

Two hours and Seventeen Minutes

Two hours and seventeen minutes, that's how long I've been sat here. Two hours and seventeen minutes sat here on this wall on this grey May Day bank holiday weekend, watching the tidal flow of traffic as cars come and go, seeing them circle and start and jostle for position. Two hours and seventeen minutes of watching the families bundle out from their spacious air conditioned bubbles, their SUVs and 4x4s and family saloons. The grownups stretch their legs while the little ones run around, all cooped up and hyperactive and glad for the fresh air and space. And I see the few straggling teenagers, stuffing their hands into their pockets and following sullenly behind, wishing themselves invisible or elsewhere. I know that feeling.

Every time I see a blue Picasso roll in through the entrance my heart beats faster in my chest. Even now, even after I've realised that the Citroen Picasso is not only bewilderingly common but also seems to only come in three colours. My heart, as usual is too quick to the punch. No, not them, not this time. Maybe they'll be here in a minute.

I've emptied my pockets already, the fiver and change swallowed up by the overpriced Burger King when we came in to eat. This glass and plasterboard maze, home to every chain restaurant you could feasibly name and more besides, all wrapped up with a generous 20% surcharge of a bow on top since well, it's not like you have any choice in the matter, is it?

This is my fault, that's what I keep telling myself. I had to be cool, I had to wander off for a slash and not tell anyone, I'm the one who's too cool to say "back in a minute." I'm the one who let the credit run out on my phone like a prat. I'm the one who claimed the back seat of the car for his own, slumped down in the chair watching telly on my phone, trying to shut the world (and my siblings) off. Come to think of it, I'm surprised my parents even remembered me when they left the house this morning. Mum and dad are busy enough with the other two, I should be able to find my own way to and from the car, it shouldn't be too difficult. But now I'm the one stuck outside an identikit service station on the M25 while my family continue to roll on westwards. Happy holidays!

The more I think about it, the more pissed off I get. Two hours and seventeen minutes. That means that even if - and it's a big fucking if - even if they pull around that corner right now and they speed through the entrance and ruin the Picasso's suspension on the speedbumps and even if they screech to a stop in front of me and mum's eyes are all wet from worry and she jumps out of the car to apologise and fuss (dad behind the wheel, not even taking his eyes off of it, bitter at losing Good Time before the crowds hit the roads), *even if...* it means nothing. Even if all that happens right now (and it won't), they will still have been driving for an hour and ten minutes before they even noticed I wasn't there. What does this say about them?

What does it say about me?

Of course I know what it says about me. I'm a teenager, not an idiot. It's not like I can't talk, or I can't join in and crack a smile when Ceelie and Gary want me to play with them. Sometimes I even do. But most of the time I just... don't want to. I can't. It's as simple as that. It's easier not to say anything and to just blend into the background, it's safer. People expect less from me that way, and I can't say anything stupid. It gives me space to think about what I want to without having people judge me, or ask me silly questions.

This one time my dad came past my room while I was working. "What are you drawing for?" he asked me.

What are you drawing for? For? To me, it summed up everything about him in five simple words. Or more accurately, that one word. For. Not "what are you drawing?" – expressing an interest and asking for more details. What am I drawing for? Well, I'm drawing because I want to, and because I want some kind of future, because drawing is more fun than not drawing. Because when I draw, I have the control, I can take my time and make the world the way I like it. It was more like he couldn't comprehend why I'd even be doing something like that, like any form of self-expression is a step too far out of his comfort zone of football and The Sun and the pub. I think he thinks I'm gay, but I don't see any need to disabuse him of this notion just yet. I like that he's scared of it, it means he talks to me less.

Mum thinks I'm gay too, but she's the other way with it. I think she wants a gay pet like she's seen on TV, someone she can take shopping with her and get fashion tips off and read Heat with, as if liking boys would make me more interesting. And then if I try to deny it – why then the lady doth protest too much! She tells me at least once a week that she loves me, that she'd love me no matter what and that I can tell her anything if I want to. I can almost see it in her eyes, this pleading. Please be gay, please be interesting, please don't just be this sullen kid...

