



Desiderata

It has just gone midnight as Tom exits the Brooklyn Hotel into the chaos of George Street. 'Exits' is putting it kindly. It's a neutral term. I won't say stumble. I'm not here to judge. I'm here to do *other* things, but certainly not to judge...

Leaving behind women with teased hair and bubble-gum pink lacquered lips, Tom makes his way towards the next weathered pub facade. He's got a few hangers on, a few faces that don't concern me one jot. But I'm careful not to lose him in the throng of loiterers, lingerers, those who cling on to the last shred of light, those with sticky, liquor coated hands. The smell of cigarette smoke is in his clothes, vomit and piss drying into the soles of his dark tan Sperrys.

As though he can taste the smell, he winces and spits. It lands right between my feet, and before I take it personally, I remind myself that he can't see me. Not now, anyway. I wait until he sleeps before I let him see me. But I'm there. Always there. You can come along for the ride, if you'd like. Just not a word to him.

One of the empty faces puts a hand on Tom's shoulder, squeezing it lightly.

"It's getting late, my wife—" the face mumbles. Sour breath meets the crisp May night.

Tom sighs, tired, frustrated, already lonely. If only. I'm right here.

"Righto, I'll see you on Monday."

The man is gone.

For Tom, the night is still young. *Billie Jean* spills onto the street from a nearby pub. It's been months since it was released, and every desperate disc jockey seems to play it a few times a night. He should know. He's been out all night. He doesn't want to go home – he isn't ready to face sleep. Or rather, not ready to face me.

He scans left and right along George Street, peering down towards the maze of cobblestone streets of The Rocks before seeing a payphone. The orange Telecom logo sits atop three scratched perspex walls and a metallic grate from the waist down. He'd awoken with the imprints of those grates branded across his face more times than he'd like to admit.

Ignoring the cards of the hookers wallpapering the back wall, he picks up the receiver and pauses. Who to call? Smoke and cleaning fluid burn his nose. The ground is carpeted by fag butts. Tom tries to recollect a number; they gyrate behind his eyes. It makes his head hurt.

It's 9-9-3-1-2-8, Tom.

Got it, Tom smiles, proud of himself for being able to remember six digits. You're welcome. He calls the number. The phone rings. Rings. And rings.

"Hello?" A tired voice sounds down the line.

"Johnny! How goes it?" Tom says, pressing the phone against his mouth.

A sigh. "Go home, Tom."

"Come on, mate, it's not *that* late. The Beauchamp is kicking!"

"Piss off Tom, it's sparrow fart. Stop calling, it's never worked. You just wake me up and piss me off."

The line goes dead.

Tom sinks to the ground, lamenting the fact that none of his friends are ever up for anything. He decides to take a moment to gather his thoughts through the thick haze of the thousand or so *Reschs* he's sunk so far this evening. He could just stay here for a bit. It's a good idea. A good idea indeed...

That's my cue. The night shift – let us go.

He shuts his eyes.

The lights of George Street are a lingering echo of light in the dark.

The vision pulsates and melts.

He is still in the phone box, slumped against the grate. I've decided to keep him there. I like him thinking he's awake when he's not. His legs are bent – he has lost all sensation. A heavy weight has settled on his chest. Drool has crusted to his chin, across cracked lips. He goes to wipe his mouth with his hand, expecting the metallic odour of the phone machine buttons to be coating his fingers. His arm stays grounded.

Tom tries to move.

The lightbulb above him twitches.

Tom attempts to speak – to cry out. Not again. He knows.