

## Corner Shop

Alex is nineteen. Indecisive and feeling pressured, he decided to take a year out from school after finishing his sixth year. He figured he'd work, get some experience under his belt and become a bit more financially stable; at some point taking money off Mum and Dad is just embarrassing. Somehow that year turned into two, and the more he stocked, scanned, swept, and restocked, the less money he seemed to be earning. He'd never admit it, but Alex feels suspended in his life, floating in a half-existence with no direction. He's stagnating somewhere between a good life and a bad one, and he manages to convince himself it's better than propelling himself headfirst into disaster. Alex is decidedly detached and completely neutral for most of the day, except when it comes to her. Every time she comes in for her vanilla latte at lunch, Alex feels a little tug somewhere deep inside, a long-forgotten part of him that his hidden away. He tries to act unaware of it, but he is painfully conscious of her effect. Like a fish on a hook it makes Alex squirm, knowing that should she choose, she could reel him out of his disappearing act and drag him into the reality of the world. It terrifies him.

Laura is pregnant. Probably. Probably pregnant. Most likely very nearly certainly pregnant. No coffee today. Coffee's bad for babies anyway, isn't it? Maybe? Laura shakes her head and hurries to the back of the store. She only has a thirty-minute lunch break and she's absolutely bursting for a piss, been holding it in all day. She stands in front of the boxes of tests, her eyes darting to everything but the choices in front of her. Luckily, the store only stocks three brands, so it's not too hard a decision.

"Christ, Laura, just pick one," she mutters. Closing her eyes, she shoots her hand out to let Fate pick for her. But Laura and Fate have always had a rather tumultuous relationship. "Aw, you gimp!" She holds one hand delicately in the other, bruises beginning to bloom where her knuckles collided with the shelf. She turns to find the tall boy behind the register staring at her. He's smiling.

Kieran is failing maths – for the second year in a row. So maybe he prefers gaffs with his pals to studying higher maths. Gotta live while you're young, right? He's got a conditional to do English anyway – all he needs is a pass at higher maths. Every Wednesday during his free period before lunch he goes to the shop to buy sweets to help him through his upcoming maths period where Mrs. MacDonald will glower and chide and tut impatiently. Kieran hates those tuts. Passionately. He flops his schoolbag down at the store entrance and wanders over to the sweets and pretends to consider the options, though he knows he'll get exactly the same as always – Reese's, a bag of M&Ms, and a bag of chocolate eggs while they're in season. Halfway down the aisle, he hears a loud exclamation from a few rows over.

Lucie is tired. She's lived in Glasgow all her life, which is a considerable length of time. She rarely ventures out of her house anymore and has depressingly few visitors. A couple times a week she'll make the short trip to the Co-op at the corner. She rather likes the boy who works there – not like that. Lucie simply finds it amusing that a boy of his age could appear just as exasperated with existence as she is. She enjoys the constant tilt of his head, as though he cannot be bothered to support it properly and she is always bemused how his bright eyes can be looking directly into her own but still look fixed upon something in the distance. To Lucie, he appears irrepressibly present with a desperation to be vacant, someone begging to fade. In Lucie's experience, those are the best kinds of people, but only once they lose that

desperation. It is replaced with a gratitude to exist that cannot be understood by those who have never really, truly wanted to disappear. Lucie doesn't want to disappear – she knows she already has. From the grab-and-go aisle, Lucie sees the blonde girl reaching for a pregnancy test. *Oh, she thinks. Interesting.*

Harry is trouble. Gambling debts and a dependent older brother with a debilitating addiction and too much involvement in gangs and likely alcoholism and no job and no education. Harry doesn't want to do this, but his whole life is within a twenty-mile radius so to him the world is falling to pieces and when Craig explains it, this is the only option. Craig turns the car off.

"You ready little brother?" Harry's eyes are wide. Craig hits his arm lightly. "I'll be right outside, ready to go. Don't let me down." Harry turns to face him. Of course he won't let him down. Harry's never let Craig down. The relationship doesn't go the other way, but Harry's never really bothered to let himself notice. He steps from the van and tries to ignore the way he shakes as he enters the shop. His hands are shoved deep into his pockets where his fingertips brush cool metal.

