Just Three Miles

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Summary: *Carl thought his life was on a certain trajectory – until it isn't. Things can change from one moment to the next, so he needs to decide if and how he wants that trajectory to change. (Pre-canon, follow-up to 'This Hat Of Broken Dreams')*
Characters: *Carl Morck, Paul Harris (OMC)*
Trigger warnings: *Alcohol consumption, getting drunk, mentions of drugs, smoking*

Author's Note

This story takes place in my Paul Harris universe and expands the backstory I developed for Carl for this particular universe that still more or less fits within the realm of what we know in canon at this point in time (i.e. after season 1).

This fic builds on my previous story 'This Hat Of Broken Dreams'. The gist of what happens there is that Carl had a pretty rough childhood and was leading a somewhat aimless life with a low-income job in construction in the south of England. He ends up being taken in by the police for a crime he didn't commit and meets a police officer called Paul Harris in the process. Paul understands that Carl is innocent and also sees his potential, so he helps him turn his life around and keeps accompanying Carl's further journey as a good friend and mentor.

This story takes place two to three years later, in the early 2000's. Carl is in his mid-20's in this particular story, still living in England. It's one interpretation of what might have happened in Carl's past and mainly just a version of my headcanon. Oh, and if you need a visual for Paul Harris, I kinda imagine him like a late 30's version of John Simm.

Please consider that this was in the early days of the internet. Google Maps didn't exist yet, mobile internet wasn't a thing and there was no GPS tracking. People didn't have laptops or tablets, calls at home where made with landline phones, and mobile calls and texts were costly because flat rates weren't a thing. This was the time of brick-like Nokia mobiles with a monochrome screen and a physical keypad that did little else than call or text. (Long live the Nokia 3310!)

Huge thanks to M, pixiehood and BlueAndPink for the beta! Thanks for reminding me that we can't have enough Paul Harris in our lives and that maybe there needs to be more of it. And yes, I have more in the works for these two. A lot more.

Title and story inspired by Matchbox Twenty – Rest Stop.

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Chapter 1 – And My Mouth's Too Dry To Rage

Carl blearily opens his eyes as the car comes to a sudden stop.

He lifts his head, feeling the crick in his neck from the awkward position he's dozed off in against the trim of the passenger side. Didn't they just stop at a service station to fuel up? It's dark outside and he tries to gauge where they are. From what he can tell they're in a lay-by somewhere in the countryside.

He looks over at Heather, his girlfriend. "Why're we stopping?"

Her look on him is strangely unaffable. "Can you get out?"

He does a double-take. "Excuse me?"

"I can't do this."

He sits up straighter. "Can't do what?"

She points back and forth between the two of them. "This. Us."

"Wait, what? This some kind of joke?"

"No. This is me breaking up with you. You can come pick up your stuff in the next day or two."

What the fuck? They've just spent the day on the coast. They had a nice time together. It's been good. Has it not? "Are you serious right now?"

"Yeah. Look. I don't wanna be cruel or anything, but you fell asleep and I was thinking… you know… I wonder what he's dreaming about? And you know what? I realised I don't actually care. So yeah. This thing with us, it's not working."

Is this for real? Carl can't believe it.

"Whoa," is all he says. He can barely see her face in the dim light from the radio that casts a gentle orange glow on her skin. His mouth is suddenly dry and he swallows.

She stares straight ahead, then tells him, "Please get out."

"Wait. You're really fucking serious? You're throwing me out? Here, in the middle of fucking nowhere?"

"Yeah. Has to be now, or else I'll lose my nerve."

"What the fuck, Heather?"

"Please get your stuff from the boot."

She *is* fucking serious. He still can't believe it. "I can't believe you're doing this. This is super fucked up."

"Get out," she repeats, her voice now a little more assertive.

"How the hell am I supposed to get home?"

"Catch a lift. Call someone. This isn't the Gobi desert. You'll figure something out."

Carl is too stunned to even object. As he opens the passenger side door, he mutters, "I can't believe this."

The boot lid squeaks as he opens it and grabs his bag, then closes with a metallic thud when he slams it shut. She drives off, leaving Carl standing on the barren concrete, in the dark, at the side of the road like the scene out of a clichéd fucking romance movie.

He's still dumbstruck. What the hell. What's he supposed to do now?

He looks around. There's a house behind him, a black bin with the number 2 on it in large white lettering in front of a closed iron gate. There's a note pinned to the locked gate with a warning that this is private property. The house looks dark, there is no car parked in front.

He walks a few more steps, finds a bus stop that says *New Lodge* but has no time table. He doubts there are any buses running here at this time of night. He sighs and fishes his Nokia from his jeans pocket, relieved when he sees that he actually has reception out here. It's just one bar, but hopefully it'll do.

The phone rings a few times before Paul picks up. "Hello?"

"Hi, it's Carl."

"Carl, hey. How are you?"

"Yeah, uh… I hate to ask, but is there any way you could come pick me up?"

"I, uhm, I'm in the middle of something right now. Is it urgent?"

Shit. What's he supposed to say? "I, uh…"

"Carl, what's going on? Where are you?"

"That's the thing. I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"Somewhere on the A380, I guess."

“The A380? Are you all right?”

“Yeah, just… Kind of a long story. I’m okay. I just got dumped in the middle of fucking nowhere.”

