THE 24-HOUR CAFÉ

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First published in Great Britain in 2020 by
Orion Books,
an imprint of The Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Carmelite House, 50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN (Hardback) 978 1 4091 7524 7
ISBN (Export Trade Paperback) 978 1 4091 7525 4
ISBN (eBook) 978 1 4091 7527 8

Typeset by Deltatype Ltd, Birkenhead, Merseyside

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd,
Elcograf, S.p.A.



www.orionbooks.co.uk

FOR MY FRIENDS

JOHN

He laughs and pulls a face and the baby inside the café laughs back.

What a dote, he thinks, the laughter leaving the imprint of a smile on his face. Reluctantly, he turns away from the window and back to the street, back to work.

'*BIG Issue*, *Big Issue*, *Big Issue*!' he says in a sing-song voice. No one looks up. The flow of pedestrians continues around him like a river around an islet.

So many of them are on their phones. Either walking with them held to their ears, having loud conversations that he catches snippets of as they walk past, or staring at them in their

hands, only looking up to cross roads or when they nearly walk into other people or the occasional lamp post.

'Let me finish!' says a short man with a loud voice and a flushed face as he walks past John, 'Let me finish! I said, let me finish!' He is nearly shouting now and a few of the people around him turn to watch. He seems oblivious to anyone aside from the person speaking to him on the other end of the phone.

'Mum! Will you just shut up?' he says, and then he turns down a passageway at the end of the road and disappears.

The lights change and a stream of pedestrians cross the road. An old woman with a rucksack on her front and a map in her hand walks slightly ahead of an old man with a hooked nose and a creased, pink face who walks slowly, looking all around him. Straining against a lead is a dog wearing a high visibility jacket with 'NERVOUS' written in large letters. It jumps and jolts away from the feet of pedestrians and John can hear its owner, a young woman in a bright orange beanie hat, talking to it in a soothing voice. He feels for the dog; although John hides his anxieties well, there are days when he'd like to wear a jacket like that himself. *Wouldn't we all?* he thinks to himself.

Pedestrians weave in and out around John as he stands on the pavement, some continuing along the street, a few veering off into the café.

John takes a deep breath and tries again.

'Good morning sir, can I interest you in a *Big Issue*? Well, have a great day. Madam, *Big Issue*? Have a lovely day. Who's going to make me a happy man on this grey day then?'

Most people ignore him but some look up at the sound, make brief, awkward eye contact and then look hurriedly down

again. He is not surprised. Resilience is a key requirement of this line of work.

'Get a fucking job!' shouts one voice. It belongs to a man in his sixties, wearing a tweed jacket and yellow trousers.

'This is my job!' John shouts back, but the man has already walked away.

That always pisses him off. He doesn't come to other people's workplaces and disparage them, does he? He is always polite, even when people refuse a copy (which is most of the time). Sometimes it's hard – when it's raining and he has a few copies left and is determined to sell them before leaving. But he doesn't pester people – it's not professional.

He's been doing the job for three years, working on the same pitch opposite Liverpool Street station and outside Stella's. It's more than a job, though – he likes to think of himself as an entrepreneur. He buys the stack of magazines from head office, just like any other business owner purchasing their stock, and then keeps the profits on what he sells. It's up to him what time he arrives and leaves work – whether he works late on a busy day and packs up early on a slow, rainy one. He likes the flexibility and feeling, finally, as though he is taking back control of his own life.

'John!'

He looks up and sees Paul, one of his regular customers, heading towards the door of Stella's, his hand raising briefly in a wave. He is a tall, middle-aged man with a broken nose and dark eyes. He carries a briefcase and a weight on his shoulders that slumps them forwards. John waves back at him.

'Good to see you Paul,' he says, as Paul fishes in his pocket

for coins. They make the exchange swiftly and quietly and once Paul is holding a copy of the *Big Issue*, which he rolls and puts into his pocket, they move onto the important part.

John thinks of his job as part entrepreneur, part therapist. He has plenty of regular customers who stop by for a chat, but often someone new pauses by him after buying a copy and starts telling him something about their life. When he first started the job it had surprised him, these conversations. But now he thinks of it as completely natural – he has learnt that everyone just wants someone to talk to. And he is here every day, rain or shine. They know where to find him, and his conversation can be bought for as little as £2.50 (much cheaper than a therapist). He'll talk for free, of course, but the serious customers understand the etiquette. Buy a magazine, and then let's chat. Let's chat for as long as you like.

