



NOTHING AND NO ONE

written by Conor O'Brien

It's so damn cold. It's freezing. Hard. This cold hard bench. I'm tired. Exhausted. I must stay focused. Must remain alert. It's been seven hours. Where the fuck is she. Where am I? What am I? What's even the point of all this. Christ, my head aches. My ass and thighs ache. My calves and soles ache. This bench is entirely unforgiving. But here is where I was told to wait. So here I shall wait.

That man over there has glanced at me three times now. These are the moments that can collapse the whole thing from within. Reacting the wrong way to a moment of uncertainty. Stupid fat bastard, stop looking at me. Everyone becomes a stupid fat bastard the more they worry me. And this stupid fat bastard -

He's getting up. He's leaving. A sigh of relief manifests as a cloud before my eyes. It rises up and above me and disperses into the frigid air. But he walks towards me and for a moment I tense. He gives me one final glance and – *was that a smile?* What the fuck are you smiling at you slobbering prick. Ya, walk away. He walks away. There's nothing that irks me more than sad middle aged men staring at me. Go be sexually frustrated somewhere else please, thank you.

These are seven hour thoughts. The kind of dangerous thoughts that if left unmonitored will continue to fester and expand and take over all reasoning and become the only thoughts, the thoughts of a fire burning deep from within and taking –

Goddamnit, focus. You have a job to do, so focus. I need to stretch. My muscles are solidifying. I am becoming marble. Cold hard cold marble. A slow extension of the legs is excruciating. How long has it been since I've stood up? Long enough. Leaning and shifting my weight gingerly forward, I rock up onto my unused feet. My chest pulls up and I cautiously withdraw my numb hands from the depths of my coat. These gloves are doing almost nothing. *Goddamnit*. If they wanted to send me out into the cold for hours on end could they could at least have given me decent protection.

The cynical part of me thinks this is nothing but a test of endurance. Ya, Jacqui, go out and sit on a bench until the contact arrives. No, Jacqui, you needn't bring anything or do anything else. The contact will have all the information you need. Negotiate the terms of agreement from there. We will be at HQ monitoring your progress. Stay safe. Meet the contact. Get home.

This is bullshit. *The contact*. Pious pretentious old fucks sitting by the fire swirling brandy while I sit out here actually doing something. Or nothing, as it turns out. But they don't know what it's like. They have no idea what it's like, to be out here in the field, in real life. Stupid fat old bastards with their receding hairlines and their weekend golf trips away from their wives and children with their prostitutes, sitting behind a desk in the warmth watching our location beep on a fucking computer. My soles ache.

I'm standing. Ensuring to keep an eye out and both ears open, I walk a few paces up the street. I turn and walk a few paces down. Each step sends fiery daggers up through every ligament. This is a unique kind of cold. I am no longer human. I am pain personified. I am Jacqui's red hot fiery pain. I am the death that creeps up slowly and surreptitiously. I am the end of all hope and light. I am going to sit back down.

The bench is infinitely colder than before. The pain is infinitely worse than before. Perhaps it would have been better to not move. To just sit into the cold and let it wash over me. Move my mind to other things. Instead I tried to make it better and now everything is worse. Goddamnit, more dangerous thoughts. More dangerous irrational thoughts. I need to stay focused. Christ, I am tired. My head aches.

I realise I haven't drank anything in well over two hours. I did not bring enough provisions for this. I am not well prepared. They did not tell me nearly enough about what this was going to require. An hour, I expected. Maybe two. I am cold and tired and drained and without anything to keep me going. Where the fuck is she? Long grey coat and blonde hair. That's all I've been told. Ridiculous. Is this what they do to all the young women? Send them out into the cold unprepared and undersupplied on a bullshit "negotiation" mission to wait for hours and hours for some bullshit woman who's never going to arrive? Chief Assistant Field Negotiator. Christ. One of those bullshit made up job titles they give women to keep them quiet about opportunity disparity. Never would have taken the damn promotion if I knew they were gonna fuck me like this.

Goddamnit, I feel so much hatred. I feel so much spite. It boils within me. It sears within me. My organs are alight with the ferocious heat of disdain. My breathing intensifies and I can feel the heat rising in my face. It almost feels nice. I welcome it. Let the hate and spite and disgust burn within you and let it drive you through the cold dark night. Don't force the hate. Don't *become* the hate. Don't let the hate become you. But don't let it fade. Right now, hate is all you have. Hate. Hate. Hate.

Hey –

What –

How's it goin' –

Who are you –

Could I have a light –

Goddamnit –

Go on, just a light –

I don't have –

Fuck you anyway –

Breathe. Goddamnit. I can't be this nervy. I shouldn't be jumping at every sound and every creep. There are always plenty of creeps, no matter what the mission. I must focus. Not let these thoughts and creeps distract and overcome me. The man stumbles down the road away from me and I see him gesture to a young couple who pass him. They typically back away and wave their hands in defensive response. The man spits at their feet and the couple skips along, eager to put as much distance as possible between them and him. They shoot me a nervous glance as they pass, possibly thinking I would also ask them for a light. I stare up into their eyes. He holds her by the elbow. Suddenly I want to spit at their feet too. But I don't.

