

Harry Mason

PERSONAL SPACE

SHORT FILM SCRIPT

INT. SHOPPING CENTRE – EVENING

HUNDREDS OF SHOPPERS pour through a packed centre.

Tinsel and flashing lights hang from every possible surface. Cliff Richard and Shakin' Stevens blare out. An animatronic Santa waves eerily from a nativity display.

People barge around in a frenzy, armed with bag upon bag of shopping, sharp elbows and aggressive glares.

INT. COFFEE SHOP – CONTINUOUS

Ducking away from this into a plush coffee shop is ALFIE (19), 6 feet 5 inches of gangly awkwardness. He tries to recover himself.

INT. COFFEE SHOP – LATER

Alfie reaches the till. It's manned by LAURA (20), pretty despite her coffee-spattered uniform and antler ears.

LAURA
Hello!

Alfie thrusts a sandwich and bottle of water on the counter.

ALFIE
These. Please.

LAURA
Did you want your panini heated up?

ALFIE
No please. (frowns) Thank you.

LAURA
Alrighty, that'll be-

| A GAGGLE OF MIDDLE-AGED LADIES flutter past_—Alfie practically leaps forward to avoid them.

LAURA (CONT'D)
-er, £2.40 please.

Laura puts her hand out. Alfie swerves around it and puts a collection of coins and coppers on the counter.

ALFIE
It's the right amount, I counted it. Three times.

LAURA
Guess I'll take your word for it!

She laughs and scoops up the money. Alfie simply walks away.

INT. COFFEE SHOP – LATER

At a table, Alfie places his sandwich down (one bite left uneaten) and brushes the crumbs into a napkin.

Laura watches him scrawl in a jotter as she collects empty mugs.

ALFIE
(muttered) Debenhams. Marks and Spencers. Thornton's?

He scribbles something out. Laura watches on, intrigued.

INT. SHOPPING CENTRE – EVENING.

Alfie braves the crowds but is unable to stop himself twitching.

People press in from every angle; even when Alfie veers away from one person he finds himself closer to another. His breathing is rapid and jagged.

The crowds suddenly part. Up ahead, a tiny girl - ESMÉ (5) - is charging forward hell-for-leather.

She slams straight into Alfie. Stunned silence. Alfie lets out a frustrated howl.

Everyone stops and stares. Alfie glances around, embarrassed, before hurrying away.

INT. DEBENHAMS – EVENING.

Alfie speeds down an aisle.

He stops by some perfume but clearly doesn't know where to begin. He picks one bottle up - stares at it. He squeezes it but jumps back at the spray. He sniffs, then scrunches his nose.

Just around the corner of the aisle, Esmé appears. She tiptoes forward, sticking her head around to watch Alfie.

Alfie stops. Peering down, he notices Esmé. She scampers away, giggling.

INT. DEBENHAMS – LATER.

Alfie blusters hopelessly through piles of blouses.

His head cocks to the side - Esmé's head is peeping out from a clothing rack. She quickly retreats. Alfie darts away.

INT. DEBENHAMS – LATER.

Alfie rides the escalator upwards.

On the adjacent downwards escalator appears Esmé. She ducks down mischievously as she passes Alfie. He is unnerved, and watches her in bewilderment as he is carried up and away.

INT. DEBENHAMS – LATER.

Alfie stalks along. Esmé appears from nowhere and sidles up to him as if they were the oldest of friends.

ESMÉ
Hiya!

Alfie jumps out of his skin.

ALFIE
What do you want?

Esmé reaches for his hand. He yanks it back and bolts ahead but Esmé simply follows along, little legs straining to keep up.

ESMÉ
Do you want to be my friend?

ALFIE
No.

ESMÉ
I've got lots of friends. Ruby, Ella, Dexter... (frowns) he's a boy and smells bad. Hannah isn't my best friend because she stole my pencil case.

Alfie doesn't respond.

ESMÉ (CONT'D)

Will you be my best friend?

ALFIE

I don't want a friend.

ESMÉ

Oh.

She shrugs and skips along.

ESMÉ (CONT'D)

What are you doing?

ALFIE

I need to find a Christmas present. I'd like you to leave me alone.

ESMÉ

You don't want a friend?

ALFIE

I said that. Twice.

ESMÉ

But everybody wants a friend! Read Winnie the Pooh, he'll explain it to you.

Alfie stops, unable to make any sense of Esmé.

