

The Morning After

Warm sun breaks through high windows. I roll over and look at the plaster ceiling rose. This isn't my room. Not even my house. As awareness returns, so does the distant ache of a hangover. A shadow enters from the doorway and sits on the bed. I struggle up to find Kate looking at me with sad, come-to-bed eyes. Looking at me lying in her bed!

"What are you thinking?" she asks.

"I don't know." I can't collect my thoughts. What am I doing here?

"I guess I can't believe... That you're real. Really..." I trail into self-conscious mumbling. I look into her eyes again. For clues? No, because I can. They're fresh, but dark patches beneath them show that, she too, had a good time last night. There's something behind them but I don't know what.

"I'm here aren't I?" she replies, reaching out for my hand.

"That doesn't mean it's real. Does it?"

"What do you think?" Her fingers barely touch mine.

"I don't know what to think any more. Not since last night anyway." Snippets are coming back, but I'm not sure I want them to. Self-consciously I pull the duvet up over my bare stomach. I don't know what happened last night. I'm still wearing underwear.

"Here, drink this." She offers me a white mug, steaming with coffee, black as peat. The smell is strong, wrapping me in its aroma: heather on a wet autumn day.

"What is it?" I ask. Stupidly.

"A home-made pick-me-up. Try it: it'll help. I made it specially."

The coffee tastes bitter, despite a ton of sugar. It feels coarse, like mountain scree in my mouth. When I swallow the heather catches fire in the back of my throat. There's a punch in my chest and sweet burning in my throat. I cough, "Bloody hell!"

"Don't you like it?" A look of hurt flits across her face for a second; "I put some Scotch in it. Hair of the dog and all that." I can't reply: the whisky is still burning in my throat. I look at her in silence, drawn to her eyes again. I figure this is good because it distracts me from the shadow suggesting itself within her dressing gown.

I blush as she catches my eyes. I need to break the silence: "After last night I might have to have a rethink on that. Drinking whisky I mean. Thanks for... y'know..."

She smiles, "Don't mention it. How's your head?"

"I've felt better."

"And your arm?"

I hadn't noticed, but now it aches. Maybe I'm still slightly drunk? I remember falling in the dark. Someone was there. Her? I rub my arm and wince at the tenderness beneath my fingers.

"You fell up the kerb outside. Just think, we got you all the way back here without any mishaps; then you fall over into the front gate just yards from the front door."

Now the memory comes back. I remember her supporting my pawing, unsteady frame. I try an apologetic smile, but I don't know how it looks on the outside.

Kate sits on the bed, pulls her naked legs up under her body and cups a mug in her hands. I glimpse her soft thighs. I know I shouldn't look, or maybe I'm just frightened that she'll notice and think I'm a perv. We both drink in silence for a while. Each sip brings back more memories, until I remember enough to feel I owe her another

apology. "Sorry about last night." I'm not sure exactly what I'm apologising for, but it feels better to say it.

"Forget it. At least you limited yourself to only throwing up once. Once you got here you were quite civilised really."

"Was I? I don't really remember."

Once again she looks hurt, her eyes downcast. "After everything that happened. You really don't remember?"

"I... er..." Oh Christ! I can't remember if I've slept with her. Then those seductive eyes of hers sparkle again. A grin spreads across her face. I notice patches of powder and makeup from last night. She's toying with me. Does she know that the mouse has fallen for the cat?

"Like I said, you were a perfect gentleman."

I look around the small room to dispel a lingering sense of disbelief. My dinner suit and shirt are folded on a chair in the corner. Our shoes are laid neatly beside each other on the rug. The black sequined dress that captivated me on the walk back here hangs from the wardrobe door on a cheap plastic hanger. I remember the dress – and the cleavage. My fingers grasping sequins at the waist and the soft flesh beneath as I clung to her, staggering up the road. The pennies slowly drop; one, two, three... Drip, drip, drip... "I've taken your bed. I... Where did you sleep last night?"

She nods to the duvet beside me, "Beside you. It was either that or the floor. I figured I'd done enough for you without giving myself back ache as well."

"Sorry."

"Stop saying sorry!" she snaps, but the green eyes laugh.

"Sorry." Christ, what's wrong with me? Why can't I talk normally? "So what did happen? I remember you and Robert pulling me away from the table and I think I remember hanging on to someone up the road. You?" The question is faked. I remember more than sequins, bosoms and scent, but asking makes me feel less guilty. She nods.

"Whatever I did, I'm sorry." There, I've got another apology in. I figure the more the better.

"Will you relax? We got back here, eventually. I forget how many times you told me you loved me or asked me for a shag."

I feel myself blushing and hide by drinking more coffee. It still tastes disgusting but burns less now. I wish she hadn't mentioned shagging, not while she's sitting so close to me on her bed. Fortunately she continues, breaking my thoughts before they can take hold, "After I'd dragged you up off the front step we sat in the kitchen and had a coffee. You sobered up a bit then and started threatening to walk home by yourself."

