

What if you had said yes?
Some moments change everything

THE VERSIONS OF US

Laura
Barnett



1938

This is how it begins.

A woman stands on a station platform, a suitcase in her right hand, in her left a yellow handkerchief, with which she is dabbing at her face. The bluish skin around her eyes is wet, and the coal-smoke catches in her throat.

There is nobody to wave her off - she forbade them from coming, though her mother wept, as she herself is doing now - and yet still she stands on tiptoe to peer over the milling hats and fox-furs. Perhaps Anton, tired of their mother's tears, relented, lifted her down the long flights of stairs in her bath chair, dressed her hands in mittens. But there is no Anton, no Mutti. The concourse is crowded with strangers.

Miriam steps onto the train, stands blinking in the dim light of the corridor. A man with a black moustache and a violin case looks from her face to the great swelling dome of her stomach.

"Where is your husband?" he asks.

"In England." The man regards her, his head cocked, like a bird's. Then he leans forward, takes up her suitcase in his free hand. She opens her mouth to protest, but he is already walking ahead.

"There is a spare seat in my compartment."

All through the long journey west, they talk. He offers her herring and pickles from a damp paper bag, and Miriam takes them, though she loathes herring, because it is almost a day since she last ate. She never says aloud that there is no husband in England, but he knows. When the train shudders to a halt on the border and the guards order all passengers to disembark, Jakob keeps her close to him as they stand shivering, snowmelt softening the loose soles of her shoes.

"Your wife?" the guard says to Jakob as he reaches for her papers.

Jakob nods. Six months later, on a clear bright day in Margate, the baby sleeping in the plump, upholstered arms of the rabbi's wife, that is what Miriam becomes.

It also begins here.

Another woman stands in a garden, among roses, rubbing the small of her back. She wears a long blue painter's smock: her husband's. He is painting now, indoors, while she moves her other hand to the great swelling dome of her stomach.

There was a movement, a quickening, but it has passed. A trug, half-filled with cut flowers, lies on the ground by her feet. All around her is the soft drone of bees, the crisp apple smell of clipped grass - she hacked at the lawn earlier, in the cool of the morning, with the pruning shears. She must keep busy: she has a horror of staying still, of allowing the blankness to roll over her like a sheet. It is so soft, so comforting. She is afraid she will fall asleep beneath it, and the baby will fall with her.

Vivian bends to retrieve the trug. As she does so, she feels something rip and tear. She stumbles, lets out a cry. Lewis does not hear her: he plays music while he's working. Chopin, mostly; Wagner sometimes, when his colours are taking a darker turn. She is on the ground, the trug upended next to her, roses strewn across the paving, red and pink, their petals crushed and browning, exuding their sickly perfume. The pain comes again, and Vivian gasps; then she remembers her neighbour, Mrs Dawes, and calls out her name.

In a moment, Mrs Dawes is grasping Vivian's shoulders with her capable hands, lifting her to the bench by the door, in the shade. She sends the grocer's boy, standing fish-mouthed at the front gate, scuttling off to fetch the doctor, while she runs upstairs to find Mr Taylor - such an odd little man, with his pot-belly and snubbed gnome's nose: not at all how she'd thought an artist would look. But sweet with it. Charming.

Vivian knows nothing but the waves of pain; the sudden coolness of bedsheets on her skin; the elasticity of minutes and hours, stretching out beyond limit until the doctor says, "Your son, here is your son." Then she looks down and sees him, recognises him, winking up at her with an old man's knowing eyes.

PART ONE

Version One
Puncture
Cambridge, October 1958

Later, Eva will think: *If it hadn't been for that rusty nail, Jim and I would never have met.*

The thought will slip into her mind, fully formed, with a force that will snatch her breath. She'll lie still, watching the light slide around the curtains, considering the precise angle of her tyre on the rutted grass; the nail itself, old and crooked; the small dog, snouting the verge, failing to heed the sound of gear and tyre. She had swerved to miss him, and her tyre had met the rusty nail. How easy - how much more *probable* - would it have been for none of these things to happen?

But that will be later, when her life before Jim will already seem soundless, drained of colour, as if it had hardly been a life at all. Now, at the moment of impact, there is only a faint tearing sound, and a soft exhalation of air.

"Damn," Eva says. She presses down on the pedals, but her front tyre is jittering like a nervous horse. She brakes, dismounts, kneels to make her diagnosis. The little dog hovers penitently at a distance, barks as if in apology, then scuttles off after its owner - who is, by now, a good deal ahead, a departing figure in a beige trench coat.

