

The Button Story.

It is Joe's job to man the button. If it all goes wrong, it is Joe's job to press the button. He is the last option. It is his only job.

There are two of them; Joe and another worker who he never sees because the other worker works the night shift and Joe works the day. Joe does not know anything about the other worker – not a name, an age or if they prefer a hot or cold dinner – but sometimes it smells faintly of roses and freshly cut grass when he starts his shift.

Joe sits there all day. He mans the button and then goes home to his wife and three kids. One of his kids has a pet goldfish. One of them is good at science but not at mathematics.

Joe works in a small windowless room. When it is not smelling faintly of roses or freshly cut grass, the air in there tastes like the past. There is a medium sized console with a big red button in the centre and a single chair. Part of the vinyl has frayed around the edge of the seat cushion and it cuts into Joe's leg when he turns the wrong way. There is a light on the wall. It is unlit. That is all.

When Joe goes to work he wears a white cotton jumpsuit that his wife has carefully ironed the wrinkles out of. He brings his lunch – a tuna sandwich – and something to snack on. Sometimes it is an apple. Sometimes a treat-sized chocolate bar.

Joe eats his lunch at midday. Sometime between three and four he eats his snack. He doesn't eat any later because he might ruin his dinner but really he could eat whenever he wants because there is never ever anyone else there.

One day there is someone else there.

She is maybe thirteen or fourteen and is sitting in Joe's chair. Joe frowns at her.

'Who are you?'

'I'm the work experience kid.'

Joe does not know what to do. This has never happened before. But she is small and kid-looking, so he isn't worried. Joe cannot sit in his chair because she is there already, so instead he has to kneel on the floor beside the console. Joe is uncomfortable. On the way down to the floor he scratches his hand on the frayed vinyl.

Joe is silent.

He watches the light on the wall because this is his job.

The girl is silent.

She is watching the button because this is not her job so she doesn't realise she is doing it wrong. Joe smirks to himself. Does she think the button is going to change?

The girl grows bored. She swivels the chair towards Joe. The torn vinyl brushes his thigh.

'So what do you do?' she asks.

'It's my job to push the button,' Joe tells her.

'And then what?'

'And then it's all over.'

'What is?' she asks.

'Everything.'

She squints, confused. Joe indicates the light on the wall.

'When that light there comes on, that's my sign. When that happens, I push this button with my left hand.'

'Your left hand?'

'My left hand.'

'Does it have to be your left hand?'

Joe nods; it does.

'Yes. That's how we're trained. I've done all the training.' He indicates a framed certificate on the wall.

'And then what?'

‘Nothing. It’s all over.’

‘What if you get it wrong?’

Joe hasn’t thought about this before. While waiting for his answer, she is fiddling with the frayed bit of vinyl. It is tearing further from the seat of the chair. Joe watches it with concern. She grows bored of waiting.

‘Why do you wear the white suit?’

‘Because we’re told to.’

She considers this and Joe tries not to be too annoyed. This question annoys him because he wears it because it is his uniform and he has to. It comes with the job. She looks around the empty room.

‘Who works here at night?’

‘Someone else.’

‘Who are they?’

Joe shrugs. He doesn’t say anything about the roses or the freshly cut grass.

‘So the fate of the world rests in the hands of you and another person?’

Joe nods. She is still playing with the ratty vinyl.

‘It’s a 50 per cent chance it will be me,’ he adds.

‘It could be the other person. It could happen at night.’

Joe nods but he knows it will most likely happen during the day. This is what they told him in training.

‘It’s always daytime somewhere.’

They are silent for a while.

Joe wonders if she has brought her own lunch or if he will have to share his own. She twirls on the seat. Joe watches the unlit light on the wall.

‘Do you actually want to push it?’ Her eyes are half-moons.

‘It’s my job.’

‘But do you want to?’

Joe does not know what to say.

‘It’s my job,’ he repeats.

She isn’t satisfied with this answer. The small strip of vinyl finally comes away in her hand and she discards it under the console. It disappears into the darkness.

They are silent for a while.

Joe’s legs are getting sore from kneeling and he adjusts himself slightly. The girl stares at the button. She is doing it wrong.

‘You need to watch the light,’ Joe tells her. ‘When the light comes on you press the button.’

‘Do you get any more information?’ she asks, ‘when the light comes on?’

Joe shakes his head. There is no other information. When the light comes on you press the button.

‘But what if there’s a problem? What if something has gone wrong?’

Joe shrugs. She considers this, swinging her legs beneath the console.

‘Why do you think it will happen?’ She swivels around to face him. The vinyl does not scratch his leg because it is no longer there. ‘Do you think it’ll be because some evil genius wants to take over the world and wages war on freedom?’

Joe’s brow creases.

‘I don’t think anyone would ever be evil on purpose. I think that if they were evil, it would be because they don’t know any better.’

The girl chews her lip.

‘That’s a very wise thing to say.’

Joe looks embarrassed.

‘My wife says that no one is wiser than me. But I don’t think I know anything. I asked her family – her brothers and father. They think they know everything, and they act that way, always telling people what is right and what is wrong. But they don’t really know everything, they just think they do. I’m the only one who realises how little I actually know.’

‘So I guess that makes you the wisest,’ the girl says.

Joe thinks about this.

‘I guess so.’

The girl nods.

‘Well, what do you know?’

‘I only know that I know nothing’

She rolls her eyes.

‘You must know more than that. You’re pretty old.’

Joe thinks. He plays with the zipper on his jumpsuit while he thinks.

‘I know that the light from distant stars takes so long to reach us that by the time we see them they are gone. I know that the word ‘listen’ contains the same letters as the word ‘silent’. I know that when my youngest child sits in the sun and laughs it makes my heart feel like it wants to explode in rainbows in my chest. I know that I will never be as free as the second before I was born.’

Joe pauses. The girl is watching the light on the wall but maybe she is not really watching.

‘Those are beautiful things to know,’ she says.

‘Yes,’ Joe agrees. He joins her in watching the light, because this is his job.

‘I’d like to know all those things too one day,’ she says quietly but does not take her eyes off the light.

Joe is about to tell her that one day she will, but he stops because something has happened. The light is on. It is bright red and serious. Joe’s whole world grinds to a halt. The girl’s eyes are supernovas.

‘The light is on,’ she says.

‘Yes,’ he replies.

‘What if it’s a mistake? Should you check? Should you call someone?’

Joe shakes his head. There is no phone. There is no someone. There is only one instruction and there is only him. The girl’s face is pale like the moon on a brisk winter’s night when loved ones pull themselves closer to keep from the chill.

‘It’s my job,’ Joe says. He reaches across the console towards the button.

‘Wait!’

She is staring at the button in front of her.

‘Can I?’

Her eyes are wide as meteors and deep as black holes and shine like a lighthouse in a storm. He gestures with his left hand as a reminder, and then Joe lets her press the button.