

Sunday morning. Text message wakes me. I'm up and scrabbling under the bed for the phone with just a hint of shame for my eagerness. Only one person texts me.

'Have you heard of Syon Park?'

I stop to think for a bit.

'Are you Jewish?' I always do proper capitals now.

'Haha.' says the reply. 'Dick. Syon not zion. Butterfly house. Been there?'

I text out 'Why do I feel I'm about to?' and straight away - *how* does she text so quickly? - comes the reply.

'Because you're clairvoyant? Great. Get thee ready.'

I look at the time on the phone - it's only 7:08 - and a last text comes while I'm looking at the screen.

'I'll see you in 40 mins.'

Even though I'm tired, I get wriggly expecting Anne and can't get back to sleep. I should get up and shower and get ready, but the thought of *being* ready and sitting there waiting obediently when she arrives is too much, so instead I drool into the pillow for a while and daydream.

All of sudden there are brisk footsteps outside my room and the door flings open. Without any preamble, Anne jumps on the bed, all knees and elbows, and pins me under the sheet.

"Fuck. *Fuck!* I can't believe it!"

“Sorry. Sorry, I was in bed, I should’ve got up...” She’s ignoring me.

“I can’t believe it! They closed it down. The butterfly house. I *really* wanted to go there.”

“Uh. How did you get in?”

“Henry walked out as I went to push the buzzer. He let me in. Oh, I can’t believe it!”

I sit up properly in bed, still groggy - definitely groggy compared to this onslaught.

“You can’t believe...? They closed the...?”

“...the butterfly house. There was this wonderful butterfly house at Syon Park. I remember my Mum took me when I was a kid and I woke up this morning and thought *that’s* what I want to do today. So I looked it up in the A-Z and found it, it’s way out West, and I texted you and now I’ve found out it was closed, ages back, to build some stupid bloody *thing*.

I let loose a long breath and rub my eyes. Anne looks at me with a hint of pity.

“Fancy a cup of tea?” I venture.

“You mean you want *me* to make you a cup of tea?”

“It’s alright, I’ll be up in a minute - I’ll make it.” But she wraps a pillow round my head and pushes me roughly back on the bed.

“No, no, poor Finn. You need a sleep-in. I’ll make the tea. God knows you deserve it after a hard week in the...” - the pillow comes back off my face long enough for Anne to give me a hawkish look - “...newsroom?”

“Lame.” The pillow comes back - and not gently - though it’s kind of pleasant in the dark. “White with one?” I mutter meekly into the fabric and she clatters off to put the kettle on and give me some peace. After a while I decide not to push my luck and sidle to the shower.

When I get out there’s a mug of tea cooling on the arm of the couch, plus some toast. Anne’s sitting with her legs crossed on one of the wooden chairs, cradling her own cup. She gives my skinny towel-wrapped frame a leer as I hurry to my room, where I throw on clothes willy-nilly, rub my hair mostly dry and re-emerge.

“So, oh hunk-of-man, what can you do about my vanished butterflies?”

“Tea tea tea...”

“Oh, you’re a little addict.”

The first mouthful is like sunlight in my brain. I swill another around my teeth and send it down. Pause to enjoy effect. Open mouth...

“So. Anne. Good morning!”

“Hi Finn. How are you?”

“Very well now, thank you. Thanks for the tea.”

“Not a problem.”

“So, she-who-will-never-guess-my-job... I, ah, sense that you have a certain up and at ‘em thing going on this morning.”

“You’ve hit it. Right on the head.”

“...and I sense also that you’ve had a little disappointment... something about butterflies... I might have slept through some of that part.”

“Again: spot on.”

“Okay, well, I guess what that means is we need an alternative. A different activity that doesn’t involve butterflies; one that’s just as excellent a way to spend the day - maybe better? - that you and I should think of right now. Toast?”

“I’ve just eaten, thank you. Those are for you. And you’re absolutely right, we need an activity. So, oh fortunate one - what shall we do?”

I grab a piece of toast and take a big bite, chewing to stall for time.

“Hmmm.”

Again, stalling with the long exaggerated swallow and a sip of tea.

“Okay, here’s a few ideas.

“One, we could do a day trip inside London. These are the things I like doing: trip to Richmond Park, trip to the Natural History Museum, trip to the Design Museum - or else picking out a place neither of us has been. Benefits: stimulating to the mind, easy to tackle, can relocate to the pub afterwards and have a meal. The downside? *Meh*. You can do that any time.”

I’m making this up as I go along.

“So, suggestion two: playing a game. Pull out the rail map, point to a random station. Go there, and get on the first train we see. Don’t pay for the train and get off after an hour.

