, his sanctuary.

Previously it had just been a brief moment of peace on his daily hurry to and from the tube, head down, coat buttoned high, a crumpled copy of the Metro thrust under one arm as he marched through the park, focused only on getting to and from work. But now that he met her there for lunch sometimes, it had become an entirely different experience, and he had fallen in love with this small little park that fit snugly in the midst of a world of bankers and lawyers and business-men. Friends preferred to lunch in the shadow of the Gherkin, or play it casual in Spitalfields Market, but for him there was nowhere better than the park.

In the winter they had huddled on benches, buffeted by the grey, November wind with their hands cupped around Styrofoam beakers of hot chocolate. They laughed at others who scurried through the park, fighting with umbrellas blown inside out and looking aghast that anyone would want to sit there in such miserable weather. On summer days, like today, when the park was teeming with others all escaping the confines of the office, and their suits, for an hour, they rarely got a bench and had to battle instead for a space on the grass. He felt jealous at having to share this place that he thought of as belonging only to them, but the swish and sway of the park's trees soon soothed him and he relaxed his shoulders, allowing the park to work its magic. On finding a spot that lunchtime, tucked in between two glorious Technicolor flowerbeds, she had kicked off her sandals, stretched out her legs and wriggled her red-nailed toes in the perfect, soft green grass, and he'd wished he could lock that moment in his head forever.

Now, she looked so small and fragile, her face wet with tears and her shoulders shuddering. She appeared unconcerned that everyone could see her - that people were walking past, glancing their way and then looking back again, wondering what had happened. He worried that they might think it was his fault she was crying. There was a girl now, walking towards them, carrying a large pile of books. They looked heavy, and the girl looked tired,

but as she saw his friend crying she slowed, frowning, almost as if she might stop and say something. He caught her eye and, instinctively, smiled at her. She shifted the weight of the books in her arms, smiled back and, as if reassured, strode on, passing them without another look.

'I'm sorry,' said his friend. 'I'm sorry.'

He remembered his mum crying, once, like this. She'd picked him up from school, and they had walked home together, stopping to buy a watermelon from the Turkish store on the way. It had been a hot summer's day then too, and children in shorts and swimming costumes had been playing in their street, running through garden sprinklers, kicking footballs around and shrieking every time the ball went near one of the houses, terrified that they would break a window. His mum had opened their front door just as the phone started to ring, and he remembered her sinking down onto the stairs, the phone in one hand and the blue plastic bag, bulging with watermelon, bumping against her leg. As joyful shouts of 'Goal!' rang from the street outside, the voice of his grandmother had echoed, tinny and shaking, into the cool, dark hall saying, 'Maggie? Maggie darling? It's okay...everything will be okay.'

He'd felt adrift then, too, not knowing how to react to his mother's grief. She had repeated over and over, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' until he'd felt that it was her fault, somehow, that granddad was dead. In the end, solemn and pretending maturity, he had placed a grubby hand on his mother's knee and muttered, 'There, there.' It was a baby's comforter, the words instinctive and natural. She had gathered him into her arms and held him close, stroking his hair and taking up his refrain.

'There, there. There, there.'

His hand hovered over his friend's knee. Should he pat her, or would that make her feel like a pet dog? Probably he should have said something by now, and he'd already ruined everything with his imbecilic silence. What had they been talking about before she'd started to cry? He couldn't remember anything provocative. Hadn't they just been talking about Doctor Who? Or were they bemoaning the loss of *Benji's* and the fact that it was impossible to find a simple cheese and tomato sandwich anywhere in London anymore, unless you didn't mind paying a tenner, giving the cheddar a miss and swapping for a Hungarian goats cheese with exclusive Italian vine-ripened tomatoes on home made Mexican flat bread, or some other such nonsense? Yes, that was when she'd started to cry. His mum was his one reference point in the puzzling world of women, and she had only ever cried in front of him that one time, and that, at least, had been about something understandable, but a sandwich? No, it must be about something else.

He hadn't cried for years, not properly, and as a child he'd tended to run away to cry, and only if absolutely necessary. He had vague, damp memories of being curled in small, dark places: under the hedge at his grandmother's house, inside his wardrobe at home, behind the piano in the school hall one day when there had been nowhere else private to run. He remembered seeing the big, open hall, austere and frightening now that it was empty of children, the full-length windows casting sunbeams onto the polished wooden floor. He could see the tiny specks of dust dancing in the light, and he could smell that strange, distinctive school smell that was something old and musty, paper and pencil sharpenings and books with

cracked spines, all mixed in with clinical bleach and floor wax and vomit and urine. He had felt safe, crouched behind the piano, crying. He couldn't remember now what he'd even been crying about, but he remembered rocking, balanced on his heels, arms wrapped around himself, crying softly and hoping no one would find him.

He opened his mouth to say something then closed it again, folding and re-folding the empty crisp packet he held in his hands. He'd felt this awkwardness, uncertainty of what to do, once before on the Eastbound circle line heading towards Moorgate one morning in rush hour. He'd had no seat, of course, and had been standing in the central aisle between the two rows of facing seats. He'd been reading *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, struggling with the weight of it in just one hand since he needed the other to grasp the strap and stay upright. He'd reached that part, anyway, where Samwise Gamgee was going to carry Frodo up the mountain, and he had a feeling that he should save it for later, perhaps when he was somewhere quiet, and alone, and private. Just in case.

Dropping the book into his bag he'd looked across the row of seats in front of him; a man reading *Harry Potter*, a lady chewing her pencil over Sudoku, a woman with beautiful black hair coiled around her head and fastened at the top with a wooden clip. He noticed that nearest the doors sat an elderly gentleman; well turned out in a nice tweed jacket with those funny little wooden football buttons. The old man was crying, silently and slowly, with just a trickle of a tear every now and then that would run down his cheek, slipping almost unnoticed into his tidy white beard. The old man's hands, their paper-thin skin mottled with age spots, were welded together, as if they were the only thing holding him in one piece.

He'd felt paralysed, torn between wanting to help and yet unthinkingly submitting to the unwritten rules of the tube - that you fix your gaze in the middle distance, as if standing on a mountain top quite alone, and then you act as if there is no-one else around you at all times, unless you're forced to acknowledge perhaps a comedy tube driver's comments on a delay, or a sweating tourist's plea for help with an unruly suitcase. He'd done nothing, of course, his bag heavy and the book bruising his leg as he jumped off the tube at Moorgate with a sigh, feeling disappointed and relieved, frustrated and sad.

He looked again at the woman crying on the grass next to him. The bustling noise of the park faded to silence as he tentatively raised his hand and slowly, gently, placed it upon the small of her back. He felt the warmth there, from where the sun had beamed upon her, and softly he began to trace his fingers in a circle across her back. She turned to look at him; her eyes rimmed red from her tears, puffy and swollen, and her nose red too with a tiny droplet hanging on the end. She brushed it away quickly, flushing at being laid so bare before him. He thought she had never looked more beautiful.

'There, there,' he whispered. 'There, there.'