There is the nail, lodged above a jagged rip, at least two inches long. Eva presses the lips of the tear, and air emerges in a hoarse wheeze. The tyre's already almost flat: she'll have to walk the bicycle back to college, and she's already late for supervision. Professor Farley will assume she hasn't done her essay on the *Four Quartets*, when actually it has kept her up for two full nights - it's in her satchel now, neatly copied, five pages long, excluding footnotes. She is rather proud of it; was looking forward to reading it aloud, watching old Farley from the corner of her eye as he leant forward, twitching his eyebrows in the way he does when something really interests him.

"*Scheisse*," Eva says: in a situation of this gravity, only German seems to do.

"Are you all right there?"

She is still kneeling, the bicycle weighing heavily against her side. She examines the nail, wonders whether it would do more harm than good to take it out. She doesn't look up.

“Fine, thanks. It’s just a puncture.”

The passer-by, whoever he is, is silent. She assumes he has walked on, but then his shadow - the silhouette of a man, hatless, reaching into his jacket pocket - begins to shift across the grass towards her. “Do let me help. I have a kit here.”

She looks up now. The sun is dipping behind a row of trees - just a few weeks into Michaelmas term, and already the days are shortening - and the light is behind him, darkening his face. His shadow, now attached to feet in scuffed brown brogues, appears grossly tall, though the man seems of average height. Pale brown hair, in need of a cut; a Penguin paperback in his free hand. Eva can just make out the title on the spine, *Brave New World*, and she remembers, quite suddenly, an afternoon - a wintry Sunday; her mother making *Vanillekipferl* in the kitchen, the sound of her father’s violin drifting up from the music room - when she had lost herself completely in Huxley’s strange, frightening vision of the future.

She lays the bicycle down carefully on its side, gets to her feet. “That’s very kind of you, but I’m afraid I’ve no idea how to use one. The porter’s boy always fixes mine.”

“I’m sure.” His tone is light, but he’s frowning, searching the other pocket. “I may have spoken too soon, I’m afraid. I’ve no idea where it is. So sorry. I usually have it with me.”

“Even when you’re not cycling?”

“Yes.” He’s more a boy than a man: about her own age, and a student; he has a college scarf - a bee’s black and yellow stripes - looped loosely around his neck. The town boys don’t sound like him, and they surely don’t carry copies of *Brave New World*. “Be prepared, and all that. And I usually do. Cycle, I mean.”

He smiles, and Eva notices that his eyes are a very deep blue, almost violet, and framed by lashes longer than her own. In a woman, the effect would be called beautiful. In a man, it is a little unsettling; she is finding it difficult to meet his gaze.

“Are you German, then?”

“No.” She speaks too sharply; he looks away, embarrassed.

“Oh. Sorry. Heard you swear. *Scheisse*.”

“You speak German?”

“Not really. But I can say *shit* in ten languages.”

Eva laughs: she shouldn’t have snapped. “My parents are Austrian.”

“*Ach so?*”

“You *do* speak German!”

“Nein, mein Liebling. Only a little.”

His eyes catch hers, and Eva is gripped by the curious sensation that they have met before, though his name is a blank. “Are you reading English? Who’s got you on to Huxley? I didn’t think they let any of us read anything more modern than *Tom Jones*.”

He looks down at the paperback, shakes his head. “Oh no - Huxley’s just for fun. I’m reading Law. But we are still *allowed* to read novels, you know.”

She smiles. “Of course.” The Law faculty’s miles away from English, and from Newnham; perhaps they were introduced at a party once. David knows so many people - what was the name of that friend of his Penelope danced with at the Caius May Ball, before she took up with Gerald? He had bright blue eyes, but surely not quite like these. “You do look familiar. Have we met?”

The man regards her again, his head on one side. He’s pale, very English-looking, a smattering of freckles littering his nose. She bets they gather and thicken at the first glance of sun, and that he hates it, curses his fragile northern skin.

“I don’t know,” he says. “I feel as if we have, but I’m sure I’d remember your name.”

“It’s Eva. Edelstein.”

“Well.” He smiles again. “I’d definitely remember that. I’m Jim Taylor. Second year, Clare. You at Newnham?”

She nods. “Second year. And I’m about to get in serious trouble for missing a supervision, just because some idiot left a nail lying around.”