“Benefits of this plan: spontaneity is fun and we could end up somewhere brilliant. Potential downfall: trains go to Luton too.” I swallow the last of the tea. “Any suggestions to throw in the mix here? I’m just making this up.”

“And you’re doing a wonderful job. I like the idea of a train trip - we’re up early and we should take advantage of that - but maybe the random factor would throw it out? Why don’t we load the dice in our favour - any suggestions on places to go?”

“Well, again, there’s always the ‘meh’ options - places everyone goes. But we should find somewhere awesome. Forget about Brighton and Oxford and Cambridge and so on. Do you have a map?”

“Must have left mine at home.”

“Alright, alright. Hang on - come in here.”

I rummage through the bookshelf in the main living room area and sure enough there are a couple of decent-sized fold-out maps that show the south of England. We spread them on the floor and get down on our hands and knees, crumpling the paper where we lean on it.

We both go quiet as we scan the tiny village names in a band around London. Anne traces her finger down a rail line through Kent.

“What about this? Wye.”

“Wye not?”

“That cuppa’s done you wonders. To think you were in bed half an hour ago.”

“It’s next to Ashford, which is on the main London rail line. About...” I press my thumb into the gap between the two names then compare it to the scale bar “...two miles? We could walk it at a pinch, but it looks like there’s another railway that branches off. What do you think?”

“A tiny little town in the middle of Kent. It could be full of chavs and housing estates, but what’s the bet it’s the prettiest little place you’ve ever seen?”

I brew on this for a moment, pulling a thoughtful face.

“So what do we need?”

“We need to walk out the door and go.”

“Hang on we don’t even...” I reach for the A-Z and open it at the rail map.

“Look, the line goes straight into Charing Cross,” says Anne, her voice rising. “You don’t need that.”

I stop to think again, running through things we might need. Then we both look up from our bums-in-the-air, map-scouring pose as we hear Phil and Jane’s door open and someone walk to the loo. Anne looks back at me with a kind of warm tolerance and says in a quieter voice “Get your wallet, a hat in case it’s cold and your jacket.”

When we slip out, closing the door softly, I hear the toilet flushing behind us.

“We’re on the way!” Anne announces to the empty street, enjoying the loudness of her voice - and she grabs the scruff of my jacket and shakes me. I just scrunch up my shoulders and duck my head away from her - is she going to be this annoying all day? - but eventually she calms down enough to curl her arm around my waist as we walk, back to being the affectionate Anne that she does best, and we settle into a rhythm. Down the stairs to the tube on the Northern Line; comfortable in each other’s company as our carriage rocks to Charing Cross.

“How am I going to ask you about your week if I don’t know what you do?”

“It’s a problem isn’t it?” says Anne. “It’s a shame, ‘cause it was a good one, too. It made it all seem worthwhile.”

“I reckon you do something artistic. Kind of creative, or something with people. Working with retards maybe.”

Anne laughs out her nose and shakes her head.

“No - that’s the weekends. But you’re close with artistic. What about you. How was your week?”

I look up, trying to read the signs that flash by as we pull into a station. Charing Cross.

“It was fine. This is us.”

“You know your eyes were doing the most horrific thing just then.”

“How do you mean?”

“They were flickering when you tried to read things out the window. Real *Exorcist* styles.”

We get out and trudge up to the overland rail station, taking our time because there’s no one around. Up on the concourse we stand arm in arm looking at the timetable board. The names of towns scroll past and that train lady’s voice intones the destinations: the sound of modern Britain. There - Ashford. Leaving in three minutes. It couldn’t be easier.

“Anyway - your week?”

We’re sat on the mostly empty train in facing seats. Anne’s gathered up newspapers.

“Yeah,” I begin, with my feet up on the cushion in defiance of the signs. “Miles got in touch.” And as the train shunts gently away from the platform, overcoming its inertia with a lurch then building up speed in a smooth motion, I lay the happenings of the last few days in Anne’s lap - taking my time because she seems patient and interested. I tell her about Kip first and his random visit to our place - she thinks it’s strange that he knew where to come and asks lots of questions - then we talk about Miles and his business idea, and finally Henry and his drugs.

Outside, the view that speeds by grows more rural as we pass into the Kentish countryside. The sky turns a perfect powder blue with towering white cloud-heads, like a painting with spitfires in it. Maybe there’ll be rain later; a classic British summer day.

We reach Ashford and lo-and-behold, when we get off there’s another train going to Wye. By the time we get there - just an hour and a half since we left my place - we still haven’t finished dissecting my week. The train pulls away and we stand alone on the small country platform carrying on the conversation, oblivious for the moment to the sudden quiet, the birdsong, the emptiness. Anne wants to know about the machinations of Henry’s double life - does he have a regular job? So it’s like two separate careers? - but I still want to ask about Miles.

