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Christmas Night Out

A prostitute, Rob thought. That's what I need, a prostitute. He slumped down in his seat and looked around the table at his colleagues in their party clothes, paper hats and booze-rouged faces.

He thought for a moment that he'd said it out loud. Not that anyone could hear over the sound of Slade. Or was it Wizard?

Mud. It was Mud.

Whatever; it was music from another century. Shows how rubbish the current pop scene was that they couldn't even come up with decent Christmas songs.

He surveyed the vast space – fairy lights and Santa banners everywhere. His employers had taken two of the tables. The throngs arrived. Sat. Had a few drinks. Got fed a 'take-it or leave-it' menu by an army of waiters. Prawn cocktail. Turkey and trimmings. Christmas pud.

There was a choice for the veggies. Apparently. But Anna, his big mate from reception, was left sitting with an empty space where a plate should have been.

The noise was mental. Folk shouting, trying to compete with the incessant cheers and the beat of music from yesteryear. How had he been persuaded to come along? It was Dave. He said there would be lots of hot girls, pissed up and ready to throw off their inhibitions along with their high heels and little black dresses.

Yeah, right. Like that could ever happen to him. Dave had only asked him because he wanted a lift; he knew Rob rarely drank.

All these people just highlighted how friendless he was.

You're pathetic, Rob, he could hear his dad saying in his ear. *Pathetic.*

How do you find one anyway? A prostitute. Would they have their own Facebook page? A website? The Yellow Pages – under Wide-legged and Willing. He chuckled to himself. See, he was funny. When no one was listening.

He studied his work-mates. Everyone was in the middle of a conversation. Mouths pressed against ears to combat the loud music. Not one person bothering with him, even though he was sat right in the middle of the table. Might as well be invisible.

He should go now. Tonight. While the thought was warm. Straight after

the turkey course and before the pudding. Which would be dried out, with hard, wee raisins that would stick in between his teeth.

How much had he drank? Two bottles of beer. That would be within the limit, wouldn't it? Plod couldn't fine him for that, surely. He picked up his bottle from the table in front of him and held it to his mouth. The beer was warm.

Just then, Jenny from accounts appeared at his side. 'Want to dance?' she mouthed.

She was quite cute. Actually too good-looking for him. Probably asking him for a bet. He glanced about; a couple of her friends were staring in his direction and giggling. He felt his face grow hot. He shook his head.

'C'mon, I love this song,' she shouted, prodding his shoulder.

Rob cocked his head to listen to the tune and caught: A-GAH-DO. No wonder she's asking me, he thought. No sane male would dance to that unless he was twelve pints into a bender.

'Need the loo,' he said.

He jumped to his feet and rushed in the direction of the gents, all the while thinking, *For Godssakes, mate, could you be any more lame?* He heard an effeminate voice in his mind. *Need the loo.* Jeezus.

After he'd emptied his bladder, he washed his hands and had a good look at himself in the mirror.

Heard one word: loser.

Thought of another word: prostitute.

And left.

As he left, he had a look for Jenny from accounts – he'd never learned her full name – to see if she was even bothered. She wasn't. Her pals had joined her and they were all throwing their arms in the air as if they were actually enjoying themselves.

Outside the front door he saw Dave in the smoker's corner, under one of those big heaters shaped like a mushroom. They'd arrived together in Rob's car, with the idea of having a few drinks and getting a taxi home. Dave was jacketless, shivering in his white shirt, but looking pleased that the girl wearing his jacket over her shoulders was Rachel, also from accounts. She was the hottest girl in the office. Rob burned with envy that Dave was relaxed enough to talk to her so freely.

How did he do that? Talk to girls without making a total arse of himself?

'Not feeling too good, mate,' Rob shouted over at Dave, and walked away too fast for whatever he said in reply to reach him. Heard something. He was sure it rhymed with banker.

He strode over to his car, unlocked it and stepped inside. It was only when

he was in his seat and seemed to feel his head brushing against the roof of the car that he realised he was still wearing his party hat.

He groaned. Pulled it off, crumpled it into a ball and threw it onto the passenger seat. He should never have gone. Office parties were always the worst.

Right. Where do I go, then? he thought as he fired up the engine. Guys drive up and down certain streets, don't they? Or do they walk?

Jeezus, he was so lame. He knew nothing.

Five minutes later he was driving down the main street of the town. The place was deserted; even the Christmas lights strung overhead, winking in red and blue, did nothing to disguise what a shithole of a place this was. Every fourth shop was boarded up. Pizza boxes blew down the middle of the road: the west of Scotland's tumbleweed.

