

Press The Button

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Press the button; slide the lever. Wheels turn while soft static sounds. I position my headphones over my ears and ready for my shift.

Essentials include; potato crisps, cola, pack of cigarettes, lighter, notebook. I also bring a battered old copy of *The Old Man and The Sea* and set it neatly with my other items; things to keep me occupied during the long hours ahead.

First hour is mostly static. I overhear a short conversation that went as follows:

“The bastard, Mickey, did you hear what he did?”

Goon 2 grunts a response.

“I heard he hooked up with Sal’s woman the other night. You believe that?”

“Mickey is all talk.”

Second hour. Ate half the bag of crisps, changed the reels, smoked some. At the 46-minute mark I hear Goon 1 leave the room. I can tell it’s him by his footfalls, the way that he walks heavy on his heels. Shortly after that Goon 2 leaves, probably for a smoke break. I take this opportunity to take a piss and come back to more white noise.

Third hour I drink one of the colas and attempt to read. I hear Goon 1 and 2 come back in the room at twelve after then settle in for a game of cards. The sharp rap of knuckles on the table tells me it is blackjack. In between the knocks the static is annoyingly loud and I can’t concentrate. I end up reading the same sentence four times before I give up and pack the book away.

Fourth hour switch card games, sounds like Slap Jack believe it or not. I smoke a few more and can now hear the faint hum of the ceiling fan amidst all the electronic fuzz. I change the reels again, pack and label the full rolls; case number, date, and time.

Fifth hour. Boredom is setting in. I’ve doodled images of what I imagine Goon 1 and Goon 2 to look like. I feel like I know them well. Goon 2 has a reoccurring cough that sounds like he’s hacking up part of his lung. He does it now, hacking away. I hear the crinkle of cellophane as he unwraps a cough drop.

Sixth hour. I practice pencil tricks. As I twirl the pencil around and between my fingers I hear the door open and the sharp staccato of high heels across the floor. Metal chair legs scrape across the floor as The Goons get to their feet quickly. I lean forward, listening hard. A woman has never visited before. Who is she? Her voice is sharp and clear through my headphones and carries a faint hint of an accent.

“Where is it?”

“Here ma’am. It’s here.” Goon 1 fumbles his words. I hear the thump of a case hitting the table and the double click of the spring locks being flicked open. There is deafening silence for several seconds. I hear someone shift nervously foot to foot. Most likely Goon 1, I tell myself. Goon 2 is too well seasoned to show weakness under pressure. Heels gasps softly; it’s almost a sigh.

“Perfect.”

I hear subtle movement a barely audible scuff of a footstep and a click. There is a knot forming in my stomach as I strain to hear more. I know that sound, I’ve heard it before.

“That will be all, gentlemen.”

In that moment my headphones fill with a deafening, rattling explosion of noise. I tear them from my head and toss them. They fall to the floor, discarded, but I can still hear the sounds of betrayal bleating out of them in the form of bursts of spraying bullets. I hear the thumps as they hit the wall and the heavier thud of two bodies dropping to the floor. My lungs burn, I release the breath I didn’t realize I’d been holding in and a strangled kind of sob falls out with it.

I scramble back to the headphones, jam them back on my head. I need to know what happened. The quick click of heels again and the lid of the case slaps shut. The locks click home and Heels retreats from the room.

“Leave it. We’ll be gone by the time they find them.”

They’re dead. Betrayed by one of their own and all for some lousy object. The silence in the room is deafening. Electric static fills my ears but try as I might I hear nothing more.

I clean up the desk. Wipe off leftover crisp crumbs, dump my cigarette butts in the trash, and pick up the phone.