

Here or There

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Set in Times
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To my father, the greatest storyteller I know.

*'When you are sorrowful look again in your heart,
and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for
that which has been your delight.'*

Kahlil Gibran, The Prophet

*'Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering
of the desire.'*

Ecclesiastes, 6:9

Prologue

Desire can always be split into two. The things you desire, by their very nature, are never the things you have. Although the things you have are still desired, still things you appreciate – when you take the time to remember. Desire will always disappoint you, in the end. For what you want is never as good as the wanting itself.

She had shown him this, in a way. He had to be grateful: without her he would have been lost, even unto himself, and at least for a while everything had had meaning, a purpose. She enlightened him, back then, and he drank her in until he was so intoxicated she controlled all his actions, a feeling he wholeheartedly embraced. Diminished responsibility, he'd like to claim, but he would be laughed at or, worse, despised.

“It was mutual; it was what we both wanted,” she'd argue, “wasn't it?” she'd add, a little insecurity creeping through. Because, at the end of the day, she'd lost more than he had, sacrificed her whole world in search of one she could control, only to find herself wanting, again.

It had been on the news; he remembered the day she had gone to the front door as usual, picked up that day's national newspaper and retreated to the kitchen for a routine cup of coffee. He had been in the bedroom when he heard her exclaim and, thinking she had hurt herself, he rushed clumsily into the kitchen, almost tripping over the bags that at that time resided permanently on the bedroom floor. Instead she was seated, one

hand over her mouth and the other clutching at the paper sheets, eyes rapidly scanning words that had by then become so familiar to them.

“What did you expect?” he had asked her. “It’s no surprise they’ve covered it – there’s a lot of interest in these sorts of things.”

““These sorts of things’?” she had responded defensively, immediately standing him alongside the media fiends and vicious critics. That’s how it became, eventually; at one time the two of them had stood together, but now their own actions only served to pit them against each other.

“These sorts of things, as you refer to them, are our lives, our actions, our circumstances. How can you dismiss them like that? How can you offer them up to the media frenzy and sit back with satisfaction. How can you not care that more and more people are hearing about this? It’s become a farce, not a consequence.”

Her face crumpled and stained with tears, and he went to her and put his arms around her. Though he couldn’t help thinking, yet again, how unattractive she looked when she was crying.

“I didn’t offer anything, and I am not satisfied. It’s just a small part of the course of events, that’s all – one day it will be forgotten.” She sobbed in his arms but was quiet for the rest of the day. He didn’t know if he believed his own words. He wanted to agree with her, but he had to keep up his role as protector, had to sustain the meaning they’d once injected into their relationship in order to make it worthwhile.

Meaning was slipping as fast as time. Any chance of perspective had crumbled a long time ago, perhaps even the day she revealed her proposition, and the day he had complied, eager to please her and longing for an ideal that he foolishly believed was within their grasp.

He wondered if he had ever been a good person – certainly he didn’t feel like one now – and if he had given up that side of him, sacrificed his integrity for the pursuit of pleasure. He was no longer capable of judging himself or her, though plenty of

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others were, and when he looked at her now, stared into her eyes, he saw a series of events, emotions, turmoil – several things, but no longer a person. She had transformed in his vision to embody all that they had been embroiled in, and in his eyes she was now the antithesis of her former self – suffocation rather than a means of escape.

He thought he still loved her and, despite events, he was not willing to let go of everything they had worked towards. They had deconstructed so much, painfully and ruthlessly, and there was no way he would give up before the reconstruction took place, wherever and however that may be. We owe it to ourselves, he told himself, otherwise we'll never know if we did the right thing. But the right thing is always wrong for someone, the good mirrored by bad, desire twinned with dissatisfaction.

He could remember that last night as clearly as if he were still experiencing it – in terms of senses rather than memory. The candles flickering across the room, casting eerie shadows on the walls and slowly dying away as the night passed. The smell of mint on her breath, the scent of which he caught from time-to-time as she whispered to him quietly. Jumbled words that he later forgot but nevertheless clung to, each one as poignant as the next. The light touch of her hand on the back of his neck.