“Dumped? As in by your girlfriend?”

“Yeah.”

“In the middle of nowhere?”

Carl knows it sounds ridiculous. “Yeah. Weirdest fucking thing. I nodded off and she just stopped and threw me out.”

“Heh.” He lets that hang there for a moment, then says, “Okay. I’ll, uh… I’ll come pick you up but I need fifteen minutes.”

“Okay. That’s cool.”

“Can you try to find out something a little more tangible than *‘somewhere on the A380’*, though?”

“Yeah. I’ll have to look around. I’ll ring back in a bit.”

They sign off and Carl shoulders his bag, then looks around. He can’t see very far, but there’s a single-track road that branches off from the lay-by, so he starts walking. There should be someone living here somewhere, right?

There’s no street name sign in sight. Just shrubs and a stone fence. He passes a sign that says you can only turn left at the end of the road. Yeah, that’s not helping. The road stretches on and he has trouble making things out in the dark but he keeps walking. His mind is still reeling. What the fuck just happened? *How* the fuck did this just happen?

He and Heather have been together, what? Over a year. And he thought it was going well. They met at a pub, one of her friend’s hen do. They’d hit it off right away and got swept up in a bit of a whirlwind. They had fun together, talked, felt comfortable around each other and the sex was good. She’d even introduced him to her parents about four months in.

Sure, things weren’t always perfect. They’d fight sometimes, and when they did, it was always heated. Carl knew he had a temper, and that he got loud when it flared. But they always made up, they’d always be back to good within a day or two.

So where had it gone wrong?

He thinks back to the day they just spent together, the conversations they had. They’d taken a stroll, lain on the beach on the frayed straw mat she had in the boot and talked about all sorts of things.

He'd joked about marriage being overrated, but only because they both agreed that it wasn't all that important to either of them. Carl had no family who would care about any such mundane rituals or whom he would care attending such a do in the first place. Heather said she didn't need a ring to seal a partnership, but now Carl wonders how much she actually meant that.

As he walks, he finally spots another metal gate at the side of the road. That, too, has a sign on it that says *No public right of way or access.* Well. He isn't here to trespass, so he ignores it and climbs over the field gate. He quickly changes his mind when a large, black dog starts barking aggressively as it comes running up to him.

"Fuck," he mutters, then climbs back over the gate onto the road. Guess he needs to find a friendlier place to help him out. The fuck is it out here with the paranoia?

After another few minutes of walking, he comes to a crossing. A blue sign ahead reads *Unsuitable for heavy goods vehicles.* To the right it looks more like a mud track than an actual road. He turns left.

The road snakes on for what feels like half an eternity and his mind wanders again to his and Heather's recent conversations. Having kids was also a recurring topic, and Carl always kind of evaded the question. They were still young, they could think about that in a few years.

Truth is, he isn't even sure he wants kids. He doesn't think he's cut out to be a father. It's not like he had people who exemplified it to him. All he knows with a great level of certainty is how *not* to do it.

He has of course seen it second hand, when he was invited round to other kids' houses who grew up in happy homes, but the invites had been more of a courtesy than out of actual friendship. Like the awkward kid you only invited because your parents wanted it. It was always kinda weird, made him feel like he was on the outside, looking into fake lives of fake people you only saw on television.

Did he fuck this up? Did he say the wrong thing somewhere? How long had she felt this way? Did she just pretend the whole day that everything was fine? They'd kissed, fucking damn near had sex on the beach. Well, he'd wanted to. Had she? Now he isn't so sure anymore.

Something swirls in his gut, and he can't tell if it's rage or anger or just the realisation of the fucking gut punch that's starting to set in. He sucks in a breath, doesn't know where it comes from, but something coalesces from inside him into a scream that pierces the uncanny silence.

His feet are starting to hurt in the well-worn plimsolls he's wearing but finally there's another sign of civilisation. A driveway that leads up to a house with a sign that reads *Babcombe Farm.* He checks his phone again, the display lighting up in a stark light green against the dark as unlocks

the keypad. He sees with dread there is no reception here. Just his fucking luck. He makes his way up the driveway, hoping there won't be another dog-related surprise.

A middle-aged man opens the door when he rings the doorbell of what he figures is the actual farmhouse. "Evening," the man greets Carl.

"Hi. I, uh..." He has to grin. "This sounds really dumb but I, uh, kinda got lost and I need to know where this is so a friend can come pick me up.

The man now smiles at him, too. "Lost, eh? Out here? What were you doing in these parts, lad?"

He sheepishly scratches his head. "It's a bit of a long story."

"Well, come on in, let's see if we can help you out."

Carl considers the invitation for a moment, then decides to accept it and follows. He's led to a kitchen, hears a female voice from another room. "Cary? Who is it?"

The man points at the kitchen table, then leaves the room and comes back a minute later with a woman in tow who greets Carl. "Well, hello there."

"Hi," Carl says, now seated at the table.

She smiles warmly. "My, we don't often get random wanderers around here."

He nods. "I would assume not."

"You want a cup of tea?"

He shifts in his chair. "I, uh, I just need to call my friend, tell him where to pick me up. Where exactly are we?"

"Babcombe Manor," the man says, "Out in Chudleigh, Newton Abbot."

Carl checks his phone again. "Do you have a phone I could use? I don't seem to have reception here."

