

## Life in the Faslane

I should take more time to appreciate it. The pale blue of it. The cauliflower floret clouds that gather across it.

The deepness of it. Where does it go? Anywhere or just up, up and out into that dark canyon we call space?

Earth. Space. Galaxy. Universe.

Universe. Galaxy. Space. Earth.

Here.

A stone pinches my back. I lift my hips up off the road and use my spare left arm to sweep it away, rolling it across the A814. A chain lock links my right arm to Mad Mikes. It's heavy, keeping our bodies from being easily lifted from the blockade. Any movement makes it grate its metallic teeth together.

'We are warning you. We have the authority and the means to arrest any and all of you involved in this disruption,' a husky voice calls over a megaphone. 'You have five minutes to get up and get out of the way.'

Calean's voice, as gruff and damning as his horned helmet-wearing ancestors, slams back at him. 'We have the morals and the means to stop any and all of you involved in the murder of thousands with nuclear weapons. You have five minutes to shut the fuck up and turn around.'

I bend my knees, stamping my feet against the concrete.

'Aye, aye, ayeeeee!' My calls of endearment set off the rest. We are thunder and we are here.

There's blue lights but not the disco kind. There's sirens but they won't move us.

It's all play and they know it. They don't think we're worth the resources it would cost to bring us in. But I don't mind being worthless if it means others being safe.

I tilt my head backwards, crown pushing into the grit of the road. Cars stack up behind us, their drivers hooting all at different times, for different lengths. I let the sound of it consume me until beeps become music on a page.

A melody of appreciation.

The Faslane National Anthem.

In my mind, everyone's a supporter.

I glance back up at the sky and let the beeps fade into the background. I think I can see straight through Earth and out into space but, no, it's just black sunspots floating on the surface of my eyes.

'Unlock yourself.' The husky voiced man is close now, and loud. His shadow strains over me, blocking what little heat the Scottish summer sun was dribbling out.

I transfix my eyes to the sky. Chase black spots. Could this be the world's earliest version of packman?

Stay calm.

Earth. Space. Galaxy. Universe.

'Look at me,' he says with a shower of spit. 'Get up, now!'

He'd be louder if he used his megaphone.

Do I really want him standing over me with that though? It would at least catch all that excess saliva.

My heart beats as if jumping six-foot hurdles. How can I stabilise it? I watch a cloud bulge and warp into the shape of a tree.

I breathe deeply, dispelling voice shakes.

‘Mike, that lad’s calling youuuuu,’ I sing-song, still avoiding the man’s face.

Mike chuckles. ‘Oh naw, not me sweetheart! Oh Orla, I think this gentleman is asking you to get up.’

A strong, but slightly softer voice comes from further down our barricade. It’s Orla.

‘Ocht, he’s not after me. Maybe Pete? Pete!’

The man grunts. ‘Stop this shit.’

‘Cannae hear you, son,’ Mike replies.

‘I said-,’ the man raises the megaphone to his mouth, ‘-stop this shit. All of you!’

Mike rolls his head towards me.

‘Well, what d’you think, hen? That’s me told. Time to get up and go?’

With nerves comes adrenaline, and with adrenaline comes feeling too much at a rate too quick to process. I laugh loud, becoming hysterical.

The man looms, looking like he wants to stomp on my mouth to get the laughing to stop.

Funny thing is, it does make me feel as though I should.

‘You bitch. You stain on society. You-’

‘Gaz,’ Across the road, another policeman beckons him, pointing at an angry driver shouting pig related abuse from their window.

‘Fuck it,’ Gaz says, marching away to deal with someone else’s opinion of him.

Thirty minutes pass. We don't move. Our opposition doesn't back out.

I hear heavy footsteps approach from behind me. I roll as far as I can, catching sight of patent leather docs tied up with rainbow laces. I trail upwards, gaze ascending skinny legs. Sunlight bleaches out the lad's face, but not the bulky video camera that rests on his shoulder. So, this is him.

'Johnny?'

He crouches beside me. The thick, brown curls of his art-school haircut fall forwards across his eyes.

'Aye.'

'You're younger than I expected,' I say.

He laughs lightly, tucking one side of curls behind his ear with his free hand.

