

The Coat

Rob stood at the bar with his hands tucked into the pockets of his jeans. If anyone asked, he would say that he was getting a drink and waiting to be served.

‘Oh, there you are.’ It was Mo. ‘You’re really late, aren’t you.’

‘I’ve been here for over an hour,’ said Rob.

Mo took his phone out to check the time and looked at it as if that were impossible.

‘Really? Where have you been?’

At the same time as asking, he was also trying to get the attention of the bar lady and succeeding immediately.

‘Six pints please, whatever’s the cheapest. Actually – Rob, you having one?’

‘I’ve already ordered,’ said Rob, noticing afterwards that there was only one person behind the bar. Mo gave him a little nod and searched into his eyes.

‘Are you okay?’

‘I’m fine.’

‘Where have you been?’

‘I was out in the smoking area, there’s loads of people there.’

‘Yeah, there’s a shit ton of people. I didn’t know Saul knew so many girls.’

Rob laughed a short laugh, puffed through his nose.

‘Fit girls,’ said Mo.

They scanned the room together and Rob stayed acutely aware of the bar lady behind them overhearing their conversation.

‘You didn’t come home after work.’

‘Yeah, I was working late,’ said Mo. ‘Had to come straight here, thought I texted you.’

‘No, you didn’t.’

‘Might have lost battery while I was sending it, sorry.’

Rob shrugged. Mo was still scanning the room when his six beers were ready. He picked up the tray and thanked the bar lady.

‘Come join us? The whole group’s here, we’ve got a table upstairs.’

‘Sure.’

‘Ace, see you up there.’

When Rob eventually went upstairs, he heard a screaming voice shouting ‘Rob, over here!’ from the far corner of the room.

‘Siddown, Rob!’

He sat down on a free seat and realised that he had joined in the middle of someone telling an anecdote. It was something about one of them appearing on a TV show for blind dates. Rob found the story difficult to follow, both because there were bits of assumed knowledge which he did not pick up and because he kept thinking what he would say if someone asked him a question, formulating the words in his head. Nobody did ask him anything then and once the story finished, the drinking began.

Pints of beer appeared as if from nowhere, the table pockmarked with glasses of varying fullness. Conversations splintered into small groups and they talked about nothing in particular. They mostly reminisced about other times the group had gone drinking or gossiped on where people they knew had gone to university and what they were doing now.

Then someone patted Rob on the back from behind. It was Joe. At school, people used to draw penises in Joe's exercise book and he would pretend he found it funny but later remove them with Tipp-Ex at home. He had moved several social circles up since then.

'It's so great to see you, Rob.'

'You too.'

'We didn't think you'd come, Mo said he wasn't sure.' The way he said the word 'we' was almost offensive, Rob thought.

'I was actually waiting for him back at the flat.'

'Where you guys living now?'

'In Maida Vale, it's the same place as before. You were there a couple of months ago for Mo's birthday.'

'Oh yeah, that was a sick night. Don't think I've seen you around since then?'

'I've been busy with a few things,' said Rob, wondering whether it sounded too rehearsed, before realising that he didn't care.

'Oh yeah, Mo said.'

'Family stuff.'

'Christ,' he said, perhaps wishing he had never asked. 'Well, it's still so great to see you, mate.'

The conversation tailed off and Joe gave him another pat on the back before disappearing downstairs to the bar. The music got louder and people started to dance, one person prompting another like a domino effect. Every now and again, someone would drop a penny into another person's beer and they would have to down it in one. Rob drank his pints quickly to avoid becoming an easy target. He was drunk then and he felt tired. He excused himself to go to the toilet and gave in to the luxury of pissing whilst sitting down, spreading his legs to minimise the chance of contact between his trousers and the floor. He decided it was a sensible time to leave. Once he was done sitting, he slinked off without saying goodbye to anyone.

He'd had a good enough night and they would be fine without him.

