

Chapter 8. The Unforgiving Minute.

"If you can fill the unforgiving minute

With sixty seconds worth of distance run,"

Realization of the fallout from the park incident cascaded and covered Him quickly, He immediately regretted their actions.

Robert obsessively searching for the people that ripped them off, had now brazenly attacked one of the most powerful families in town. As soon as He heard them discussing their names, He realized who they were. He and Alex attended middle school with two of them; it had been years since they had seen one another. In the small universe in which they inhabited, it would appear that the guy He had just head butted was the very same Kashif that took Alex to Edinburgh all those years ago.

Their family had always been notorious; the eldest son a local politician and Muslim cleric was a tall portly man who often donned the pages of the local newspaper. The second and third oldest: Nasacat and Macwally were possibly the most despicable people He had ever met. His personal interactions with the two had always been negative. He had stood up to Macwally at the back of the bus on the way to His first day at secondary school, but the older bigger Pakistani bully beat Him for His bravery. He had a friend a few years later: Charlotte, a pretty fair haired slim young lady who He had admired for some time but never had the courage to ask out; she was beaten and raped by Nasacat during their last year at school. The man was not convicted of the crime due to lack

of evidence and eventually poor Charlotte dropped out of school and of the clutches of a tormented life before even finishing her exams. Kashif was His age, He remembered Him as the tall kid from the play-ground football games although by then, time had fattened him up a bit. He also remembered how intolerant and sharp he treated his sisters at school. More recently, the three middle brothers ran both a family taxi business and provided at least half of the drug trade in the small town.

He would not hesitate again to blindly fight at the side of His friend, but He did resent Robert taking such brash actions on their behalf; especially over a matter He had already tried to exclude Himself from. The boys bickered as they trotted up the hill to Roberts back door:

“What the fuck mate, you been carrying that pipe all night?”

“I mean, yeah. It’s for emergencies, it’s my emergency bat.”

“What the fucks going on with you mate, fucking emergencies... You are crazy para’ all the fucking time these days.”

“You are just vastly underprepared all the time. These days; mate. I don’t hold it against you.”

“You know who they are right?” He ignored the jab.

“That’s why I did what I did; I found out that their firm robbed us. I know it for a fact, my dealer is their dealer. I have been looking for that little shit for months; I’ve even been carrying a fucking bat in case I found him. You know I had to do that. We

cannot bend, they won't; I did it for us, all of us." Robert was angry and becoming upset. The coke he did earlier was obviously still coursing and he sniffed between sentences.

He didn't want to fight with him. He didn't agree with the tact or the approach they had just used to open this Pandora's Box, but He knew His friend truly believed in what he was saying. He also knew then that they both would eventually face the consequences of these rash decisions. That threat stayed, indigested and fermenting in His stomach for the imminent future.

Christmas was days away and if He planned to fill His pockets with Jewelry, His best chance was fading. He had already figured out that if He was going to get a clean get away, He needed large crowds of people in which to hide. He also thought He had figured a way to convince the store clerks to help Him with His task and the busily shopping families would hauntingly, only help better serve His cause here. Taking stock, He gathered His provisions the evening before:

A pillow and extra-long leather belt, a small set of nail scissors, a yellow neck tie, a new plastic pleather briefcase and a suit, three sizes too big with a white collared shirt to match; a razor and a packet of blue plasticine; two jars and a bottle of talc; a spool of wire, three colors; two t-shirts, one little vial of food coloring, a hoodie and a pair of jeans; a can of shaving foam; a large pair of thick rimmed glasses, a yard of rubber tubing and finally, two bottles of water.

He laid in bed that night wrestling with the ever-ticking seconds of the clock. His mind raced as the sun slowly gave chase to the moon. He had planned every detail but now, with only short time between He and it, doubted His own logic. The variables

would always be beyond His control, but standing on the edge of this cliff, He was very aware that even the slightest slip would be impossible to recover from. He had lined up almost ten individual purchasers; this alone made His efforts worthwhile in His eyes. His icing on the cake would be if He bagged anymore and Miles would come through with a large chunk of change. He dared to dream that maybe He could get twenty-five watches after all.