'I mean, you, well,' I'm blethering, 'You sound much older on the phone,' I slip my spare hand underneath my head like a pillow to hold it up. It feels very 'draw-me-like'. Not exactly what I wanted.

'Likewise,' Johnny replies.

I smile. Good.

'You ready?' I ask.

He nods, stands, then prods at the buttons on his camera. I watch as his eye falls into place at the viewfinder.

It's time.

I clear my throat, take another deep breath.

‘Just fifty of your nuclear weapons could kill two hundred million people,’ I shout. ‘Nuclear weapons will, at best, sicken thousands of people and, at worse, kill them.’

Mike joins me. In unison, we shout.

‘Less than one percent of the nuclear weapons in the world could threaten two billion people with starvation in a nuclear famine.’

Down our chain, the others join in.

‘Ionising radiation from your nuclear weapons will contaminate the environment.’

We’ve rehearsed this well.

‘In areas devastated by nuclear weapons, the effects will still be felt years later. Babies will be born deformed or dead.’

‘Murder. Starvation. Contamination. Deformation. This will be in your hands.’

We pause.

‘Make the right choice.’

The others fall silent, leaving me to shout on, ‘You are being live streamed. We are showing the world the truth. Turn around now. Make the right choice.’

The MOD police stand in a line, elbows touching. Their bulletproof jackets accentuate their chests, making them look like a flock of pigeons. They gawk at us.

One thumbs the two-way radio clipped to his belt, hesitating. He lifts it out, holding it to his mouth, speaking words I can’t hear nor make out from his lips. His beak juts out as he pauses, listening to whichever authority is at the other end.

‘This is it, Farh.’ Mike says.

‘You think?’ I prop myself up onto my free elbow. It must be the signal. The threat of being live streamed, they hate that.

The policeman clips the radio back in its place. Without looking down at us on the ground, he turns, making for his vehicle. I watch the others follow him. It's like they have copied and pasted the same person, with the same beliefs, the same manner, the same taste for violence, and dropped them all down in Helensburgh.

Doors slam. Engines start.

I love this bit. The retreat. Watching them attempt three, four, five, eight-point turns. Each one getting in another's way.

‘Get it right up ye!’ Pete calls.

I sit up as far as my chains will allow. We've won again. I slam my feet against the ground one after the other, pounding them over and over. The others join.

Foot stomping and cries and kisses. There, between it all, is Johnny. He pans the camera over the dissipating convoy. Then his camera finds me, and I smile. I smile for the win, for the cause and, in many ways, for this man I've only just met.

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White sage and daydreams. The thick purple blanket beneath me. Soft slippers on the velvet rug. What else? I roll the tassels of my throw pillow between my thumb and index finger. The prickles of my cactus heart pierce through my skin. The lists aren't helping today. They're not stopping the bile from rising up against my swallows. Maybe I could write the list out on a piece of paper, crumple it into a ball and shove it down my throat.

There's a knock at the door.

‘Farrah?’, Mike’s voice calls from outside, ‘That guy, the filming guy, Johnny, is here. He wants to show you the footage from the other day?’

I wipe the sweat from my palms across my pillow before turning it over. ‘Oh.’, I say, ‘Aye, come on in.’

Mike’s bald head emerges from behind the door. ‘Everything alright, sweetheart?’ He looks across to me from under his thick, greying eyebrows.

Oh Mike. He cares so much. ‘All good!’, I say. Mike nods and steps back.

A head full of dark brown curls pops through, smiling. ‘Am I alright to...?’

‘Aye, yeah of course. Come in’

I watch as his fingers find the doorframe and he pulls himself out of the mud and into the caravan. A low-slung backpack hangs off his shoulders, following the contour of his spine.

‘Do you want me to take these off?’ He points to his shoes. The docs from the other day. The ones with the rainbow laces.

‘You’re okay, mate. I don’t mind the mess.’ I gesture to the rest of the room. It’s immaculate, as it always is.

Mike hovers in the doorway. ‘Have you seen your maw recently, hen?’

‘Oh aye, yes. She was over here this morning making me a roll and a slice, cleaning up, telling me to focus on my education.’

‘Farrah.’ Mike says. I laugh and he smiles, softening as if I was his child.

