

Leather Bound

*I'm stuck. I have no idea what to do. I can't write - I can't think straight.
Who is she? Where is she?*

I put the cap back on my pen, close my notebook, and sigh.

It's a beautiful morning. Perfect. Well, almost. The sun has just come to rest on top of one of the tall buildings that surround the park where I sit. It offers little warmth, but at least it's there. It's coming to the end of autumn now, and the cruel frost-bitten fingers of winter are beginning to wrap themselves around nature, strangling the flowers while they sleep in their beds, and frightening the birch trees into dropping their silvery leaves onto the gravel path next to my feet. My breath clouds in front of me and I watch as it spirals upwards in the morning air.

I've been unable to write anything worthy of note for about a month now. It's the most frustrating feeling. I know the words are in there somewhere, waiting to flow out like a raging stream through my fingers, into the pen and onto the page. But recently the door to my inspiration in the back of my mind has been slammed in my face by the same person who locked it from the other side; jangling the keys as I kicked and punched at the door, trying to break through. The same person who holds the key; the key to everything; my career, my life, my heart, everything. But where is she?

I've always hated the underground - Everything about it; the nauseating smell of cheap cigarettes, sweaty people and damp walls. The intense claustrophobia of being inside a tin can on wheels, packed full of tired, disgruntled-looking people who would clearly rather be anywhere else, and worst of all the anonymity of being one in a million people who would ride the tube that morning; go and sit at their desks, drink coffee, moan about the weather to their equally anonymous colleagues, go home at the end of the day, and do it all over again tomorrow. But I suppose if we were all anarchic anti-communists who waged war against conformity and the establishment, then nothing would ever get done, and I struggle to hit my deadlines most of the time anyway.

Ever since I left university I knew that I wanted to become a famous writer, like Steinbeck or Harper Lee, but like many people who leave university; full of anticipation about the lives they will lead, the people they will meet, and the things they will do – I had absolutely no idea where to start. So I asked around, looked for jobs that involved elements of writing, like a book critic or something, something interesting, a job that challenged me. It didn't go well. I ended up sat behind a desk, drinking coffee, moaning about the weather and writing dull reports on the local crime rates, litter on the streets and how important it is to 'get your five a day,' while my brain turned to mush and my eyes turned square, staring at my computer screen like a zombie in a suit and tie, waiting for my journey to begin.

I have attempted to memorise the day I saw her on the train. I'm not sure why, but it seems like it is very important that I do. I woke up in my flat as usual, the sunlight straining to break through the gaps in the thick blanket of cloud that lay across the skyline, but with little success. I got out of bed and walked to the window, rubbing the sleep from my eyes with my knuckles. I live in the top floor flat, and one of its few perks is that I have a fantastic panoramic view. I can see the park, well, the patch of grass and silver birch trees where I like to sit and write my stories. *The sky matches the city; I remember thinking, and my mood.* It was still early, but already the streets were alive with ants in suits and ties marching along the pavements in droves their beetle black brogues attacking the pavement with each step. I smiled dryly and went to make myself a mug of tea.

The tube station was unusually quiet that morning. There were only a handful of people milling

around; most in their office clothes, checking their watches every thirty seconds or so, willing the trains to arrive on time. *Good luck with that.* I'd been part of this routine for long enough to know that my train would likely be about four minutes late. This gave me time to write.

I carry my notebook everywhere I go, inside the pocket of my coat. I take it with me just in case I see someone or something that interests me, for example a very large; round man who had a hooked nose and wore a navy blue bowler hat I once saw crossing the road. Or an alley in the poorer area of the city that had been spattered here and there with offensive, badly spelt graffiti, which depicted surprisingly accurate analogies of the state of the British economy.