They'd started the evening dancing cheek-to-cheek just like old times, and as the night went on he found himself reaching out to caress her face, as if trying to recreate the feeling of her smooth cheek against his. Then she'd slapped him, not once but twice, to remind him of the destruction that tainted them. The sting of her hand, her strength, the urge to be slapped again, if only she would touch him.

The warmth of her body against his, something he later sought on nights when his cool sheets would make him shiver and long for her. It hadn't been easy, and it hadn't been certain, and he couldn't even decide if it had been worth the torture he now felt. But he liked to think it was.

The infusion of coconut in her hair, its silky texture

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underneath his chin, and the way she stretched to sweep it from her face.

In the dull light his mind twisted and burned, feverish with regret and longing. We were meant to find catharsis, he seethed, not play out this bitter endgame.

He realised that what once she had given him, only she could take away, and he loved and hated her all at the same time, resented her manipulation and impulsiveness, while also recognising those reprobate traits in himself. Their own desires had stung them, beaten them, switched the polarity so that, like two negative magnets, no amount of effort could keep them clinging together. Desire will always disappoint you, in the end.

At the close of the night, the harsh words and the emptiness he felt as she drew away, drifted almost, though not reluctantly, until she was gone. And the words on the small, white square of paper, written in pencil so as to render them finite:

'I don't want to be here'

Chapter 1

It was dark when she left the building and sloped off along the side alley, pulling her hat down over her head, all the while listening out for unfamiliar night sounds. The air was crisp and she could see her breath periodically materialising in front of her face. She was the last to leave, as was so often the case, and yet again she wished that her manager, Mr Busby, hadn't chosen to make an example of her, hadn't picked on her and pulled her up on her work in front of all the others, when so many of them were slipshod and apathetic.

“My boxes were all filled and complete, really they were!” she had protested, beginning to suspect that someone further down the line had been playing a cruel joke on her, but Busby insisted that each box could be traced back to its original workstation – something to do with the barcode or reference number.

So here she was, leaving an hour-and-a-half after everyone else, not even Busby staying to turn off the lights and lock up. He refused to believe in the quality of her work, yet he could entrust her with the security of the whole place – a lazy and vindictive man. The darkness smelled of stale flowers, precarious like the calm before the storm.

Each day began early at Taunton's Confectionary factory. A post-WW1 venture established in 1920, it started as a chocolate shop that expanded rapidly due to high demand and before long production had to be moved to a different site to facilitate

adequate supply. It was a great time for confectionary: the lingering view of chocolates as a luxury made them all the more sought after, but ingredients were plentiful, and business thrived.

It was started by Mr A. Taunton, with ownership passing down the family line, and it was currently owned by Gregory Fellows, the son of Taunton's granddaughter, who had his finger in many pies and generally left the running of the factory to Busby. At five-minutes-to-seven in the morning, six-days-a-week, a cluster of weary but chattering women would gather at the front entrance, ready for Busby to unlock the doors. One-by-one they would traipse in, deposit their meagre belongings and packed lunches in the lockers provided, and take up their places along the production line.

There were a lucky few who worked in the two small factory offices: Busby and his personal assistant, Alice (an understandably nervous type), occupied one of them entirely, and the factory 'Supplies and Maintenance Office' vegetated in the other. But the Head Office was in a different location and the factory workers rarely saw the people who governed their working lives. Most of the processes were mechanical these days, but no machine could provide the checking services that each of the employees did. It was dull work but stable, and this seemed to keep most of the women happy. They chatted and joked, squabbled and gossiped, fretted and fussed, and whiled away the time with their petty grievances and latest tales. For her, it was different. The job was a means to an end, something she had to put up with in order to get where she wanted or, at the very least, in order not to slip back into the past.

She worked at the very end of one production line – the Belgian chocolates – each box complete with a small disclaimer stating that although some of the ingredients came from Belgium, the chocolates were not actually produced there. Her job was to inspect each box, once it had been filled by the great machine that stood in the middle of the line, making sure both trays were complete with one chocolate of each type. She had

one colleague to her left inspecting the boxes before they were filled, and one to her right inspecting the plastic sheeting placed in between each tray and on the top.