Excitement would tally places with dread, both would cause Him to fill with prickling heat below the sheets in uncomfortable anticipation. He tried not to think about His mother, He knew that other than Him, she could be the only other victim here. The more He contemplated His selfishness, the more He despised His actions. One thing He knew to be true: as a child, if He had a thought, even if He knew He would get in trouble; He had to watch that thought play out, from fear He would swell and burst and be covered and be trapped. This was His tic.

He remembered sitting on the stoop outside His family's glass front door and watching the spokes spin on the fallen BMX in front of Him. At eight years old, He could stare limitlessly as the reflectors spiraled above the gravel drive way. This particular day He wondered if He could drop a stone through the spinning wheel. Never too impulsive, He imagined His outcomes. Success, stone falls through. Failure, stone hits spoke and flies off. Worse still: Failure, stone hits spokes and flies at Him. Worst case: Failure, stones hit spoke and flies and hits and breaks glass door window. Even His young mind understood the concept of three to one odds against. Yet, like a hungry little pain inside Him, this moment created a compulsion that He could not quench. As He held the little round pebble above the freshly spun wheel He imagined the worst trajectory and pictured the crippling fear He might

experience with the shattering of glass. That would be by far the worst crime of His short little life. The itch was burning too hot now; surely, He could drop the pebble cleanly through. Reflector, reflector, reflector...drop. SMASH.

As He lay fighting both the dawn and Himself, He hated what He was about to potentially do to His family name. No matter His guilt He already knew that He was powerless from ceasing to scratch this new infernal itch. He wondered how or if He would be feeling just twenty-four short hours from now.

It was the eve of the eve of Christmas Eve; starting the engine on the little white chop shop Peugeot He brought just for this job, He checked the back seat for the spare number plates He'd lifted during the weeks. Swapping them over would be His only concern should He by some crazy chance get away. The petrol gauge was healthily full and taking into account the evening traffic, He had more than enough time to slowly cruise the journey west. Stopping at a motorway café, He even had enough time to complete both the maze and the coloring portion of the "Little Chef" children's table mat. Arriving too soon today, would almost be as bad as arriving too late. By now, He more than anyone, recognized that timing was fickle and had to be respected. That last thirty minutes of the journey saw His heart thump a beat that drowned out the rest of the world, luckily by now, He had recently made the journey enough times that His body magically knew where to go. Pulling into the cattle market, His surreal paralysis was finally broken by His realizing all the front parking spaces were occupied. This was different; vicious variables, He was already at war. He finally found an empty slot nestled in the far back corner, it was certainly busier than normal.

Shaking the little car as He moved around inside, He began to prepare for His work. First, He pulled the extra shirt over His head, and then He slipped on the hoodie. Wriggling in the little space, He tucked His jeans into His socks and pulled on the gray wool and silk suit trousers. Stuffing the pillow now down the front, He covered the remainder by zipping up the hoodie. Wrestling on the shirt, He tightened the buttons and finished the sausage skin form with a tie under the collar around His neck. Using talc now, leaning His head out the window, He generously worked the coarse knuckle length hair of the beard He had spent the last few weeks growing, finally adding one last pass to His head. Getting out of the car, His legs filled with blood and His thighs felt stiff from the long car journey. During little plie's, He threaded and tightened the belt around His new artificial tubby waist. It was already becoming hot inside His little suit and the struggle from the restriction of all the clothing while He tried to weave His arms into the suit jacket, reminded Him of the stuffy tangled wrinkled sheets from the night before. Sliding the cool plastic tortoise shell arms of the eye glasses behind His ears, He reached into the back and grabbed the briefcase He had also prepared the evening before. From this point forward, the itch was in control; scratching it would bring either welcome relief or unimaginable discomfort, either way, for now, He was already lost to it.

