



Borrowed Light (extract)

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Monday

Mary is on her way to work that morning, when she sees the stranger kill himself. She is passing through Liverpool Street Station. She buys a coffee from Upper Crust, and then heads in the direction of W.H. Smiths, to get a newspaper. This is when she gets caught somehow, swallowed up in a crush of people spilling from the escalators and the stairs. She hears shouting from above and immediately knows what it is about, although this is the first time she has seen it. A jumper. People scatter automatically and she is jostled, hot coffee splashing onto her fingers.

The crowd looks up as one. She sees, even though she does not want to, a man, clambering onto the railings and pausing to stare at the concourse below. Then he steps onto air and she almost does not understand, because for a second, he seems to stay upright, though he dips slightly, as if he has just stepped onto a thick carpet, or the dense sand of a beach, but then he is tumbling.

His shoe knocks the smooth grey underside of the railings with a muffled clang. The dark and bitter scent of coffee floods her nose and lies crisply on the back of her tongue. She has seen this on the news – grainy footage of indistinct figures falling from rooftops and bridges, but it is only now, with this fall, that the instant stretches, allowing every other moment to register in black and white. The scatters of coins from his pocket that trace the air like shooting stars are in monochrome. Then they clatter to the ground, ringing like bells and in a split second, she sees the burnt copper of pennies, the nickel-brass glint of pounds as they spin against the tiled floor.

Her head has been filled with something like the sea. Everyone else in the station

disappears and it is just her and this man. Her gaze flicks to the ground where his shadow is growing. She looks up again; the man somersaults, his arms and legs spread wide and his tweed jacket billowing. His red tie flaps over his shoulder, reminding her of semaphore.

A scrap of paper slips free from another pocket and she is distracted by its lazy glide. It will reach the ground long after its owner and she thinks of half remembered formulae about acceleration, mass and velocity. He flails as he turns and his left leg smacks into the thick glass of the balcony. She has a second to note the lines that crackle along the glass like rain.

He keeps falling, his dark hair ruffled by invisible fingers and she can see now that he is smiling. His face becomes clearer with each moment and then there are his eyes. Dark brown and wide and later, she will say that there was not enough time for the feeling of something passing between them, slow and strange, like ink through water. His eyes hold hers. Something breaks in her chest and fills her lungs.

She is waiting for the rush of adrenalin that will tear her feet away from this spot. To stay means a broken neck at best but her limbs seem to belong to someone else. He looks happy, but expectant and so she speaks with her eyes despite herself because there is no time for words and she says without thought, something like *'gravity is a kiss'*.

Large hands bite into her shoulders and give a fierce tug backwards. She feels her right shoe fall off as she is dragged away. A rush of displaced air cools her face and

then there is a brush of fingertips against her mouth. Her eyes blink open, sight and sound becoming fused so that she cannot tell which was first: the meaty thud or the way the jumper looks on the floor, split open like bad fruit. Blood pools around his head and she watches as it filters between the tiles. The world blooms and sticks fast in Technicolor.

She opens her mouth and lets out a shuddering breath. A thin wail presses itself against her ears, which she eventually realises, comes not from her, but a siren.

She looks at her fingers, still red from the spilled coffee. For a second, she is somewhere else, lost in the distant country of her youth, walking up a stone path towards the rotten barn which houses her mother's body. She elbows this thought aside with the realisation that someone has just saved her life.

She turns around slowly as the person releases the grip on her shoulders. She suspects she is about to utter inconsequential words because what is there, that can mean much now, but then she sees the man's face. Her tongue catches suddenly, as rusty as a failing hinge.

"Mary," he says.

For the second time in as many minutes, something capsizes in her chest. Even as her vision blurs, she finds herself looking over his shoulder because it does not seem possible that this man is here, without Pierce, but of course it is possible, because Pierce has been dead for 40 years. That was the last time she had seen this man and

the past is carved deep in his face. Despite that, despite the rough salt and pepper beard that swallows his mouth, the stoop that has settled across his thin shoulders and the weight of his hollowed, surprised expression, she knows him.