

## **The Community**

It started as a Wednesday like any other, hanging like a new moon between weekends. I stood patiently at the bus stop waiting for the number forty-three. The shelter was made of sandstone with a wooden roof so that the tar dripped down the walls like an afterthought. People stood looking drowsily into the palm of their hand, bent over, as if suspended from their pads, like streetlamps. Others were walking, not looking where they were going, stumbling around each other, their mouths gaped open, mesmerised by the thing they held, holding it out in front of them as if they were being led along by it like a dog on a lead. Some even had leads trailing from beneath their jackets as if plugged into their abdomen.

An old man, hobbled along towards his seat. 'Heh, look at this,' he hollered to anyone who cared, 'zombie land,' he shook his head. 'it's like zombie land. Heh, heh.' He sat down and whisked his cap off then whipped it back into place with one last shake of his head. He tore off a piece of pastry and threw it to the pigeons, his morning ritual complete.

The pigeons pecked at the ground, the tips of their beaks tapping away incessantly as the number forty-three pulled up and sighed as it dropped to let me on. The driver offered as much as he could muster, making the sound of either a moan or a morning, I couldn't tell, before climbing the stairs and reluctantly settling for a seat that wasn't my own. The rain from the previous torrents had collected inside the roof and was dripping from the seams along the ceiling onto the taught plastic coverings. Teenagers spread themselves out into the corners of the bus, their limbs splayed, like menacing arachnids, sitting stationary, waiting to scuttle or pounce. Songs were played then discarded for the next one halfway through. I tried to focus on the book in my lap but my attention span was being crossed by people

broadcasting their personal lives. I stared out through the window at the world passing by. Streets and lanes raced passed me like pages of a flicked through magazine.

At the town the bus pulled up at the stop in the middle of the high-street. My eyes were drawn to a rather attractive looking young woman with shoulder length black hair who lifted her head up from her pad and stared up at me. She held her pad in front of the face of the old man next to her. He frowned into it and became transfixed for about twenty seconds. Then he too turned his head towards me. The bus pulled away and drove on further out of town.

At the next stop on the outskirts a man boarded the bus with his face leaning into his pad. He caught my eye as he reached the top deck, and I noticed his face bore the same countenance as the dark-haired woman. I turned around and watched him as he strode to the back seat of the bus. He looked right back at me then turned and forced his pad into the face of the woman who was sat next to him. After another twenty seconds they were both looking towards me. I heard a shout from downstairs. "Hey. What the hell are you doing." Then it was silent. I looked around and saw everyone with their face drawn into their pads. I shrugged it off and continued to watch out of the window. Again, people were pushing their pads into other people's faces. When I turned around everyone was looking towards me with the same stoic countenance.

The bus pulled into the city station and the doors hissed open. I hurried off and walked up the incline between the shop facades and the tall vertical windowpanes. Everyone was standing looking into their pads that were all orientated towards me as if I were north. I went into the café and ordered a coffee. The woman behind the counter looked up at me and said nothing, then proceeded to place an empty polystyrene cup under the machine, pressing a button that brought the coffee sloshing to a froth. She placed it onto the counter.

“Four dollars,” she snapped, swinging the contactless towards me. These had been the only words I’d had spoken to me all morning.

I sat down in a corner of the café and looked around. People seemed to be kissing everywhere I looked. When they stopped, there was a subdued look in their eyes, like they had reached the mordant phase of drunkenness. They all stopped and stared at me. I continued to sip my coffee trying to conceal the flinch as it burnt my palette. Faces were almost pressed up to the window looking in at me as I sat there cautiously surveying the interior of the coffee house. The employees behind the counter had stopped serving and were stood still. Everywhere I looked everyone was looking directly at me, their eyes boring into me like pallid memories. I rose from my seat, picked up my coffee and headed towards the entrance. The crowd parted enough to let me walk by, but turned like an array of satellite dishes tracking my trajectory through them.

As I passed through, I could sense them following after me. I looked from side to side and felt they were imitating my movements, mimicking the rigour of my walk.

‘What do you want?’ I cried out.

‘What do you want.’ They cried back in unison.

‘What do you want from me?’ I cried again, clenching my hands to the top of my head while my ears started to ring.

‘What do you want from me?’ the crowd echoed, placing their hands onto their heads.

I stumbled towards the wall near the teller machine and knelt into it. I could sense the denseness of the crowd suffocating me as if a dark mass was descending upon me. I closed my eyes tightly in anticipation of what was going to happen next. The ringing increased in intensity so that it felt as if my brain were rupturing.

After a while the ringing in my ears ceased, and everything fell silent. Then I heard a warm gentle voice as a hand touched my shoulder.

