

“-seems like he almost wants to fail.”

I nod in agreement, not really paying attention to what Steven is saying. He's just one of many distractions I'm trying to avoid while I sit through this lecture, my mind focusing in on the textbook drone of our tutor.

“But you have to think, you know,” Steven continues in a low voice. “He spends all his time out with us, why the hell is he wasting money on tuition fees?”

“It's not his money,” I mutter back, monotone. “His parents own a store chain, he's loaded.”

At this point the air conditioning starts chattering, quite literally.

“Cha-cha-cha! Woo! Nice breeze Kevin man that Steven guy needs to shut up you know he really drives me whack sometimes you know man man you know?”

I sigh and try to ignore it, but Steven is continuing, his voice persistent in my ear. He talks about money I think. He's an accounting student, but appears in my lectures sometimes when he's bored. The tutor doesn't care. Suddenly the air conditioning roars back to life.

“DID YOU KNOW THAT I CAN CALCULATE PI TO TWO DECIMAL PLACES KEVIN?”

“It's not that hard!” I spit back, losing my concentration.

“That's what I said,” Steven. “If you reason it all out he can get accommodation without having to-”

I tune his voice out again. The air conditioning has fallen mercifully silent, the tutor gesturing to a diagram of the synaptic cleft between neurones. For a few minutes I actually manage to pay attention - learning a snippet of something about how mind-altering drugs aren't actually mind-altering at all – before someone snaps their folder shut behind me, making me jump.

“Haha, what was that?” Steven asks, interrupting his train of needlessly vocalised thought.

“Nothing,” I mutter, my nerves completely shot, my concentration all over the place.

“You're fucking tense,” he says, massaging my shoulder. I have doubts about Steven's sexuality in my spare time. I shrug him off and pretend to be looking at my notes, but the world seems to have contracted, the tutor's voice cut out completely, along with the air conditioning and the quiet chatter from around the room. My neat, cursive handwriting details two sheets worth of information on stress anxiety, and I briefly wonder whether we're still covering that module. My handwriting hasn't been that good in a while, although how long that is I'm not exactly sure.

Suddenly I'm hit by a tidal wave of nausea, making me slump back in my chair, panting, a whirlwind in my head.

“What's wrong?” I hear Steven ask. “It's like you aren't even listening to me.”

And then the air conditioning comes back.

“Kevin, can I ask you something? Do you think *I* could become a psychologist? I mean, okay they don't offer the course to me and I don't have any qualifications but there's an element of novelty in having an air conditioner for a shrink for instance I could tell people like you that they're clearly insane for even believing I can talk or that I have a sentient mind in the first place for that matter and OH DEAR isn't that a paradox I picked that up in philosophy 101 the other week I've been waiting to spring that one on you-” It goes on, relentlessly this time. I stand up and grab Steve by his jacket, pulling him after me as I make for the exit. From somewhere the tutor asks a question, possibly relating to my departure. But I'm not interested any more.

Outside I'm able to focus again. I tell Steven I just need a couple of paracetamol and I'll be fine, but, annoyingly, he expresses concern and tries to follow me to my building, so I make a lame excuse about catching up on the work I'm missing and slam the door in his face.

It's early afternoon, so I make my way to the canteen (there's one for every student accommodation block) in search of the lunch I missed earlier. A few small groups of friends are sitting at the long plastic tables, some catching up on lunch like me. I have to wait three minutes before getting served, due to most of the staff cleaning up the detritus from the last meal. I've used up all my food tokens (although what for I have no idea) so I take out my wallet and offer a crumpled note to the girl at the counter, not bothering to wait for any change. I sit away from most of the groups and nibble on a chicken and mushroom sandwich, occasionally pausing to take a gulp of slightly-too-

milky coffee. Another student sits a few yards away across the table, and I contemplate how he'd respond if I told him I had frequent conversations with the machine they used to heat up his cheese and tomato panini. I don't recognise him – he's wearing a thick wool coat and a scarf that obscures most of his face, typical winter attire really.

“How do you eat through that scarf?” I suddenly blurt out. He looks up at me and makes an unintelligible noise of confusion. “I was just wondering how you've been eating your lunch with a scarf over your face.”

He pulls the article of clothing away from his mouth, still looking puzzled.

“Uh, I didn't have it on.”

“Right...” I say, embarrassed. “Thanks, you've... taken a weight off my mind.”

I stare back down at my sandwich, face flushed, waiting for him to go back to whatever he was doing. This takes an unnecessarily long time, and I consider getting up to leave, before reconsidering and carrying on with my lunch as normal.

I'm granted a mercifully uneventful five minutes, during which I observe that this chicken tastes mildly like bleach, possibly a side effect of the sludge (mayonnaise?) used to hold the sandwich together. I file this factoid away for future reference and make a mental note to prepare a home-made chicken and mushroom sandwich for comparison. Then the guy with the scarf starts talking to me.

“Um, hey?” he waves a hand to attract my attention (a small, almost feverish gesture). “You're in my psychology class right? Aren't we supposed to have a lecture now?”

His phrasing of every point as a question annoys me slightly, but I feel uneasy bringing this up after my previous embarrassment, instead choosing to answer his question truthfully.

“Yeah, we do. I'm having lunch though.”

“You know what we're missing?” he replies, and I'm deeply shocked to notice that he is in fact speaking with an American accent.

“Something with... with...” I struggle to grasp an answer. “Voices. People who hear them, I mean. Like talking washing machines and stuff.” It's not exactly a lie, at least not from my point of view.

“Oh,” he says. “I thought we were doing neuropsychology?”

I really don't feel like continuing this conversation.