



Step Forward, Harry Salt





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For Reeganne and Astrid,
and for Mum, Dad and Sheridan
with all my love
always.

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1. Commute

And there it is again, thought Harry to himself. The number seventy-five to Sheffield. Right on time, exactly three minutes late. Coinciding (as it always did), with Harry riding his barely trusty mud-spattered moped past the boarded-up windows of shops, glowing cafes and a large, blue government billboard bearing the following slogan:

Hang On, We'll Be Right with You!
Get ready for
#TheChange

All written in cheerful, white letters above the rain-drenched high street.

Harry was tired. He wiped his visor with his woollen and annoyingly wet glove as the bus went past. The reasons he did this were twofold: partly to ensure that he didn't collide with the rusted and steamed-up Ford Focus in front of him, but also to ensure that old Doreen Twigge – the grandmother of one of his former school friends – was occupying her usual position on the pavement outside the shoe shop to give him his daily wave. Sure enough, there she was – a vision in taupe, giving a vigor-



ous wave of her gnarled hand and a pearly white, denture-filled smile from within her clear, plastic hood. Harry returned the favour with an affectionate salute of his right hand and, with unfortunate irony, drove into the back of the Focus.

Harry's feeling of shock was immediate, as was the feeling of the handlebars of his scooter slamming into his chest. Neither sensation was a pleasant one, and while winded, Harry took a moment to weigh up which was worse – the feeling of shock, the feeling of pain or the late addition of steadily rising embarrassment – and plumped for the latter.

To confirm to Harry that he had made the right decision, two things then happened at once. Firstly, the driver of the Focus got out of his car. As he did this, Harry noticed to his right the hunched and keen Doreen Twigge waddling across the road into the oncoming traffic, handkerchief held straight out in front of her to absorb raindrops that she would no doubt use to rub Harry's reddening cheeks. Traffic was now starting to build up on either side of the rain-sodden street as drivers stared agog at the aged crone, on a mission to wipe, ambling through the beams of their headlights. Harry also became aware of angry car horns blaring behind him as the rain started to seep through his plaid work trousers.

“What drugs do you take?”

Harry's moistened reverie was broken by an exasperated voice. As his thighs clasped his scooter and he removed his helmet, he turned to be confronted by the driver of the Focus: a round man of Asian origin, in his fifties or thereabouts, sporting a tan roll-neck sweater that accentuated his rotundness in all the ways he probably hoped it wouldn't when he bought it originally.

“I beg your pardon?” replied Harry, not entirely sure why his inquisitor was so keen to learn about his medicinal needs.

“You do, do you? Then I'm sorry, but I will not be pardoning you,” the man countered with a degree of incredulity and a heavy accent that Harry didn't really have the time or inclination to trace.

The rain was beginning to increase in its voracity, and to compound this, so was the amount of traffic and car horns. Harry wished desperately that he was somewhere else – somewhere dry and less stressful – but as was always the case in awkward situations such as this one, this completely failed to happen, allowing the Focus driver to question him in broken English again.

“What drugs do you take to tell yourself that it is quite okay to be driving your motorcycle inside my car?”

Harry drew in a deep and weary breath. “I don't take any drugs. Apart from crappy, ineffective sleeping pills lately, but... Oh, never mind.”

“Well then, what do you like to drink?”

“I don't drink either, sorry,” replied Harry, “Not often anyway. I apologise for driving my motorcycle – which is a scooter I've christened ‘Darren’ by the way – inside or on top of or into your car.”

Within himself, Harry felt a slight glimmer of hope that this would be the end of the argument, and that he would be able to ride to work from here. Again, disappointment was swift, as any hint of a smile was instantly wiped away by Doreen Twigge's wet handkerchief. Despite everything, Harry had the presence of mind to keep his mouth closed during this procedure. A quick wipe of his helmet visor followed, along with a quick squeeze of Harry's sodden cheek.

“What you did just there was very dangerous,” Doreen declared.

“Exactly!” chimed in the Focus driver. “Exactly the point I am making to him! You are not a qualified scooter pilot!”

By this point, the car-horn symphony had segued into a cacophony, and Harry noted that, in a case of wanton overkill, the cars in front of him were now joining in too.

“I am qualified! I am! I have a certificate! Give me your sodding address, I'll send you a copy to enjoy at your leisure. I'm sorry about your car, really I am, but it's not even dented. Look!” Harry exclaimed somewhat indignantly.

“It is very rusty though,” opined Mrs. Twigge, throwing them both momentarily, “and your bodywork won’t enjoy this rain, will it? And neither will yours, young man. I hope you’re wearing a vest.”

“I... er... well... yes, Doreen, I am. Thank you. Look, I’m truly sorry,” Harry hurriedly added to Mr Focus, who was now ignoring him and staring off into the distance, “but if you hadn’t stopped so suddenly, then none of this would have happened. The lights were green ahead and...” Harry stopped at that moment, as it became clearer as to why this frustrating series of events was occurring.

Ahead of where they were and at the centre of a number of stationary, honking cars stood a neon-clad crossing lady, marshalling the crossing with her lollipop at arm’s length as an irate man gesticulated into her face. Calmly and in a resolute way that immediately triggered Harry’s sympathy, she faced up to him without flinching, without even moving at all, absorbing his ire in much the same way as Harry’s trousers were absorbing the rain. As she stood there, stiffly facing the angry commuter, a couple of nervous schoolchildren scurried across the road among the melee.

