

Two years ago

Rain had blunted all of London's spires, flattened her high-rises, buried her tower blocks in puddles of mud. Even the chimneys at Battersea Power Station were laid low, their long reflections boiling in the water. Not just days, weeks of rain. Pillars of it coming down, stirring up a stink, shifting the ground under your feet, not letting you forget that this city was built on burial pits.

The rain found its way into everything, bleeding through brickwork, shaking the glass from broken windows, filling the empty can Christie put out for the rush hour. She ran her finger around its ragged lip, inviting blood – proof that she was still here. A Guinness can, its top taken off with a blunt knife, stones weighting the bottom. Coins did the same trick, but it'd been days since anyone dropped coins. She sucked at her finger, tasting meat and copper. Raw inside, an empty ache, but *I'm still here*, she thought. She wished she had better proof than a bloody finger in her mouth.

The world was a wall of umbrellas. She knew the

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commuters on this route, had seen them sweating in their summer dresses and shirtsleeves. Scowling now, heads down, shoulders up. Angry at her for taking up space on their pavement, sticking her dirty feet in the half-shut door of their conscience. The rain was an excuse to hate her more than they already did.

When she was new to this game – how long ago? Months? – she'd searched the crowd for kind faces. But she'd quickly learned it wasn't kindness that gave coin. People threw change at her the way they'd toss it at a toll-gate basket. To get past, away. Soon, they wouldn't have to pretend not to notice her. She'd be see-through. The rain was washing her away.

'Do you mind?' a woman demanded, meaning Christie's feet, which were in her way apparently, even though they weren't. She'd made herself so small, no part of her was in anyone's way. 'For God's sake find yourself somewhere to go.' Thin and furious, her fist fierce with rings, clenched around the handle of a yellow umbrella.

Christie had tucked herself into a doorway where it was almost dry, but the rain still found her. Pricking through old bricks, a trickle and then a stream. She felt its fingers tickling her neck.

'There are *places*, you know.'

She didn't know. She wished she did. She was scared of the rain, the way it ruined everything, her clothes, her sleeping bag – everything she had. Rain scared her worse than fire.

When she was new to this, a young couple would come with leaflets. They'd stop and crouch, faces working hard. Talking about Our Lord and what was coming and 'Are you ready?' Christie expected it from old people, though most shook their heads as if beggars hadn't existed back in their day. Only once did anyone over the age of

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sixty give her a second glance. The young couple had pamphlets with pictures of grinning people. The colours ran, making her hands dirtier. When she asked for money, they got mad. They pretended they weren't – 'We're on your side' – but she saw it under the surface of their skin like a swallowing of snakes.

Worse than the snakes was the little man who came and sat beside her. He never spoke, just sat dropping change into her can, one penny at a time, so she couldn't get up and go or tell him to piss off even though he was freaking her out. He smelt funny. Not poor-funny. Rich-funny. Being rich didn't help, the young couple said, it was about being ready for what was coming. Death or Jesus, she didn't know, but there was a whole moment when she thought she could do it – pretend to be religious so they'd save her from this. Being nobody, nothing, invisible.

When the rain started, they stopped coming.

Everyone stopped, except the little man. In a plastic cape that ran the wet off him into her doorway. Splashing coppers into her can, and she knew she couldn't afford to be picky but when he went, she shoved her hand in and scooped out his coins, flinging them away from her, sucking rusty blood from her knuckles. He'd be back for more tomorrow. She should move, somewhere he couldn't find her. Her whole body hurt like it was being squeezed.

Where would she go?

Who should she be?

She could make herself smaller for the woman with the rings, pretend to believe in Jesus for the religious couple. Go with the creep in the cape and be . . . whatever he wanted her to be. Just to get out of the rain for a day, an hour. It was washing her away, all her colours, everything. She wasn't *her* any more. Empty inside, scraped out. Missing.

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That was when he found her, *where* he found her . . .
Right on the brink of being lost.

He wasn't like the little man. He was tall and fair and he smelt of the rain that was bluing the shoulders of his shirt. He didn't have pamphlets, or questions. He wasn't angry with her.

His hands were empty and open, like his face.

When he stood in her doorway, he blocked the umbrellas and the hiss and spit of tyres in the street. His shoulders stopped the rain from reaching her.

Strong fingers, wet like hers, but his palms were dry and warm.

Safe, he was safe.

There are places, you know.

She hadn't believed it, until then.