The woman shows him to the living room. "Of course, luv."

Carl calls Paul again, tells him what he knows, but of course the name alone isn't all that useful for Paul. Carl tells him to hold on, then he gets the farmer and asks him to explain how to actually get to the place.

When that's done, Carl is being guided back to the kitchen where the woman has put on a kettle. Carl thinks, okay, he might as well. Better than sitting outside by himself for however fucking long.

"What's your name, luv?" the woman asks.

“Carl,” he says.

She introduces herself as Fran, her husband as Cary. The conversation they strike up is mostly small talk. Carl doesn’t feel like going into the details of how he ended up here, so he dodges the enquiry as best as he can.

He’s nicely filled up with tea and shortbread by the time Paul’s silver hatchback pulls up outside. Carl thanks the couple and leaves.

Paul’s look on him is half curiosity, half worry as Carl gets into the passenger seat. He says, “Hey. Thanks for coming.”

“Of course.”

Paul is always so fucking benevolent. Carl can’t remember a time when Carl has asked for something and he’s told him no. The guy is a bloody saint, and Carl still doesn’t get what his motivation is. He seems too good to be true sometimes, like the second shoe has to drop at some stage. Carl always waits for that to happen.

He puts his bag on the back seat and fastens his seat belt as Paul turns the car around and they drive back out towards the A380.

Paul isn’t the kind of guy who peppers people with questions – not unless there’s an important agenda. So they drive in silence for a few minutes until he asks, “You wanna talk about it?”

Carl hasn’t decided yet. “Not really.”

“Okay.”

He leaves it at that, and so does Carl. The low, steady sound of the car engine is comforting, just like the old Depeche Mode album that accompanies their silence until maybe Kennford when Paul asks, “You okay?”

Is he? Carl sighs. “I don’t fucking know.”

“She really dump you out of nowhere? What the hell happened?”

Carl shrugs, even though Paul can’t even see it in the dark. “Fuck if I know.”

“Did you have a fight?”

“No. It was all good. We went to the beach. We fucking kissed. I don’t… I don’t get it.”

“So she broke it off? What is it she said?”

Carl hesitates at first. “Something about not caring what I was thinking and that this isn’t working between us.”

Paul makes a grimace that Carl can’t quite read in the dark. “And she couldn’t have told you this when you got home?”

He shrugs. “Exactly my question too. She said she’d lose her nerve or something. Look. I don’t know what she was thinking. This is all fucked up, right?”

“Yeah, it is. Damn, fella. She seemed like a nice girl. I’m really sorry.”

He recalls her shoulder-length brown hair that swayed in the gentle sea breeze, her grey-blue eyes, how they’d strolled along the beach. Fuck. He can’t believe that’s now over.

It’s starting to get to him and he scrubs his hands down his face, then draws in a shaky breath and slowly lets it out. Fuck, he doesn’t want this to get messy with Paul right next to him, so he bites his lip, turns his head and leans back against the headrest, staring out into south England’s murky dark beyond the window.

They drive the rest of the way in silence until Paul drops Carl off at his tenement. He looks at Carl after he’s parked the car. “Will you be okay?”

“Sure.” Carl just shrugs noncommittally, then reaches for his bag in the back. “Thanks again.”

“No problem. Call me if you wanna talk, yeah?”

“Sure. Ta.”

His flat is a mess, he knows. The site supervisor work keeps him busy, and they’ve been trying to meet this impossible deadline that had the whole team working crazy hours. It was a fight to even get this Sunday off but he really needed it not to lose the fucking plot on his co-workers.

He dumps the bag with his things in the corner by the door and ignores the state of the place. Fuck this shit, he just wants to forget this day – this is the kind of night where the idea of drowning out the real world with a good amount of potent booze sounds perfect.

There’s a bottle of cheap gin in the kitchen cupboard, the one with the yellow cap. He doesn’t bother getting a glass and relocates to the couch where he takes a good swig straight from the bottle. The first gulp of it tastes harsh and vile, the lingering bitterness refusing to mellow out, so he takes another swig.

He’s got maybe a third of the bottle in him before he feels the relaxing buzz of the alcohol thrumming through his veins, his mind quieting to a level where it doesn’t seem to matter

anymore that he was just dumped by who he thought was the woman he'd spend the rest of his life with.

He kicks off his shoes, sinks down into a reclining position and stares at the yellowing Styrofoam ceiling panels with the high-octane liquor keeping him company until he nods off.

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Chapter 2 – Hell, If It's Over…

Carl awakes the next morning, and immediately wishes he hadn't. His head is throbbing and feels twice its normal size, his throat might as well be dry sandpaper and his eyes burn with an exponentially stronger version of the exhaustion that seems to be his constant companion of late.

He lets out a tired groan, lifts his head and lets it fall back against the soft cushion. He regrets it when the thud exacerbates his already splitting headache. "Fuck," he mutters, and then his brain jumpstarts with a delay when he remembers the events of the evening before.

The extra dread hits him like a heavy lorry and he drags his arm across his eyes. Maybe if he just closed his eyes again for a few minutes, it'd become easier to focus, to get up off the couch. Just a few minutes…

He drifts to wakefulness again an indeterminate amount of time later. Fuck. What time is it?

His mobile is nowhere in sight. He fishes around in his jeans pocket, finds the damn thing. Of course the battery is dead. Jesus fucking Christ.

