

‘The Fox Yelp’

‘I’m not blind,’ Hannah exclaimed.

The boy, who she’d just seen slipping a yellow and black 2B pencil into his pocket, jerked his head up.

‘But you are fat,’ he shouted, flinging the pencil at her.

He was eight, ten at the most. Half her age.

Maintaining eye contact, he slowly inflated his cheeks like a frog, puckered his mouth into an inflamed arsehole and hunched his shoulders, contorting himself into a hideous monster.

She inhaled sharply.

He stepped forward, swelling with every step.

She took a half step back and banged into the wall behind her.

He cocked his head and raised his eyebrows at her.

And she ... looked down. She saw the worn marks on the carpet where she stood every day in front of the wooden serving counter. But she couldn’t step forward into them. Just swayed and leant back on the shop wall.

The long second stretched like hot toffee.

Then she heard him snort and when she looked back, she saw the light of interest dying in his eyes. He turned, sauntered to the shop door and then flung it open so violently that the little old-fashioned bell was thwacked up and gave a metallic splat rather than its familiar tinkle.

This wasn’t the first time she’d been such a gutless wuss. Only last week, she’d been cycling along the wide cycle lane on Brighton seafront and a young man had shouted at her.

‘Milk it, you fat cow.’

And all she’d done in response, was rise from her saddle to march on the pedals of her bike, staring resolutely forward. Mum would have been so disappointed in her. But then Mum had been dead for six long years.

The shop’s round wall-clock showed five to six, but she resisted the urge to close five minutes early. The energy of the boy still hung there, sullyng her palace of order. She tugged at her top layer of purple lace tunic and then reset the layers below, the middle one of black satin tunic and the base of beige compression vest.

She tried to breathe in for seven and out for ten like Mum had taught her. But her lungs were already full after four, her ribs straining against her silky layers. She exhaled like a stepped-on paper bag and tried again.

One, two, ah. Full on three, this time.

Wasn't there some homespun tosh about breathing on one of those expensive bound notebooks she sold for a hefty mark up? She lifted the wooden hatch to her narrow serving area and walked across the shop noting the perfectly graded colours of the pencils, royal blue into sky blue into turquoise, the precision of each brand of notebook in its own pile, and the rolling beauty of the wrapping papers ordered by colour and texture, the edges exactly aligned.

Three down in the pile of expensive notebooks was the dark blue one with the breathing quote, in big capital letters that fog-horned the mawkish mush.

EVERY DAY IS A NEW BEGINNING

TAKE A DEEP BREATH

SMILE, LAUGH, AND START AGAIN

Did these stupid empty sayings ever help people? Mum had smiled and laughed all day long. But now she was dead. And since Mum's death, smiling was as alien to Hannah as speaking Norwegian – like those tourists in the shop yesterday, with their sing-songy yurdiluckthuggsuct. With most of the languages she heard in here, like French or Spanish, she could latch onto the odd word and intuit the meaning. But with the Norwegian she'd been totally shut out.

She crouched down to retrieve the thrown pencil. Damn it. That little shit had broken the tip.

Enough was enough.

The next time she was confronted in any way, she wouldn't back down.

The doorbell tinkled again.

She looked up sharply. Another thieving child?

But it was a young man. Attractive. With straggly black hair, wearing a long dirty army coat. Bit down-at-heel for this kind of stationers, but then Brighton was full of crumpled dusty students and arty types, who all lounged about in the many indie coffee shops along The Lanes, scribbling intensely.

He glanced across at her and then broke eye contact to scan the table of notebooks.

Yep. Just another poet type.

Back in her serving area she slotted the thrown pencil into the heavy-duty sharpener bolted onto the counter. She turned the handle and felt at one with the sturdy efficient mechanism as it shaved thin layers off the pencil, unsheathing a new pointed tip.

‘Empty the register.’

She looked up to see that the poet was now holding a chunky grey gun with both hands and pointing it directly at her. It looked so basic, so mechanical, so unlike anything she’d seen on her recent CSI binge.

He jerked the gun in the direction of the old-fashioned register.

‘Empty it,’ he barked. ‘Now.’

From adding up the takings in her head throughout the day, she knew there were exactly three hundred and seventy-seven pounds and sixty-three pence in there, precisely arranged. No fricking way was she giving that up. Over her dead ... well ...