After driving up and down the street five times he parked, thinking, *Well that was a waste of time. Place is dead.*

Maybe he should get out and walk?

OK. He filled his lungs, stepped onto the pavement and looked around him. Better not look seedy. *Walk confident, mate*, he told himself. He stuck his chest out, tried not to shiver too much in the cold. He should have brought his scarf and his hat. They were a matching set. A Secret Santa present from work. Along with a wee box of chocolate willies.

Ho ho ho.

Ha ha ha.

He walked. The thunk of his solid leather shoes hitting the pavement. His breathing ringing in his ear and breath misting just before his face. This was nuts. He was stupid. What decent man goes to a prostitute? He should be locked up for even thinking about using someone that way. He turned. He should just go back to the car. Head back to the party and pretend he was enjoying himself, just like the rest of them.

A noise.

He turned and saw a small shape: a woman.

Was she one? He tried to assess her. Long, dark coat. Chin tucked into a massive woolly scarf. Handbag tight in her grip. What would she think he was doing? *Better make like I have a purpose*, he thought. So he turned away and said 'Damn' loudly, as if he'd just remembered he'd forgotten something.

Without as much as a glance in his direction, the woman walked past. Hurried away as if he wasn't there. Much like the folk at the Christmas party. Jeez. After that stupid pantomime, no wonder she rushed past him.

He huddled into his coat. Unclenched his fists and forced a deep breath.

This was a mistake. He wasn't that kind of guy. He didn't use people. He certainly didn't pay for it. Mind you, he didn't get any in the first place.

Deep in his self-misery, it took him a moment to realise someone was standing beside him.

'Not much happening tonight, mate,' a voice said.

He jumped back. 'Shit,' he said. 'You gave me a fright.'

Looking down at his new companion, he saw that she barely filled her jeans and her ski jacket looked about five sizes too big.

'You lost?' he asked her. She reminded him of the wee sister of one of his old school pals.

'Naw. But you look as if you are.'

'Eh, no,' he said, discomfited by her confident stare. 'Just waiting for a mate. We're going to the pub.' He coughed. 'For a drink, like.'

'You're different from the usual guys I see here at this time of night.'

'Shouldn't you be at home watching the X-Factor final with your ma?'

Then he considered what she had just said. 'What do you mean, "different from the usual"?' With all those words, he'd said more to her tonight than anyone at the office party.

'Just different.' She cocked her head to the right. 'You've never been here before, so I'm thinking it's your first time. Usually guys are nervous their first time. Like we bite or something.' She gave a small laugh. 'Don't get me wrong. You're nervous – it's like a neon sign above your head. But you're different. There's something little-boy-lost about you.'

'You're a prozzy?' he said.

'We prefer the term "sex-worker", if you don't mind.'

He stared at her as if she was an exhibit at the zoo. She looked, well, kinda normal. Underfed, right enough, but normal. Like a real person.

'Did your ma never tell you it was rude to stare, mate?'

He looked away. 'Sorry. Better go.' He took a step away and looked back at her. 'Nice talking to you.'

'Nice talking to you?' She laughed but there was no cruelty there. 'You're leaving the sexiest wee bum in Scotland?' She turned and wiggled her backside at him. She didn't look in the least bit sexy. More like a wee girl having a laugh. Except for her eyes. They were too dark. Too knowing. And Rob felt the slow heat of shame.

'Listen,' he said. 'I really am – meeting a mate.' He coughed. 'For a pint.'

'Aye. And my name's Theresa May and these jeans are leather and cost me £995.'

'Theresa May?'

'Aye. You know? Prime Minister. Mrs Austerity?'

Wondering, *how did we get from talking about sex workers to Theresa May?* Rob decided he should just leg it. Make for the car and drive home. There was chocolate in the cupboard. And bread. Cheese in the fridge. He could have toasted cheese and watch something on Netflix.

'So, you wanting some business or not?' she asked him as she linked her right arm into his left. 'Better do it in your car; I could do with a wee heat.'

'Right. Sure. OK. We ...' Rob started walking back to his car.

As they walked, his new companion kept up a stream of chat. Theresa May was mentioned again. So was 'Boris Fucking Johnson'. When Rob reached his white Ford Ka, he looked around to make sure there was no one around to see him.

At that moment, the first car he'd seen for a while drove past. A solitary male inside, staring straight ahead. Rob felt his face burn. Did he see him? Was it anyone he knew?

'You going to unlock the door, mate, or is that the mannequin challenge you're doing?' she laughed.

'Sorry.' He pressed a button on his key fob and the doors unlocked.