“You’re very lucky to be in charge of the chocolates, you know,” Busby would sneer at her sometimes, sarcasm oozing from his tongue like the sweat from his pores. “Others only get to inspect the paper and plastic. Make sure you don’t slip up; it’s taxing work.” His breath smelled of old fish and vinegary chips, causing those he addressed to slightly recoil. And with that, he would stride off to peer over the shoulder of another worker.

The best bit about the job was the samples or ‘end-of-line’ confectionary of which they were each allowed to take home a single box every week. This occasionally caused tussles and contention as the women pushed and shoved to get the best scoopfuls from the different tubs that stood in one corner of the main factory floor. Yet even this perk was tainted by the sickening chocolate smell that infused their working environment day-in, day-out, to the extent that she could no longer bring even a delectable Taunton’s Truffle to her lips. Her flat was filled with unopened sample boxes just waiting for someone to consume them, but she had no one to give them to and was periodically forced to dispose of them.

In general, the days were tedious and dull, with lunchtime being the only reprieve. The workers seldom left the office during a break, aside from those who smoked, because there was nothing on the industrial estate other than stark, depressing buildings that were far from pleasant to look at. She would eat her lunch quietly in a corner of the canteen and listen to the other women harangue and chide each other, discovering whose husband was wayward, whose husband a drunk and whose children were causing trouble in the neighbourhood.

It was a welcome distraction, in a way, to immerse oneself in the idle chitchat and sometimes it was the only time of day when she could throw herself into another world (the third she had been party to, she supposed) and take her mind off her own

concerns. Their combined lunches provided aromatic respite from the intensity of chocolate and she silently analysed each woman's circumstances from the contents of their lunch packs – tuna and mayonnaise here; ham and cheese there; some brought only a few cheap crackers with processed cheese spread and a packet of crisps. The scent of the food rose and mingled with the chatter, bringing the sparse factory cafeteria to life.

The workforce, apart from Busby and the two men who occupied the second office, was entirely female, and this was never questioned. It was not an environment that men could survive in – emotionally or socially – and the female workers would have ripped any man to shreds. It was their own union of solidarity and trust, which could not be penetrated by any male save Busby, and this, she was sure, made him all the more conceited. A lone dictator governing the *jejune* fairer sex, he prowled and sniped like a slothful lion with a pride of labourers. He wasn't married, unlike most of the workforce, and they never had any inkling of his life outside the factory. He would occasionally hover around a gossiping gaggle, clearly interested in their prattle but, the minute one of them spotted him, he would reprimand them for 'stealing company time' and verbally whip them back into shape. He didn't mind the occasional whisper or the rare conversation about work, but he despised any talk of which he was not within earshot.

He struck her as lonely, in some ways, but at other times she thought him so antagonistic to human company that he was better off by himself. The other women seemed to appreciate some kind of authority – they were set rules to abide by, even if they weren't always adhered to – but she hated his oppressive nature and the way he lurked around factory corners so you never knew when he would appear.

Strangely enough, it was Alice she thought about most during quieter days at the factory. For, as she had discovered, a female union excludes not only men but any woman unable to conform to its unspoken criteria. Like Alice, she revealed nothing of her

past or circumstances, maintained a vague air of derision, rejected small talk, wore no perfume and, as a result, remained a mystery. Her clothes under the standard uniform were deliberately smartish but not trendy (these days, it was a relief to keep things simple, though on occasion she longed for the opportunity to don a skirt, heels and pussy-bowed shirt – clothes she had long ago discarded) and she privately struggled to coat her words in an unidentifiable accent, adopting grating colloquialisms from her colleagues in an attempt to ingratiate herself with them.

Two or three months into her employment, her social ranking at work was sealed; then she held herself back from her co-workers and they, in turn, were less than forthcoming. Alice, she came to realise, was ignored – none of the workers had any claims to the details of the private lives of senior staff. She, however, was silently snubbed, her mask mistaken for elitism, her mysteriousness for mistrust.