Enough was enough.

She shook her head slowly, staring at him defiantly – as if she was playing a game of ‘no blink’, like she used to do with Mum.

The poet suddenly lurched towards her, his hip banging the table of notebooks and instigating a wild cascade of colours, shapes and ruffling. He registered her horror at the avalanche, smirked and swiped his hand at the rack of speciality paper, rolls spilling out, peacocks falling on William Morris prints and candy pink chiffon sheets landing on glossy purple dachshunds. His dirty army boot planted on a sheet of white textured wedding paper.

‘Give me the money,’ he blurted.

‘It’s ‘show me the money’,’ she said evenly, ‘in the film. Jerry Maguire?’ She stepped out from behind the counter. ‘There’s nothing in the till, today’s takings have already been collected.’ Her voice was calm, almost throwaway, as she lied.

‘Just get it,’ he growled, edging forward, the heavy gun shuddering slightly.

‘Stop this,’ she said firmly. ‘I’m not giving you anything.’

They stared at one another: two boxers, eyeing each other in the ring as the announcer droned on about their weights and accomplishments. Threat and recognition. The only two people in the whole auditorium who could understand how each other truly felt.

This was the longest she had ever looked into a man’s eyes in her life.

‘Back up,’ she said huskily.

‘Make me,’ he murmured.

‘You’re not going to hurt me, you know you’re not,’ she said, registering that she wasn’t talking in her usual halting manner, but with her mother’s sensuous tone, rolling out her words seductively.

She reached her hand out and pushed the gun down.

He frowned.

She nodded.

‘Get the money - bitch.’

At the crazy violence of his last word, she ... smiled. And the sensation was so unexpectedly tingly that she laughed – in a wild burp - just like her mother used to do, throwing her head back and letting out her fox yelp of a laugh.

But then Hannah remembered her father wincing at that feral sound and realised how condescending her laughter must sound to the poet. She wanted to claw it back. But it was already out in the air, hitting those little bones in his ear that she remembered from the picture in her GCSE biology textbook.

And she knew, before he did it.

Felt the thought bloom in his head, registered the message engage his muscles and saw his hands rise. She didn’t break eye contact as the gun exploded and the bullet penetrated the still air.

It hit her right shoulder and as she jolted back, she twisted to avoid the rack of pen nibs, the calligraphy primers and the Mont Blancs nestling in their velvet sconces. She hit the corner of the counter and crumpled at its base, wincing in pain. But it was only a grazing. She was down, but not out.

He lowered his gun and stepped over her to the cash register. He depressed the wide key at the bottom to release the drawer, which jerked out with its familiar juddering clunk. He stared down at all the neatly arranged money, narrowing his eyes at the discovery of her lie and then glared at her accusingly. She raised her eyebrows and shook her head, letting Mum’s mischievous smile play across her lips.

‘Leave it,’ she said, in the wheedling tone that Mum had used when she wanted to wind Dad round her little finger.

The poet glanced at the money longingly and then ... stepped back from the register. He was upright with the gun. She was crumpled on the floor. But she felt the shift. That surge of power that Mum had wielded so casually.

The poet started breathing heavily and bouncing his weight between his dirty boots. He was suddenly shimmering with nerves. Hannah recognised that shimmering - only too well. He was just as fragile as she was. He needed what she yearned for - kindness.

‘It only glanced my shoulder,’ she said gently. ‘I’m ok. I just need to get it checked.’

He nodded furiously.

‘Could you pass me my phone from the counter,’ she asked.

He reached for it.

‘Not with your hands, use your sleeve. Don’t you ever watch CSI?’

He gave a nervous snort. ‘Yeah sometimes,’ he mumbled sheepishly. Then he pulled his cuff down, wiped the cash register, and picked up the phone and laid it beside her.

‘You go now,’ she said, catching sight of the fallen dark blue notebook lying quote upwards. ‘Tomorrow’s a new beginning.’

‘Thank you,’ he whispered.

Then he crossed the shop and opened the door. The familiar tinkle sounded. Gently this time.

And then he was gone.

The stinging on her shoulder was thrilling.

The mess all around her was intoxicating.

She could breathe in to seven with no effort at all. Mum would have been proud of her.

As she waited for help, she flicked her phone to the App store and typed into the search box.

‘Learn Norwegian.’