ALFIE

Don't you have a Mum with you?

ESMÉ

Nope, I'm all by myself!

Alfie shakes his head and carries onwards. Esmé's face lights up.

ESMÉ (CONT'D)

Does this mean we're friends?

ALFIE

Just...stop standing so close.

He steps to the side.

ALFIE (CONT'D)

This far. Two feet. At all times.

Esmé steps nearer - Alfie takes one step back. She retreats - he steps forward again. Alfie nods and they walk on.

INT. DEBENHAMS – LATER.

Alfie studies a collection of garish figurines. Esmé stands two feet behind.

ESMÉ
So, Alfred?

ALFIE
No. Just Alfie.

ESMÉ
Like the frog on telly?

ALFIE
I don't know.

Esmé inches a finger towards Alfie. At a precise point, his entire frame tenses. She stops and pulls her finger back.

INT. DEBENHAMS – LATER.

The mismatched pair stride along, Esmé chatting incessantly.

ESMÉ
-and then he goes through the woods, and *then* he gets to Grandma's house and says "I'll huff and I'll puff and- '...no, that's not right..."

Alfie grimaces and puts his hands over his ears. Just then, the overhead Tannoy system clicks on.

TANNOY
(bored) Attention please, attention. A young girl has been separated from her family. Name: Esmé Roberts. Age: 5.

The preoccupied shoppers pay the message little attention. Alfie remains oblivious as Esmé prances around him.

TANNOY (CONT'D)
Esmé is of African origin, 3 foot tall, dark hair in pigtails, wearing a pink jumper and a small purple rucksack. Last seen near H&M.

Alfie lets his hands down and heads out, Esmé in tow.

TANNOY (CONT'D)
Anyone with information is asked to report to security on the upper shopping level. That is all.

INT. SHOPPING CENTRE – EVENING.

Alfie and Esmé march through the crowds, their ~~two feet~~two-foot gap somehow remaining intact.

ESMÉ
But how can you not like people?

ALFIE
They scare me.

ESMÉ
You're weird.

No reaction.

ESMÉ (CONT'D)
What do you like? I like green, and sandwiches with no crusts, and the Night Garden off ~~of~~
'In the Night Garden' -

ALFIE
I like numbers.

ESMÉ
Sums? Urgh!

ALFIE
Lists.

ESMÉ
I sent my list to Father Christmas!

ALFIE
And Walter Strauss' theory of universal stability.

Esmé scrunches her face.

ESMÉ
You *are* weird.

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INT. PEACOCKS – EVENING.

Alfie attempts to locate the price tag on a t-shirt as Esmé clammers into the depths of a clothing rack.

ESMÉ (OOV)
(from within) Alfie! Alfie! Watch me!

Two ELDERLY LADIES pass the rack. The sleeve of a jumper waves at them.

ESMÉ (OOV)

Pick me! Pick meee!!!

The ladies gasp. A faint smile flickers around Alfie's mouth.

INT. HMV – EVENING.

Esmé yawns as Alfie flicks through DVDs. The gap between them seems to have narrowed.

ESMÉ

Who's the present for?

ALFIE

My Mum. For Christmas.

ESMÉ

But you're a grown-up!

ALFIE

I need to find her a nice present. Last week she said 'After this crapper of a year, Christmas with just the two of us might finally be an opportunity for something good.' That's exactly what she said, so I saved £20 especially. Now I have to get her a nice present or Christmas won't be something good, we won't have a good day and her crapper of a year will just get worse.

Esmé has completely lost track of what Alfie is saying. She blinks.

ESMÉ

I like pick and mix. We should get pick and mix.

INT. CLINTON'S – EVENING.

Esmé sneaks behind a BUSINESSMAN queuing at the till. Alfie watches from the doors, knuckles in his mouth.

Esmé taps the businessman on the back. As he turns, she scoots sideways so he cannot see her. He shakes his head and turns back.

Esmé taps him on the other side. He turns again, faster this time, but still sees no-one.

Esmé waits, suppressing giggles. She then raps him hard on the back. He spins around - she bolts away in hysterics.

Alfie dashes after Esmé, unable to stop himself laughing.

INT. SHOPPING CENTRE – EVENING.

The pair regain their breaths. They now stand even closer to each other.

ESMÉ'S MOTHER (OS)

There she is!