She had a fantasy, still, that one day she would end up in Busby's office, after he had gone home, for a *tête-à-tête* with Alice. She ran the scene through her mind almost daily, and each time her mind fudged the details until the point where she revealed her own history, Alice captivated and attentive. It always ended the same way – Alice would tell her that Busby was leaving and she would be recommended for the manager's position. As much as even Alice remained alien to her, she was the only fantasy audience she could find for the story she could never tell.

Sometimes she wondered if Busby knew, if someone had told him about her past, despite being reassured that nothing of the sort had happened. He seemed just the sort to take someone's weakness and manipulate it for his own amusement until they hit breaking point. She shivered at the memory of him approaching her earlier that afternoon, placing his hand on her shoulder and quietly tutting in her ear, the familiar smirks from her colleagues and the low chuckle he gave as he reminded her she'd have to stay late, again, and alone.

All the other women had left bang on five o'clock, most boarding the musty factory bus that fetched them daily and dropped them back to the nearest estate where the majority of them lived. It was seven o'clock and already dark by the time she'd locked all the doors, set the alarm and left. Striding round the curve of the alleyway leading from the factory car park to the main road where she could catch the No. 43 bus, her flat-soled shoes made a regular, dull thud. She walked briskly, occasionally looking around behind her, habit forcing her to stay alert and ignore the sound of her quickening heartbeat. She had trained herself so well that when she felt the hand grab her hair and jerk her backwards she didn't even scream; only a small gasp left her lips and disappeared into the darkness.

"Elisabeth Rowley?" a gruff voice growled. A waft of cheap aftershave mixed with cigarette smoke crept round her neck and tickled her nostrils. She turned and faced him, scanning desperately for familiar features that were not there. He was dressed all in black with a stern look in his eyes and he still held her hair with a firm grip.

"I used to be," she replied, knowing then that her time was up. A slight thrill shot into her bloodstream and she bit her bottom lip in disbelief.

She said no more and didn't resist as the man led her roughly along the alleyway, at the end of which was parked a dark blue car. He opened the rear door and placed his hand on the top of her head, guiding her into the vehicle. It was the first bit of gentility he had shown her and, despite her fright, she relaxed a little. She knew he wouldn't hurt her – he couldn't – and as she waited for him to walk round and get into the driver's seat, she set her mind to planning the best way to behave. Arguing would get her nowhere; these people wouldn't play games. She needed to work out where she was going and what they would do to her, how much she would tell them, and how much she would let them think they could manipulate her.

What she struggled with most was who to be; should she revert to her old habits, her old voice, her old accent? They were

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slowly fading from her mind, her training having been rigorous, yet a part of her welcomed the chance to reveal them once again. When you've deliberately reinvented yourself, erased the person you once were piece-by-piece, and convinced the world you're someone else, how do you begin to regress to your former self? In the quest for anonymity, there had been no police guidelines on the worst-case scenario.

He started the engine and the car roared to life, the hum of diesel piercing the silent evening. Contrary to the stereotypical profile she had already created of him in her mind, he was a careful and somewhat hesitant driver, the car jerking just once or twice. He stuck to back roads and after twenty minutes she had lost all perspective of where they were. The car was old and stagnant; a few discarded food wrappers lounging on the floor mats instinctively made her draw her legs towards her. At one point he reached for the radio but hesitated and drew his hand back. He remained silent, except for occasionally clearing his throat, and she herself dared not speak.

He had locked all the doors after he had entered the car, and she assumed that the green light glowing from the button on either back-seat door meant that the child lock was on. She slowly unzipped her handbag and reached into it for her mobile phone, wishing that she had been in the seat directly behind the driver and not on the opposite side where he would see anything she was doing the minute he turned his head.

Her hand trembled as she slowly lifted the phone out and tilted it to one side so that the light behind its façade would be hidden. The sound was on; if she pressed any of the keys he would hear it and, in order to turn the sound off, she would have to press at least three. She poised two fingers over the necessary keys and gave a loud cough as she pushed them. He turned round at the noise, just as she let her hand fall a little, and he noticed the phone.