“I’m meant to be in a supervision too. But to be honest, I was thinking of not going.”

Eva eyes him appraisingly; she has little time for those students - men, mostly; and the most expensively educated men at that - who regard their degrees with lazy, self-satisfied contempt. She hadn’t taken him for one of them. “Is that something you make a habit of?”

He shrugs. “Not really. I wasn’t feeling well. But I’m suddenly feeling a good deal better.”

They are silent for a moment, each feeling they ought to make a move to leave, but not quite wanting to. On the path, a girl in a navy duffel coat hurries past, throws them a quick glance. Then, recognising Eva, she looks again. It’s that Girton girl, the

one who played Emilia to David's Iago at the ADC. She'd had her sights set on David: any fool could see it. But Eva doesn't want to think about David now.

"Well," Eva says. "I suppose I'd better be getting back. See if the porter's boy can fix my bike."

"Or you could let me fix it for you. We're much closer to Clare than Newnham. I'll find the kit, fix your puncture, and then you can let me take you for a drink."

She watches his face, and it strikes Eva, with a certainty that she can't possibly explain - she wouldn't even want to try - that this is the moment: the moment after which nothing will ever be quite the same again. She could - *should* - say no, turn away, wheel her bicycle through the late-afternoon streets to the college gates, let the porter's boy come blushing to her aid, offer him a four-bob tip. But that is not what she does. Instead, she turns her bicycle in the opposite direction and walks beside this boy, this Jim, their twin shadows nipping at their heels, merging and overlapping on the long grass.

Version Two
Pierrot
Cambridge, October 1958

In the dressing-room, she says to David, "I almost ran over a dog with my bike."

David squints at her in the mirror: he is applying a thick layer of white pan-stick to his face. "When?"

"On my way to Farley's." Odd that she should have remembered it now. It was alarming: the little white dog at the edge of the path hadn't moved away as she approached, but skittered towards her, wagging its stump of a tail. She'd prepared to swerve, but at the very last moment - barely inches from her front wheel - the dog had suddenly bounded away with a frightened yelp.

Eva had stopped, shaken; someone called out, "I say - look where you're going, won't you?" She turned, saw a man in a beige trench coat a few feet away, glaring at her.

"I'm so sorry," she said, though what she meant to say was, *You should really keep your damn dog on a lead.*

"Are you all right there?" Another man was approaching from the opposite direction: a boy, really, about her age, a college scarf looped loosely over his tweed jacket.

"Quite all right, thank you," she said primly. Their eyes met briefly as she remounted - his a peculiarly bright blue, framed by long, girlish lashes - and for a second she was sure she knew him, so sure that she opened her mouth to frame a greeting. But then, just as quickly, she doubted herself, said nothing, and pedalled on. As soon as she arrived at Professor Farley's rooms and began to read out her essay on the *Four Quartets*, the whole thing slipped from her mind.

"Oh, Eva," David says now. "You do get yourself into the most absurd situations."

"Do I?" She frowns, feeling the distance between his version of her - disorganised, endearingly scatty - and her own. "It wasn't my fault. The stupid dog ran right at me."

But he isn't listening: he's staring hard at his reflection, blending the make-up down onto his neck. The effect is both clownish and melancholy, like one of those French *pierrots*.

"Here," she says, "you've missed a bit." She leans forward, rubs at his chin with her hand.

"Don't," he says sharply, and she moves her hand away.

"Katz." Gerald Smith is at the door, dressed, like David, in a long white robe, his face unevenly smeared with white. "Cast warm-up. Oh, hello, Eva. You wouldn't go and find Pen, would you? She's hanging around out front." She nods at him. To David, she says, "I'll see you afterwards, then. Break a leg."

He grips her arm as she turns to go, draws her closer. "Sorry," he whispers. "Just nerves."

"I know. Don't be nervous. You'll be great."

He *is* great, as always, Eva thinks with relief half an hour later. She is sitting in the house seats, holding her friend Penelope's hand. For the first few scenes, they are tense, barely able to watch the stage: they look instead at the audience, gauging their reactions, running over the lines they've rehearsed so many times.

David, as Oedipus, has a long speech about fifteen minutes in that it took him an age to learn. Last night, after the dress, Eva sat with him until midnight in the empty dressing-room, drilling him over and over, though her essay was only half-finished, and she'd have to stay up all night to get it done. Tonight, she can hardly bear to listen, but David's voice is clear, unflinching. She watches two men in the row in front lean forward, rapt.