Alfie and Esmé wheel round. ESMÉ'S MOTHER, a buxom woman in bright African prints, stands across the concourse surrounded by concerned family members. She points at them. Before Alfie can even look down, Esmé has peeled away and thunders down an escalator.

Alfie runs after her, trying hopelessly to avoid contact with other shoppers. Esmé's family follow, shouting and hollering.

INT. SHOPPING CENTRE. LOWER FLOOR – CONTINUOUS.

Esmé zig-zags along but Alfie is hot on her heels, knocking bags from indignant shoppers' hands as he goes. Esmé's family fall behind.

Alfie rounds a corner and almost trips over Esmé - she stands stone still, face pressed against the window of Wilkinson's.

ALFIE

What are you doing?

Esmé pretends not to hear him. She gazes at a hand-held Hoover.

ALFIE (CONT'D)

That was your Mum, wasn't it?

No response.

ALFIE (CONT'D)

That's it, you have to go back right away or we'll both get into a lot of trouble! (beat) What are you looking at?

ESMÉ

It's beautiful!

Alfie notes other children flooding into the Disney store opposite. He groans.

Laura then appears behind them. Her eyes brighten, as if happy to see Alfie and Esmé.

She watches them enter Wilkinson's. Other shoppers grumble as they push past, but Laura is transfixed by what she sees.

Alfie and Esmé stand at the till. A server scans the Hoover. Alfie pulls out £20 and, after a moment's hesitation, places it on the counter. He hands the Hoover to a gleeful Esmé.

Laura smiles.

Alfie makes to leave the shop, but Esmé seems reluctant. After a beat, not quite able to believe what he doing, Alfie reaches his hand down. Esmé grabs it.

Laura watches the pair exit together. Alfie is totally on-edge, but holds tight to Esmé nonetheless.

ESMÉ'S MOTHER (OS)

There!

Esmé's family knock Laura over as they pelt past. Esmé's mother scoops her daughter up, furious.

ESMÉ'S MOTHER

You naughty little girl! Where have you been?

Esmé squirms but her mother keeps a firm grip.

ESMÉ'S MOTHER (CONT'D)

You think you can keep running off like this? You think it's funny?

For once, Esmé is unable to respond. Alfie draws back but Esmé's mother turns on him.

ESMÉ'S MOTHER (CONT'D)

And you, stop right there! What are you doing with my daughter? (leaning in close) You try to snatch her, hmm? That's it? Jerome, get your phone!

Alfie sweats, terrified. Esmé's lower lip wobbles.

LAURA (OS)

He was taking her to security!

Everyone turns - Laura steps forward.

ESMÉ'S MOTHER

What are you saying?

LAURA

I saw everything. He was upstairs when the announcement came on-

ALFIE

I didn't hear-

LAURA

(talking over him) *He was upstairs when the announcement came on.* He was taking her to security. Right?

Alfie nods.

ESMÉ'S MOTHER

And you are...?

LAURA

I work in the coffee shop. (indicates her name badge) Laura. I saw your daughter outside. Everyone else ignored her; this boy was the only one who helped!

Esmé's mother's glare reluctantly relaxes.

LAURA (CONT'D)

I followed them the whole way. He was just trying to get her back safe. I promise.

ESMÉ'S MOTHER

(to Esmé) Is this true?

Esmé wriggles, instantly cheery again.

ESMÉ

Alfie's my best friend!

ESMÉ'S MOTHER

Hm. Very well.

She places Esmé down.

ESMÉ'S MOTHER (CONT'D)

We have to go now anyway. Do you realise how late we are, all thanks to you? Come on, move!

She gives Alfie the slightest of nods before dragging Esmé away.

ESMÉ'S MOTHER (CONT'D)

(fading) And what is this contraption in your hand?

Laura steps closer to Alfie. He glances at her, confused.

ALFIE

You followed us? All this time?

LAURA

Sorry. Couldn't help myself. I always get sentimental this time of year.

Esmé turns and gives one last wave before disappearing. Alfie waves back, sighing.

LAURA (CONT'D)

That was a good thing you did.

She rubs Alfie's shoulder. His body tenses up. He tries not to react-

He can't resist a slight twitch. Laura draws her hand back.

LAURA (CONT'D)
Oops, sorry!

Harry Mason grew up in Leicester. After a teacher described him as 'a lovely little lad, but likely to snap one day and go on a killing spree,' he decided that a career in writing would be the safest option. If that doesn't work out, well...he's still an alright waiter.