An unmistakable need drives him to the loo where he pisses into the bowl with hearty abundance until the pressure in his bladder is relieved. His head is still killing him and now his stomach is doing unpleasant flips alongside an appearance of cold sweat on his brow. He's barely flushed the toilet when he finds himself heaving the remains of yesterday's meal into the toilet bowl.

Fucking awesome. The bathroom reeks of days old piss. He dry heaves some more.

After he's rinsed out his mouth and dug around in the cupboard drawer for some painkillers, he shuffles into the kitchen. The clock on the wall tells him it's 8:43. Shit. He should have been at work three hours ago.

What if he doesn't go? At least then he won't be yelled at for being late. Maybe that's easier, he doesn't think he could take that right now. He throws the painkillers in his mouth and washes them down with two gulps of water. There's also a consideration of chasing it up with some coffee, but he isn't sure he can stomach that right now, and the effort it would require to make it seems like way too much.

So instead he scuffles into the bedroom, undoes his belt, drops the jeans on the floor where he stands along with his jumper and crawls into his unmade bed. His socks are also easily discarded and carelessly sail through the air towards the foot of the bed. He doesn't bother checking where they land.

He must have dozed off again and wakes when his landline phone rings. His first instinct is to answer it, now that the headache seems to have been downgraded from stabbing agony to unpleasantly noticeable. But answering the phone would mean getting up, and he doesn't think he wants to expend the energy. It stops ringing after a while.

But now Carl is awake and alert enough that his mind keeps spinning in concentric circles that revolve around that moment when Heather metaphorically punched him in the fucking face.

He sees her face again, in profile, the radio playing an *Oasis* song he's heard a million times but doesn't remember the name of.

This is when it finally hits him. He got so used to the idea that they'd have a future together, that he found someone he loved and who loved him. That they'd be together, maybe find a place they could move into as a couple. And now that was all obliterated with one bombshell that hit him like a bolt from the blue.

There are tears in the corners of his eyes that start sliding down and drop into his pillow. It seems so fucking unfair. What did he do to deserve this? He's already been over all the things he said yesterday, so maybe it's all the words he has never said. The crumpled up promises he's always wanted to make but couldn't get out through the cracks of his broken shell that hides this partly rotten core that he thinks is too ugly for anyone to see.

His mind spins in the same loop over and over, always gets caught on the same thing. Where the fuck did it start to go wrong, and how the fuck did he miss the signs? Could he have done more? Could they have avoided this?

At some stage he angrily wipes at his cheeks, sucks in a heavy breath. He feels carved out and hollow. His phone rings again and he ignores it again. Probably his workplace. He doesn't care anymore. He never liked that job in the first place. With Heather gone from his life, what is there to live for anymore?

Carl doesn't really know how much time has passed when his doorbell rings. He opens his eyes. It's dusk outside, so it must be early evening. His stomach gurgles with excess acid that he tries to ignore.

A few minutes later, someone's hammering on his flat door. He vaguely recognises Paul's voice.

“Carl, open the door!”

He keeps ignoring it. Maybe he’ll go away if he stays quiet.

But Paul doesn’t go away. He’s insistent until he finally calls out, “Carl, if you don’t open the fucking door, I’ll call the fire brigade to force it open!”

Carl sighs. Yeah, he doesn’t think he wants that. That would make everything worse.

He peels himself out of bed and reluctantly opens the door.

Paul stares at him, then says, “Jesus Christ, Carl.”

Carl throws him a disdainful look and goes to his bedroom to pull on the pair of jeans that still lies on the floor. Paul follows him, clocks the almost empty bottle of gin on the coffee table in the living room.

“You didn’t turn up for work today.”

He lets the statement hang there. Carl shoots him another look. “What’s the point?”

Paul lightly shakes his head in disbelief, then sighs. “Shit, pal. This one really hit you hard, eh?”

Carl huffs scornfully. “If you hug me, I will punch you in the fucking face.”

A brief smile flits across Paul’s face but it’s fleeting before it’s replaced with something sterner. “Carl, this is serious. You can’t just skive off work without calling it in. Shit like that gets you fired.”

He shrugs. “So what? I hate that fucking job anyway.”

Paul sighs again, then says in a resigned tone, “Okay.” It’s the kind of tone that’s usually followed up with, *oh boy, there’s work to be done here.*

Carl squeezes past him and goes to the kitchen. His mouth feels dry and fucking disgusting. The half a glass of tap water does little to eliminate the feeling.

Paul stands in the doorway and asks, “Have you eaten anything today?”

“What are you, my fucking mother?”

“So that’s a no.”

Carl fills the glass again, drinks more water until his stomach does another unhealthy flip. Fuck. Food might not be the worst idea but he also doesn’t want to give Paul the fucking satisfaction that he’s right to be concerned.

And then Paul vanishes, comes back a minute later and holds out a fresh set of clothes he must have pulled from his wardrobe. “Go shower, then we’ll get some food into you.”

For a moment, Carl wants to throw the stuff back at him, but there’s something in Paul’s tone that makes him take the clothing and do as he says. Maybe he can use the distraction. Might be better than staring more holes into the fucking ceiling.

He feels marginally better after he’s showered. Paul waits for him on the couch, flipping through a graphic novel he’s unearthed from… somewhere. Maybe something that kept sitting on his bookshelf from the Cody days. Graphic novels aren’t Carl’s style.

