

# A PATH WITH HEART

STORY BY HARRY KUMAR

I awoke in a small, unremarkable kitchen. The walls were cracked and beige, and the cupboards were a faded red, paint flaking at the corners. One of the cupboard doors hung off of a single hinge. I wondered how long it had been that way. Light flooded into the far corner of the room through a broken window, revealing dust slowly turning in the air. Judging by the faint yellow tinge of the light, I supposed that it was late afternoon or early morning.

An image of a cat shrieking abrasively interrupted my vision. Its mouth had been wide and eyes piercing. I was almost certain it had been sat atop a plastic toy slide — the kind you'd see in an overgrown garden. The vision had consumed me in a flash, dissolving before I could properly embrace it. The cat dropped to the floor, kicking up light clouds of dust as it sauntered across the kitchen. Paying no attention to me, it leaped up to the countertop and gracefully stepped into the sink.

I pressed my palms firmly against the table to lift myself up. Raising my hands, I felt my skin catch on the table's tired wooden surface. As I navigated my way around the room, the floorboards bowed to my somnambulist movements. The door on the far side was partially enveloped in filtered sunlight. Glancing over at the sink, I confirmed that the cat still lay there, curled up. I reached for the doorknob: it was coated in a fine film of dust.

There was some resistance from the door due to a warped floorboard jamming against it, but after a moment of wrestling, the door gave way. Before me was a dingy hallway stretching at least a hundred yards with doors on either side. The walls were concrete with two metal pipes trailing along both sides. A worn, patterned carpet stretched out to the end of the hallway, clashing hypnotically with the otherwise industrial interior. Without a sound the cat darted past me, running along the carpet and turning right out of sight.

About halfway up the hallway on the left, I could see a thread of light peeking through one of the many doors. I slowly treaded in the direction of the light, cutting across its thin beam. Pushing against its metal bar, I opened the door.

To my surprise, the woman was still stood outside when I emerged. I wondered how long she had been waiting. Without hesitation, she set off on her way, beckoning me to follow. I closed the gate behind me, pausing to balance the rusted bolt on its latch. We began travelling at speed down a narrow alleyway, paved with uneven, worn stone. Between many of the paving stones were large mossy gaps in which rain had pooled from several days prior. The rooftops above us closed in on the sky, leaving a sliver of mid-blue trailing overhead. The town was silent, but for the intermittent dripping of pipes and the hollow patter of our steps. Twenty-or-so paces

ahead, the woman turned a corner. I followed.

There had been a time when the town was awake with a sense of urgency. The shops were busy and the cafes were teeming with young revolutionary minds. I could recall, as a kid, sitting on the bench opposite the electronics store, watching the window display. A 24 hour news channel was on one of the TVs while Top of the Pops shrieked in silence on another. The vacuums and shredders were statuary, bleached by the sun of past seasons. A poster in the window declared a sale of 'up to 40%' and 'twelve year warranty on selected products.' It too was sun-bleached and boasted its offers in a rounded, friendly font. Waiting in stillness on the damp bench, I found myself overwhelmed by fervent and impatient desire. And yet, the fulfilment of these desires felt distant; I was of an age when bank cards seemed like an implausible defiance of money.

"Where exactly are we heading?" I called out to the woman, who was still a considerable distance ahead.

"Not far now," she replied. Her voice rang as if she was just centimetres from my ear. The corner of her face was caught momentarily by the amber glow of a pedestrian crossing light, before submerging once again into darkness. She continued to direct me ahead without further word.

After some time, the stone pavement disbanded and we were walking along tarmac, crumbled at the edges. My shoes lagged behind my footsteps, heavy as though filled with sand. Turning my gaze up, I realised that we had been walking for some time and that the town was long behind us. The stretching silhouettes of empty shopfronts and terraced houses had dispersed to reveal an expansive evening sky. Disoriented by the shift in space, I scanned ahead for the woman. To my relief, she wasn't far in front of me. Only then did I notice that we were pacing through a car park. The cars were gathered in an unusual arrangement: dense clusters surrounded by vast expanses of empty bays. It was as though a parade of warring factions had arrived in succession, each taking stronghold of their own parking zone.

The woman, still ahead of me, was weaving through one of the clusters of cars. I followed her, shimmying by wing mirrors and glancing into the dim interiors as we passed car after car. After a minute or so of winding and turning, I found myself pressing up against the window of a silvery-blue Toyota Corolla. Peering in, I caught sight of a familiar air freshener: a cartoonish maple leaf, with google eyes and crooked teeth. I couldn't recall where I had seen it before, but the vacant stare of the jovial leaf was somewhat saddening, almost heart-wrenching. Much like the car of my early childhood, the owners kept an A to Z in the passenger's side compartment. I recalled frantic moments at traffic lights, scrambling to

find the right page; on special occasions, it had been my responsibility to guide the way from atop the front passenger throne. The A to Z had been my trophy of maturity: a token of my 'having grown up.'

