

Don't Blink

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The broken watch on his left wrist keeps him grounded. The hands no longer move, yet it seems like the golden etchings around the cracked face could circle on and on until the end of time itself. Cogs hidden beneath the once white face rest in an eternal slumber. But for this he is thankful, the ticking that once seeped into his ears leaving a permanent burn on the surface of his brain was now replaced with the steady beating of his own heart, much like the ticking of the metal hands themselves. Tick tock, thump. Tick tock, thump. Tick tock, thump. And it's with this rhythmic beating, like the symphony of time running out, that he knows he still has some time left. But really, how could he ever forget.

He never knows where he'll end up, never knows what he'll see or whom he'll meet or what he'll learn. But after all these years of travelling, he's not quite sure there is much else he wants to. He's not sure he could handle the weight of the forgotten knowledge he's already cursed to remember.

That's not to say it's all bad—all death and war and corruption—because there are moments that are quite miraculous. He has seen just as many nations rise as they did fall, witnessed the births of beliefs and ideals and revolutions. He watched the Romans march in and establish the beginnings of what would be London. He watched the plague wipe out half the population. He's seen the death of Kings and the anointment of Knights and the grassroots efforts of revolutions. He's seen happiness in its rawest form. Birthday parties and first laughs and ice cream cones. These are the moments that gave him a kind of peace he has slowly lost over the last forty-seven years, ever since it all began.

He still doesn't know what to call it, what he does—or rather what has been done to him—even after all this time. Not that he'd speak a word of it aloud, at least not since the first few times he found the courage to try. But that was long ago, back when he was starry eyed and naïve, just a young boy. He likes to think of it as travelling, though he knows that's not quite right. Because it's not as though he ever leaves. Not completely. It all happens so quickly, quite literally in the blink of an eye. One second he's adding milk to his tea, and the next he's hiding beneath an archway in the midst of a 1930's air raid on the city by German forces. And by the time he makes it back, back to the present, *his* present, the milk he poured into his tea is still swirling into a cloudy murkiness within the ceramic edges of his cup.

He never goes anywhere except *back*. And it's always within relative distance to where he finds himself in present time. He's thankful for that as well. He can barely hold within his mind what he knows of the past, and the idea of knowing the future,

be it society's or his own, may very well push him over the edge. And that edge, he realized, was approaching fast.

A rush of heated air brushes by him, filling his nostrils and burning his tongue. And with it comes the familiar screeching of the tube as it comes to a halting stop. As the doors slide open a mob of people file out in a fashion that resembles anything but an orderly queue. Chaos and urgency are etched on their faces, white headphones dangling from their ears and leather bags swinging at their hips. He envies them, watches them and wishes he could be as ambivalent to the world in which he lives. But he's cursed with a hyperawareness. The seconds that click by and the breaths that swirl into the air are all too loud and suffocating.

He wishes the present didn't require him to try so hard.

Against the thin skin of his left wrist, the watch feels infinitesimally heavier and he clenches his eyes closed to steady himself. Tick tock, thump. Tick tock, thump.

The car empties almost entirely, a few empty blue suede seats left open for the taking, but as Steven crosses the short distance from the platform of King's Cross onto the once packed train, that empty seat disappears from view. In its place appears a mass of dirt and debris and rubble. It's a square of men in dirty clothes and sweat covering their bodies. The air is heavy and hot and it suffocates as he looks around the twisting streets around him, full of shuffling bodies and rags and waste.

The street is loud with metal scraping metal and feet sloshing in mud and, strangely enough, laughter. He picks up on the sound instantly, the way it contrasts with the decay he's surrounded by. A young group of boys sit huddled around a wooden crate, marbles rolling about. Completely oblivious to the people around them, they fight over the tiny objects, pushing and laughing and tossing the marbles around. It's some kind of game, he's sure. One everyone has played but no one can remember. He has the sudden urge to play along with them.

He stumbles and it pulls his gaze away from the children, eyes moving to the construction down the road. He notices the familiar towers, the curved grand windows, that tiny clock in the center of it all. It's King's Cross. Or it will be, the train lines not yet completed as he watches steel being carted down a street and behind a large metal contraption. It's sobering.

"It's going to be revolutionary, that train there. You'll see."

He's startled by the sudden intrusion, the woman next to him so close so quick. His hands reach into his pockets instinctively. Her tattered clothes and dirt ridden curls evidence of her lower status. "It'll change things, it'll change everything." Her voice comes out of her throat like a cat scratching at the carpet, but it's strong and resilient and so incredibly sure. He nods to her as she continues on her way, giving him a nudge as though they were old friends as she parts. He watches her walk purposefully down the street, stopping every once in a while to make a comment to

a passerby, much, he's sure, like the one she made to him and he suddenly wishes he could tell her she was right.