Afterwards, they gather in the bar, drinking warm white wine. Eva and Penelope - tall, scarlet-lipped, shapely; her first words to Eva, whispered across the polished table at matriculation dinner, were, "I don't know about you, but I would *kill* for a smoke" - stand with Susan Fletcher, whom the director, Harry Janus, has recently thrown over for an older actress he met at a London show.

"She's *twenty-five*," Susan says: she's brittle and a little teary, watching Harry through narrowed eyes. "I looked up her picture in *Spotlight* - they have a copy in the library, you know. She's absolutely *gorgeous*. How am I meant to compete?"

Eva and Penelope exchange a discreet glance; their loyalties ought, of course, to lie with Susan, but they can't help feeling she's the sort of girl who thrives on such dramas.

“Just don’t compete,” Eva says. “Retire from the game. Find someone else.”

Susan blinks at her. “Easy for you to say. David’s besotted.”

Eva follows Susan’s eyes across the room, to where David is talking to an older man in a waistcoat and hat - not a student, and he hasn’t the dusty air of a don: a London agent, perhaps. He is looking at David like a man who expected to find a penny and has found a crisp pound note. And why not? David is back in civvies now, the collar of his sports jacket arranged just so, his face wiped clean: tall, shining, magnificent.

All through Eva’s first year, the name *David Katz* had travelled the corridors and common rooms of Newnham, usually uttered in an excitable whisper. *He’s at Kings, you know; our year. He’s the spitting image of Rock Hudson. He took Sheila Johnson for cocktails.* When they finally met - Eva was *Hermia* to his *Lysander*, in an early brush with the stage that confirmed her suspicion that she would never make an actress - she had known he was watching her, waiting for the usual blushes, the coquettish laughter. But she had not laughed; she had found him foppish, self-regarding. And yet David hadn’t seemed to notice; in the Eagle pub after the read-through, he’d asked about her family, her life, with a degree of interest that she began to think might be genuine. “You want to be a writer?” he’d said. “What a perfectly wonderful thing.” He’d quoted whole scenes from *Hancock’s Half Hour* at her with uncanny accuracy, until she couldn’t help but laugh. A few days later, after rehearsals, he’d suggested she let him take her out for a drink, and Eva, with a sudden rush of excitement, had agreed.

That was six months ago now, in Easter term. She hadn’t been sure the relationship would survive the summer - David’s month with his family in Los Angeles (his father was American, had some rather glamorous connection to Hollywood); her fortnight scrabbling around on an archaeological dig near Harrogate (deathly dull, but there’d been time to write in the long twilit hours between dinner and bed). But he wrote often from America, even telephoned; then, when he was back, he came to Highgate for tea, charmed her parents over *Lebkuchen*, took her swimming in the Ponds.

There was, Eva was finding, a good deal more to David Katz than she had at first supposed. She liked his intelligence; his knowledge of culture: he took her to *Chicken Soup with Barley* at the Royal Court, which she found quite extraordinary; David seemed to know at least half the bar. Their shared backgrounds lent everything a

certain ease: his father's family had emigrated from Poland to the US, his mother's from Germany to London, and they now inhabited a substantial Edwardian villa in Hampstead, just a short tramp across the Heath from her parents' house.

And then, if Eva were truly honest, there was the matter of his looks. She isn't in the least bit vain herself: she has inherited her mother's interest in style - a well-cut jacket; a tastefully decorated room - but has been taught, from young, to prize intellectual achievement over physical beauty. And yet Eva found that she *did* enjoy the way most eyes would turn to David when he entered a room; the way his presence at a party would suddenly make the evening seem brighter, more exciting. By Michaelmas term, they were a couple - a celebrated one, even, among David's circle of fledgling actors and playwrights and directors - and Eva was swept up by his charm and confidence; by his friends' flirtations and their in-jokes and their absolute belief that success was theirs for the taking.

Perhaps that's how love always arrives, she wrote in her notebook: *in this imperceptible slippage from acquaintance to intimacy*. Eva is not, by any stretch of the imagination, experienced. She met her only previous boyfriend, Benjamin Schwartz, at a dance at Highgate boys' school: he was shy, with an owlish stare, and the unshakable conviction that he would one day discover a cure for cancer. He never tried anything other than to kiss her, hold her hand; often, in his company, she felt boredom rise in her like a stifled yawn. David is never boring. He is all action and energy, Technicolor-bright.