By this time, Carl has already accepted his fate, so he puts on his shoes, grabs his coat and keys and opens the door. Paul follows him outside, then asks, “What do you feel like?”

Carl isn’t in the mood to make decisions. “I don’t fucking care.

“Okay, noted. How about some pub grub?”

“Yeah, whatever.”

There’s a traditional pub just around the corner that Paul steers them towards and Carl follows somewhat listlessly. Paul attempts small talk but Carl isn’t biting, so they walk mostly in silence. Which, honestly, Carl’s fine with. More than fine with, he much prefers it.

The air inside smells of stale sweat and the aftermath of too many lost football games. Paul asks him if he wants a beer, but Carl opts for ginger ale. They find a table and Paul orders the good old classic – fish ‘n chips. Carl doesn’t really feel like anything in particular, ultimately goes for bangers and mash.

As they wait for their food, Carl knows there will eventually be questions. Conversations. Things he won’t be able to readily evade. Maybe he can pre-empt some of it.

He glances at Paul. “Can we not talk about it?”

Paul’s look on him seems somewhat sympathetic. “The Heather thing?”

“Yeah.”

He nods. “Sure. But there *is* something I wanna talk about.”

“Yeah, look, the gin was a questionable decision. Can’t say I enjoyed it a lot in hindsight.”

“No, not that. Cause I get that. I wanna talk about your work.”

That confuses Carl. “My work?”

“You keep saying you hate construction. Why aren’t you taking the next step?”

“You mean quit? What else would I do?”

“Maybe that’s something you could start figuring out.”

Carl bristles a little. “Figuring out? Like what? New jobs don’t fall from the fucking sky.”

Paul sighs. “No, they don’t, especially if you’re just sitting on your arse, staying stuck in a job you hate. You put a lot of graft into getting your A-levels. What are you gonna do with that?”

Carl shrugs listlessly. “I don’t fucking know.”

“Have you thought about college?”

Carl wants to laugh. “Where would I get the fucking money for that?”

“Jesus, Carl. It doesn’t have to be Cambridge.”

“Yeah, I don’t think I’m cut out for that.”

“Come on, pal. You must have had *some* reason to go to all that trouble. I’m not saying you have to decide tomorrow. But that job is wasting your potential, and I know that you know that, too.”

Carl leans back in the wooden chair. “Why do you even care?”

Paul leans one jaw into a propped up hand and gives him that *‘seriously?’* look. “I’m not gonna answer that, because you can’t be *that* bloody thick. I know you’ve got other things on your mind right now, and I know you think the whole world has turned against you, but please remember every once in a while that you’ve got people rooting for you.

“And yeah, the world can be a fucked up, cruel place that isn’t always kind to people. Which means you have to make your own luck sometimes. So you can sit here and wallow in self-pity or you can say, fuck it, and do something about it.”

“That what you did?”

“When it mattered, yeah.”

Carl shakes his head. “I don’t get it.”

“Don’t get what?”

“Why me?”

“Who knows. Coincidence. Or fucking karma.”

“Karma? Seriously?”

“Call it fate, then.”

“Yeah, I don’t believe in that shit.”

“And yet, you landed in my lap.”

“I landed in your jail cell.”

“Would you rather I’d looked the other way?”

Carl doesn’t have the chance to answer because their food is served right then and they eat in silence for a while. The meal isn’t the best Carl has ever had, but he has to admit it feels good to get something in his stomach. He feels marginally better afterwards.

Paul must have read the room pretty well because he doesn’t tie Carl to the chair with more conversation after they’ve taken away their plates. Paul downs the last swig of his beer and shoots Carl a look. “Ready to head out?”

“Yeah,” Carl says and they both grab their coats from where they’re slung over the backrest of their chairs.

As they go back to Carl’s place, Paul recounts a story from work that Carl only half listens to. There must have been something amusing to it because Paul is chuckling next to him, but Carl’s not really there.

They stop in front of Carl’s front door and Paul gives him a long look. “Listen…”

Carl meets his eyes. “Paul. I’m good.”

“No, pal, you’re not. And that’s okay. I just wanna know if I need to worry about you staring at the bottom of another bottle when you go back in there.”

“Nah, not gonna do that again. Besides, I only had the one. It’s cheap beer from here.”

Paul puts one hand on Carl’s bicep and lets it linger there. “Please call me before you decide to get leathered again. Middle of the night, even. Yeah?”

Carl gives him a faint nod. “Okay.”

Paul’s hand vanishes from his arm. “Maybe you also wanna try not ending up unemployed.”

“It’s cool. I’ll smooth it over tomorrow.”

“Okay.” He turns to go, then turns back around. “Oh, and Carl? Please answer my calls.”

“Yeah, I, uh…”

“Look, I get it. But it gets iffy when I can’t reach you after something like this.”

Carl’s throat is suddenly dry and he swallows. He’s not used to someone actually being worried about his well-being when he’s been behaving like an arse.

“’k, pal,” Paul says before he leaves. “I’ll see you around.”

“See ya,” Carl says, his voice thick with unbidden emotion.

He stands there for a long moment, then fumbles for his keys.

Up in his flat, he eyes the somewhat controlled mess all around him, suddenly annoyed by it. Something’s gonna give, so he starts in the kitchen where he washes the dishes that have been piling up for a good few days.