"I think I remember that."

"Anyway, I persuaded you that you weren't in any condition to do that and that you should stay here. It was a bit awkward getting you undressed: you thought I was trying to seduce you, kept trying to snog me while I pulled your shirt off."

"Sorry," I mutter. What would have happened if I'd succeeded? I need to stop repeating myself. I remember a friend who can't help saying 'okay'. One day in a seminar we counted fifty okays in the space of a ten-minute presentation. No wonder he failed his exam.

Kate tries to glare at me, for saying sorry yet again, but it's a friendly expression and she can't fake the anger. She grins. I feel wonderful, apart from the headache, my arm, and the taste of the coffee in my mouth. She continues, ignoring my interruption;

“I put you in bed and put a bowl beside you by just in case. By the time I’d been to the bathroom you were asleep. Nothing else happened last night.”

“I don’t know what to say.” I think I’ve probably made that fairly obvious already.

“You could thank me for looking after you.”

“Thank you.” If only I could tell you how heartfelt those words are. But I’ve embarrassed us both enough already this morning and it’s not seven-thirty yet. “I’d offer to return the favour, but I can’t see you getting completely leathered in front of the Dean of College somehow.”

She smiles, “I’ve got my wild side but, no, I can’t see it either. Why did you get so drunk? I mean I only really know you by sight, but Robert and that other guy...

Mark? They both said you don’t usually drink *that* much.”

“Yeah,” great, now she thinks I can’t hold my drink.

“So what happened?” she asks again.

“I asked someone out. They said no.” I wait for an awkward pause that doesn’t come. The conversation flows like we’ve been mates for ages.

“Oh. Who?”

“Sasha Hoffman.”

“What! The northern girl with the brown hair and chunky ankles?” Surprise and the same look that Robert gave me when I told him what I’d got planned. I realise I’ve never seen Sasha’s ankles. Never taken any notice of them anyway. Last night I was too busy staring down her cleavage. That didn’t help my case with her. I look again at the dress on the wardrobe and remember Kate’s cleavage too. She must hate me? I come out of my thoughts. She’s looking at me, but not like she hates me. More like she’s interested in what I’m going to say next.

“Yeah. That’s Sasha.”

“Why does a nice boy like you want to go out with a slapper like her?”

Because a loser like me might actually have a chance with her I think, somewhat unfairly. I’ve got to know Sasha a bit, and she’s not the girl everyone thinks she is.

“She’s okay really,” I answer. “I thought we were friends...”

“Oh dear,” Kate sympathises. “Never ask your friends out. Make friends with your girlfriend, but never ask your friend out on a date.”

“I’ll try to remember that, not that I’m likely to ever ask anyone else out again.”

“Why not?”

“All the women here are either like you, or tarts, or my friends,” I trail off limply.

“What do you mean ‘like me’?”

My mouth’s trying to catch me out. It’s her; she makes talking so easy, “Out of my league.” I answer. What the hell am I saying? She’ll show me the door for sure in a minute.

She laughs: a gentle chuckle, “Why’d you say that?”

The words spill out, I can’t help them, “You’re always hanging round the rugby club. You’ve got money. You’re always near the top in any subjects you do. I can’t even get near you in lectures for your fan club. The last thing I ever imagined was waking up in your bed, whether or not anything happened. I can’t believe you didn’t have a date last night.”

For the first time this morning she frowns. “I did,” she answers a little curtly.

“What happened?”

“We had a row.”

“Sorry.” This time she ignores my repetition. Any discomfort I felt from her presence has left.

“Don’t be. I wanted to dump him anyway. He gave me an excuse.”

There's a pause. I don't know what to say. The last of my coffee has gone cold. I push the mug across the desk.

"As for 'my fan club': that's a pretty good description," She's put her coffee down too, looking at the wall while she talks to me, "Pack might be a better one, and not just 'cause of the rugby. All those guys want is a fit blonde on their arm to impress their mates. A 'trophy bird'." She looks down at her gown, it's grey with a yellow bear motif, "I'm no different from any other girl really."

"I don't know. You're more beautiful."

Shit. I've ruined everything now. We were just making friends. Now it sounds like I've tried a cheap come on. I'm faced with the back of her head, her blonde locks tangled from sleep. Why can't I keep my mouth shut?

"See, you're just like them. Always looking at the outside," She sounds hurt. No, disappointed. She keeps her face turned away.

"I wasn't talking about the outside," I blush. "That's very nice too 'though. You helped me last night. No one else did."

She turns back towards me and gives me a smile that melts me before she opens her mouth; "I know how you can pay me back for looking after you last night..."

"How?"

Now she's looking straight at *me*, interrogating my eyes, eying my torso. I look at the sunlight playing across her face as she speaks. "Take me out to dinner... Tonight?"