They got in, their shoulders touching briefly as Rob leaned across to lock in his seatbelt.

'There's a quiet wee lane just a couple of streets away. We can do it there,' she said.

Oh my God, thought Rob, I'm actually doing this.

The girl removed her gloves and rubbed her hands together. 'OK, mate, before you drive off, here's the deal. Twenty-five for hand relief. Fifty for full. A hundred for a blow, cos I hate doing that. Mind you, if that's what you really, really want, Emma works the other side and she'll do it for thirty. But her breath is rank, mate, and she never, ever flosses.'

Rob put both hands on the steering wheel. 'Mind if we just drive for a bit?'

'Sure,' she studied him. 'No funny business, right? Emma took a wee photo of your car reggy. She'll forward it to the polis if I'm no back in an hour.'

'She did what?' Rob looked across the street. Up and down. Saw no one.

'You can't see her. She's gone all ninja.'

Rob started the engine and drove off.

She stretched forward in her seat, rubbed her hands together again and then pointed towards the controls. 'Which one's the heating, mate. Turn it up, eh?'

Without a word, Rob did as she asked. Then returned his focus to the road. He drove for about ten minutes and all the while she continued her chat.

Then: 'You don't talk much, do you?'

Rob gave a weak smile. 'Strong silent type, me,' he replied. "Cept you can delete strong from that sentence.'

'Nothing wrong with silence, mate. Too many people rush to share their opinions for my liking.' Pause. 'Why don't you just stop here?'

Rob looked around himself. Realised he was a couple of streets back from the beach. This was a modest residential area of the town, but, because it was so close to the shoreline, a lot of the houses offered Bed & Breakfast. He saw a space and parked.

'Right, so what's it to be?' she asked, and her hand landed near the top of Rob's thigh, perilously close to his zip.

'Shit,' he said and slammed his back into the car seat trying to get away from her hand. 'Don't do that, please.'

'Jeez, what's your problem?'

Rob relaxed. A little. She'd taken her hand away.

'I actually don't want ... sex.' This came as a surprise to him as well as her.

'You don't?' Her face fell, but there was a note of relief in her voice, too.

He shook his head. And for good measure said, 'No, thanks.'

And then he thought, '*No thanks? You really are a loser, Rob.*'

'You some kind of pervert, mate?' she asked while tucking her hands up into her oxters.

'Sorry. No. I just want to talk ...' he made himself finish. 'To a girl.' His face was so hot he was sure it was going to combust.

She turned to face him. He looked ahead, trying to ignore her scrutiny. Couldn't. He'd never felt quite so uncomfortable.

'I never really talk to girls.'

'Go to a club, mate.' Her tone was harsh.

Rob turned to check her expression. She was smiling.

'Problem is I hate people and clubs are full of them.'

'What's your name?'

'Rob,' he replied and cursed himself for forgetting to make something up. 'Yours?'

'Doesn't work like that.' She crossed her arms.

Rob studied her. Wondered why she had to resort to this to make money.

'You on drugs?' he asked, surprising himself. Wasn't like him to be so up front. Must be the confines of the car.

'What do you care?' she asked, all bristle. 'I've got two beautifully formed ears, and for a price they are all yours.' She pulled her right foot up and tucked

it under her left leg as if making herself comfortable. 'What do you want to talk about?'

'The weather?'

'It's bloody Baltic.' Smile. 'Next?'

'Politics?'

'Bunch of bastards. Next?'

'Do you always speak in alliteration?' Rob found himself smiling.

She snorted.

'Religion?' Rob suggested.

'Bunch of ...' she made a face. 'Can't think of anything beginning with B.'

Rob laughed. It had only been a few minutes but he already felt more relaxed with this girl that he had with any other female.

'So, why haven't you met a nice girl then?' she asked softly.

Rob's laughter rolled to a stop. He didn't know if he was able to be that honest.

'Dunno.' A small speck of dirt under his right thumbnail was suddenly fascinating.

Her jacket rustled as she reached across and placed it on his arm. 'You're a nice guy, Rob. You must be able to find a girlfriend, no bother.'

'You think?' He found the courage to meet her gaze.

'Totally. You're kind of cute.'

Rob looked at her. Eyebrows raised in question.

'No, no, you are. Well. Your eyes are nice. Look at the lashes on them.

Girls love that shit.'

'But when I speak to girls I start to stutter and it feels like my face is about to explode.'

'Girls love it when a guy blushes.'

Rob snorted his disbelief.

'Am I not a girl? Can I not be a judge? After all, I've shagged a few.'

'Seriously? Judges?'