Two hours, twenty six minutes. I check the time on my phone absent mindedly, looking for a txt or a missed call. Nope. Well Craig, you did it, congratulations. You've managed to become self sufficient, an island unto yourself! I can't tell if this is a mark of respect, or something more the opposite.

What will happen if they never actually come for me? Do I go talk to someone? Find a responsible adult with a badge on and say "Sorry sir, my parents have forgotten about me and headed off to Gwent for the weekend, can you be my new daddy?" Maybe I'll end up in care, and the big kid (I'm betting he's called Tyrone) will threaten me, he'll hold a knife to my throat as I try to sleep on the lumpy mattress. Maybe I'll never wake up at all, and I'll be reduced to a headline in the local paper – "Orphan Boy Throat Slit By ASBO Youth!"

I don't think I should tell anyone, not yet at least. I'll stay here, they'll come back eventually. I know they will.

I could make a life for myself and subsist on the leavings from the small village of fast food restaurants around me. I could have the remains of an Egg McMuffin for breakfast, left on the table by some hurried businessman in his pinstripe suit, pulled away from his nutritious meal by the siren call of his Blackberry. A modern day hunter-gatherer, I'd know all the best spots in the service station, the choicest bins, the quietest corners, the maintenance corridors my playground as I avoid the complicated web of modern surveillance within, leaving no trace of my actions.

I'd need a disguise, obviously. A way to blend in with my surroundings. I'd need a cleaner's uniform, with a name badge. Hi, I'm Jeff, your friendly neighbourhood sanitary technician. Oh, you're finished with that meal already? But you hardly touched it! Don't worry ma'am, I'll clean this up for you, you need to get on your way. The West Country waits for no-one. Oh why thank you, you have a good day too, and a safe journey!

This place would become an island and I'd be trapped on it like some kind of post-modern castaway.

Tom Hanks in a hi vis. I have no four-wheeled raft with which to leave the island, no way of traversing the torrential flow of traffic beyond the off-ramp. I might as well be a thousand miles from civilisation. Maybe I'll go mad with nobody to talk to - the transient population isn't exactly known for its welcoming disposition and would be unlikely to engage in conversation with this twisted cleaning creature that I'd become. Walking with a limp (all the best cleaners have limps), growing my hair out all wild and unkempt. Maybe I could steal a comb. Strip down sink wash with hand pumped quick-dry soap, patting myself down with scratchy paper towels. Blow drying my hair with machines usually reserved for hands.

Eventually I'd become my new job. I'd be that guy, that cleaner who is there when you arrive in the morning, and then silently nods goodbye as you leave at night. I'd call you 'sir' and avoid eye contact, I'd know my place. Supervisors would find me wandering the halls and induct me into their crews. "Oh, you must be Jeff, Karen says you do good work" they'd say. "Can you go clean the toilets by Little Chef, someone's gone scrawled 'shit' in shit on the wall again. Ignore the smell, just think of the money," he'd say with a cheerful wink as he hands me the bucket. And that'll be my life as a secret unpaid castaway, clearing up excrement and leftovers, sleeping on a cardboard box in an unheated supplies cupboard.

Or maybe I could become a thief instead, an Artful Dodger of the M25 (graduating to Fagan once my beard comes in properly). Fingers light as clouds and stickier than flypaper. Lifting wallets left right and centre, eating like a king on my ill-gotten gains. Supersizing every meal, going for the premium option, Aberdeen Angus every day. My base, a pirate's cave of stolen electronics. Maybe I could induct other kids into it too, a whole twisted crew of forgotten children.