The next morning, he got up at the third time of asking and by then it was late. The first and second times he woke, he looked at his phone and tried to calculate whether he had got enough hours of sleep but before he knew it, his eyes had closed again.

It had been 3.30am in the night when he heard the sound of a car door shutting outside. They lived in a modern apartment block situated on a quiet road connecting two busy roads. The road was cobbled and the car made a rickety noise as it drove away. He was sure there were two sets of footsteps approaching the front door and one of them was definitely wearing heels. They didn't speak and there was a long silence before the front door to the building opened. Rob wondered if Mo couldn't find the fob or if they were kissing. He tried to get back to sleep.

It was too late for breakfast so he decided to stay in bed until lunch.

He opened his laptop and checked his emails. There was still no response on the job application. He read through his CV once more, each time seeming to find new things he ought to have written differently. He was sick with the number of clichés he had written – like “good communication skills” and “fast learner” – neither of which he believed to be true. He also felt

he had listed too many languages that he had a “conversational” level in and he was sure he would get found out. Most painfully, he didn’t have any work experience since finishing university and this tormented him, having read several online articles which said that employers didn’t like gaps on a CV which were unaccounted for. Mo suggested he write that he worked as a private tutor for the past two years but Rob wasn’t convinced that he should.

‘They’ll know I’m lying.’

‘Then maybe you should just tell them the truth.’

‘No way.’

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t want their pity. It’s too personal anyway.’

‘Then put down that you’re an English tutor. Just don’t make any spelling mistakes.’

He closed the laptop, then took a shower and changed into fresh clothes. On the bedside table there were two large glasses of water from the night before, sitting next to a framed picture of his mother and father. He had barely had any of the water and, realising how dry his mouth was, he drank it all and took the empty glasses, along with the remains of a discarded kebab he found in the back pocket of his jeans, to the kitchen.

When he got there, it became obvious that somebody was watching TV in the living room. It was almost 12.30pm. Mo had never been even a minute late for work.

‘Hello.’

It wasn’t Mo.

‘Hi.’

She was watching BBC News and slouched on the sofa in a way that suggested she hadn’t changed the channel in a while. Her hair was tousled and she hadn’t showered, she was almost sweaty. Rob imagined her back sticking against the leather of his sofa through her T-shirt. Her body was thin and long and her bare legs were resting on the coffee table, one crossed over the other. He looked at the soles of her feet, which were black with dirt.

‘You guys don’t have very clean floors.’

He shrugged and stayed standing there.

‘I’m Rob, by the way.’

‘I know.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I met you last night.’

The sunlight passed a cloud and pierced through the window, shining directly into Rob’s face. He was sure he had never seen this person before.

‘I was in the upstairs area when you were there. We didn’t speak, actually. But Mo told me about you.’

‘What did he say?’

‘That you were his housemate.’

‘Well, there you go. He wasn’t lying.’

Rob was aware that he was a lot more dressed than she was and he felt then like it was her home and it was he who had rudely interrupted her watching a TV programme.

‘Did you have a good night?’ she asked.

‘Yeah, it was alright. I didn’t stay long.’

‘I’m Rachel, by the way, but my friends call me Rach.’

‘Cool. Nice to meet you, Rachel.’

Rachel began staying overnight a lot after that.

Slowly, they settled into a routine. Mo came home from work at 7pm. Rachel joined about an hour or two later. She worked in one of those fancy cafés in Kensington where people paid £4.50 for a coffee but didn't tip anything. Mo and Rob got started on dinner and by the time Rachel was there, it was usually time to eat. Mo was an able cook and the food was always good. After they ate, they drank wine, washed up and then Mo and Rachel would disappear into their room while Rob watched late night gameshows they were playing on Dave. Sometimes he turned the volume up high.

One evening, when they were on the sofa drinking wine, Rachel made a suggestion.

'Let me cook something for the flat.'

Mo laughed. He was always laughing, Rob thought that was why people liked him so much.

'Why do you want to cook for us?' Mo asked.