“Don't even think about it,” he warned, the first words he had uttered since getting into the car. “Who would you call, anyway?” He gave a flippant laugh, more cruel in light of the

fact he was right – she had no one to call. What would she do? Explain the past five years to someone in a few sentences and convince them that she needed rescuing? She had lost her freedom so many years ago that she no longer mourned for it, no longer felt that acerbic taste in her mouth when she woke-up.

“Give it to me,” he demanded, and for the second time in her life she handed over the last link she had to anyone she cared about.

He turned her phone off and threw it into the glove compartment. For a minute or so they continued, in silence, until again he spoke, “You might as well give me your handbag now; I’ll need to take it off you anyway.”

“But I’ve got things in here I need!” she protested. “Personal things, nothing that concerns you.”

“I’ll be the judge of that. Now hand it over and if there’s anything you need later you may ask for it.”

Hesitantly, she held it forward and he reached backwards and took the bag, placing it on his lap.

The next time they stopped at a traffic light he rummaged through it, finding her purse and driving licence, which he held up to the streetlight.

“Hannah Sampson, eh? Did you pick that?”

“No. You take what you’re given – you must know that.” She waited for a response, almost hoping to strike up a conversation or even glean any word from him that would give her a clue as to her fate, but he fell silent again, as unpredictable as the fresh wind that snuck in every now and then from a small gap at the top of his window.

They drove for another ten minutes or so, still skirting around back roads and unfamiliar terraced housing until the car slowed and turned into what appeared to be a car park with a closed repair garage at its head. He stopped the car and cleared his throat once more, before turning and staring her straight in the eyes. “We’re here.” He got out and walked around the car to her side, stopping first to open the boot and take something out.

Her heart beat faster and faster in its paranoia of what she was about to face, and when he opened the door for her she at first shrank away and then reluctantly tumbled out. He held out his hand to help her straighten up, but she chose to ignore it and leaned slightly against the car, willing herself to be strong. “This way,” he said, pointing towards an enclave next to a ‘M.O.T. While-U-Wait’ sign.

He walked on ahead – obviously not the slightest bit concerned that she would not follow – swinging a black plastic bag. She breathed heavily through her mouth as she began to trace his path, lagging a good ten metres behind. She could detect a faint smell of chocolate on her own breath; perhaps her job had become part of her after all, not that she would be returning to it now. He stopped when he got to the enclave and turned around to wait for her, his patience perhaps a last-minute act of kindness.

Walking under the brick arch and looking to the right, she saw a door that he opened without a key, and he stepped inside into the darkness. She approached the door, squinting to make out shapes beyond the entrance, and took small steps inside. The door swung shut behind her and she realised another man had been waiting behind it; she had clearly been expected.

The man who had shut the door then grabbed her by the wrist and led her down a corridor, and she wondered where the first man had gone, almost longing for his now familiar presence. This second man was stocky but clean-shaven, dressed head-to-toe in dark colours. He led her to another door and opened it, gesturing for her to go ahead.

Light was spilling out from this room and as she entered she took a deep breath that her body instantaneously expelled when she saw who was standing before her. Her hands unclenched and her body slumped, as if the events of the past two hours had expended her entire spirit. She had always imagined this moment, too many times to believe it would ever really happen. Now that they were both here, in the same room again, she realised that every single moment of one’s past dissolves into

one's existence with the passing of each second; it is neither retrievable nor deniable.

"Elisabeth," he hissed, and she could not tell whether her name on his tongue was tinged with relief or regret.

She said nothing – there was nothing to say – but she held his gaze as he walked confidently up to her, past the black chair and dark, wooden desk that were the only objects in the room, and she stopped herself from flinching as he put both hands firmly upon her cheeks and brought his face close to hers. He had aged substantially, his skin rough and patchy, though his eyes remained youthful and inquisitive. His glistening temple creased and uncreased like a vexed slug. His warm breath smelled of whisky and his fingers were clammy as he ran them over her face and her lips. She closed her eyes and concentrated on breathing, but suddenly his hands left her face and cold air hit her once again. She flashed open her eyes to see him walk back to the desk and pick up a small shot glass that rested on one corner.