The walk to the overpass seemed shorter than it should; steamy beneath the pillow, it was hard for Him to concentrate on the pace of His stride. He did not want to look like a rushing fool, a little out of place was ok; memorable was not. He needed to steal a grip now if His strict timing was to be obeyed. Stomping up the twenty steps, turn, twenty steps, He breathed in deep and out hard on every other one. Reaching the top, His character returned and again He was able to numbly succumb to the selfish shadows of

the Will for goal. He paced, proud and confidently over the pass, focused forward. He did not even mind the pan handler, sat, legs across the path, forebodingly in that place for the first time since He'd began His reconnaissance. The variables He could not control, He could only control how He Himself responded to them; and despite small details beating out of time; His faith in His plan was not waivered. Stepping over the vagabond, He descended the steps and on, into the sea of shoppers as just another overweight, elderly gentleman.

Despite the shops closing, the walkways bustled with busy hording shoppers. Security gates that lazily hung in variable heights of unenticing hint; were accompanied by polite passive aggressive smiles of shop assistants wanting to leave after a long day. The bright string light bells and candy canes flooded the paths with illumination, only emblazoned more by the back drop of the dark winter sky. His now deeply seared breadcrumbs were all present and correct, although some donning the odd angel or wise man: Emerge from the access ally next to the record store, turn right at the fork by the red iron letter box and then forge forward past the Woolworths (nativities now replaced the displays that housed the pick'n'mix), left, behind British Home Stores and finally over and up the steep spanned stairs to the indoor shops.

As He weaved this tale, He told me here that He witnessed these events through the crack of the opening of the door, just as you and I are about too. He told me that it was as if He had left Himself, and watched as the character that had dutifully commandeered His body performed the tasks He planned with a cold precision. Increasingly as He told me His tales from now on, it would seem as though He unconsciously began to distance part

of Himself further and further from His own actions. Into this world we're thrown.

Entering the mall from the rear, He first flanked the building and purposely passed the police station, ensuring that nothing was out of the ordinary, it wasn't. The lights were out in the little coffee store and chairs were already stacked on tables. Ignoring all the people filing from the stores, He focused only on the space where He knew His immediate future lie. As He closed in, His heart fluttered for a brief second of humanity, but seeing the half-fallen roll cage and the busy closing rituals behind it, fed the beast He needed to become. Thankfully for Him, timing doesn't care for inclination.

There was no last deep breath or clear moment of inception, His mission had begun the moments His feet left the little car back in the lot. Without loss of stride He flicked the case so it would spin on its flat under the barrier, dropping levels He rolled Zenpo Kaiten after the attaché.

Overwhelmed from their day, the fatigued staff did not notice the briefcase topping into the room; consumed with the medial tasks already belated by the last-minute shoppers, they instead rushed to complete their polishing, packing and counting. The man rolling through however did abruptly steal all attention. The senior older lady was the first to react, dropping her ledger and pen, arms a grasped she cried: "Goodness, are you ok sir?"

It wasn't until many hours later that He registered her words, He at the time did not recognize her instinct to want to help Him, instead, already dead for the task, He ignored any sounds coming from the people inside of the store. It did not matter what they said, like a boxer tucking his chin behind his guard, He didn't

need to actually be able to see the head to hit it, focusing on the chest allows one safety and access to the mechanical cues needed to attack and defend. He needed no words yet and listening to others would only muddy the waters. Just as He had practiced in His bedroom every night for the past week, He out stretched and gripped the cases handle as He break fell back to His feet. Pushing through His heels, He rose and drove forward; free hand in front, gripping and driving the shocked women back by the scruff, against the display case that had just been emptied in the middle of the store. Slapping the case to the glass surface, He quickly snapped the little buttons, popping clasps: click, click. Lifting the lid pulled the cotton He had tacked to the little market brought cheap digital timer, it gloriously beeped as it began furiously counting down from 5 minutes. Either side of the timer sat two jars half filled with liquid, one clear, one red. Rubber tubing poked through the lids and wrapped back down through the briefcases letter pocket that was holding the crafted device. In the well of the case sat two large blue bricks of modeling clay; He had spent hours sculpting their perfect angular corners and smooth sides. The bricks were joined by two pieces of wire, which also ran back into the busy pocket.

Hand still gripping the blouse of the woman, He now stared intently into the eyes of the gloved male associate whose space they had just invaded. His forced coarse accent rattled through His teeth, His Belfastian delivery was as flawless as it had been during the hundreds of times He had rehearsed it in the car during His many journeys here:

“I tell ye, in five minutes, this bomb explodes. If I do not reach my associates, this bomb explodes. As of now, I cannot stop this bomb. Do ye understand me?”