He turns back when he hears young boys screaming. He's not sure why or how but he knows where to go. The crate is deserted but he already knew that, and he finds himself pushing past throngs of people who are seemingly oblivious to the screams. Maybe it's so normal to them. The thought makes him sick. The boys playing marbles are no longer playing. Instead they're running and pointing and one of them has tears in his eyes. The little boy he heard laughing earlier is on the ground. He's not moving and he's not breathing and his skin is taking on a light blue hue. He thought that only happened in the movies.

"He ate it—we were just kidding, but he ate it and now—"

"He's not breathing!" They're shouting and looking around at anyone and everyone who'll listen. But nobody's listening. He runs to the boy, ready to kneel down and do anything he can. He learnt the Heimlich once, he's sure he remembers how it goes. Only he can't. Because the boy's not there anymore.

He returns with a lump in his throat and a burning in his eyes and a pain that is all consuming. The seat is just feet away, still empty like the rest of the car. But it slowly fills up, the people on the platform behind him pushing by him and to the empty seats. He stands still as stone, paralyzed with sadness and a slow burning rage.

He doesn't even hear the beeping of the closing doors, doesn't hear the sound of the man shouting out the next stop, doesn't hear the silent chatter of fellow passengers. All he can hear is the ticking of his heartbeat as it reaches its own final crescendo.

His feet are moving of their own accord. He finds himself in a seat with his gaze fixed blankly ahead watching the blurs of whites and blacks swirl in his vision. The train stops and it starts and it stops and it starts and before he knows it he's missing the stop that would take him back to his flat, searching instead for the one thing that will give him peace. His mind is completely disconnected. His heart is beating out of his chest, no longer the steady rhythmic thumping that lulled him into abject acceptance of his life. Instead, it beats like ceremonial drums pushing him towards the only option he has left. He knows where he wants to hear the last ticks of the clock, and there's nothing that could change his mind.

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He always ends up here. He's not sure how and he's not sure why, legs no longer taking orders from his brain. And yet, he knows this is where he should be, where it should all end. He somehow feels drawn to the narrow halls and the chipped white paint. The yellow line creating distance between the edge of the platform is dirtied and faded, like it has lost hope in its hope to ward off those who get too close. And

all he wants to do is cross it. Take that step, feel the rush of air like fire against the grey dusted hair of his face. He wants to hear the screeching of a train coming to a stop before the time its due. He wants the numbness, the emptiness, of a life finally finished.

Against his wrist, the cool metal of his watch pulses in anticipation.

Around him, he can see out of his peripheral vision a little girl with pigtails and a yellow coat laughing. She's holding a balloon and a stuffed pig. She's twirling in a kind of carefree innocence that he remembers only faintly. Her parents watch from their seats against the tiled wall. They're smiling, lips too wide and teeth too white. It makes him sick. Sick with disgust. Sick with envy. Sick with his own thoughts of resentment and yearning and unnecessary hatred. His feet inch closer to the off yellow line.

In the far corner, weaving from one side of the yellow line to the other is a mouse. Small. Grey. Quiet. Oblivious to the world in which it lives. Ignorant. Content. Everything he wants to be. Everything he can never be.

It takes everything in him not to jump right there.

Up above, the sign reads ****Next Train Approaching**** and he knows he's ready. He has been ready; he was always ready. He finally understands that now. This gift was a blessing. It helped him see the world for what it was, with all its faults and all its misery. And it was now giving him a way out. So with a smile on his lips, eyes held tightly shut, he waits as the wind tunnel invaded his senses, ready for his next, and final, steps.

He faintly hears the screeching of a train coming to a halt before everything goes black.

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The smell hits him first. Thick. Hot. It smells of scorched wood and garbage left in the waste bin too long. He can't see where it was coming from, for it seemed to be coming from everywhere. Around him, a haze of grey smoke hangs in the air cutting him off from the world around him. He can't see much, blinded by the heavy smoke and the stench that disorients him. Words couldn't have left his lips even if he had tried, his lungs and chest heaving in heavy spastic intervals. He's sure the coughing will cut off his breathing entirely. Wouldn't that be ironic.