However, the reason Harry had stopped so quickly and refocused his attention was not entirely due to the resolute lollipop lady or her neon uniform but rather the three determined-looking paramedics who had just sprinted past him in her direction. With keen efficiency, the taller two of the three moved towards the crossing warden while the slightly more diminutive third team-member moved towards the angry driver who had been berating her and ushered him back to his car. As Harry and his entourage watched, an ambulance emerged from a nearby street, reversed quickly to the crossing and opened its back doors. With the same silky efficiency already shown, the gleaming-wet crossing lady, lollipop and all, was carried into the ambulance by the taller paramedics before the shorter one clambered in behind them.

As the back doors slammed shut, the sirens began to blare, the row of red and blue lights began to flash, and the ambulance was gone as swiftly as it had arrived. With the drivers round and about satisfied by this early morning show of medical proficiency, or just plain glad to see the argument ended, the cars ahead began to slope off into the rainy morning.

With a quick, “Idiot!” in Harry’s direction, followed immediately by an odd but nonetheless factually correct, “Old woman!” at Doreen, the disgruntled driver grumbled his way back into his Focus and departed.

Harry pushed his scooter out of the way of the traffic to join Doreen, who was now standing on the pavement, eyeing him up as if he were a bereaved twelve-year old who’d lost his first football match.

“Thank you for wiping my face,” was all he could think of to say as he looked off to where the crossing lady had been.



Garden

And there it is again. That feeling of complete, unbroken serenity. Far away in the distance, although I can't see them from here, a long procession of cars sits patiently in line on the motorway, waiting for the hot summer sun to turn each individual one, momentarily, into a gleaming, silver jewel containing a mum, a dad, two kids and a boot overpacked with holiday clothes.

If I were upstairs in my bedroom, I'd be able to look away over the fields and trees and beyond to see this giant, metal snake, excited in the knowledge that, in two weeks' time, I'd be a part of that parade to the coast. I know I've got two weeks left because my dad, ever the creative sort, made a little calendar for my wall last weekend, with twenty-one days on it, and "Holiday Countdown" emblazoned across the top in neat, red pencil crayon. Each night, he comes in and, with his best rollerball pen and ruler, draws a cross diagonally through the box bearing that day's date in its centre. So far, seven have gone, leaving fourteen remaining enticingly.

But I'm not up in my bedroom right now. I'm in the garden, wearing my shorts and my favourite blue-and-red t-shirt, pushing my weather-beaten tricycle round and round in a circle, humming a tune about chickens and deckchairs that I'd heard on the radio that morning. I'd been sitting on the kitchen step, talking to Grandma about astronomy as she did the post-breakfast wash-



ing-up. She, Grandpa or sometimes even both of them, would come over to help when my dad was busy with his projects.

“Russell Grant,” I’d told her, “he’s really clever, can see into space with his telescope and use his diagrams to predict the future. My favourite is Aries.” I liked him much more than Patrick Moore because he was less frightening and wore nicer, more colourful jumpers, although he did seem to know less about the Giotto probe that the European Space Agency were sending up to Halley’s Comet. I wasn’t sure that he could play the xylophone either. Dad was very excited about this event too – almost as much as he was about our holiday – and he had promised that I could stay up late with a sleeping bag and watch it happen live on the BBC with him from the living-room floor. I’d told Grandma about this too, and I’d said that I hoped that Russell Grant would be presenting the coverage from inside the probe, but she had just carried on with the pots in the sink.

Being careful not to ride over my dad’s neatly maintained and colourful flower borders, I pushed my trike into the shaded area behind the garage and stared up into the bright-blue sky above. Two white vapour trails formed a giant ‘x’, and for a moment again, I was giddily reminded of both my forthcoming holiday and Halley’s Comet. From one of the gardens up the road, I could hear the faint beat of someone’s car stereo and snatches of animated conversation from someone’s house where they must have had the back doors open like ours, to cope with the irrepressible heat.

As I lifted my leg to climb off my trike, my shorts tightened slightly and I felt something pressing into the outside of my thigh. Of course – it was a red boiled sweet in a clear, plastic wrapper, given to me by my grandpa the previous week. I stood up, took it from my pocket and began to unwrap it – not easy, as the combined heat from the summer sun and my tricycle-powering thigh had made it very sticky, so extra concentration and fingernail skill were required to peel it off.

While reflecting on what a good thing it was that I didn’t chew my nails like some of the other children at school, a sudden move-

ment in the bush to my left made me jump and stand rigid, my wrapper-peeling hand switching to grip one of the handlebars tightly while the other clasped the sweet. A large, black dog’s head had emerged from under the hedge, and it was gazing directly at me, panting slowly, with its pink, ham-like tongue and sharp, white teeth in stark contrast to its jet-black fur. I stood petrified, rooted to the spot.

I hadn’t seen this dog before. It wasn’t from here. We didn’t have a dog, and I didn’t know anybody on our street who did either. A feeling of hot and absolute terror was already oozing its way through my body, a liquid electricity that made every fibre of my being stand alert, giving my perception a sudden and frightening clarity.

The dog drew in its tongue, ready to bark. Screaming at the top of my voice, I hurled the sweet at the dog’s head, just as it bared its ivory-white and glistening teeth. I turned and ran. Upon turning, I heard from behind me the sound of the sweet I had so looked forward to seconds previously making contact with the dog’s teeth, like a small pebble striking a ceramic tile. But I didn’t turn back to look and had no idea how close the pursuing dog was to me. All I was focussed on was getting into the arms of my suddenly worried-looking Grandma, who had come out from the kitchen and was stood facing me as I ran as fast I could towards her.