She made a 'You Wouldn't Believe It' face. 'Anyway, back to you. Girls love the shy guys. The cocky types are so obviously after one thing. Show us a little bit of vulnerable and we're putty in your hands.' She patted his knee. 'Mind you, shy gets boring after a while, so you would need to find some confidence from somewhere.'

'How?'

He asked the question a second time and tried to remove the desperation from his voice. 'How?'

'Practice.'

'Practice?'

'Your ears painted on, mate? Practice. And think more about the other person instead of being in your own head so much. We're all the same, really. We all want the same stuff. To be safe, warm and loved ...' There was a plaintiveness in her face that made Rob look deep into her it, trying to read what was behind the words. 'We make the mistake of thinking everyone's watching us with the same focus as we place on ourselves. People don't do that. You get a quick glance and they move back to the most important thing in their lives: themselves.' She laughed. 'Whoa. I'm never usually that deep.'

'You're nice,' said Rob.

'That's a good start,' said the girl. 'Focus on the other person, less on yourself.'

'No, I mean it; you're nice. Why do you need to do this?'

'You don't get to go there, Rob.' She turned away from him.

'Sorry. Didn't mean to offend you. It's just ... you've got a good mind. You could go to college, or something.'

'Yeah, and they'll hand me my methadone as I walk into the classroom.'

'Other people manage it,' said Rob. 'Clean themselves up.' He was amazed he'd ventured an opinion here, but it suddenly felt important to him that he helped her.

'What the fuck do you know, Rob? Have you ever taken as much as an aspirin? Leave me and my problems out of this, OK.' If she had been a cat, her back would have been arched. 'Go back to Mummy.'

'She died. Died when I was ten,' he said, almost to himself. Like he was offering a reminder of better times.

'Yeah, well, we all have our tragedies.' She bit a nail. Looked over at him. 'Must have been tough. Ten?'

'And you know something, I see folk on Facebook sharing stuff about how wonderful mums are, and it pisses me off. My memories are of a silent, crabbit woman. Just before the car crash I heard her tell a neighbour that, when I came along it, was a nasty surprise.' He paused and examined the old hurt. 'Nothing changed after the crash really. Dad was just as miserable without her as he was with her. I often wondered why they bothered to marry. So I stayed out of his sight. Learned that approval was earned by silence. Eventually, he would notice I was there and reward me with a smile. Of sorts.'

How long Rob talked for he had no idea, only that he talked until his mouth ran dry of syllables. Until his mind was empty. And he found that the hurt was somehow less.

'Sorry.' But he didn't know why he was apologising.

'So you should be,' she grinned. 'My ears are frazzled.'

'And still,' he grinned back, 'they are beautifully formed.'

'A compliment. Flattery will get you anything.'

'Talking about that. How much do I owe you?'

'Ooh,' she squirmed. 'You're almost too nice to charge ...'

He moved in his seat, enough to enable him to pull his wallet from his back pocket. He opened it. It was pretty full, as he'd taken plenty of cash with him, expecting to buy a few drinks for the guys. His way of wheedling himself into their good graces. He pulled the lot out. About £150.

Her eyes widened.

'One condition,' he said.

'A quick blow job?'

'Not even close.' His face formed an expression of apology.

As he thought about what he was going to say he was worried he was being patronising. Would she be fed up hearing this from people?

Then he forced the words out. 'Get help? Go and do something else?'

She reared back from him. Looked at him as no one else had in his short life. Her eyes became distant, as if she had temporarily focussed on a possibility. But the light in them faded almost instantly. She opened her mouth as if to speak, and then closed it again, swallowing whatever was running through her mind, the way someone might swallow a nose-full of thick phlegm.

She reached out for the money and it was deep in the folds of her jacket before Rob could finish another breath.

'I'll try,' she said, then turned, pushed open the car door and stepped outside.

She closed the door and, instead of walking away, she walked round the front of the car and approached his window. He rolled it down.

'What?' he asked.

She leaned forward, pressed her lips to his ear and whispered. Then, with a wave, she was gone.

Rob watched her as she walked into the distance. Her legs jutting down from the puff of her jacket barely looked strong enough so support her weight. He smiled as he recounted her part of their long conversation. *Old before her time*. Something his granny used to say about his mum.

And she was wise beyond her years. If only she could see that. She'd helped him to see the worth he had: shame she couldn't see that in herself.

He looked to his left and, through the partly open curtains of a house, he saw the tall, lit triangle of a Christmas tree, the electric lights flickering like candles in a breeze. He thought about the final word from her. Like a gift – quiet

and warm in his ear – she had given him the one thing that kept her free. The only possession she had left.

Her name.