Now, across the ADC bar, he catches her eye, smiles, mouths silently, "Sorry."
Susan, noticing, says, "See?"

Eva sips her wine, enjoying the illicit thrill of being chosen; of holding such a sweet, desired thing within her grasp.

The first time she visited David's rooms in King's (it was a sweltering June day: that evening, they would give their last performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), he had positioned her in front of the mirror above his basin, like a mannequin. Then he'd stood behind her, arranged her hair so that it fell in coils across her shoulders, bare in her light cotton dress.

"Do you see how beautiful we are?" he said.

Eva, watching their two-headed reflection through his eyes, felt suddenly that she did; and so she said simply, "Yes."

Version Three
Fall
Cambridge, October 1958

He sees her fall from a distance: slowly, deliberately, as if in a series of freeze-frames. A small white dog - a terrier - snuffling the rutted verge, lifting its head to send a reproachful bark after its owner, a man in a beige trench coat, already a good deal ahead. The girl approaching on a bicycle - she is pedalling too quickly, her dark hair trailing out behind her like a flag. He hears her call out over the high chime of her bell: "Move, won't you, boy?" But the dog, drawn by some new source of canine fascination, moves not away, but into the narrowing trajectory of her front tyre.

The girl swerves; her bicycle, moving off into the long grass, buckles and judders. She falls sideways, landing heavily, her left leg twisted at an awkward angle. Jim, just a few feet away now, hears her swear. "*Scheisse.*"

The terrier waits a moment, wagging its tail disconsolately, and then scuttles off after its owner.

"I say. Are you all right there?"

The girl doesn't look up. Close by, now, he can see that she is small, slight, about his age. Her face is hidden by that curtain of hair.

"I'm not sure."

Her voice is breathless, clipped: the shock, of course. Jim steps from the path, moves towards her. "Is it your ankle? Do you want to try putting some weight on it?"

Here is her face: thin, like the rest of her; narrow-chinned; brown eyes quick, appraising. Her skin is darker than his, lightly tanned: he'd have thought her Italian or Spanish; German, never. She nods, winces slightly as she climbs to her feet. Her head barely reaches his shoulders. Not beautiful, exactly - but known, somehow. Familiar. Though surely he doesn't know her. At least, not yet.

"Not broken, then."

She nods. "Not broken. It hurts a bit. But I suspect I'll live."

Jim chances a smile that she doesn't quite return. "That was some fall. Did you hit something?"

“I don’t know.” There is a smear of dirt on her cheek, and he finds himself struggling against the sudden desire to brush it off. “Must have done. I’m usually rather careful, you know. That dog came right at me.”

He looks down at her bicycle, lying stricken on the ground: a few inches from its back tyre there is a large grey stone, just visible through the grass. “There’s your culprit. Must have caught it with your tyre. Want me to take a look? I have a repair kit here.” He shifts the paperback he is carrying - *Mrs Dalloway*; he’d found it on his mother’s bedside table as he was packing for Michaelmas term and asked to borrow it, thinking it might afford some insight into her state of mind - to his other hand, and reaches into his jacket pocket.

“That’s very kind of you, but really, I’m sure I can...”

“Least I can do. Can’t believe the owner didn’t even look round. Not exactly chivalrous, was it?”

Jim swallows, embarrassed at the implication: that his response, of course, *was*. He’s hardly the hero of the hour: the repair kit isn’t even there. He checks the other pocket. Then he remembers: Veronica. Undressing in her room that morning - they’d not even waited in the hallway for him to remove his jacket - he’d lain the contents of his pockets on her dressing-table. Later, he’d picked up his wallet, keys, a few loose coins. The kit must still be there, among her perfumes, her paste necklaces, her rings.

“I may have spoken too soon, I’m afraid. I’ve no idea where it is. So sorry. I usually have it with me.”

“Even when you’re not cycling?”

“Yes. Be prepared, and all that. And I usually do. Cycle, I mean.”

They are silent for a moment. She lifts her left ankle, circles it slowly. The movement is fluid, elegant: a dancer practising at the barre.

“How does it feel?” He is surprised by how truly he wants to know.

“A bit sore.”

“Perhaps you should see a doctor.”

She shakes her head. “I’m sure an ice-pack and a stiff gin will do the trick.”

He watches her, unsure of her tone. She smiles. “Are you German, then?” he asks.

“No.”

He wasn’t expecting sharpness. He looks away. “Oh. Sorry. Heard you swear. *Scheisse*.”