My knee starts to bounce. That strange unconscious bounce that people mistake for nerves or anxiety. But I think that's wrong. I believe it's the expression of a pent-up energy. A contagious energy. Whenever I notice a bouncing knee, I like to watch that person. I watch their face, their hands. Do they attempt to transfer the energy through the body, once they become conscious of the bouncing? Do they bounce one knee or two? In unison or out of sync? On trains, in meetings, in the cinema, the energy is forever present. But even more interesting is to watch the people around them. A bouncing knee makes other people nervous. They feel some kind of unexplainable subconscious transmission. They feel it but can't *feel* it. It's the passing of that energy. So, either the person will look towards the source of the energy – the original bouncing knee – and not-so-kindly ask that person to stop, or soon enough their own knee will join the race. Sometimes a second person's knee will start bouncing without even having seen the first. Someone sitting in front of someone in a row of chairs. Inexplicably, there goes their knee. The knee behind stops and impossibly, theirs does too. It's the energy. It's omnipresent and forever moving from person to person. A pent-up energy stored within the confines of a small conference room will travel from knee to knee, always on a fruitless search for release. The energy –

Was that sign always there?

My head whips around as if searching for someone who may have erected a sign right before me without me noticing. The sign hangs off the gate across the road.

You are trespassing on private property.

What?!

Where the hell am I?

I look around.

Nothing, no one.

Was I on private property this whole time? My thoughts race as I scan through my initial recon of the area. I sure as hell would have noticed this sign. *Where the hell am I?* This makes no sense. I'm tired, it's dark. It's cold, this hard bench. A field. A field? I'm confused. My head aches.

Without thinking of the cold, I slip my hands out of my coat once more and bring them to my face. A sudden, scratching pain. The rough material of my gloves against my soft eyelids. Godfuckingdamnit.

Alright, Jacqui, calm yourself. Take a breath. You need to focus. What did they say. What did those fat fucking lazy bastards – *FOCUS*. Ok, take a breath. An icy hand reaches down my throat as I try to breathe. I can't breathe. *Breathe*. Focus, stay alert. I close my eyes. What did they say? This bench, meet the contact, sixteen-hundred-hours, wait, meet the contact, grey coat, blonde hair, wait, meet the contact, make the negotiation, get out.

Simple.

Fuck.

The dangerous thoughts. They have me. They have me right where they want me. These are the moments that can collapse the whole thing from within. I need to stay rational.

But it's been almost eight hours. Rational thoughts have gotten me nowhere so far. Perhaps a negotiation with the irrational is the only way forward from here. I stand –

I'm already standing. Where am I?

My head whips around as if searching for –

What is that?

Something is moving towards me in the fog.

When did it get foggy?

I brace my fists inside my coat pockets. They're actually outside my pockets. I watch the figure approach. It's moving in slow motion. Drifting through the haze. I'm holding something in my hands. It's a sign. It says –

You are trespassing on private property.

My knees start shaking but this time it *is* nerves. They don't even feel the cold anymore. Not anymore. There is no cold. It's all sweat. Behind me is a fence. On the other side of that fence is a path, then a road, then another path, then a bench. I am no longer on that bench. Where am I? What am I? What's even the point of all this. Christ, my head aches. I hate this, I hate this, I hate this, I –

Hey –

Hello –

Who are you –

Where am I –

What are you doing here –

Why are you holding that sign –

Do you need a light –

A torch illuminates us both. She wears a long grey coat. She has long blonde hair. She holds the torch by her hip in such a way that her face is cast in shadow. I breathe. I'm on not on the bench anymore but that's ok. I have found the contact.

Come with me –

Some negotiation. She turns and I follow the torch light and the soft footsteps of the woman. The cold grass crunches under my feet as I tread through it. I hate long grass. It always gives me the creeps. Anything, anything at all could be hiding under there, poised, ready to pounce. Long grass is dangerous. Short grass you can see the dirt, the soil. You can see what it really is. Long grass, you have no idea what's growing underneath it. Long grass is dangerous.

Where is she?

The light floats through the fog a mile down the field. Did I stop walking? Goddamnit. I brace and work myself into a jog. Why didn't she wait for me? She seems to be running away. The light moves faster and faster through the increasingly dense fog. I am sprinting now, trying in vain to catch up. There certainly isn't any cold anymore. My limbs have loosened up, shedding their icy constraints as I dash through the creepy grass. This is ridiculous. Why have I waited over ten hours for a contact who was only going to flee from me.

Holy shit, that's a big house.

In the middle of the field, which now seems to stretch endlessly into the surrounding abyss, stands a large and looming colonial farmhouse. Three stories and four chimneys. Peeling white paint. What looks like a small lake out front. Cobbled stone steps lead up to the front patio, which circles around each side of the house. The front door is open and in the doorway, illuminated by a bright light coming from within, stands the woman. Or at least I think it's her.

I take a moment to catch my breath. I'm still unfit. One of head office's gripes with me. I never seem to be fit despite passing all the cardiovascular requirements. I'd like to see those fat bastards run. Maybe this still is all one big psychological and physical challenge. Well fuck it, I'm going to prove myself whether it is or not. I am not going to lose. The ball of flames that is pure and utter hatred burns from within and invigorates me. I suddenly have all the energy in the world. The energy of every bouncing knee in every bored conference room. I am the energy of the fight. I am hate and flames and energy and life.

I stride towards the farmhouse, which gets smaller with every step. Ya, fuck you, you stupid fat farmhouse, I'm in charge here. This is my mission, not yours. This is my property, not yours. My negotiation – not the cold's, not the bench's, not that smug couple's, and certainly not this woman's. I will win. Even if I don't know what I'm doing.

I climb the steps. The frozen moisture on the steps melts under the heat radiating from my feet. I reach the patio and stare down the woman. The *contact*. She puts down the sign. She stands at the top of the steps. I stand in the doorway. I turn off the torch and say –

Come inside –

After you –

The bench and the cold and the man looking for a light seems like another life. The aches and the cold and the scared couple seem like another life. It's only ahead of me now. I lead the woman in the grey coat through the hall and to a back room. I know where to go. I know where I am.

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