As he walked back towards her she slowly began to shake her head, glancing behind her only to find the door was firmly shut. She backed up but he was soon upon her, and in one swift move he reached up and held her nose as she instinctively opened her mouth to gasp.

"Drink this," he commanded, though the pungent liquid was already trickling down her throat as she swallowed, coughing in vain.

When she woke up with her wrists and ankles tied to a chair her scream echoed in her ears alone.

Chapter 2

Simon gulped down his morning coffee, feeling the caffeine buzz spread through his veins, and grabbed his jacket and keys. Looking in the hallway mirror, he realised he'd forgotten to slick back his hair in its usual trendy coiffeur.

"Hey, Amy," he called to the figure sleepily ascending the stairs, toast in hand, "what's the time?"

"Ummmmmmno," came the reply, as Amy turned her head lazily, glancing back at him. Simon continued to preen in vain, for now his hair was sticking up and fluffing at the sides.

"Ah, no porcupine today I see," quipped Amy, making a familiar reference to his usual hairdo. "Relax, I'm sure it'll survive without a whole tub of gel for one day!"

"Very funny," replied Simon, finally darting back to the living room to check the time and evaluate whether he had long enough to retrieve his gel. His face paled when he saw it was already gone half-past-eight – late again.

"Gotta go," he shouted back to Amy as he opened the front door, but once he had stepped outside and turned around he realised she was no longer standing there. He closed the door clumsily onto his finger and shrieked from the pain, silently glad that she hadn't still been there to hear his high-pitched squeal.

Still sucking on his finger, he started to jog, slowing only when he could see Mile End station in the distance. When he got there, huffing and puffing to allay a stomach cramp, he shuffled forward in the barrier queue, his face almost brushing against the

coat of the person in front of him. When it was his turn, he stuck his ticket into the machine and automatically walked forward, his fingers reaching out to grab...nothing. He clutched at air as the barriers suddenly clamped down on him and he realised his ticket hadn't emerged. The ticket machine's loud beep nearly masked Simon's own exclaim, and caused those around him to tut in annoyance or snigger. He nudged his body this way and that but he was stuck fast. Soon the crowd about him parted like the sea, and a lone figure of rescue appeared, frowning condescendingly.

"Where's your ticket?" asked the London Underground employee.

"The machine swallowed it!" Simon insisted. "Look, can you please let me out of here?" The barriers were massaging his waist in a most unpleasant way, and he could almost feel his coffee swilling around inside him.

"We'd better open the machine," said the man, as if addressing a colleague, and Simon sagged with relief until he realised the he meant to retrieve Simon's ticket rather than to set him free. He waited, his cheeks reddening, as hundreds of commuters passed him by before his ticket was found. He tried to place his arms as if he were resting on the barriers instead of being trapped, but either way he looked ridiculous.

"Look, I have a valid ticket. I don't know why it was swallowed, but if you could just let me out...I'm late for w-"

"This the one?" said the man, holding up a slightly crumpled ticket.

"Yes, yes, that must be it. Now, can I go through?"

"Take your time in future," he instructed, as if explaining the laws of physics. "Don't put your ticket through for the person in front of you. No need to rush."

Simon muttered angrily as he was set free and made a dash for the escalator. He trotted as quickly as possible down the stairs, rushed across to the southbound platform, ran up to the train teasingly sitting there, before tripping on the carriage lip and flying head-first into the throng just as the 'beep beep beep' of

the doors closing began to sound. They came together, sharply, onto Simon's legs, which had not quite managed to board with the rest of him.

"Oh dear," said a woman's voice, most likely the one looking down upon Simon's head. A few people tried to lift him up, but his feet were stuck and the best he could do was kneel sheepishly as if in prayer.

'Could whoever is obstructing the doors please move away? You're holding up a whole trainful of people,' came the announcement, just as the doors once again opened. Simon just had time to whip his feet in before they closed once more, and he managed to stand up, brushing down his suit.

"Sorry about that," he said to those around him.

"Are you alright?" asked the same female voice, a concerned middle-aged woman with wide eyes and mousy hair.