Next he picks up dirty laundry to chuck it in a corner of the bedroom – he’ll get to it later. Then he starts tackling the random shit that’s lying around. Empty crisps bags and other rubbish, things that aren’t where they belong.

His eyes fall on the graphic novel that Paul had looked at earlier, now carelessly discarded on the coffee table. It’s something called *Tank Girl*, and neither the cover nor the content he leafs through is something that speaks to Carl at all. He’s never understood the appeal of comics and graphic novels. He’s always enjoyed actual prose more where you could get lost in imagining your own world and form your own pictures in your head.

He remembers that Cody loved that stuff, so this must be something he left behind when he was staying with Carl. He stands there, trying to decide what to do with it. He’s not gonna have any use for it, but it seems disrespectful to Cody’s memory to just throw it away.

There’s a sharp pang in Carl’s stomach, and he sinks down on the couch. He hasn’t really thought about Cody in a long time, and now that seems wrong. It’s still a fucking tragedy that his life was cut short so drastically and so early, a fucking shame that to this day they still don’t know why he was murdered and by whom, that Cody is now a number on a box in a police archive somewhere.

He tries to recall what he remembers of Cody, finds it hard to visualise or remember all the details. It’s been almost three years, and his brow creases with a wave or emotion that rolls over him. Shit. Things were so different then, but also some of them are still the same.

Carl can’t help but feel grateful for the fact that he managed to get out of that life, that he made an unlikely friend along the way who just seems to be there when he needs a helping hand the most, but there’s also that nagging feeling that another domino is about to topple.

Like fucking Heather. It's that kick in the gut that he hadn't been prepared for, the one that smarts all over again like someone just poured salt in the wound. He still doesn't know what to do with it. She'd said she wanted him to pick up his things, but does he even want to? What did he leave at her place that he really needs? Surely not the extra toothbrush, razor and handful of clothes. Maybe, he thinks, she can go and fuck herself.

With renewed energy, he gets up from the couch and finishes tidying up the place, throws a framed picture of him and Heather in the rubbish bin along the way. He doesn't even remember why that's there – possibly something that she put there at some stage. Thinking back now, she always seemed to be the type who defined her own self-worth by what others thought of her, the type who liked to flaunt status symbols. That wasn't Carl's style at all. Was that part of why she discarded him like a chocolate bar wrapper at the side of the road?

It gets him thinking, though. There has to be more to life than this – than a mediocre job governed by managerial whims and deadlines. Maybe Paul wasn't wrong. Maybe he needs to think about fucking change.

He takes the graphic novel from the coffee table and puts it back on the shelf, next to the Michael Palin travel documentary hardcover. Cody's legacy can be here to stay, even if Carl's not gonna read it. Maybe someone will appreciate it down the line. And even if not, it's not always the worst thing to have a tangible reminder of the past. Carl thinks he might want to hold on to that as long as he can.

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Chapter 3 – Are You Listening?

It might be a small miracle that Carl manages to keep his job after going AWOL for a day because his manager isn't exactly the most lenient and has a special penchant for reliability. Carl tried his best to eat the humble cake with his fists balled in his pockets, and at the end of the day was glad that it worked. It gave him some more time to consider alternative options.

The whole thing is like a thorn in his side over the next few weeks, he thinks about career options on and off, but nothing tangible seems to present. He even skims job offers in the paper, considers actually going to one of those stupid job centre consultations but dismisses the idea fairly quickly.

Another thing that he can no longer ignore is how much illegitimate shit is actually happening in his workplace, shit that he turned a blind eye to before, mostly because it was expected and he didn't want to get into any trouble.

He can look past the corner-cutting when it doesn't actually affect work safety, but a few weeks ago, Carl overheard a conversation between the site manager and one of the construction workers about stolen supplies.

There were some stock discrepancies and Carl was asked about it later, if he noticed anything suspicious. He hadn't until that point but started paying more attention, saw a few things being pilfered here and there. Yet, he kept his head down because he knew what it was like to live on the breadline. Two of the workers were let go a week later.

It's late one Friday evening when Carl exits the temporary container cabin that they're using as a make-shift site office. There was annoying paperwork that had to be completed before the weekend and it took Carl an inordinate amount of time to figure out the electronic forms in the software. It made his loathing of anything to do with actual paperwork shoot from fairly strong to really fucking colossal.

Carl stops short in front of the door when he hears voices not very far away. That's odd, the site should be deserted at this time of night. He decides to investigate and quietly creeps closer. At a certain point, he recognises one of the construction workers underneath the scaffolding – Sergej, a Russian immigrant with a fairly strong accent – talking to another man Carl doesn't know.

He knows it's not the most respectable thing to listen into the conversation, but this seems kind of suspicious, and Carl's ears prick up when he hears a woman's voice as well. From what he can pick up, this is about drugs. When he peers around a concrete pillar to get a better view, he can see that there are packages being exchanged. Shit. Is this some kind of drug deal?

He thinks it might be best to book it out of there, but then voices become raised and there's now an argument going on for sure. The man opposite Sergej grabs the woman by her upper arm and yanks her around. She looks like she might be a prostitute. Heated words are exchanged, the woman is accused of having stolen from their stash.

