

# Live

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*Firefly*



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*Meanwhile music pounded  
across hearts opening every valve to  
the desperate drama of being  
a self in a song*

*Anne Carson – Autobiography of Red*



# Part I



*The black car handled with youthful zeal by the driver speeds through the country night rounding corners with a giddy lean. Around a sharper bend a faint hiccup from the back left wheel as if it had lifted from the road and spun freely in the night air for a second before joining the tarmac again. And the road's white markings flash like a pulse beneath it. And signs blare out from the hedgerows frozen for a blink in the headlights before they're gone.*

*The driver smiles, throat open in song and delight, the car thick with noise and joy. Beneath the music filling the car, the growl of the engine. Beneath that, a pretty hush from the tyres as they sluice across the wet surface.*

*It is raining lightly. Each streetlight's glow repeats a thousand times in the windscreen's constellation of raindrops. The lazy arc of the wipers clears the glass and the whole thing starts again. Soon, houses rear up, their walls flat and huge, windows like shut eyes and blind to the passing meteorite of the rushing car and its shimmering trail of sound.*

*Then suddenly and without warning the black car is slipping sideways quickly and the road running out even quicker and with a lurching sudden thud the quick car lifts suddenly quickly too quick and sudden over the kerb and suddenly towards the wall as the driver grips the wheel and grips the wheel and grips the wheel and*







# ONE

Wednesday morning. They're in *Emily's*. As usual.

George slumps in his seat by the window, the seat he always slumps in.

'It's not right though, is it? Why should we have to travel that far?' He stirs his straw around the bottom of his chocolate shake.

Across the small table, Owen shrugs, rubs the back of one hand across his bleary morning eyes.

'I mean, on top of the tickets it's fifteen quid and two hours on a coach which drops you a half hour walk from the venue. And you still have to leave early to catch the return because they always oversell the seats and the last to arrive won't get on.' He stabs at his drink with a straw. 'Or you spend more than double the cost of the ticket on the first piss-smelling train the next morning, and you can stay for the whole gig only if you're willing to spend the night at Paddington station avoiding drunks and perverts. It's a joke!'

Owen takes a slurp of his own milkshake (also chocolate) then stares down at his breakfast burrito, nodding in glum agreement. 'If we knew someone with a car, though...' He chews a tasty mouthful.

George laughs. 'You've *got* a car. Besides, we're public transport people. Ecowarriors. Or something.'



‘And no way I’m driving in London, mate.’

There’s a brief pause before George continues. ‘Remember the last time we did the train though, after we saw Violent Slipper at the Roundhouse? The dickhead attendant on the public toilets who wouldn’t let us in?’

‘We didn’t have 50p.’

‘We had *one* 50p. He should have let us both through his little turnstile together.’

‘But it was 50p *each* to get in.’

‘That’s not the point. The attendant didn’t give a shit. Earning minimum wage to sit on his arse all night, why would he? And you didn’t help, mooching off down the platform as soon as he started to argue.’ He takes a long slurp of shake. ‘But that guy on the other side of the platform was *looking at us*, remember? Like, really creepily.’

‘The attendant wasn’t going to let us in though.’

‘He would have. I was working on him. But that guy was looking, eyes boring into my vulnerable, young back while you’re off on a mooch. Leaving me alone while you do a mooch down the platform to check timetables or whatever.’

‘Yeah, he was a bit weird. I think you overreacted, though.’

‘He wasn’t going to go for *you* though, was he? You had your leather jacket on, hair like that, big guy like you. He wasn’t coming anywhere near *you*. It was me he was after, in full twink mode, looking like a



wounded fawn, like some kind of *buffet* laid out in front of his pervy eyes.'

'So why didn't you go into the toilets on your own?' Owen's halfway through his wrap, just hitting the yolk on the extra egg he always orders.

'What, and leave you on *your* own? No way. We stick together. Against the perverts.'

'Thanks, mate.' He dabs at his chin with a napkin.

'No worries, mate. Besides, you'd mooched off and taken your 50p with you.'

A pause. They both dip to their drinks, take long gulps.

George sits up again. 'And who even *carries* cash with them nowadays? Coins are dead. What kind of public facility in the twenty-first century doesn't accept contactless?'

Owen pushes his plate to one side, leans forwards on the table, cheek lying on crossed forearms. 'They did, remember? The man's machine was broken.'

'SO HE SHOULD HAVE LET US IN, THEN!'

