

Speeding

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He was shorter than me. Tubby with it. A small barrel of a man about my age but with less hair to show for it. He stood in a beam of light, a slender shaft lancing down from the airport's cathedral-high ceiling, the diffused beam forming a halo from what remained of his brushed back locks.

“Morning Sir.” His smile was practiced, gentle even, but it created an impenetrable barrier. A friendly menace to stop me in my tracks.

“Could you come with me.” It was a question without the question mark, said in a tone to give the illusion of choice, but his outstretched arm was an obstruction, not a signpost. Beyond lay a partitioned area and he nodded towards it, a persuasive motion that made me realise I hadn't moved since he smiled in my direction.

Fear already gripped me.

I mumbled a “yes officer” and walked ahead of him feeling the first beads of sweat trickle between my shoulder blades.

Had I been such an obvious target? If I had been the customs man, what would I have seen? A man in his twenties with too much stubble and dirty hair; a loose jacket, cheap and shapeless, covering a shirt too long between washes, and ragged jeans brushing the tops of my brand new trainers. Was that sum total enough to arouse suspicion?

As we walked, the customs man slipped beside me and guided me without a word towards a row of long black tables. Smooth and without any obvious haste, he had walked me of own free will to a place where I didn't want to be.

“Can I see your bags sir? Are you aware of the contents of these bags? Has anyone asked you to carry anything?”

I incomprehensibly garbled my way through his questions, placing my battered green rucksack on the table. Would he search me too?

He began picking his way through the multiple pockets of the rucksack and I stole a glance at his face, trying to read his mood or intention; searching for a moment of understanding. Was he bored? Suspicious? Did he know? But to my probing eyes, his face was horribly neutral.

A giggle to my right broke my concentration and I stole a glance at the table next to me. A young 20-something woman was having her bags searched by another customs man. At least his intentions were clearer. They swapped secret smiles when a small shred of cloth that might have been a bikini top, slipped from an overstuffed case and dropped to the floor. She bent to pick it up, skin-tight-jeans stretching around her ample backside, while her breasts struggled to free themselves of a neckline that plunged down as far as anyone would want to swim.

“Do you smoke?”

The question jerked me from soft female flesh to my own predicament.

“Yes.” My answer sounded flat and hard, moving from my throat with too much energy. An answer too prepared for a question too expected.

He caught it too, a brief flicker of his eyes and the ghost of a smile. A cat spotting the mouse out of the hole. I avoided his gaze and tried not to think of the drugs hidden inside a single cigarette, inside the semi-secret pocket of my jacket.

Just a small amount of white crystallised amphetamines. Speed. A bit of Whizz. A class B drug. It wasn't much. Just enough for my own personal use. I'm not a dealer. But it was still illegal and I remembered the hidden stash the moment I saw the custom man, the second I saw the coiled snake of his blue tie emerging from the jungle of tourists. The instant our eyes locked, the sharp corner of the hidden cigarette packet pressed against my skin and I remembered...

“Don't do it.” Had been Andy's advice.

He sold me the Speed, even showed me how to hide it inside a cigarette. And he told me I was stupid, many, many times.

“I know it's only a bit of whizz,” he said as his fingers professionally scooped the brown tobacco back into the cigarette, covering up the pale white crystals now snuggled up against the inside of the filter tip. “But I can't get over you smuggling drugs *into* Amsterdam. It's like, just dumb man.” And he'd laughed, coughing slightly on the acrid smoke of his rolled up joint.

On the face of it, yeah, I was being stupid, but I had no contacts in Amsterdam and no time to make them. I was meeting a girl, a girl who had been Speeding all night in a London club when I met her. A girl who laughed at my tiredness. My

inability to perform. A girl who I wanted to meet again and, playing by the same rules, show her...

Show her what? I wasn't sure anymore.

I'd smuggled the drugs into Amsterdam and the girl had been waiting by the railway station, as she said she would. But things had changed. She had upped the ante. She was using. And she wasn't afraid to show it off. The needle marks on her arm sickened me and, having said so much, we parted, never to meet again.

After that, I wasn't in the mood for Amsterdam and I ended the evening alone and tired in an all night café. I'd managed to doze there, one arm supporting my head, elbow dug into a table that wobbled with every breath and was covered in a multitude of stains best not thought about. I was forced to pay rent to stay here in the form of endless cups of coffee. And each one, I nursed to the grave.