Gripped with fear the male associate vigorously nodded. The assailant was firmly in control.

“Ye all sit here and not move, and ye prey that timer stops, otherwise all the mummy’s and daddy’s and babies here will die.”

Letting go of the woman’s neck, He scanned the back of the room, ensuring He made eye contact through the fake lenses with the last female associate now cowering behind the display case. Returning to the male, He reached out and heaved the closed little black box into His arms. Walking backwards towards the gate, He continued to switch His gaze amongst the scared trio. Reaching the roll down, balancing the box in one hand, He elected to lift the barrier high enough for Him to gently bend and duck under.

The tension inside the little shop had built, edging on evaporation, but stark contrast, the busy superficial stresses of the closing shopping center seemed nonrelevant, almost pointless. For the people wondering their way through the gradually emptying aisles in blissful ignorance, the only excitement was for the festive season. Briskly walking now, He gripped the box tightly to His hip, it was far heavier than He had anticipated so He trapped and rested one side against the leather belt around His waist. Reaching the heavy double glass doors, He did not look behind Him and instead focused on His route ahead. In this moment, had He been chased, it would not have mattered; His bluff relied on all or nothing, had it indeed been called at this point He would have had little choice but to surrender. Pushing His way ever forward, it took every ounce of strength not to panic and run, even now if someone emerged and gave chase, there wasn’t enough distance between He and the mall for His confidence in His running in this state to help Him. Instead He thought long term, His glass was half

full. Should He make the journey back in one piece, His concern after the fact would be who may have seen Him commit these crimes. He had layered His protection so thoroughly; to draw unnecessary attention to Himself now would be a self-inflicting injustice and insult. He would coolly walk, minimizing witness. Finding His current.

The agonizing stroll took all His effort. Inside the suit He was hot and clammy, and He could feel small drips of sweat run between the hairs on His legs. He had to juggle the box from hip to hip every fifty strides or so; it was dense and compact, an awkward angular kettle bell. Finally, He made it back beneath the awning of the record store and before He made His way around the corner to the brief safety of the access alley, He took a moment to glance behind Him...Nothing. For now, there was nothing out of the ordinary.

Turning the corner, He found Himself alone for the first time since He began His task. His step increased now into a welcome run, slowly He felt control wriggle and wrestle to His Will. As He ran, He ripped open the buttons of the shirt and tugged out the pillow. Tossing it to the side, He first removed the pillow case that He had left on it and then proceeded to pry open the plastic latched lid to the jewelry deposit insert box. Fumbling, He was forced to stop and take a knee, half looking over His shoulder, half struggling with the unexpected puzzle in His hand, His head for a second swayed and overheated. Panic momentarily set in, He had tried to stay away but was slowly being sucked back into His own consciousness. It was too late now, this had to finish. Snapping back, queasy, He twisted the release, popped the lid and dumped the contents out into the pillow case. He had no time to admire His bounty, besides it wasn't His yet. He couldn't however

extinguish the ember of excitement that caught deep in His belly: there was a lot of stuff falling into its new bag.

Back on His feet now, He exploded back to pace, tossing the security box into the skip at the end of the alley, He sprinted to the overpass and took the steps two at a time, ten up, turn, ten up. When He finally crested the top, He had lost the suit jacket, trousers and shirt; ripping and strung up the railings as He traveled. The pan handler sat, still laid across the passage, staring at Him now, aware of His busy actions. He stopped, their gazes locked. No words were said, the old man on the floor was as satisfied with the solution as He would be. Releasing the balled pillow case, it spun below its twisted grip in his hand and heavily shimmied. He reached in and pulled out the first solid banded object He could find. He tossed the heavy silver watch toward the vagrant, just making out the black letters of Bvlgari before the old man snatched it up and greedily stuffed it in his jacket. Back to a sprint, He glanced down the roadway beneath Him checking for flashing lights, still no commotion; this was great, precious minutes were more than He could hope for. Hoodie up, He dropped down the steps, fast tapping the steel as He pounded, hitting the path back to the parking lot, His attire now less out of place helped blend Him to the urban shadow.