Owen groans into the crook of his elbow, reaches for the last slice of toast on George's plate. *Emily's* does the best toast. He's already finished a plate of his own, dripping in butter.

George swipes the toast-seeking hand away and leans in, a pointed finger (purple nail varnish, chipped) jabbing at the tabletop. 'That's corporate neglect. And the rail networks are a public service so that makes him a government employee so it's *governmental* neglect.'



And *that's* how you end up with bodies in the canals.' He picks up his last slice of toast, folding it into his mouth, continuing his diatribe despite his hamstering cheeks. 'We were being *watched*, remember? *Hounded* by a peeping-tom. You've seen the news. You know what happens next. Same story every time.'

'I know.'

'Course you do. How many hours were we sitting on that bench, freezing our arses off?'

'I was perfectly warm.'

'You had a fucking *coat*, though.'

'Whose fault is that?'

'Irrelevant detail. We were freezing our arses off into that bench. Arse icicles dripping through the little holes in the metal so we couldn't even move if we *wanted* to. Had to wait for the sun to come up and thaw our arses out. And sleeping in shifts, keeping an eye on that *pervert* on the other platform who didn't take his eyes off us *all night*.'

'Not even once.'

'Sitting there with his *stupid* little hat in his hand.'

'Quite a big hat, actually.'

'Sitting there with his stupidly big stupid hat. Our little arse icicles binding us to the seat.'

'Little arse? Speak for yourself.'

Behind the counter, Emily herself is polishing glasses. She looks up as the pair in the window seat move into the last stage of their story. She's heard



them tell it dozens of times before, but it always makes her smile.

George continues. 'My freezing tiny arse, watched by a hawky pervert and his big, tall hat *all night*. Couldn't take our eyes off him or he'd have come for us.'

'Come and taken us away.'

'Snatched us up, dragged us into the shadows, dropped us in the canal. He watched us *all night* from his seat on platform 8. Didn't even turn his head once. Not a single degree.'

'And why is that, exactly.'

Emily delays putting a stack of coffee mugs away to avoid drowning out the punchline, holds herself back from joining in.

'Because it was a statue of Isambard Kingdom Brunel!' They always shout it together.

She laughs along with the boys in the window – young men now, she supposes – and calls over. 'Like the arse icicles, George. Nice new detail.'

'Thanks, thought you'd appreciate.' He rearranges himself in his seat, faces her. 'So when are you going to save us the trips to London and almost certain death and start putting bands on here, Emi-Lou?'

Emily smiles, waving away the question. All her younger customers call her Emi-Lou. They always have. She's probably called Emi-Lou more often than her real name.



But she doesn't mind. If she did, she'd get the sign fixed above the door. The bottom of the 'y' hasn't been attached for years. But if she got that fixed, she'd have to fix all the chipped tiles behind it, and then the window frames beneath that, and then she'd probably have to start fixing up the inside too... So the sign says *Emilu's*, and Emi-Lou is her name.

She goes into the kitchen to check the morning delivery, start filling fridges with lettuce, peppers, mushrooms.

In the seat by the window, George turns back to Owen. 'Point is though, why do we have to go all the way to London to see some grungy pack of musicians from Iowa? And *don't* say because it's easier than going to Iowa. *They're* the ones on tour. Why aren't they coming nearer to here?'

'Because "here" isn't really anywhere. I mean, who'd come here, in their right mind?' Owen throws arms wide, gesturing to the near-empty diner and to the wider emptiness that surrounds it.

'Yeah, true, but why are they only doing three UK shows before buggering off to Europe for three months?'

'I guess Americans think of the UK like another state. You look at their US tour last year, right, and they only did one show per state. Two, tops, and even then, it's at the same venue for two nights. In the states, that's a 75-date tour. Takes you months in a transit van.'



‘They don’t have transit vans in the States.’

‘Whatever. Anyway I was thinking maybe we could get one.’

‘Get one what?’

‘A van. For touring.’

George shuffles a little. ‘Sure. Definitely. Maybe soon. Then we can support all those bands and get paid to get there. At least then we’ll be guaranteed entry. Brine Mango’s pretty much sold out already.’ He leans back on his seat, calls to two fellow customers in a booth across the room. ‘Hey Dyl, Carson, you get Brine Mango tickets?’

One of them looks up. ‘Yeah. London date. You?’

George shakes his head, turns his attention back to Owen. ‘London sold out in minutes. London’s full of freaks, though. Not like out here in the sticks.’