“Well, like I said Finn, you could do a lot worse than going into business with him. You know Miles is quite driven, don’t you?”

“That’s half my worry. He seems so intense about it. It’s just like... it’s a *massively* ambitious project. It’ll either be a huge success or a total failure - there’s no middle ground. It’s a hell of a long shot and I’m not sure I want to be shackled to Miles if and when it goes down. No offense. I mean, he’s your friend.”

“I know and that’s alright. Yvonne and Miles are good friends, but I know what they’re like. But I don’t see what the risk is. Are you worried about the fallout with me if it all went wrong?”

“Sure. I mean, that would be weird.”

“No it wouldn’t.”

It’s perfectly quiet on the platform now but for the two of us standing face-to-face. It’s slightly absurd.

“I know exactly what Miles is like, but there’s no way anything that might happen with him would affect what goes on between you and I. You think those two are more important to me than you?”

I shrug, uncomfortable, but she holds my eye.

“Do you?”

I don’t say anything.

“So this is what you should do. You should go along with his plan. Just make sure you insulate yourself from him a little. You sound like you’re getting along fine, but make sure when you’re dealing with him at work that you keep it professional. Because I think it’s worth getting involved. You don’t want to end up being the fifth Beatle.”

“The what?”

“You know. The guy who was in the Beatles before they were big. He played drums before Ringo.”

“I thought he was kicked out.”

“Whatever. Or the guy who sold his stake in Apple Computers then, and missed out on a billion dollars. I’m just saying, you don’t want to look back and wish you hadn’t backed out of something good for just some stupid social reason.”

I look at my feet for a while, thinking.

“Alright. You’re right. Anyway, it’s just some freelance work at the moment.”

Anne gives me a slow, pleasurable smile that makes it look like she’s genuinely happy for what I’ve said.

“Wye not!” she exclaims, and thrusts her arm through mine. “Now where are we?!”

We look around. Wye doesn’t seem so small after all. From the station we can see serried houses marching in pretty tiled rows down the streets - there might be a couple of thousand living here. And then: “What the hell’s that?”

A high down rises on the other side of the village, running off into the distance on either side, and on it, right above the houses for all to see is a great white crown, carved into the chalk of the hillside.

“Finn, my boy - we have our destination!”

We make our way over a bridge and down a series of roads, always trying to keep the crown in sight. It has a familiar look - like something on a coin that you never notice despite seeing it every day - and even though it's just a simple outline with a cross on top, there's something eerie about it.

“It's modern, isn't it? It's got to be,” says Anne. I ask if this is better than butterflies.

“Much better. God, it's spooky though isn't it. Have you been to see the Long Man of Wilmington?”

“The one with the boner?”

“No that's the other one. The long man has two sticks in his hand. Well they look like sticks, but people say they represent the edges of a door and he's guarding the entrance to the underworld.”

“What do you think this is guarding, the entrance to a giant stamp collection?”

“Haha. But it is modern, isn't it? That's a royal crown of some sort. It's like it says Queen woz here.”

Eventually we find ourselves down a Coldharbour Lane - “Just like Brixton” - and the crown, close now, disappears behind trees. There's a path.

“Ladies first.”

We wind up an overgrown track and emerge from the woods onto a grassy slope. The crown's hard to see now because we're on it, but the lines are clear. They're channels cut into the turf that have been filled with white flints - pale-looking stones that show dark hearts of glass where they break.

"Look, there's a plaque."

And sure enough the crown is modern - or near enough. A commemorative effort marked out by students in 1902 for King Edward's coronation. The mystery's gone.

"Bit of a shame there's an explanation, isn't it?" says Anne, and we drift off the site and further up the hill.

From here the view gets silly-pretty - all fields and hills and oaks under a white-bright sun. We mill about for a while then turn our backs on the town and follow a path. We should have got some water.

By the time we've gone down the other side of the hill and strolled through fields where insects fly up as our feet swish through the grass, the sun's passed behind clouds. Finally, after a couple of hours walking, we spot some houses and - joy! - a pub and just as we near it the heavens open and we run the last hundreds yards in the rain.

It's been a day of good timing.

The downpour eases off as quickly as it came. By the time we've ordered our lunch and a drink each it's bright enough to settle out back on the outdoor tables where the white concrete patio drying in the sun gives off a fresh, chalky odour.

The only other person out here is on the table next to us - and I can see Anne getting curious. He's in walking boots and shorts and a vest with a funny badge - a proper anorak

- but tanned and in his mid fifties by the look of it. Anne's not even pretending to listen to me as she peers at him filling out paperwork. Eventually she throws in a shamelessly pointless remark, and opens a front.

"Lovely day!" she says loudly. "So lucky with the sun!"