Spaces had opened in the parking lot now, but the inconvenience of losing His lucky spot had faded to the smoothness that His plan had currently managed to play out. Opening the hatch on the back of the car, He tossed in the treasure bag, took off and covered it with His hoodie. Dashing around to the driver's door, He open it reached in and grabbed His little bag of supplies from off the back seat. Gripping large chunks of hair, He roughly cut away at His course beard, trimming it as close to

skin level as possible. Dousing His head with bottled water, He leant between the cover of cars and washed out any talc that had survived the journey to this point. Using the rear-view mirror and the wing mirror, He shaved His face clean. Hastily scrubbing the razor across His chin caused it to tear and burn; He didn't care, although a little bloody, by the time He had finished, a different man was reflecting back at Him. The little car sprang to attention as soon as He turned the rekeyed lock and He zipped back and then out of the trusty lot. Hitting the road, all the traffic lights turned a current of green, He traveled His quickest most unrestricted route to the motorway yet.

As He joined the slow crawl of traffic and, only once He had made His way over to the relative safety of the middle lane, He took a moment to remove His tight leather driving gloves. Eight minutes and twenty-two seconds. The little digital Casio on His wrist was now the only proof to Himself that He was there at all. He pushed the start button just before tossing His pretend bomb. It was such a short time, yet every second was filled with painful eternities. Not just for Him. As the bypass leaving the city swoops one last time past the historic municipal center, He could see the rows of red and blue lights spasming across the scape. The traffic flow slowly opened up the further from the city He got, He had hit the open road long before the police and news helicopters had time to get in the air. The long drive home was uneventful; His one stop to switch His number plates went flawlessly, He chose the parking lot to the Little Chef, He knew no one looks out the window; they all are crayon filling in the mazes in front of them. Back on the road and trying to stay His nerves He switched between stations and silence on the radio. News of the event hit the airwaves soon, reports of the bomb threat and subsequent evacuation stole the headlines, at that time, no mention was made to the robbery. He

could not stop thinking about the people He had just assaulted. He had planned a non-violent event, but until now had not appreciated all the factors, those vile, variables...vicious still.

He could not help but think of the poor woman He man-handled, she was about His mother's age. It did not matter that He knew she at no point was ever in harm's way, it mattered that she didn't know that. He had purposefully and masterfully exacted terror upon her, while her reaction to Him was defaulted in kindness. He felt broken, ugly in that moment. He knew too that as He had so much time, those three, poor people sat a watched a ticking clock that was never going to stop. He had made them contemplate their mortality, for five painful minutes. He imagined maybe the shock alone of the timer reaching zero would have been enough to push good people over their edge. There were no victimless crimes, although He left no visible scars, He knew He had assaulted those people with unforgiving reckless abandon.

A tough drive back soon melted away as He pulled onto the side street, around the corner from His house. Kissing His mother on the cheek before she went up to bed, He carried His heavy bag (now containing the pillow case and its bounty) into the kitchen and put on the kettle. Restricting Himself, He felt like a kid on Christmas morning. He had an idea what gifts He might have, but until He ripped away the wrapping, it was not a reality. He was relishing this anticipation. He waited for the water and the tea to stew before He took all His prizes, cuppa included, finally up to the privacy of His bedroom. There He slowly unpacked His bag. Holding the soft bottom corners of the case, He slipped the contents out onto His bed. The pile, slipping uncoordinated, pooled silver and gold across the mattress. The little sixty-watt lightbulb

that hung from the ceiling, fed a bouncing spark of jewels and precious metals.

Rolex, one, two, three, seven. Cartier, one, two three, five. Movado, one, two, three, nine. Breitling, one, two, three, four. Gucci, one two three, ten. It went on, and on. Gold tennis bracelets, several Troy's, Diamond rings, Safire broaches, packed in delicate tight wads. Far more than He had ever imagined. He never contemplated that He would ever have the problem of getting too much. That would be tomorrow's problem. That night He had an appointment with a bed that owed Him a sound night's sleep. Unforgiving minutes filled.