‘Not in a while. I’d try Jacks or Andy’s.’ I tuck my hair behind my ears. Suddenly aware Mike and I are having a ‘Mike and I’ conversation, as if Johnny isn’t just standing there, in my caravan, in my room. I glance over to him, see him leaning against the wall.

He's not reacting as other outsiders do but moulding himself around my world. It makes me uncomfortable how at ease he looks in here.

Mike clears his throat. 'Well, I'll go and see if I can find her. Don't worry, I'll let her know you were asking after her'. He clicks the door shut, wiggling the plastic latch into place in the plastic door.

I laugh. 'Cheers', I say to the shut door. I smooth my bedspread out with my hands. 'Hey,' I say to Johnny. I click my knuckles one at a time. Stroke at my hair and my neck. What am I doing? Why am I twitching around so much? I stand.

'Hi,' he says.

Edinburgh born, Glasgow educated is my guess.

'Sit wherever you want, man?' Man? Have I ever said that before? I go over to my little stove in the corner and lift the kettle. I shake it, hearing the water slosh around. 'Tea? Coffee?'

'I'll have a coffee please, if you're making,' Johnny replies. I watch as he makes himself comfortable on the sofa. He leans over to the stack of books perched on the armrest, reading the titles. I find myself wondering whether he likes reading. He seems like the kind of guy that would. I wonder what he thinks of that pile. It's a weird mix. Dear god, there's a serial killer book in there. What if he thinks I'm getting inspiration or something? Would it be weird to say I'm not?

'You read?' I ask, deciding not to bring up the whole I'm not a serial killer thing.

'Aye, I'm addicted'.

I smile. Of course he is.

'I love your house by the way,' he says.

I laugh. 'It's not exactly a house but yeah, she's nice. Probably not what you're used to right?'

'No, nicer. I've got a room in a tenement in Goven.'

'Easter House area?'

'You know it?'

'I've heard about it' Our eyes meet.

He laughs and means it. 'Posh round there, it is.'

'Oh aye, I've heard you can almost go three days without a break in?'

'Three, sometimes four!'

'Gawh!' I say, 'I'm impressed!' I turn away and reach for the cupboard above the stove. Are his eyes on my back? Is he secretly assessing me? Can he see the slither of skin poking out from between where my jeans end, and my t-shirt starts? 'Do you have milk or sugar?' I ask.

I hear him rustling around in his rucksack. No eyes on me then.

'No milk and one sugar please,' he says.

I make the drinks and turn too fast. Hot coffee lurches to the edge of the mug, swashes and scolds my hand. I pretend not to notice, instead focusing on making it over to him with at least half a cup left.

I hold it out and Johnny takes it. 'Thanks'. He spins the mug, reading aloud, 'Nice n Sleazy. You've been?'

'You've heard of it?'

‘Aye! Was there a couple of months ago for a United Fruit gig,’ He curls his fingers around the mug, placing the pad of each finger down one at a time. ‘Got to meet the singer, Iskandar, afterwards actually. Nice guy!’.

‘No way?’ I ask, when really, I want to say ‘marry me?’ despite not believing in the institution.

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I roll an empty can of Red Bull off the table in front of me and onto the seat opposite. Tomorrow, someone taking this train for their morning commute will roll the can onto the floor and wonder whether the person who drunk it really did get wings.

I lean sideways, resting my elbow on the table and the side of my face in my hand.

He leans towards me.

His lips are like a tradesman’s hands, rough yet careful. They melt into mine as though lips are tools, and a kiss is something to be configured between them.

I raise my hand to where his neck meets his hairline. I brush upwards, fingers combing through those curls I’ve come to love. He likes it. The tiny sigh into my mouth tells me as much.

I smile. Our front teeth bump together.

‘Sorry,’ I whisper, my forehead finds his. Johnny peels back a little to kiss my nose.

I look past Johnny on the window seat and try to see the lights of the city we are leaving behind.

Instead, I just see our shaking reflection in an otherwise empty carriage. I gaze into this projection of Johnny and see the moment my eyes first found him. The docs, the skinny legs that filled them. His facial features bleached out by the sun. A stranger.

Yet now he sits beside me, the palm of his left hand tucked against the inside of my thigh. His thumb strokes the goosebumps on my bare leg.

He knows me. He really knows me. And that makes me nervous.

World. Country. Community. Being. Head. Heart.

Him.