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'A night in the park'

Water dripped from the tree. Her eyes now open, Kate could see, even in the dim light, the drops forming. As if in slow motion she watched as they fell towards her forehead, losing sight just before impact. Mesmerised, and in pain, she didn't move. The pounding in her head couldn't be any worse, the water made no difference and was oddly fascinating.

'How did I get here?' she asked herself. 'I knew that last jaeger bomb was a mistake.'

She struggled to sit up and looked around her. Shards of fluorescence filtered through from the lamps along the tarmac path which crossed this inner city park. She had no idea of the time, she never wore a watch and she'd left her phone at home. It was just a short walk to the Queen Victoria pub, where she'd agreed to meet Jenny for a quick drink. Kate promised herself she wasn't going to be out long. Tonight she didn't want work calling again, saying someone hadn't turned up, and asking her to cover. Answering the phone on previous nights had led to ten straight twelve hour shifts, some of which had turned into sixteen, when she'd slept in the "on call" bed. Tonight, she needed her own mattress and some diversion.

Her relationship with Pete had reached vacuous nothingness, and it was time she ended it. That was tomorrow's problem. Tonight a few drinks with her best friend, eight hours sleep under her own duvet and a renewed spirit in the morning.

Kate's current predicament was all Jenny's fault, of course it was. Kate should've known better, there was no such thing as a 'quick drink' with Jenny. After two bottles of wine between them, the bombs "for the road," then "for the roundabout" and then "the traffic lights," sounded funny and a good idea at the time.

Jenny was in the pub with her husband "Bless-him." That wasn't his name of course, it was the inappropriate and condescending nickname they had christened him with at university.

Jenny and Kate had rowed in a mixed eight, he was their coxswain. The girls now played rugby, Kate as fly-half, Jenny the main lineout target and Bless-him was the team medic.

Kate loved them both. Polar opposites in many ways, they had a very happy marriage and were inseparable. Jenny, an amazonian six foot, muscular framed, blond haired beauty and Tim, his real name, diminutive with glasses and crooked teeth. They would never have been matched on a dating app. Perhaps that's where Kate went wrong with Pete.

'What am I doing here? At least I had the good sense to find a bench under a tree,' Kate thought, as it now protected her from the worst of the heavy rain.

'It's stotting off the ground,' her mam would have said. Kate smiled as she thought of her mother. 'My mam would have said a lot more besides if she was alive and could see me now.'

'Why, the devil did you drink so much? Why the hell didn't you walk all the way home? You know the dangers. Remember what happened to that girl you were at school with?' Kate raised her eyes towards the sky; the rain was easing.

'I'm sorry mam,' she said out loud.

'Get yourself home, be safe,' her mother's lilting tone replied.

Kate's eyes moved downwards. Across the park she could see the windows of her flat on the first floor of a semi-detached Victorian house. Victoria Villas, Victoria Street, next to Victoria Park. The local council and breweries showed a complete lack of imagination when it named places in this area.

A strange sensation suddenly made Kate turn around. She thought she saw a shadow behind the tree.

'Who's there?' she called out, raising a hand to her throbbing head.

'No-one,' came the reply from a man's voice.

'Very funny,' Kate said, her voice a semi-octave higher than normal. 'Let me see you.'

Wearing jeans and a rugby shirt, he walked out from behind the tree. He was tall, about the same height as Jenny, with anabolic arms, steroid shoulders and an odd, sideways movement of his upper body as he walked.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said as he came to sit beside Kate. ‘I was just sheltering from the rain.’

‘How long have you been there?’

‘Not long,’ he said, glancing down at his watch. He pressed a button on the side and the face lit up; luminescent green.

‘What are you doing in the park at this hour? What time is it anyway?’

He looked again at his watch, pressed the button. ‘Just after three,’ he said.

Kate couldn’t help smiling. People always looked at their watches if you asked them the time, even if they had just checked it for themselves. Teasing her friends and workmates about this unintentional ritual re-check was a frequent source of amusement.

‘It’s a strange time to be out in the park.’

‘You can talk,’ he replied, placing his arm on the back of the bench, his fingers millimetres away from her shoulder. Kate leaned forward to avoid contact.

Her mam’s voice again. ‘Look at his eyes.’

Kate looked at his eyes which were moving constantly up and down over her body. She saw the teardrop tattoos in the corner, exactly as described in the newspapers. Those attacks had been miles away. What was he doing here?

She shivered. ‘I shouldn’t be here,’ Kate said, putting her hands down on the bench to push herself up. ‘I’m not staying, I’m going home.’

She walked away.

‘Wait,’ he said. ‘We haven’t introduced ourselves.’

‘No, we haven’t,’ Kate said without turning. ‘Let’s leave it that way.’

‘That’s not very nice,’ he said, his voice hardening at the edges. ‘I want to get to know you better.’

Kate didn’t reply, but increased her pace towards the Park exit.

She glanced behind and saw him, under one of the lamps, following her. As she went faster so did he. She ran. Forty metres to the gate, thirty, twenty. He was catching up with her. ‘Stupid Kate, stupid, stupid,’ she said.

He was leaving her no choice. She had to think quickly. As she reached the open exit Kate turned to face him. He hadn’t expected that and stopped suddenly. Momentary hesitation, then he continued towards her.

‘I hope you’re going to be a bit more friendly now,’ he said. ‘Let’s get to know each other.’

‘No,’ Kate said. ‘I have enough friends thank you. It’s time I went home. I suggest you do the same. Goodnight.’

His smile disappeared. His lips seemed to thin as he pulled them tightly together.

‘I said I want to get to know you. Let’s go back to the bench.’ He was now within arm’s reach of Kate. ‘I don’t take “no” from a girl,’ he said, teeth clenched.

That was enough for Kate. He’d had his warning and she couldn’t have said ‘No’ any clearer. She was wearing her favourite block heeled biker boots, a bargain at £129 in the John Lewis sale, and aimed a kick towards him. He thought of the obvious and put his hands down in front of his groin to deflect the blow. But Kate didn’t do the obvious. Her studded toecap caught him just under his left knee. A strong, well-aimed blow which made him yelp. As he bent down clutching his dislodged patella, Kate kicked out again, this time at his unprotected right leg which was bearing his full weight. She had used her right foot to do the damage to his left knee, this time she used her left foot, striking horizontally, catching the side of the triangular bone.

‘Pedidextrous,’ her mam said she was. Kate wasn’t sure such a word existed.

With the second blow, being able to stand was no longer an option for him and, as he fell, he reached out towards her but only managed to grab the string of beads around her neck. A myriad of multi-coloured spheres scattered in all directions.

‘You bitch,’ he yelled.

Kate ran across the road, grabbing keys from her pocket as she did so. She entered her flat, slamming the door behind her. She stood for a moment, exhaled deeply. Without turning on the lights, she went to the window overlooking the park. She saw him, trying to stand. Dislocations in both knees, one vertical the other lateral, would need expert manipulation to reposition them before he could walk. Kate had performed similar manoeuvres many times in A&E. The treatment would be quick and very painful, but he would soon be back doing crunches, squats and bench presses. Kate had heard prisons have excellent gyms.

‘Lesson learned?’ her mam’s voice reverberated in her head, as Kate picked up her phone to make the three digit call. ‘One good thing though, I never did like those beads you were wearing tonight.’

‘Thanks mam,’ Kate said, pressing the numbers. ‘If you hadn’t woken me up with that dripping water...’