"What?" Laura asks loudly. Her eyes are boring holes through Alex's head, and he looks away, but he can't keep the smile off of his face. He shrugs. Laura turns back to the tests and finds a small old woman has suddenly appeared at her elbow.

"Um. Hi."

"Hiya," replies Lucie absently. She's also looking at the tests. They stand for a couple moments in silence. Laura stares back and forth between the woman and the little boxes on the shelf.

"Are you... looking for a pregnancy test?" Laura asks. Lucie barks a sharp laugh.

"Aye, hen, got a wild sex life, me." She laughs again then falls serious. She plucks a box from the shelf. "This one." She thrusts it at Laura. "Trust me."

"Uh, okay," Laura replies. She walks to the register, Lucie just behind her. She drops the box on the counter. Alex looks at it, at Laura, then back at the box. Laura avoids looking at him. She glances back at Lucie, who stands content behind her, despite having nothing to buy. A school boy in uniform joins what appears to be a queue behind the old woman. Laura notices his shiny badges. He looks at the box on the counter and goes red.

"Could you all quit it?" Laura snaps. Kieran and Alex look at their feet.

"Quit what?" Asks Lucie.

"Quit looking at the stupid box like it's a snake or, like, I dunno. a Playboy or something. You don't know anything about me." No one replies but Laura can feel their eyes on her. "I've always wanted a baby," she blurts. She didn't mean to, but she meant it.

"I wish I'd had children," Lucie offers. Kieran reaches for his earbuds and Alex just shrugs again.

"Why are you doing that?" Laura asks.

Alex shrugs.

"Stop it."

He stops.

"Whatever," Laura says. "It doesn't matter what you all think anyway. I don't even know your names." She leans forward and squints. "Well, you're Alex."

Alex feels his breath catch as she says his name. Something in his brain starts to move that hasn't moved in a long time. Slowly, it's like his body begins to reel his soul back down to earth. He can feel himself coming back into his body.

"I am," he says.

"Uh, yeah," Laura says. "I just said that."

"His name isn't who he is," Lucie interjects. "Ask him who he is."

"Alright," Alex laughs gently. "Bit early for the waxing poetic, no?." Laura looks at him, surprised. It's the most she's heard him say. Usually he's just fading into the background.

"Look, I'm just here for some scan," Kieran pipes up. "Are you gonna buy the baby test or not?"

"Baby test?" Laura repeats.

"Give us a second," Alex replies.

Lucie, finding herself unusually – well, not amused, but not bored by life, pressed on. "Babies are a new life. Don't they make you think about your own? Maybe it's just my age. If you distil your personality down to one word, is it a good one?"

"The fuck does that have to do with anything?" Laura asks. She pulls out a tenner and slaps it on the counter in front of Alex. He ignores it.

"No, it's not," he says, looking at Lucie.

"Don't humour her," says Laura.

Kieran rolls his eyes.

"Neither is mine," Lucie says. "I stayed comfortable throughout my life and let me tell you comfort never leads to great things." Lucie flicks her eyes towards Laura so only Alex sees and mouths '*Great Things.*'

"I just wanna know if I'm gonna be a mum or not, thanks," Laura says, rattling the little box.

"Maybe I'll have time to do something with my life once school's over and I can get out of this place," Kieran adds. Laura smiles.

"I always said I'd get as far from here as possible." She looks down at her apron and the probably-pregnant stomach beneath it. "Guess not." She looks at Lucie. The old woman's eyes are dark and burning. "I guess this is the most exciting thing in my life so far. And it's pretty good – I think. I hope." Lucie smiles, then flicks her eyes at something behind Laura. Laura turns and is surprised to see Alex staring at her. He was smiling again. She almost smiles back.

"Take it." He hands her the pregnancy test. "No one will know." Just as Laura reaches out her hand, touched, Harry busts through the door.

"Get down!" He shouts. He pulls the gun from his pocket and fumbles with it but manages to keep it from falling and hopes no one notices. Lucie notices.

"Fuck's sake!" Laura mutters in frustration as she raises her hands in the air. "Here, how will none of youse just let me piss on a stick in peace?"

"I – what?" Harry is so taken aback he begins to lower the gun.

"She's pregnant," Alex clarifies.

"Probably," Laura adds. "Probably pregnant."