The Toyota's interior disappeared behind the fog of my breath on the window, breaking me away from my memory. Scanning around the car park, I found that the woman was no longer in sight. Worse still, I had managed to wander down a narrow passage with no exit; the two cars before me converged on each other, clasped at the nose in a pince-nez fashion. Now that my attention was focused on the cars around me, I found that they were all tightly packed, far more so than I could recall them being in moments prior. The door of the blue Toyota and a white pickup truck were clenching me into a space barely two-foot wide. I leveraged my torso onto the roof of the Toyota using its door handle as a foothold, and clambered across the bonnet of several adjacent cars. Reaching a clearing, I scanned my surroundings for the woman. No sight of her. The car-park extended as far as I could see ahead. Stillness all around — empty.

Three thousand feet away, in a hollow cavern, a scratching began. The coarse scratching echoed silently and was heard by nobody. A pause. The scratching began again. Scratch .. pause .. scratch .. this time the sound scoured the inner reaches of the cavity, which was surely the size of a

canyon. scratch ,, scratch. Finally, in a determined release, the seventh scratch carried a hollow rumble, resonating like a glass bottle in a tiled bathroom.

My leading companion was revealed in the faint, warm glow of her lighter. She puffed a plume of orange mist and arose from a crouching position. Turning for a moment, she shot a look my way, as if to indicate that it was time to set off once more. I picked up my pace and followed in her direction.

We coursed past the car park zones, trolley bays and clusters of cars. Before long we were travelling through true emptiness. The odd pothole and occasional remnant of flaking street paint served as a sign that we were in fact moving. Nothing appeared between us and the horizon, which formed a dim line all around us.

After many minutes — perhaps even an hour — the boundless expanse reached an end. We found ourselves at the foot of an imposing building: as wide as it was tall. I became aware of the building the very moment that it became all I could see; its presence shifting out of the shadows to occupy every dark fold of the space before me. My eyes adjusted to the looming structure. The woman continued to dart ahead. As she entered the building through an arched entrance, a dull light flicked on, revealing the

interior to be a grand ticket hall — the kind found in train stations across Europe. Despite clear neglect, the station possessed a distinct charm. The hall was lit by tens of small Tiffany style lamps, which warmed the space immensely, and benches all around the were stacked with rather gorgeous, plump-looking cushions. In short, the decor was a fine balance between grand and friendly.

Entering the hall, I could hear a vague, stuttering hum. The noise, it seemed, was coming from a ticket machine, whose receipt mechanism was malfunctioning. The machine was the old kind — all buttons and no screens. A trail of receipts was cascading down to the polished floor, gathering in a pile of curls. Every two or so seconds, the machine would pause, before spurting out another stream of receipt paper. I closed in on the ticket machine. The sound was now filling the hall, no longer a vague hum but a grating shriek, not dissimilar to the incessant shrill of a roadworks. Beside the coin input was a metal plate, covered in manic scratches. The sound of scratching joined the cacophony.

All of a sudden, my vision was drawn to the woman, who was directing her gaze right at me from across the hall. The chorus of dissonance ceased in an instant. Behind the woman, a stampede of figures charged toward the train platforms. Their faces were not visible to me and their steps made no sound. The crowd turned right and disappeared in silence.

I couldn't make out the woman's face, but I felt that she was making direct eye contact with me. For a moment I was certain she was trying to communicate an urgency; attempting to shake me into action. But before I could stumble in pursuit, I felt a pang of clarity. I traced my companion's gaze behind me. An enormous clock consumed the far wall of the hall. It was no less than 20 meters in diameter. The clock face bore a flat, ivory tone with sharp, taunting dashes in place of numbers. Its four hands splayed across its face, reading '43.' Just like the hall, the clock was covered in a film of dust.

I turned back to the woman. She was no longer stood gazing up at the clock, but was sprinting through a ticket barrier. I yearned for my my legs to spring into action, but with each attempt at a stride, I was pulled down. The feeling was akin to a dull leg cramp — resistance to my movements thickened, pulling me earthwards. The woman turned right, out of sight.

I can't remember what it took, but after some time, my legs regained responsiveness and I too passed the barriers. In fact, I recall feeling freed from the moment I forgot to be stuck. Turning right at the archway, I was surprised to discover a single platform with a train waiting. Nobody was in sight. The doors began to beep, as if prompted by my presence. I stepped on board.

The train inched to a start before I had made my way to a seat. The carriage was empty. I made my way down the carriage seat, skirting my way around a mound of sand on the carriage floor. I collapsed into one of the low two seaters. I had always been fond of the Bakerloo line's distinct seating arrangement. Staring up at the map, I wondered which direction the tube was heading. Before I could form much concern, I felt myself drifting towards the precipice of a deep slumber. A tired throb of drowsiness carried its way through me. The tube was picking up speed and the mound of sand was gradually collapsing in on itself. Before long, the mound had dispersed entirely.