Eventually, the sun rose over the roof tops, glistening off the damp red-roof tiles that stretched away along the length of the canal-lined street. The city was waking up, its dirty streets looking very much like the hangover they were. But it was at last time for me to leave.

I made my way to the train station. Sleepwalked to my early morning flight and only remembered the forgotten stash of drugs the moment, the very moment, I saw this customs man.

It's odd. Seeing things; reviewing them in the clarity of hindsight. Sometimes I feel as though I am a couple of jokes behind the real world and sometimes I feel as though I'm the only one who can see the funny. And sometimes I wonder if I'll ever really grow up. I think perhaps this was one of those moments.

"Do you mind if I see your cigarettes." There was a lot less friendliness in his eyes now. He was the hunter and the scent of a kill was in the air. The look on his face

seemed to say he knew exactly what I had done, exactly where the drugs were hidden. His eyes prosecuted me with unflinching justice.

I reached into my trouser pocket and pulled out a carton of cigarettes I had bought in the café. It was blue and covered with some writing on it that might have been Russian. They tasted like tires burnt on a hot summer's day but despite this I'd smoked maybe half.

The customs man took the carton almost gently from my hand, pried open the cardboard lid and tipped the contents out. They scattered, nicotine snowflakes on the coffin-black table, with his hands pushing them backwards and forwards until they all lay flat and separated. White bodies with brown heads. A row of the dead.

He looked at them hard and I knew exactly what he was searching for. The cigarette Andy had repacked looked okay, more or less, in a deformed sort of way. In the packet, it looked fine, but if you actually took it out, if you actually looked at it, you could see straight away that something just wasn't right.

"Thank you," the man in blue said all too soon. He rounded up the cigarettes, popped them in the box with a practiced movement and handed the carton back to me. I reached for it as I imagined an innocent man would. No haste and without hesitation. When I moved to retrieve that small blue box, I focused on the motion as though my life depended on it.

He could still be suspicious, if he searched me he would find that second packet and it wouldn't take him long to work out the rest.

"Can I see your passport?"

I nodded, pocketing the cigarettes and searching for my travel documents. I half-reached inside my jacket and for a cold sliver of a moment, I almost took out the hidden carton from its semi-secret pocket of my jacket. My fingertips grazed the

corner of the hidden carton and I froze, hand half-inside the thin fabric of my jacket. I stood like that for a long time, too tired to react, too afraid to panic. Then I looked up into his face not willing to think any further, searching in his eyes for some kind of inspiration.

“In the back pocket of your jeans Sir?” His suggestion was the first question mark I had heard from him and yet when I reached round, there it was.

How carefully had I been observed?

I handed him the thin red book and he flipped it open. I watched him pause at the back page of my passport, then look up at me. I expected a delay, a last penetrating gaze, but there was nothing. Just an empty smile and an almost inquisitional lack of suspicion. He zipped my bag shut, handed my passport to me and before I realised, he was finished and I was free.

Out through the green channel, I walked past a firing squad of waiting people, armed with smiles and hastily scribbled name-cards. Their faces a blur as I headed away, bile spilling up from my guts and filling my mouth. I made it to the toilets just as the first noisy stream of vomit spewed away from me in a wide arc. It splashed into the stainless bowl, instantly swirled away by my hand on the flush. I puked again, a half-dry retch. Then I flushed, over and over, my head pressed on the cool rim of the bowl, as the fresh water splashed up over my burning face.

A long moment passed before I was confident enough to sit, defeated, on the floor. The cold air from under the door hit me and I gulped it down, a razor in my throat that caused me to return to the bowl and dry retch some more.

When I had finished, when I could think again, I caught site of my reflection in the polished tiled wall, half obscured by graffiti and smears from a cleaner's cloth.

From somewhere deep inside me a hollow laugh barked out, a dark sombre sound, echoing away, cheerless and lonely in this empty room.

With a jerk, I was on my feet, intent on flushing the troublesome cigarette into a waterlogged grave. I took it out and on the edge of dropping it, stopped...

A nagging doubt held for a moment. A moment too long. And then the cigarette was back in the packet and back in my jacket.

It was Saturday. There was bound to be a party tonight, bound to be a girl, and I was wasted. A smear of paint dragged too far down a wall by someone wanting too much from the brush. If I wanted to retrieve anything from this weekend, I might find a use for my troublesome burden after all.

I pulled the toilet lid down and rested for a moment. In the tiles, my reflection watched me with a tired drawn look, and I nodded back.

Yeah, one day I would grow up. But not today.

The End