"I'm ok," replied Simon, then, on realising she was still staring, "I'm fine, really," and he turned slightly away to escape her gaze.

It was then that he realised he'd dropped his ticket somewhere in the rush, and he groaned at the thought of the hassle of explaining himself at the other end. But, even worse, he looked up to see Rose grinning at him from further along the carriage. Rose was easily the most attractive young woman at their office, and very much in demand.

As he smiled back, Simon noticed that today she was wearing a navy pin-stripe suit and blue...well, heels (aside from colour, how many different ways were there to describe high heels?). Her hair was neatly tied up and clipped together with a blue fabric flower that fanned out across the back of her head, perhaps a little too fancy. He'd previously considered it an advantage that they both lived near each other, using the fact as a topic of conversation whenever their paths crossed. But now he cringed at the thought of his fall and what she must have thought – hardly the suave, debonair type she surely would go for. That's why he never had much success with women – he was always the funny guy, game for a laugh, the *just a friend* guy

they all liked to have around but not to date.

As he stepped off the train onto the seething platform at his stop, Simon glanced round for Rose and for once was relieved that she had disappeared. At the top of the escalator, he found the wheelchair access barrier open and slipped through it quickly, making a mental note to remember to buy another ticket at lunchtime. The station clock told him it was five-past-nine, and that he would surely incur the wrath of his boss, often referred to as ‘Cold-Stance’, once he reached the office. Finally, he turned left into Wood Street and made his way past the homogenous office buildings until he reached his own, the offices of Radison Consulting Ltd.

He plopped down onto his chair and stared vacantly at his desk. The voice of Jason, his colleague, jogged him out of his weary stupor, “You’re late again.”

“Stating the obvious, Jason.” The two of them usually got on fine, but Simon sometimes resented the goody-two-shoes smugness that radiated from Jason. It wasn’t his fault, Simon supposed, that women loved him, both at work and outside. He just wished that, occasionally, some of his colleague’s good fortune would waft his own way.

“Well, she’s not happy. She wants to see you in her office.”

With a sigh, Simon stumbled over to Constance’s door and braced himself for the reprimand. He had worked there for just about nine months, and it was the first serious job he’d ever had, although admittedly he could take it a fair bit more seriously. When he eventually slinked back to his desk, he made a joke of his telling-off to Jason, who kindly indulged him.

Later that day, Dan phoned. Dan was one of Simon’s housemates, a teacher employed at an inner city school through one of those government schemes that aimed to entice bright young things to mould younger not-so-bright things into first-class British nationals (diversity welcomed, of course), with the bribe that they would subsequently be placed in top jobs that might never materialise. Dan was shouting unintelligibly about Bill and Amy, and it took Simon a while to decipher what he was

saying. It was only when he got home that evening that he got the whole story.

Dan had returned that day at lunchtime, feeling the onslaught of a sore throat and not wanting to pass it onto the pupils – the perfect excuse for leaving early. He'd stopped at a chemist on the way back to pick up sachets of a honey and lemon drink and some throat sweets, and hurried back to the house. He thought about phoning Amy, who had the day off, but decided he was feeling too sorry for himself to do anything but vegetate, and he was hardly in a state to trek to her flat. For a good few minutes after he entered the house he heard nothing but silence, and it was only after he had fixed himself a cheese sandwich, retrieved the quilt from his bedroom and positioned himself on the sofa that he heard muffled voices and stifled laughter. His hand paused on the remote control, and he heard them again (male? female?) so he eased himself up and out of his cocoon, and wandered back up the stairs.

“All the doors were open apart from Bill's,” he told Simon. “I could hear a female voice, and I even chuckled to myself because I thought Bill had a girlfriend!” Bill was trying to make it as an actor – and, to his credit, had been in one television advert for a hardware retail chain, which he talked about so much that the others frequently joked about his name being in ‘halogen lights’ – and worked in a pub most evenings and weekends. His arrogance and deluded aspirations usually put women off so Simon could understand why Dan had been amused and surprised.

