

# Stephen

It is a duty to love one's neighbour; it is a duty in so far as it is referred to God; yet it is not God that I come in relation to in the duty, but the neighbour I love.

—Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 80

Stephen grinned sheepishly at his date over the rim of a raised coffee cup, the contents of which never quite seemed to reach his lips. The young man before him feigned polite interest as Stephen babbled nervously, first about his trade and then about his family – recounting how his father worked in the City and how his sister had taken their mother's name, Olsen, after the divorce. He had proceeded even to a litany of childhood pets before a hand was lowered gently to rest upon his forearm, arresting his recitations.

To this moment, Stephen's gaze, having been any more averted, would have long since left the café and departed down the street without him. Now it was fixed intently upon the pair of dark, inquisitive eyes that met his own from across the table. That the silence constituted relief as much as awkwardness was confirmed moments later, when the two men burst into laughter. Gazes soften; postures relax. The ensuing conversation is more organic, more earnest, than the prosaic, anxious drivel that had preceded it; Stephen's date even finds space to contribute a few insights of his own.

The minutes pass with all the rapidity of time well-spent. Before long, one of the men is making his excuses and rising from his seat. There is a convivial embrace, an exchange of expectant glances. Yet, when asked whether the two might meet again, Stephen seems apprehensive; all he can muster is a vague commitment to talking further online. This

assurance proves enough to satisfy his companion – or at least to warrant the pretence of satisfaction; the man departs, scarcely concealing his despondence. Once alone, Stephen sinks deflated back into his chair, sighing heavily. His fingers grasp at the chain around his neck and pull, extricating an ornate silver crucifix from beneath his shirt, whence it had until now been concealed. For a few moments, he is motionless, the curio fastened between thumb and forefinger; tears begin to well.

With sudden resolve, Stephen composes himself, replacing the crucifix beneath its cotton mantle. He draws from his trouser pocket a mobile phone, opening what appears to be a dating app. The image on the screen is an unmistakable likeness of the gentleman with whom he had just parted ways. Uncertain lineaments coalesce into a subtle grin, rapidly supplanted by an expression of unbridled terror. Eyes still fixed on the notification, Stephen reaches for his coat – and the door. Exclamations follow him from the premises.