“You speak German?”

“Not really. But I can say *shit* in ten languages.”

She laughs, revealing a set of bright white teeth. Too healthy, perhaps, to have been raised on beer and sauerkraut. “My parents are Austrian.”

“*Ach so?*”

“You do speak German!”

“*Nein, mein Liebling.* Only a little.”

Watching her face, it strikes Jim how much he’d like to draw her. He can see them, with uncommon vividness: her curled on a window-seat, reading a book, the light falling just so across her hair; him sketching, the room white and silent, but for the scratch of lead on paper.

“Are you reading English too?”

Her question draws him back. Dr Dawson in his Old Court rooms: his three supervision partners, with their blank, fleshy faces and neatly combed hair, mindlessly scrawling the “aims and adequacy of the law of tort”. He’s late already, but he doesn’t care.

He looks down at the book in his hand, shakes his head. “Law, I’m afraid.”

“Oh. I don’t know many men who read Virginia Woolf for fun.”

He laughs. “I just carry it around for show. I find it’s a good ice-breaker with beautiful English students. ‘Don’t you just love *Mrs Dalloway?*’ seems to go down a treat.”

She is laughing with him, and he looks at her again, for longer this time. Her eyes aren’t really brown: at the iris, they are almost black; at the rim, closer to grey. He remembers a shade just like it in one of his father’s paintings: a woman - Sonia, he knows now; that was why his mother wouldn’t have it on the walls - outlined against a wash of English sky.

“So do you?” he says.

“Do I what?”

“Love *Mrs Dalloway?*”

“Oh, absolutely.” A short silence. Then, “You do look familiar. I thought perhaps I’d seen you in a lecture.”

“Not unless you’re sneaking into Watson’s fascinating series on Roman law. What’s your name?”

“It’s Eva. Edelstein.”

“Well.” The name of an opera singer, a ballerina; not this scrap of a girl, whose face, Jim knows, he will sketch later, blending its contours: the planed angles of her cheekbones; the smudged shadows beneath her eyes. “I’m sure I’d have remembered that. I’m Jim Taylor. Second year, Clare. I’d say you were... Newnham. Am I right?”

“Spot on. Second year, too. I’m about to get in serious trouble for missing a supervision on Eliot. And I’ve done the essay, too.”

“Double the pain, then. But I’m sure they’ll let you off, in the circumstances.”

She regards him, her head to one side: he can’t tell if she finds him interesting or odd. Perhaps she’s simply wondering why he’s still here. “I’m meant to be in a supervision too,” he says. “But to be honest, I was thinking of not going.”

“Is that something you make a habit of?” That trace of sternness has returned: he wants to explain that he’s not one of *those* men, the ones who neglect their studies out of laziness, or lassitude, or some inherited sense of entitlement. He wants to tell her how it feels to be set on a course that is not of his own choosing. But he can’t, of course; he says only, “Not really. I wasn’t feeling well. But I’m suddenly feeling a good deal better.”

For a moment, it seems that there is nothing else to say. Jim can see how it will go: she will lift her bicycle, turn to leave, make her slow journey back to college. He is stricken, unable to think of a single thing to keep her here. But she isn’t leaving yet: she’s looking beyond him, to the path. He follows her gaze, watches a girl in a navy coat stare back at them, then hurry on her way.

“Someone you know?” he says.

“A little.” Something has changed in her; he can sense it. Something is closing down. “I’d better head back. I’m meeting someone later.”

A man: of course there had to be a man. A slow panic rises in him: he will not, must not, let her go. He reaches out, touches her arm. “Don’t go. Come with me. There’s a pub I know. Plenty of ice and gin.”

He keeps his hand on the rough cotton of her sleeve. She doesn’t throw it off, just looks back up at him with those watchful eyes. He is sure she’ll say no, walk away. But then she says, “All right. Why not?”

Jim nods, aping a nonchalance he doesn’t feel. He is thinking of a pub on Barton Road: he’ll wheel the damn bicycle there himself if he has to. He kneels down, looks it over: there’s no visible damage, but for a narrow, tapered scrape to the front mudguard. “Doesn’t look too bad,” he says. “I’ll take it for you, if you like.”

Eva shakes her head. “Thanks. But I can do it myself.”

And then they walk away together, out of the allotted grooves of their afternoons and into the thickening shadows of evening; into the dim, liminal place where one path is taken, and another missed.

The Versions of Us

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