His hands search for something, anything that can steady him, give him a sense of bearings. And luckily he feels rough stone against his calloused palms. It's a wall, extending up as high as he can see, a wall that seems to be keeping the smoke from escaping—along with most of the inhabitants as well, he assumes. It makes him wish the smoke would engulf his airways and burn him from the inside out. He doesn't need more pain, not when he's so close to feeling nothing at all.

He feels along the wall, stumbling over cobblestones and debris as he tries to find an escape from the stinging in his eyes and the taste of burning rubbish on his

tongue. But even in his clouded haze he can make out another cough, quiet, distant, and helpless. And it stops him in his tracks.

“Get up. We have to go, please get up.” The voice is quiet, broken between coughs. Strained and panicked and full of fear.

It’s still very hard to see, and he’s not quite sure he wants to see it at all. But he follows the voice of the young girl. She’s crying now, he can just make out. It’s a silent cry. But she still manages to keep on pleading.

“Mum we have to go. Everyone’s already left. We can’t stay, we’ll die.” The young girl’s hunched over another, her mother he assumes. They’re both dressed in simple skirts, nothing flashy or ornate. They’re stained with dirt and mud and ash, though it’s easy to tell that they weren’t very clean to begin with. But it’s the tear stained cheeks of the young girl, pulling at the cloth of her mother’s dress as she lies motionless on the ground that makes him fall to his knees.

“Please sit, can you help me? Can you help my mum? Please, she won’t get up. I’m afraid—I’m afraid that—“

“What’s your name?”

“My name’s Amelia, this is my mum. Her name is Anne. Please, we can’t go home. The fire, it burned our home to the ground. My father left with my brother, we were supposed to follow but we fell behind. I can’t leave her, please help.”

She can barely speak, the words coming out slurred between strangled sobs. And it takes everything in him not to sob himself. Cry for the girl, cry for her mother who, for all he knows, is already dead, cry for himself, for witnessing another death that will kill him even more.

He crawls forward, closer to the woman lying silently on the dirty cobblestoned ground. He can’t stop coughing, and the pain aches in his chest. But he does his best, tries to find a pulse. It’s not there. But he knows he can’t tell the child that. So he readies himself to carry her away from the fire he can now feel raising the temperature and leaving a slight burn on the skin of his neck.

His first attempt fails. His knees give out and he falls to the ground, the woman still in his arms. It breaks through the fabric of his trousers, cutting into his skin and leaving a bright streak of red that pools in between the stones beneath his feet. His second attempt is more successful, but even with small steps, the young girl leading him towards what was presumed to be the exit, he finds it more and more difficult to breathe. His vision’s clouding, going black. His chest aches from coughing, his lungs scream for air.

“I don’t know if I can do this.” He whispers, but the young girl just grabs a hold of his sleeve and keeps moving, faster now if that were possible. And just when he thinks he’s done, right when he’s ready to drop the body in his hands and fall to the ground along with it, he catches sight of an opening, a gate large and ornate and he finds a renewed vigor inside of him. The air seems to lighten, brighten, he’s still

coughing loudly and his arms feel like they're ready to detach themselves from his body but there's a hope. Even if this girl's mother isn't alive, at least he could get the young girl to safety. It almost makes it worth it. Almost.

They're through the gate within minutes, and he can't hold her anymore.

"I have to put her down, I can't carry her anymore."

"Thank you, thank you so much." And she runs to him, pulling him tightly against her small body. And he hugs her back, she'll need all the comfort she can get when she understands what has happened to her mother.

But then something remarkable happens. The woman lying on the ground coughs. Softly at first, then more aggressively. Her eyes flutter while she works to pick herself up off the ground. But she's too weak, and can only manage to hold up her head.

"Amelia?" The voice is faint but there. And he can't believe it.

"Mum!" The young girl flings herself at her mother who has, somehow, survived.

"You're alive! Mum, he saved you, he saved us!" The older woman's eyes meet his, and she smiles a teary eyed smile. And he can't help but give her one in return, a tear falling from his eye and down his cheek silently.

He opens his mouth to respond when he feels himself jerk back.

Suddenly there's a flash of white and a piercing that invades his ears. Its all consuming, suffocating, disorienting and it causes him to stumble backwards, tripping over what must be a bottle or can, he's not sure. He can't think and he can't breathe and he's vaguely aware of the cold ground at his back. He's no longer standing, no longer in the burning city, no longer on the edge of the platform.

"Are you okay, sir?" He looks wildly from one pair of eyes to the next, not registering faces. But he understands the question. Digests it. Analyzes it. And for the first time in his life he's sure of the answer.

Against his wrist, the watch is steady and silent.