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Dr Muffet's Recommendation

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by Ivor John

"Thank you Peter," the counsellor said, as he handed him back his credit card, "so I've taken for the first five of our sessions. We can sort out the balance later."

Peter fumbled his wallet into his back pocket as he picked up the carafe to fill a beaker with tapwater. Icecubes blocked the spout, causing water to splash down his jeans. Embarrassed at having drawn attention to himself, he sat back down on the sofa.

He was surprised at the view through the window. Being on the first floor, he couldn't see the drab backstreet shops, only the rooms opposite. He could see that they were residential, and he was drawn to looking at a woman in one of the flats. She was moving around what he assumed was the lounge, but he couldn't make out what exactly she was doing. There was something compelling about watching people who were unaware of it. He was interrupted as the counsellor adjusted the venetian blind.

"I know we've had some conversation on the phone. I have also had a brief note from Dr Muffett, which, to be honest, was not all that informative. Perhaps we could start by talking out what has been happening for you and what I can do to help you with that. Can you tell me when you became aware of feeling this way?"

He remembered the morning after it had happened. He had slept very little, hardly at. He must have dropped of some time in the early hours, because he was woken by his normal alarm. Still feeling tired. He didn't eat breakfast but left for work at

the usual time. He was pleased that he didn't meet anyone he knew. He didn't want to talk to anyone, not even the superficial conversations one has with neighbours. He walked the quarter of a mile, ten minutes or so, to Herne Hill Station, where he took the Thameslink. He had to change at Blackfriars where he could take the Victoria Line to St James's park.

The office was South Facing, and the low autumn sun, at midmorning, caused him to squint and look toward the floor. He took his glasses off and rubbed them on his trouser leg. The defraction through a film of grease made it hard to see clearly. He saw that the counsellor was sitting sideways at his desk now, his hips twisted towards him as he made notes in a spiral bound notebook.

"I am listening Peter, I'm sorry I need to make some notes, please carry on."

The tube had just pulled away from Embankment, he remembered the brightly coloured geometric lines on the white porcelain tiles. A large yellow poster, advertising The Lion King at the Lyceum theatre. The train was busy, people were crushed together. Mostly commuters he thought, with blank expressions, avoiding eye contact with each other. Standing up reading iPads. Some holding paperback books up to their faces. Invariably these would be Penguins, with worthy titles, Charles Bukowski, Saul Bellow. It was only the tourists, later, after the commuters, who would be seen reading Harry Potter or Paula Hawkins.

He had closed his eyes now. Partly to shut out the glare. But also in an attempt to shut out his memories, those memories. He had been holding his glasses in his hand and they fell noiselessly to the carpeted floor. This startled him and brought his concentration back to what was happening.

"Peter, you were telling me about your train journey."

He closed his eyes again, and tried to remember the events of that trip. It wasn't really about the events though. Nothing happened out of the ordinary. Not then anyway. It had all been in his head. He knew that. Getting on the tube at Blackfriars he normally got a seat. People heading for the city would get off there for London Bridge. If he was quick he could get a seat recently vacated. Not that it mattered, it was only four stops.

He remembered he had one of the folding seats, facing into the carriage. Surrounded by people, but he felt as if he were on another planet. He thought of that feeling you would get if you fall asleep on your arm. You could feel your arm, you know it's there, joined to your elbow. But it wouldn't respond to your thoughts, as you would want it to. It is part of you, but at the same time, it's an alien part of your body. That was just how his mind had felt. He was there, but not really. He was on a kind of autopilot, watching helplessly as events happened around him. He simultaneously felt invisible and conspicuous.

Everyone was looking at him, that is how it felt. He understood that song, in the film *Midnight Cowboy*, 'everybody's talking at me, I can't see their faces'.

"Peter, can you tell me how you were feeling when you felt this?"

"I thought I was going to die. I really honestly thought I was dying and that would be karma. What goes around comes around, that is what they say. I had to remind myself to breath. Almost to remind my heart to beat. The thing is, I wasn't even sure I wanted to. I am not sure now."