He looks up from his work, pen hovering.

"Isn't it!" is his jocular reply after a slight pause - and straight away Anne's in like a terrier:

"What are you doing?"

"Oh, well, I'm... filling out a census. Of butterflies."

"Butterflies?" And that's it - Anne gets straight up out of her seat and carries her drink over to his table. "Oh I love butterflies. Are you catching them? May we join you?" And so on and so on - turning on the charm and leaving the poor man with no option but to wave at the seat next to him - and me to gather my drink and our plastic order number and join them.

With her initial assault successful, Anne slows her pace, giving the man some space and settling into the steady business of information gathering.

"I'm Anne - and this is Finn."

"Hello. Hello Finn - I'm David."

"Are you with the National trust then?" She takes a sip of her beer.

“No, not really. I’m doing some work for the UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme. It sounds grand doesn’t it? I volunteer for them, running what we call a transect where I count all the butterflies in a set area throughout the year and record the different species.”

Anne looks like the cat that got the cream. David looks like a jolly nice man who’s unsure whether he’s having the piss taken out of him. But I can tell that Anne can tell, and she launches into an earnest account of getting up early this morning because she wanted to see the butterflies at Syon House and how disappointing it was, and isn’t it a coincidence to meet a butterfly expert out here today? And she makes sure to put in plenty of detail so it’s clear she’s not lying and David warms up with a pleased look on his brown sun-creased face.

“Well you know it’s the Duke of Northumberland that owns Syon Park. I believe it was he who closed the butterfly house down, to build a commercial wing of some sort, and Lord knows if it got made anyway. But yes, a crying shame they closed it - although I’d not been there for donkey’s.”

“Tell me about your survey” says Anne. “Are you trying to find the rare ones?”

“Well, not so much. The fate of the butterflies isn’t what concerns us. Not really. No. We’re using them as a canary species if you see?”

David has a musical kind of voice - an up-and-down tone with a slightly flutey pitch.

“Butterflies are delicate creatures, as you’d imagine. They’re sensitive to temperature change and pesticides and chemical levels too. Because of course they all start out as caterpillars and caterpillars are by nature rather porous to their surrounds.

“So you see, counting butterflies is like taking the pulse of the countryside. If anything’s different - if the body of the country’s running hot or cold, or catching some kind of fever

- then chances are you'll see it in the butterflies. More of this kind, less of that - though decoding such things isn't really my domain; I'm just a volunteer.

“But to answer your question Anne, as an enthusiast not a scientist, of course I see it as my right to get excited about spotting the rare ones, as you put it. Look here: you see! I recorded two Clouded Yellows this morning in the field below the downs.”

“Oh we came through there. Down the narrow track? But what's a Clouded Yellow?”

And I think I'm content to just sit here sipping beer, listening to Anne and David. Our meals arrive.

By the time we finish we've forgotten more about Clouded Yellows and Painted Ladies and the beautiful Chalk-hill Blue than most people will ever know. Then David tells us the best way for walking back and where we can call a cab from halfway if we're tired; and I watch Anne give him a fond goodbye - he gives us both a tarrah in return, with his blue eyes and brown face under his toweling hat - and we head off back to the road; ambling, both of us satisfied in our different ways.

The walk back to Wye takes longer than we bargained for; mostly because there's a trail on the bank marked out in green signs with a crested heron in the logo and Anne insists on stopping to look at the river every ten minutes. We make it to the station with no dramas - though there's a half hour wait to get to Ashford and then another wait on the platform there. Then when we get on the train to London we gather up all the abandoned weekend papers that we didn't get round to looking at on the way out and read them all the sleepy way home. When we get to Charing Cross dusk is falling; by the time we finally make it to Anne's front door, really kind of pooped now, it's proper dark.

We trudge upstairs, feet too heavy to lift, and slump onto Anne's soft bed. After a while of lying face down I force myself up, get two big glasses of water and bring Anne's in to her. She gulps it down in one go.

“That’s better. Oh that was a good day. How is it that my back’s sore?”

I shrug, shy suddenly, and lie myself carefully down. Anne comes over, props herself over me on locked elbows, catches my eye and holds it. I lie there, looking back.

After a while the tension in my face seems to melt. Anne stays there, watching. The room blurs into obscurity - everything fading away beyond her brown steady eyes - and I forget about Wye and about aches and pains and me and her, or anything else at all, and just look.

It goes on for a long time. Her pupils flicker slightly as she studies my own gaze, flaring and contracting minutely as if she’s trying to focus on something behind my face. Then she says in a very ordinary voice:

“I like you a lot, did you know that? In my trance the words slip inside unjudged.

“No,” I tell her. “No. I didn’t know that at all.”