**Twenty Minutes**

Kenny was a human eel. He could slalom his way through people like he was made of rubber. Parties, gigs, packed station concourses - wherever there was a throng to get through, Kenny was your man.

He'd spot a crack, a narrow gap in the wall of flesh, and extend a flat hand as though he was about to introduce himself. Then the hand would slide into the gap and the arm would follow, like a salmon bending upstream against the current. Once he'd introduced an arm, the rest of Kenny simply followed, inhabiting the space like he belonged there. People moved for him, like they were in his way and the only polite course of action was to get out of it. They’d even apologise.

I tried. The best I managed was to wedge myself in between a group of Aussie guys at a bar, crammed in like a crab between rocks at low tide. I didn't get served any quicker.

Mostly, though, I failed. *Hey, back off. Stop shoving*. *Wait your turn.* Meanwhile, Kenny would be on the other side of the room, getting served, or within touching distance of the lead guitarist.

I hated him for it. Partly because he was so good at it, but mostly because it meant I had to follow him into crowds. I’m not a crowds kind of person. I’ll always find an excuse to avoid them. At gigs I’m the guy who hangs back and intentionally gets lost, so I can watch from the mixing desk where there’s room to breathe. *What happened to you?* *We were right down the front!* I’d mutter something about getting separated. Crowds freak me out.

Not Kenny. He loved a crowd and knew how to handle one. That's how he made the 18:32 every night and I didn't.

Making the 18:32 meant Kenny got to see Eddy before he went to bed. If he missed the 18:32, which he never did, no matter how packed the station was, the next train was the 18:52.

*That's a whole twenty minutes*, he'd explain when he got looks for leaving work bang on time. *An hour and forty a week. That’s, what, three or four more days a year I get to spend with my boy. I mean, I like you guys, but this is my kid we're talking about.* Those twenty minutes were everything to Kenny.

Back in the day, it was just Kenny and me - our gang of two. Then he met Tara and things changed.

*You should find someone*, they told me. But I already had - I’d found him. Kenny was the first person, the only person, who’d ever made me feel like I belonged.

Then they had Eddy and everything changed again. I was still a big part of his life - of their lives. I was Eddy’s godfather. But I wasn’t part of their gang, not really. I missed Kenny, and it’s hard to be a good godparent to a kid you resent for taking your best friend away from you.

So, while Kenny unfailingly made the 18:32, I stopped trying. I stayed late, emptied my inbox, went for a drink, had a burger on the way home. Not because I wanted to, but because the real difference between me and Kenny wasn’t whether we made the train or not. It wasn’t how easily he slipped through a crowd. It was that someone noticed whether he was twenty minutes late home from work. Someone cared. Kenny belonged somewhere.

\*\*\*

When the 18:32 left the rails that Wednesday Kenny was between carriages, working his way to the front, ready to get off by the ticket barriers at his stop. But the 18:32 never made it to Kenny’s stop and Kenny, along with eighty-seven others, never made it home. As the carriages rolled down the embankment, crumpling like a KitKat wrapper, Kenny was thrown over a fence and into the park beyond. They found him in a sycamore tree, one hand held out as though he was about to introduce himself. They never found his other arm.

At work the crowds part for me now, shuffling aside, eyes averted. Nobody complains when I leave early to make the 18:32. I get on at the first carriage - I don't have Kenny's skill to weave my way through, or the fight to make up for it.

Every night I get off at Kenny's stop and I go to see Tara. I spend twenty minutes with her and with Eddy, because there's a lot of days left where he'll never see his daddy.

When Eddy goes to bed, I leave. I want to stay but, lately, I can see Tara’s gratitude turning to pity, like *I'm* the one who needs somebody. I can’t keep coming forever. She has friends, her family, Kenny’s family.

But for now, I come, and I stay for twenty minutes.

Which isn't a big deal at all, it turns out. Twenty minutes is nothing. It isn’t long enough to stop me feeling lonely, or stop me from falling through the cracks. It’s just long enough for me to settle briefly into Kenny’s life, like a warm bath on a cold night, long enough to feel like maybe, just maybe, I belong here. But I don’t.

So I do what I can. I find a crowd to get lost in it. It doesn’t matter what kind of crowd. Could be a bar, a gig, a football match. All I need is a mass of people who couldn’t care less that I’m there. I’m a crowds kind of person now. They carry and soothe me with their tidal murmur and sway. They help me remember and they help me forget. They help me sleep.

In dreams I'm always on the wrong side of a crowded room. I’ll spot Kenny on the other side. I wave and he waves back. I make my way through to him, jostled and sworn at, ribs bruised and aching. But by the time I get there he's gone.