‘Let me help you.’

I looked up and, in my stupefaction, I was confronted by a familiar face.

‘Amy’ I whispered. She stood leaning over me, her long red chestnut hair dangled over one side of her face. As she brushed it back, I found myself looking into her endearing azure eyes. ‘Amy. I don’t know what’s happening. I think I’m losing my mind.’ I released my hands from my head and saw a canvas of faces looking down at me. Their expressions appeared more concerned and mellow.

‘You’re not losing your mind,’ Amy confided as she stroked my hair, ‘you’ve just been out of it for a while.’

I looked at her; my face contorted with confusion. ‘Out of what?’

Amy tilted her head to mirror my gaze. ‘You’re not yourself.’

‘I’m not myself?’ I mouthed.

‘Yes.’ Amy nodded. ‘It’s alright.’ She stroked my head some more, still trying to hold my gaze as my eyes traced the outline of her beauty. ‘It’ll be alright. Just look.’ I caught her eyes again and she nodded reassuringly, manoeuvring a blue pad up towards my face.

My heart started speeding. ‘Where did you get that?’

Amy widened her eyes. ‘You left it at your hub.’

‘No.’ I winced, pushing it away from me.

‘You need this.’

Her words echoed in my mind as I recalled the last time she uttered them. It was a couple of months ago, back at her hub. I had noticed a change in her. Spending more and more time scrolling through the purple pad in the palm of her hand, becoming more and more consumed by it.

‘You can’t live without it,’ I snapped, knocking the pad out of her hand. I wanted to make her angry, but she just casually walked by me and picked it back up off the floor.

‘Why are you so anxious?’ she asked, unaffectedly looking up at me.

‘You’re making me anxious.’ I barked.

‘You need this. It will make you stronger. More confident.’ she told me, raising up her pad.

‘It’s not confidence if you’re not afraid.’ I told her.

‘Don’t you trust me?’

‘I do trust you. It’s just, I don’t want it. I want to feel the pain, sense the fear. I need time with myself. How else will I truly see beauty. I don’t want to be numb with happiness. You think everyone looks happy? Nobody sees it, because nobody’s looking. They’re only seeing the world through their pads. Everyone’s looking at photos of people made out to look how they want themselves to look. It’s not real. There’s a real world out there full of natural beauty.’

Amy looked at me sympathetically and nodded. ‘You’re not yourself.’

‘That’s just it. I am myself.’

Amy edged closer. ‘You’re not yourself.’ she repeated.

My head felt as if it were being crushed in a vice. I looked at Amy and wondered if I was actually being myself at all. Tears welled up in my eyes.

‘I think you need this. You can’t keep on like this. Being alone. Feeling pain.’

The thought of the pain welled up inside me as Amy held her pad up before my face. I looked into it as if I were staring into my soul. The fear flared up within me as I felt myself being overwhelmingly consumed. I could see myself staring at me from the pad. The image pulsing with intensity. I tried to shut it out by focusing out through the screen, beyond it. I looked at Amy who was smiling back at me. Soon my body began to tremble. I could feel myself going, the world and all the weight falling away, as I found myself losing control, my chest chuckling, before erupting into hysterical laughter in chorus with all those around me.

The following Thursday things appeared different. I boarded the bus and was greeted by the driver with a rapturous ‘Good morning! How are you?’

‘I’m fine, thanks. How are you?’ I replied.

‘Great.’ replied the driver beaming. ‘Lovely weather, isn’t it?’

‘It is.’ I agreed nodding in acknowledgement to the climate of his expression. I walked towards my seat and noticed that everyone appeared to be smiling. They smiled at me, and I smiled back at them as I sat down. A man got on the bus and sat down behind me.

After a short while I felt a tap on the shoulder. ‘Where are you off too then,’ he asked.

‘I’m just off into town.’

‘Me too,’ he returned, which caused my heart to sink as he continued to tell me his reasons for going into town. I tightened my eyes at his ailments and nodded at his pragmatism towards solving all of society’s ills.

All this pleasantness was becoming exhausting. I didn’t know how to keep up this act all the way to town. I thought about the greeting from the bus driver and all the smiling people. It made me uncomfortable. I wasn’t used to this behaviour. I pulled out my blue pad from my pocket and turned it on. As I waited for the insignia the man continued to talk incessantly. Then the screen lit up, though this time I didn’t look through it but deliberately stared into it. I could feel myself being drawn into it and I let myself be consumed as I heard the man fall silent. I looked at him, but his countenance had turned impassive. Then I looked around me. They were no longer smiling back at me, only returning my blank look.