Stash. What the hell? So there are drugs being stashed at the construction site? Fuck, this is even worse than Carl imagined.

The woman keeps insisting that she's innocent, that she has nothing to do with drugs or any drug deals. Of course Carl doesn't know if she's telling the truth but decides to give her the benefit of the doubt.

"Liar!" the stranger snarls, pulling on the woman's arm hard enough that she stumbles. "I've seen you sniffing around here. You think we don't notice?"

Carl's pulse quickens. He presses his back against the cold concrete of the pillar, trying to stay hidden, unsure what to do.

Sergej shifts uneasily, his accent thick as he mutters, “Maybe she is telling truth. We don’t need trouble.”

The other man rounds on him, he’s a beefy bloke. “Shut it. She’s a thief. I’ll teach her what happens to thieves.” He slaps her in the face, harsh and unforgiving. She lets out a pained and surprised sound, stumbles a little, her hand coming up to her face.

Carl’s stomach knots. This isn’t just a dodgy deal anymore — this is violence, raw and immediate. He knows he should walk away, call the police, anything but get involved. Yet something anchors him to the spot. The woman’s terrified eyes flicker in the half-light, and Carl feels the weight of his own uselessness pressing down.

The woman’s voice pipes up now and Carl can hear the desperate tremor of someone who’s used to being ignored. “I didn’t take anything! I swear, I don’t even know what you’re talking about!”

The man lifts his arm again and the woman flinches. Sergej steps forward, half-heartedly trying to calm things down. “Enough, Viktor. This is not helping. We don’t need the police sniffing around.”

Carl’s breath hitches. Police. Should he be calling them? Who knows how long they’d take to get here.

Viktor has his attention focused on the woman again, his grip back on her bicep. She flinches, tries to get away, but she’s a petite woman and Viktor looks like he spends a good amount of time on the weightlifting bench.

“Let me go!” she feebly protests. “I didn’t do anything!”

Viktor is now in her face. “Who are you working for, huh? Who’s taking a cut of our stash?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” she repeats.

Viktor hits her in the face again, and before he can think better of it, Carl eyes the rebar that’s lying not two feet away. He grabs it as he steps out from behind the pillar, his voice coming out louder than he expected, cracking with adrenaline. “Oi! That’s enough!”

The men freeze, turning toward him. Viktor’s eyes narrow, dangerous. “Who the hell are you?”

Carl swallows hard, forcing his voice to stay steady. “Site supervisor. This is my site. And you’re trespassing.”

The silence that follows is thick, broken only by a frustrated growl from Viktor. The woman edges back, clutching her face, her eyes darting between Carl and the men.

Viktor sneers. “You think your scrawny arse can stop me?” He takes a step forward, menace in every movement.

Carl’s heart pounds as he clutches the rebar, but he doesn’t back down. For the first time in years, he feels something sharper than boredom or resentment — a surge of purpose. Like he could make a difference, protect someone who can’t protect herself.

For a split second, he considers the possibility that Viktor and Sergej are armed, that Carl might soon be staring down the barrel of a gun. Shit, he hopes these aren’t the last seconds of his life.

With a courage and resolve that surprises even himself, he snarls, “Get the fuck out of here and leave her alone!”

Sergej twitches. He knows Carl has identified him but he seems more scared than anything. He drops what he’s holding and scarpers.

Carl takes a step closer to Viktor, considers his options. He has to do something, needs to defuse this without further violence, so he raises the rebar. “If you get the fuck out of here *now*, I won’t call the police.”

Viktor takes a second, then picks up what Sergej dropped and also makes a run for it. Carl lowers his arm with the rebar and lets out a sigh of relief. The woman is still standing to the side, so Carl puts the rebar on the ground where it clatters with a metallic jingle. He approaches the woman. “Are you alright?”

Her gaze on him is guarded, like she hasn’t decided yet whether or not to trust him. “Yeah, I’m okay,” she says curtly.

“Are you sure? Dude hit you pretty hard from what I could see.”

She shrugs. “I’ve had worse.”

He takes a closer look, and yeah, she looks like someone who deals with a lot of shit on a daily basis. “I hope you weren’t lying about the drugs.”

She adjusts her low-cut red leather jacket, tucks her hair behind her ear. “Not sure what it’s to you, but I wasn’t. Fucker just took one look at me and made up his mind. Fucking pricks like him are real scum.” She casts a look at Carl. “But, uh… thanks. I guess.”

He nods. “Couldn’t just do nothing.”

She fumbles around in her handbag, extracts a packet of Marlboros and a lighter. Her first drag on the cigarette is urgent and a little shaky. She holds the open packet out to Carl.

He thinks about it for a moment, then reaches for one. The lighter flicks harshly beneath her thumb, sparking a flame as she holds it out. He leans in, lips closing around the cigarette, and pulls a long drag from the butt. A kick of nicotine will be welcome right now.

She takes another pull as she looks at Carl. “You really work here?”

He exhales a cloud of smoke. “Yeah.”

“I’ve seen these guys hang around for months. Don’t know if you care enough, but they’ve been using this place for drug deals for a good while now. Do with that information what you will.”

Carl gives her a noncommittal look. “Yeah, okay.”

She half-turns, points towards the street. “Got to dash. Thanks again.”

He lifts his cigarette in acknowledgement. “Stay safe out there.”