'How are things?' says Paul. He is still wearing his suit, poor man, and a purple tie. He lost his job several weeks ago but still comes in every day, dressed as though he's going to the office. John gets it – when things started going wrong for him it took him a while to admit to himself how bad it was getting. When he finally did so, it was too late. The thing that he has learnt is that it can happen to anyone.

'Not too bad thanks, mate,' he replies, 'And how about you? Any luck with finding a new job?'

Paul sighs.

'Not yet, no,' he says slowly, 'But I've got a few leads. I'm hoping at least for some interviews in the next few weeks. I hope by the end of the month I'll have good news for Sandra.'

'I know it's not my place, mate,' says John, 'But do you

think perhaps you should tell her? She's your wife, I bet she'd understand.'

'I expect she would,' says Paul, 'But with that would also come her pity. And I just can't bear it. Not yet, anyway. I just need a bit more time.'

And John understands that too.

'Righto, boss. She's your missus after all – you know what's best. I'm keeping my fingers crossed for you. And my toes!'

He makes a show of wobbling on the spot and Paul laughs. It feels good to make someone laugh. They say goodbye and John waves his magazines as Paul opens the café door and steps inside.

As he thinks about Paul, he can't help but think about his own story. It started with a lost job too. He was working in construction but when the crisis hit he was let go. He tried looking for other work but it was made hard by the drinking. Without a job to get up for each morning he was drinking more and more. He didn't think of it as a problem – it was just his way of coping. Everyone had their own thing, didn't they? His was drink. It softened everything: his aches and pains after years of working on building sites and his fear of what to do next. But it also softened his brain, made him sluggish and unmotivated. What started as a coping mechanism became the thing that prevented him from moving forwards at all.

He lived in a nice flat, a little one-bed that he'd been proud to be able to afford when many of his colleagues lived in shared accommodation. But the longer he remained unemployed and the more he drank the harder it became to meet the rent. At first the landlord, who lived in the flat above his,

was understanding. John had been there for several years and they'd become, not exactly friends, but friendly. They'd even been to the pub on the corner of the street for a beer a few times. But John found that kindness only went so far when it came to money. He was evicted a few months later.

John knows that most people would disagree, that they'd think themselves above it somehow, but he has come to believe that addiction can happen to anyone. Give them the right situation (or the *wrong* one, more accurately) and they too would find some way of numbing the pain and would soon see how hard it is to stop once you've found that rush, that pleasure in a grey world. He has always been somewhat proud that at least his substance of choice is legal. Because it would be easy to fall the other way too.

After the eviction he moved in and out of temporary accommodation – sometimes with friends, sometimes in hostels. But it never worked out. His vice always made it difficult: by then it had taken up so much of his existence that living a normal life seemed impossible.

Thinking back to that time, two years sober, John shudders. Some of his old friends he has been able to apologise to. They are still wary, but he hopes he is proving to them day by day that he has changed. But there are also those whom he knows he can never talk to again. He pushed them too far, did things that wake him up in the middle of the night, terror and shame caught in his throat. He mourns the loss of those friends with a pain stronger than that of his failed romantic relationships (because there have been many of those too), feeling as though a part of him has broken away – that he is somehow less whole

now. Then there are the friends whom he simply can no longer see because they don't understand that for him, being sober means he will never be able to set foot inside a pub again. The place that felt for a while like some sort of shelter, a kind of home even at his worst, is now dangerous, off-limits.

Over the past few years things have steadily improved. He is proud of the room he now rents – just a small place with a sink in his bedroom and a shared bathroom and kitchen down the corridor – and of his job selling the magazines. But he still has a way to go. He would like to have a little balcony one day and to grow his own chili plants and maybe some tomatoes. And most of all, he would like a dog. He will get one, he promises himself, once he is confident he can look after himself. When he feels back on his feet. He already knows what he will call his dog: Lucky. Because although it sometimes doesn't feel that way when the hot water in his flat stops working or customers are particularly rude to him, he knows he is lucky. He is lucky to be alive.

As he waits for more customers he watches the sky. The clouds are the same colour as the backs of the pigeons that huddle together on the roof of the station. For a moment he forgets about his work and watches them, picking out the stripes of blue and black in their grey feathers. Most people who look at pigeons see pests, he thinks as he watches them. Rats with wings that are as bleak to look at as the city on a winter's day. But if you look a little closer you notice an iridescence to them. You see how soft their feathers look and how bright and inquisitive their eyes appear. They are not what hey seem from a first glance. They are more than what people make of them.