I turned to face the window, my head cradled in my right palm. My eyes sunk deep in their sockets, blurring my vision. The tunnel walls flashed rhythmically. In my slumber, I drifted to the countless childhood memories of long car rides, the light of the streetlamps passing by in a similar soothing rhythm. Eyes relaxed — drowsy to a state of un-focus — I indulged in the feeling of being there, sat in the back seat of the car. I was cruising down the A-something with a naive veil of profundity gently hanging over me. The street lights lights came by in flashes. Truly lulled, I fumbled for my jumper, propping it between my seatbelt and head. I could hear the whir of the Toyota's knackered engine and the soft chatter of the radio.

For some time, nothing changed. The lights continued to draw away and my spine softened into a pleasant contortion. On at least three occasions, I felt as though the bliss were 'eternal.' But my stasis was eventually cut short; gradually, I became aware of the presence of two voices. Their words were without meaning to me: flat and full of space.

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“ \_\_\_\_\_ ”

“ \_\_\_\_\_ ”

“ \_\_\_\_\_ ”

“ \_\_\_\_\_ ”

I caught a few words, but they carried no meaning.

“Its uncomfortable,” he said.

“Why not take it off?” She replied after an unnatural pause.

“There’s nothing there.”

“But where does it end?”

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The talking was followed by about thirty seconds of silence. I lay listening, waiting for a sign that I could open my eyes once again. I heard a door open, then another door, then the sound of both shutting in quick succession. I paused for another minute, determined to appear as though I was sleeping deeply.

When I finally opened my eyes, I was alone in the car and the midmorning sun was cutting through my window. I opened my door and clambered out of my seat. The car and I were perched on the edge of a vast open plane. The edge was lined with sun-beaten shrubs and tire marks. A few meters from the car, I spotted a disturbance in the shrubs: a sign of human traffic.

I scrambled down the slope. Reaching the bottom, I landed on a dry basin of withered reeds and cracked mud. A crooked tree sat beside the basin. The tree was jagged and bare against the pale sky, its charcoal limbs contorting towards the heavens, horizon and soil. Had conditions not been searing and blinding, I might have lost myself to the torrefied ditch, determinedly waiting to be met by deity or night. If only there were nothing to do, I thought quietly to myself. At the base of the tree lay a

stack of logs, clearly severed by human means. The horizon quivered in the morning heat. So too did shrubs and the monolithic stones across the flatland; so too did a troupe of ants, who had formed a line from the tree and were marching a solemn and weary parade.

I lumbered out of the basin in the direction of the man's bungalow. My movements were molten and my vision was staggered. It seemed as though my presence around nearby objects was affecting their 'coming-to-be;' that all things around me were lagging behind their intended moment and place. The effect was almost nauseating. I focused my attention down at my feet. They too were dissenting the orders of space, time and sensibility.

Eventually, my vision returned to a near-steady state. I continued towards the bungalow. The cracked tile path that I trailed down was timid and unimpressive — clearly formed out of leftover materials from a bathroom fitting. It snaked across a dusty courtyard, past a small, desiccated fountain. I reached the entrance to the bungalow: a green wooden door, decorated with ornate metalwork. I peered through the peephole. A fisheye view of the inside revealed two armchairs sat in the middle of the room atop a Persian rug. The armchairs were backed against each other in what can only be described as an unsociable layout. Across the room, I could see a staircase comprised of severely splintered planks. The gaping holes between each stair suggested that it had been out of use for a long

time. The walls of the room were adorned with trinkets upon shelves and antique instruments hung from the picture rail. It was, I thought, an unexpected interior for a bungalow reception room.

I knocked on the door. The knocker pricked my right hand as I cradled it. I thumped the door again, this time quite impatiently. I could hear the distant hum of a conversation coming from inside. The knocker stabbed at my hand as I squeezed it tighter. I was feeling a sudden sense of irritation and sadness. Deciding that the knocker was not producing adequate amplification, I struck my fist ferociously against the door. The voices hushed. I supposed that my banging had finally caught their attention. At last the door flung open.

The room before me was filled with sand. The sand had consumed almost everything in sight below waist height and the walls were cracked and crumbling, covered in dark marks from exposure to the elements. I coughed the musty air, which carried a mix of dust, salt and damp. I supposed that the windows had been bricked up at some point to avoid further weathering; as a result, the room held a stifled, oppressed atmosphere. I got the sense that fresh air and light rarely reached inside. Broken remnants of furniture littered the sand. In the far right corner beneath a sink, the contents of a kitchen draw had been emptied: spoons, forks and a whisk could be seen poking out from under the sand. In the



centre of the room, I could make out a wooden table and chair, both partially submerged. Atop the table, someone had carefully composed a pattern of four concentric sand circles.

The woman sat in a chair across the room, facing the far left corner, her head not more than a foot from the wall. I couldn't tell if she was awake; he offered no reaction to my entering the room, but was sat upright against the chair, her posture tall as though seemingly alert.

I coughed again, this time to make my presence known.

She didn't respond.

"I'm sorry, but I have no recollection of you..." My words felt almost involuntary as they left my throat, almost as though they'd been plucked from my mind by some other force.

Nothing.

Resigning myself to the sand and the room, I waded over to the table and chair. I took a seat and lay my head to rest on the tired wooden surface. My hands cradled my head, disturbing the pattern of sand.