We'd need new names, Craig is no name for a brigand - I could be Mister C, enigmatic leader of the feared M25 Buccaneers. We'd hijack these metallic jalopies, holding their lily livered crews captive and forcing them to sail us to the next islands over, spreading out all along the silver coast of the motorway, no branch of Costa or KFC left un-harried. We'd carry off the daughters of those land-locked civilians, bringing them into our pirate lives as salt wives and molls, cooks and cleaners, mothers and sisters alike to play Wendy to our Lost Boys in this topsy turvy mixed metaphor my life had become.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and give it another once over, checking for that missed call I knew wasn't there. Two hours, forty three minutes. Still no sign of them. Waiting around like this frustrates me. Like if I'd known an hour ago that nobody was coming then I could have found something to do with my time (like I would actually have anything interesting to with my time. But I'm bored and lonely and doubting my place in the world, dear reader, so humour me please).

I could be lurking around that depressing arcade I saw back inside with its handful of antique House of the Dead and Outrun cabs, that's for sure. Watching the demos on the screens and wondering who the enigmatic initials belong to. Who is AAA? SHT? FUK? Or I could be off looking for girls, those lovely shy emo girls with their MCR hoodies and dyed black hair, trailing along behind their parents. We'd be kindred spirits lost in this non-destination that we find ourselves in. I could show her my iPod, and she'd fall in love with my record collection.

But who am I kidding? Like I'm going to go up to random girls and start spitting game at them or something. Yeah, and then I'd sprout a twelve inch dick and dance like Michael Jackson... For me, conversation with a girl is like a puddle in the middle of a desert - evaporating quickly, leaving

nothing behind but awkward silence and a sense that you need to be somewhere, anywhere else.

I could make a change. I need to. But groups solidify and stratify and before you know it you're trapped in between layers of social sediment, a part of your school's fossil record in between the popular boys playing football in the playground and that kid who took a poo in a urinal that one time. Trapped in the amber of who other people think you are. I am 'that quiet kid who might be a faggot', and I'll be that until nobody knows who I am.

From the corner of my vision I make out motion that pulls me out from my self flagellation, a figure in bright orange walking towards me. I stay focused ahead, keeping my eyes on my off-ramp vigil. Eventually he reaches me, I figure the guy's just going to walk on past but he stops.

"You alright there mate?" he asks with this thick Brummie accent, all warmth and smiles. "Only I seen you sitting here for ages over in me hut," he says, nodding over to the wooden playhouse in centre of the carpark. "Ain't many people stay here for too long if they can help it, you know?"

I look up at him and for a second I want to tell him everything, about how my parents have left me here and how shitty it is, and how much they don't even care and how it's all my fault and that I'm stupid. But there's so much to say that it all gets sort of stuck in my throat. I don't know this guy, where would I even start? What if I start crying like some big gangly baby in the entrance way to this godforsaken service station? So instead I mumble out an insincere "No, I'm ok mate," with a weak smile to back it up.

"You reckon? Only I don't think there're many kids your age hanging out rounds these parts now, eh? What do you say, you want to come use the phone, come get someone to pick you up like?"

"No, no I'm fine really, thanks," I say politely. I don't even know why I'm doing this - I feel like I've trapped myself into this position. Why can't I just say what I mean? "I'm just - I'm just waiting for someone. They'll be here soon, I'm sure,"

As I say the words I'm not even sure if I believe them, and from the look that crosses his face I'm not sure he does either. He scratches his chin and looks down at me, unsure. "Well... if you say so. Listen, I'm just over there if you need me, right? You just come on over,"

"I will,"

"OK then, you be safe," he says, fixing me with a look before strolling back off to his little hut with his paper and his radio.

I turn my head back to the off-ramp, watching the drip drip drip of cars trickling through the gates. I can see the little hut from the corner of my eye and every few seconds my focus drifts over to the man in orange. Maybe I could...? No... no. Back to the road. Car, car, lorry, car, van, car, car, car.

I pull my phone from my pocket: two hours, fifty three minutes.

My eyes flick back to the hut.