‘Us provincial freaks – “preaks” – are fucked then, aren’t we.’

‘To the preaks. Fucked though they may be.’ The pair clink glasses, down the remainder of their chocolate shakes and stand, chairs shunting backwards across the floor. Owen’s falls over with a clatter, bringing Emily back out from the kitchen.

Owen, unsurprised by his own clumsiness, rights the chair, flashes a disarming smile at Emily as he continues. ‘Good name for a band, The Preaks. It’s closeness to phallic euphemism gives it pleasing *frisson*, wouldn’t you say?’



Emily meets the pair at the cash register. They've code-switched again into what she calls their 'toffish English guff'. She's had the pleasure of the full routine this morning.

'Yuh, shhhure. Frisson *definitely*,' George drawls. 'What the French might call a, a, a, a, a certain "I don't know *what*".'

Owen pulls a debit card from a back pocket. 'This one's on me, old chap.'

It always is, thinks Emily.

'*Frightfully* kind of you, old chap. I'll get next week.'

Emily holds the card reader across the counter. 'Everything OK for you again this morning?'

'Brilliant as always, thanks Emi-Lou.'

'Seriously,' George leans on the counter, 'you should put bands on in here, Emi-Lou. Fill the place with sweaty teenagers on a Friday night.'

'And preaks,' Owen chimes in.

'Of course, the preaks.'

'Not really my scene, I'm afraid.' Emily tears the receipt from the reader, hands it to Owen.

He picks up a biro from the top of the till, signs the receipt *For Emi-Lou, love Owen* with a theatrical flourish and hands it back. 'For when we're famous rock stars.'

It's the same every Wednesday morning – same table, same order, same ruse with the receipt. As always, Emily balls the autographed till paper and



flicks it into the bin behind her, eliciting the same sad-puppy look from Owen. ‘Besides, who’d want to come and play here?’ She looks over the cracked varnish, the temperamental lighting, the battered furniture. ‘Bit of a hole, isn’t it?’

‘Nonsense.’ Owen smiles. ‘It’s an *institution* is what this is.’

‘We’d be honoured to do a show here, Emi-Lou. We’d put you on the map, I reckon. What do you say?’

Emily looks at the boy – eager, almost desperate – and finds it easy to believe him. She smiles. ‘See you next week, boys?’

‘Definitely,’ the pair say in unison, pushing through the front door and out into bright sunshine.

After waving them goodbye, Emily stays behind the counter, cashing up the takings from the previous evening. The place is almost empty now. Just one more pair of students, regulars like the boys. More regular, probably. She doesn’t know these two by name, just their orders, often growled or whispered hoarsely through stale morning breath after sleepless nights and long train rides. They’re also musical pilgrims, travelling far and wide for whatever band is playing somewhere – London, Bristol, Birmingham. A few weeks ago it was Manchester, they’d said.

Always the same order though, to bring them back to normality after a transcendent night. One has a blueberry and oatmeal smoothie, the other opts for kiwi, banana and wheatgrass. And always, like this



morning, they nurse their drinks in the same booth. Blueberry sits one side of the table, their long, plum-dark hair curtaining the purple beverage. Opposite them, kiwi stirs their thick morning shake, their short hair twisted into spikes died yellow and green. Emily can't remember if the hair colours or the breakfast orders came first, but it must be conscious. Mustn't it?

The occasional peal of laughter comes from their table as the clock ticks on towards nine.

She looks up from her counting every few minutes, surveys the place.

Her place.

Still a bit of a hole, though, with its view of the traffic lights at the bottom of the high street. Inside, the wooden floor and service counter are genuinely 'distressed' rather than being designed to look that way, cracked like a dried-up riverbed. Clustered around un-matched tables, the chairs look considerably down in the dumps, bleached plywood beginning to peel from metal frames pocked with rust. The booths aren't faring much better. The vinyl is wearing thin, and the benches wheeze whenever customers shuffle across them to cosy up in a corner. Shabby-chic would be a generous description.

But she also knows she's lucky that the place – her place – is still alive. And not just alive – in rude health, in fact. She looks down at the evidence in front of her, rolls of bank notes, bags of coins and a stack of till receipts in a neat row on the counter. And just



from a Tuesday. Her regulars really are loyal folk. If only the bills weren't so expensive, maybe she'd have something left over for a re-design. Maybe she'd even put in a raised area at the back, like a stage.