"Oh." Harry didn't anticipate this.

"Would you mind holding back on the robbery until she knows for sure?" Lucie asks. She puts on her best frail old woman voice. She can barely control herself. This is the most excitement she's had in years.

"Um – I mean – I don't think..."

"Won't be a sec," Laura says. She takes the test from Alex, who is visibly annoyed at the robber's presence. Of course it would happen on his shift. Laura hurries to the toilet in the back as Kieran steps forward.

“Wait, aren’t you Harry? Harry MacPherson? You were in the year below me until you dropped out.”

“Harry MacPherson? Like Craig MacPherson’s little brother?” Asks Alex.

Kieran nods. Harry looks back and forth between the both of him. He definitely didn’t expect to be recognised.

“Alright, pal?” Kieran asks. Harry shrugs and lowers the gun totally. It feels a bit awkward in his hands now.

“Your brother was in my year,” Alex says. “How’s he? Still a right bam?”

“I guess,” Harry says, noncommittal.

“Guess that work placement didn’t work out,” Kieran says, eyeing the gun. Part of him thinks it’s probably fake, but another part knows the MacPherson’s are just nuts enough to get their hands on a real one. Harry almost smiles but shakes himself quickly.

“I said, get down!” He raises the weapon once again and tries to sound commanding. They all simply raise their hands again. Annoyed, Harry turns to face Alex. “Give me the money in the till.”

The till springs open and Alex looks down at the contents. “Sorry, mate, been a slow day. Only about £60 pounds in here. Looks like you came at a bad time.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Harry says. “Just give it all to me.”

Laura comes slowly walking back into the room, the stick swinging loosely between her fingers. Her reappearance causes a tension, all eyes expectantly on her, even Harry’s. She finds herself only meeting Alex’s gaze. His eyes are a stunning green colour she’s never noticed, but now they seem to draw her towards him.

“Yeah,” she says. “Pregnant. Not probably.”

“Oh!” Lucie claps her hands together and feels a rush of emotion towards the former stranger. “Good news?”

“Think so,” Laura replies. She’s not sure but as she says it, it feels true. She feels like she’s floating, even if the father is some two-week fling from summer she’ll never see again. What does that matter anyway when Alex is smiling at her, those spring eyes shining.

“Cool,” says Kieran. “If it’s a boy, Kieran is a great name. I think.”

“Or Lucie for a girl!” Lucie pipes up.

“Thought names didn’t define a person?” Laura quips.

“No, but they can represent,” Lucie replies. “And why not represent a chance for an old woman? A chance to not disappear.”

“Excuse me,” Harry interrupts. “Remember me?” He waves the gun. “Can I get the money now?”

“Not sure you have time, sorry, mate,” Laura says. She lifts her phone. “You let me go to the toilet, unaccompanied, with a mobile. I was on the phone to 999 while I waited for the test to make up its mind.”

Harry’s face goes white. “I – you – but I didn’t think –,” suddenly his gun is only half a meter from Laura’s face. “You’ll regret that.”

“Gonna shoot a pregnant woman, aye?” Says Alex. He tries to act like his heart isn’t beating out of his chest. “Classy.” Harry looks back and forth between him and Laura. Finally, self-preservation wins over revenge and he legs it out the door. Those inside hear the van squealing away as sirens can be heard in the distance.

Kieran lifts the sweets and raises his brows at Alex.

“Take them,” Alex says.

“Cheers, mate.” Kieran makes it back in time for maths.

“I live in the brick house at the end of the street if you ever need me, dear.” Lucie embraces Laura and walks out the shop, stopping to talk to the swarming officers.

“Do you mind that I’m pregnant?” Laura doesn’t mean to ask it, but it comes anyway.

“Not at all,” Alex replies. “Would you mind if I took you out sometime?”

“Not at all,” she says.

“Are you alright?” Alex asks. “That was close, for a moment there.”

Laura stands in a beam of warm sunlight and stares out at the shining blue skies and for a moment it’s as if she can actually taste the sweetness of her life. The sun, her baby, and the boy next to her. He’s so... unexpected. That’s what Alex is – unexpected.

“I’m alright,” she says. “And I think I’m going to be better than I’ve ever been.” For the first time, Laura smiles back at Alex.

Alex reappears.