“So, I was just about to creep back downstairs when I heard the woman say, ‘Good thing I had the day off.’ I turned round again and pressed my ear to Bill's door, and that's when I heard her! Amy! Then I even heard Bill say, ‘Hey, I wouldn't worry – he thinks I don't like you’ with a real smirk in his voice, the idiot.”

“Oh gosh,” said Simon, wondering what was coming next. “So, what did you do?”

“Well, I flung open the door and caught them in bed together!

Bill and Amy! I can't believe her especially; I mean, Bill really took his chance, but Amy! I thought she had better taste...well, I mean, she was with me, and..." He put his head in his hands, and Simon patted him on the arm, suddenly worried that Dan might be crying. But then his flatmate raised his head and his face was only flushed with anger.

"I don't ever want to see her again. And he'd better stay out of my way."

"Hey," said Simon, desperate to offer some words of consolation, "she wasn't that pretty anyway. She did have a nose a bit like a horse, and she was kind of squat." He gesticulated in front of Dan, until he realised his friend was staring at him incredulously.

"Neeeiigh!" he imitated, trying to provoke a laugh. But then Dan got up, shouting, "What's wrong with you?" before declaring him an idiot too and storming out.

"Bit too soon for the ribbing then," he mumbled after he'd left, marvelling at just how often he managed to put his foot in it. Dan's bedroom door slammed shut.

The house they lived in had four-and-a-half bedrooms, a living/dining room, a bathroom and separate toilet, and a constantly messy kitchen. Tim, a P.E. teacher and fitness-freak, had the biggest room which was cluttered with gym equipment. Simon and Dan had average-sized rooms next-door to each other, close enough so that they each heard more than enough of what was going on in the other's room. Garth (an unfortunate name bestowed upon him by a mother with a passion for country music) had the ground floor room by the front door and was trying to become an estate agent though he had worked for, and been fired from, three different agencies for lack of sales technique – which he claimed was actually a lack of innovation and vision on the part of the agents.

Bill had happily taken the box room, partly for the lower rent and partly because he upheld the ridiculous notion that one day, when he was accepting his Oscar, he would look back with fondness on his humble beginnings and memories of the house

and his room would keep him grounded – a real joke considering he was hardly grounded to begin with, let alone if he ever made it big. Occasionally, one of them would become so fed-up with the mess, he would go through the motions of tidying up, only to discover more clutter hidden under the visible clutter and give up.

For a long time, Simon's parents had been trying to convince their first-born to move back home, though their pleas ceased once he got his job at Radison – a reputable company he knew they'd love to tell friends and neighbours their son worked for. The day he was offered the job, he jumped on a train to tell them in person, grabbing a bunch of flowers for his mother on the way. He spent the afternoon with his mum in quiet contemplation of her imminent joy at his announcement, which he kept to himself until his little sister had returned from school and his father from work.

He told them over dinner, watching their growing smiles as his words sank in, and blushing with anticipated pleasure as his mother jumped up to embrace and commend him. His sister, too young to be aware of career challenge but old enough to understand their parents' expectations, smiled graciously and also congratulated him, as happy at her parents' delight as at her brother's news. He reiterated that it was just an assistant's job, that he had a three-month trial period, that he wasn't quite sure yet what the job would entail, but his contractions fell on deaf ears, and he revelled in the long-awaited glory.

His father's reaction was the one that elated Simon the most – he visibly beamed and immediately proffered a proud toast to “his son, the Management Consultant”, which struck Simon as so poignant, so longed-for on his part, that he wholeheartedly overlooked the inaccuracy of the statement and didn't even joke about it later.

From his first day at Radison, Simon enjoyed his job because it had transformed him into the son his parents had always wanted, which, as trite as it seemed, made it a job worth hanging onto with all the potential he possessed. He cherished the

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independence of living in a house with friends, despite its melodrama, and the freedom to be who he really wanted. Even though he was still a joker, he now commanded a degree of respect, and the feeling of failure that had plagued him for many months after he graduated had now dissipated. In his parents' minds, he had gone from being 'Simon-who-is-perpetually-looking-at-his-career-options' to 'Simon, our son, in Management Consultancy training at Radison', and this, he knew, was gold dust he couldn't afford to let blow away in a gust of complacency.