It was quite an expensive notebook telling the truth, but I think it was worth it. It is my most prized possession. I bought it in a dusty old bookshop from an equally dusty old woman. I remember that her skin was the same colour as the books that she sold; an ill-looking pale yellow, and her eyes were keen, intelligent eyes that told a story all of their own. As I browsed the shop those eyes never left me; I could feel her gaze like a physical force, as if she was trying to pierce my skin just by looking at me. Goose pimples ran down my arms, but I didn't leave. I had spotted a small leather bound book poking out from behind a large stack of encyclopaedias on the shelf opposite the door of the shop. The sight of the little book appearing to defiantly hold its own, against the other, much larger volumes made me smile. I walked over to the shelf, prised it out and examined it. It was lighter than I had expected, and sat snugly in my hand. The cover was made from soft leather, embossed with intricate patterns that looked like runes or something similar, spiralling and twisting across the front and back. The corners were encased in brass that had been crafted beautifully into the shape of oak leaves that glimmered under the dull lighting of the shop, causing shadows to dance across my face. I flicked through the pages and saw that they were blank. I knew I had to have it. I'd never wanted anything so much. The woman, whom I supposed must own the shop, gave me a questioning look as I placed the notebook on the counter, but said nothing, although the corner of her mouth twitched into what appeared to be an unnervingly knowing smile. I've since tried to find the little bookshop again; searching the streets and then the Yellow Pages, but it's as if it never existed.

The train was coming. *Almost Exactly four minutes late,* I thought, as I glanced at my watch. I put my notebook and pen back in my pocket and stood, listening to the whoosh of air growing closer as the train travelled through the tunnel towards me, sounding how I imagine a dragon's breath would sound. I had no idea that this particular journey out of the hundreds, would take me on the one I'd been hoping for.

The doors opened with a familiar electric whir and I stepped up onto the train. Just like the station that morning the train was almost empty. There was a woman cooing to her baby in the first carriage and two businessmen with briefcases, but no one else. I sat at the back, away from the others and tried to think why there were so few people, but nothing sprang to mind. The train pulled away from the station and began to pick up speed, taking me closer and closer to my desk, computer screen and my polystyrene cup of coffee. Or so I thought.

The train slowed down for the next station, I think it was Finchley Road but I can't be sure. I was staring off into space, thinking about the next chapter in a story I was going to write after work. The carriage jerked and the doors whirred open, and I looked up. A woman was stood in the door of the carriage. She walked up the aisle and sat in the seat across from me, and I found myself unable to turn away. She was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. Before I knew what I was doing I had taken out my notebook and pen, flipped open the page and begun to write. I described her in every way I could imagine, using all of the skills I possessed, to replicate the real thing sat less than two metres away from me, but I know I didn't do her justice. I've never believed in love at first sight, but this didn't feel like love. If anything, it felt like something more. I'd been living my dull, uninteresting little life beginning a new journey six days a week and yet not really going anywhere. I knew that this woman opposite me could change my life forever. The

stories I could write about her would be world-renowned. I'd achieve my goal of becoming a famous writer and join the list of the great authors of history. Maybe my work would even be studied in schools one day.

I looked up from the pages of notes I had written for more inspiration, to find something else to say about her – anything. I'd been so enthralled in my work that I hadn't noticed the train slow down. I think I just glimpsed the hem of her coat vanish into the throng of people waiting to board the train. I panicked. The key to my life was simply walking away from me and I was sitting there staring after it with my mouth hanging open like it was on a loose hinge. Quickly I stuffed my notebook into my coat pocket and leapt onto the platform, startling the waiting passengers. I didn't care that I would be late for work – nothing else mattered now. I sprinted through the crowd; pushing and shoving, ignoring the muffled shouts of anger and looks of displeasure from the rippling sea of faces, a sea that didn't seem to contain the one face that I was looking for. The most perfect face.

It's been about a month. I'd looked everywhere – searching the streets, the shops and the coffee bars until my feet hurt and my lungs burned. It was as if she had vanished into thin air. I didn't go back to work that day. Instead, I made my way back to my park and sat on the bench surrounded by the silver birch trees that I loved so much. I skimmed through the scribbled notes I had made on the train, trying to retain an image of her in my head.

I read my untidy scrawling font once more, and I believe I experienced something like an epiphany. The woman was me. Well, a part of me. I had described the woman in such intense, flowing detail that it had seemed to me that she must exist. I hadn't seen her on the train. I had seen myself. I'd stared at my own reflection in the window of the carriage. I had looked, really looked, at myself for the first time. Everything I was, everything I wanted to be, and I had created the most realistic, most perfect character to take me there, a stronger version of myself, to take me on my true journey. I wanted to write stories.

I think I'll call this one..... '**Leather Bound**'.

Key Stage 5 – First Prize
Harry Snape – Queen Elizabeth 11 High School