'Because you always do it and I think I should contribute at least once.'

'But you hate cooking.'

She shrugged. Mo seemed very amused by the idea.

'So, Rob's sitting on his arse here all day, I get back from work before you do too, but we're both supposed to starve ourselves waiting until you get back so that you can feel you're contributing.'

'Jesus, Mo. Why can't she just cook for us if she wants to?' said Rob.

'Okay, okay,' said Mo, his tone almost pitying. 'Sorry, Rob, I didn't realise you were so sensitive about this. Of course you can cook for us, Rach. I only meant that when you come back from work, it's usually late and you're quite tired.'

'I'll do it when I've got the day off.'

They talked for a little while longer, mainly about Rachel's manager at the café who she said was very demanding of her staff, but Rob did not speak much. Later, when he was on the sofa alone, he thought about what he had said earlier about letting her cook. His brain kept coming back to those words, replaying the outburst over in his head and wondering what they must have thought of it. He wished he hadn't said anything at all. He finished his wine, turned off the TV and went to his room to sleep.

When he walked into the kitchen, she had bloody hands. It looked as if she'd been slaughtering livestock. She was boiling beetroots.

'Beets?'

'Yes.'

'So, I assume the café doesn't serve food?'

'Ha ha. Very funny. Beets are both delicious and very healthy.'

'You look like you've slit someone's throat.'

'Maybe I have then. Are you going to help me peel?'

They stood there side by side, calmly peeling beetroots and dropping them into the boiling water one by one.

'So what did you do with your day?' asked Rachel.

'I woke up quite late but in the afternoon I went to the British Museum, they had this exhibition on Nordic design.'

'Oh I wish you'd told me. I've been meaning to go to that but Mo didn't want to come with me.'

'You like that sort of stuff?'

‘Oh yeah, totally. There’s something so beautiful about Scandinavian art, just like everything they do. So simple, elegant.’

‘Have you ever been?’

‘Yeah, I did my year abroad in Bergen. I wanted to learn Norwegian while I was there but annoyingly they all spoke such good English it was fucking impossible. Have you?’

‘Have I what?’

‘Been there.’

‘No.’

‘Oh, you should. You would really like it, I think. The people are very *noir*, just like in the films.’

‘Is that how you see me?’

‘Isn’t that how you see yourself?’

Her phone pinged then. It was Mo. He was going to be working late and he was very sorry. She seemed disappointed.

‘We’ve peeled too many beets. There’ll be too much soup for two,’ she said.

‘It’s fine, I’m hungry.’

It took them a while to finish preparing the soup and by that time he really was hungry. It was thick, grainy and tasted like beetroot, none of which was a good thing. When they had their first spoonful, they both looked at each other and laughed.

‘You can be honest.’

‘No, it’s good, really!’

The soup was hot but he made a point of having as much of it as he could in each go without burning his tongue.

‘Mmmm, it’s so delicious,’ he said, teasingly.

‘Stop it!’

He got a bottle of wine from the kitchen cupboard and poured two glasses.

‘It’s probably for the best that Mo’s not here,’ she said. ‘Because he would have definitely said ‘I told you so’.’

‘Did you have a lot of this sort of stuff in Norway?’

‘Yeah, they love their root vegetables. The family I stayed with made this salmon which was cured in beetroot. We ate it every day.’

‘That’s so cool.’

‘So now beets are cool, are they?’

They took a sip of wine.

‘What did you study?’

‘Anthropology. I worked on my dissertation while I was out there, which was on fisheries policy.’

‘Did you like it?’

‘Yeah, I loved it. Though all I learnt is basically that the fish are going to die out and nobody’s going to do anything about it.’

They finished the soup and sat in front of the TV drinking their wine, except neither of them was really watching. It was at this point in the evening that she and Mo would usually go into their bedroom. But Mo was at work and instead Rob was here.

‘Do you like me, Rob?’ she asked.

He felt a stillness in his heart.