She just lets out a dismissive chuckle as she walks away. Carl stays there until long after the cigarette is gone and he’s carelessly flicked the butt to the ground. He can still feel the adrenaline coursing through his veins, although the nicotine has thankfully taken some of the edge off.

He considers what the hell he’s going to do now. Is this something he should go to the site manager with? He has no idea what his deal is, or even if he may be involved in the whole thing. It could get Carl fired, and as much as he dislikes the job, he needs the bloody money.

Maybe Paul was right, maybe he needs to find something else. Something where he can make an actual difference.

That night, when he gets home, he switches on the old PC that he barely ever uses. There’s dust on the curved glass of the monitor, it clicks to life with the boot screen alongside the chattering of the hard drive and the whir of the PC fan.

After several minutes of idly watching the computer labouring to life, he opens the internet browser and starts looking into that idea that has crystalised on the way home. It’s ironic that it’s taken him this long to even figure it out, when it was right in front of his face the whole time.

He now knows he wants to have an impact on people’s lives, do something where he doesn’t have to idly stand by, where can change things for the better. He’s seen it when Paul helped him out, he’s lived it first-hand how Paul used the means he had to help Carl turn his life around.

That’s what he wants. He wants to help people, wants the power to help shape the course of people’s lives, and if that means he can take scum like Viktor off the street along the way, that’s the cherry on top.

It takes him a good half hour of clicking and reading through different websites until he gets the gist of it. There are paper forms he'll need to pick up and complete, there'll be written tests and assessment centres and other fun stuff, but Carl knows he'll give it his best shot. At least now he has a clear path forward for the next steps he'll need to take.

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It's Thursday night and Carl sits at their usual table at the Hour Glass Inn. He's already nursing a beer when Paul walks in, orders at the bar and then slides into the seat opposite Carl with an easy, "Hey."

"Hi," Carl greets back.

Paul lifts his beer. "Cheers."

Carl does the same and they take mutual sips.

Their conversation starts out with small talk, as it usually does, but Carl isn't quite with it today. There's something important to be discussed and he isn't sure how Paul's going to react.

The latter seems to notice Carl's vacant stare, stays quiet for a long moment, then lets his gaze linger on Carl. "Fella. What's on your mind?"

Carl catches himself staring at the cardboard coaster in front of him for too long, his fingers tracing the grooves of the wood pattern of the tabletop. He looks up. "I wanted to ask you something."

Surprise flits across Paul's expression for a split second before he says, "Out with it, then."

"You said I should think about career options."

He nods once. "I did."

"I think I know what I wanna do, but I may need your help."

A small smile creeps into Paul's expression that Carl doesn't quite know how to interpret. But Paul stays quiet, so Carl pulls the folded up paper forms from the inside pocket of his jacket and puts them on the table in front of Paul.

Paul picks the Devon & Cornwall Constabulary application forms up and his smile widens. "I was wondering how long it'd take you to figure this out."

"Wait, you knew?"

He shrugs. "I mean, not for certain, but it just kinda made sense."

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because I had to let you come to that conclusion on your own.”

“So you don’t wanna talk me out of it?”

Paul chuckles. “Nah. I think you’d be a good copper. You’ve seen enough shit to want to do something about it, and that’s as good as it gets. You think quick on your feet and you actually give a damn. We need more people like you.”

“Does that mean you’ll help me?”

“Damn right it does. You need references, right?”

“Yeah.” Carl points to the paperwork. “It’s in there somewhere.”

Paul smiles again. “Oh, I can definitely do more than that. Letter of recommendation is yours and I’ll give the recruitment office a call.”

“No, you don’t have to—”

“Carl. You want this or not?”

“I do.”

“Then shut up and let me handle this, okay?”

Carl’s mouth curves into a lopsided smile. “Okay.”

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The whole process is long and arduous, which Paul has warned Carl about more than once. But now he’s determined, so he goes and studies for the written tests, prepares for the assessment centre, the interviews, the medical and fitness tests.

It takes almost four months until he finds the envelope with the Constabulary crest in his mailbox. He sits on his couch, sudden jitters in his stomach. What if it’s a rejection letter? Then it would have all been for nothing and he’d be stuck in that godforsaken construction job until he figures something else out.

But it may not be that. It may just be…

Fuck it. He rips open the envelope. His eyes lock on the first sentence below *Dear Mr. Morck* where it says, “*We are pleased to inform you that…*”

Fuck yes! Holy shit! He got in!

He balls his fists in a celebratory gesture, then picks up his phone. There's one person he can't wait to share the good news with.

He dials the number, waits for the response which comes after five rings. "Harris."

"Paul!" Carl says a little breathlessly. "I'm in!"

There's a brief pause, then Paul asks, "Wait. The police application?"

"Yes. I just opened the letter."

"Holy crap, that's awesome!" Paul says with true joy in his voice.

"I know, right? Still can't believe it."

"You better, Sprog. Congratulations!"

Carl hasn't smiled so much in a very long time. The smile lingers long after he ends the call, all the way to the pub where he and Paul meet for an impromptu celebration, to when he lies in bed that night with a pleasant buzz of alcohol in his veins before he drifts off to sleep.

Finally he's dug his way out of the trenches. For the first time in years, the road ahead feels like it's his to claim.

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End Note:
Sprog = child, RAF/Navy reference for a young recruit