



BETTER THINGS

Reading time: about 2-3 minutes

A postcard of a bear. I flip it over and read Dave's writing (*It's me! Missing you.*), then drop it behind the coffee machine, a space normally reserved for brown envelopes and CVs.

Sandra sprays and wipes the empty tables for the second time this hour, while I gaze through the front window and into the sea. Bill limps in. Sandra tells him to clear off.

'Dave lets me stay.'

'He's not here, mate.'

I crouch behind the bar and hide. Bill leaves, muttering something. 'Scum,' maybe.

Running this place alone isn't as easy as Dave promised.



New shots for the walls?

That's all the email says. The attachments open and I click through Dave's photos of boars and bison. They don't belong here. I don't reply.

'—and now it's just me and the kids,' Sandra's telling me.

I close my stalling laptop, keys sticky from jam-stained fingers, and try to listen.

'So, I'm saying Saturdays won't work anymore.'

'Fine, Sandra. Fine. Understood.'

She gets back to mopping. A student creeps towards the counter.

'Is the flapjack vegan?'

'No.'

They trudge away, headphones on, hands in pockets.



A coach stops outside, and scores of weekend day-trippers descend on the café. New part-timer Alex and I are busy for hours. We sell out of panini. Later, I send him down the road to

buy more milk. We're both laughing. It's the best I've felt in months.

We stack chairs as the sun sets. The radio's on. Recent stuff, mostly upbeat. I like some of it.

'What sort of doctor do you want to be?' I ask him.

'Not sure yet,' he answers, 'But I want to work overseas, help places in crisis.'

'Sounds exciting.'

He'll quit the café one day. I'm dreading it.



Dave's uploaded a blog post, his first in weeks:

Abandoning everything I know to capture life on the frontlines.

There's a photo of him, smiling alongside soldiers.

Phone back in pocket, I serve a customer some stale cake

Alex pours hot chocolate from a jug.

'Are you scared about the brunch place opening next door?'

I hesitate.

'Yes,' I admit. 'I'm terrified.'



Bill peers in before entering. Enticed by the lack of Sandra,

perhaps. He doesn't know she's gone for good.

'Can I come in? It's freezing.'

'OK. For a bit.'

He's brought a copy of the local paper, flicks through it. I make him a tea. He thanks me.

Eventually, he gets up.

'It's nice here. Quiet.'

'Take it all in. We're not here much longer.'

He tuts.

'This bloody government. They don't give a toss about anyone.'

I pick up the paper he's left. Near the back there's a headline:

Local photographer's work in conflict zone shortlisted for Rising Star Award

I close the paper and look up, just as Alex passes by. He'll be on his way to the hospital. He raises a hand, waves at me. I return the gesture, but his eyes are back on the road ahead.



HARRY DOBBS

Harry Dobbs is a bartender and writer based in London. Prior to this, he has worked (with mixed results) as a communications manager, barista, recruitment consultant, and digital marketer. He also lived in Japan for a year and a half.

He is currently working on a short story collection. When not writing or serving drinks, he likes reading books and watching films, especially ones that deal in themes of loss, disappointment, and resignation.

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