‘I don’t like your beets,’ he said, and she laughed then. He was happy that he could make her laugh like that.

‘When I first met you, I thought you didn’t like me.’

He didn’t know what to say then as he preferred not to think about the day they first met in the flat, how he must have acted. His memory wanted to skip over it. She stretched her legs onto the coffee table and the soles of her feet were blackened with dirt once again. She never wore socks in the flat. But her dirty feet seemed different to him now, they were almost sensual. He found the sight of her legs very attractive, her limbs long and healthy looking. The thought popped into his head that it would not be so farfetched if they had sex. She was right there on the sofa and so was he, about a metre apart. He noticed the curve of her lips as she took a sip of wine. It felt like neither of them had said anything for a while. He looked into her eyes, and found that she had been looking into his.

Then the phone rang. Mo.

Rachel answered.

Hi.

You must be tired.

What time?

Oh, okay. Do you want me to reheat you some dinner?

No problem, will do.

You too.

Bye.

Then she got up and went to the kitchen and placed the pot of leftover beetroot soup on the stove and Rob went to bed.

Rob woke up early the next day to call his aunt. The time difference meant that whenever they spoke, it either had to be very early in the day or very late at night. The conversation started in the usual way.

‘Your cousins are so busy all the time, Rob. They never have any time for me.’

‘What are they up to?’

‘Tell me, what am I going to do with them?’

‘I don’t know, aunty.’

‘Thomas is working all the time. *All* the time. He’s in court the whole of next week.’

‘Sounds stressful.’

‘Lizzie’s back from university and she spends more time out of the house than in it. I don’t even know what she’s doing half the time.’

He tried to think when the last time he spoke to Tom or Lizzie was and he couldn’t remember.

‘I know they’ve been meaning to get in touch with you but they don’t even have time for me.’

‘That’s okay.’

‘So, anyway, what’s new with you, darling?’

‘Not much, aunty.’

‘Do you need money?’

‘No.’

‘Because I know London is expensive.’

‘It’s okay.’

‘Well, just don’t spend all your inheritance.’

‘I won’t, aunty.’

‘How are things at the flat?’

‘Good, actually. Rachel’s been staying over a lot.’

‘Are they still bothering you? I tell you, she’s got some cheek. She’s there so often that she should be paying half your rent.’

‘No, aunty, it’s not like that. She’s actually nice. Really nice.’

‘I hope you’re not falling in love with your best friend’s girlfriend.’

She seemed to find this idea very amusing.

‘Aunty, no.’

‘Have you seen any girls you like?’

‘That’s not how it works, aunty.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You don’t just *see* a girl and then go out with her.’

‘Okay, then. Have you *met* any girls you like?’

‘No.’

He could tell this was not the answer she wanted, but it was the least complicated answer he could give.

‘If only I were your age, Rob, and living in a big city like London, I would be having a lot of fun.’

‘I know, aunty.’

‘But you’re waiting for the right girl, I know. That’s why you’re such a catch, my darling.’

‘Thanks, aunty.’

‘Your parents would have been very proud.’

It went on like this for a while and sometimes the conversation went round in circles and Rob’s aunt repeated herself, before eventually tiring herself out and drawing the call to a close. Within a few moments, he got a notification on his phone that she had transferred £1,000 into his account. He was tired too then, like he had exerted a lot of energy despite not saying much himself. He was always tired after those calls. He sat on his bed and looked at the framed picture of his parents on his bedside table. It had been long enough that he had started to forget what it was like to have them around. He remembered his father’s smell, the fragrance of expensive cologne and unwashed hair. He missed it, it was the smell of home.

He wondered if they really would have been proud or if they would have been disappointed that he didn’t have a girlfriend, like his aunt was.

He needed a job, he thought.

He had already checked his emails when he woke up and there was no point checking again so soon. It was raining heavily outside. He got dressed. It was still early and Mo hadn’t left for work yet when Rob went to the kitchen for breakfast.

‘You’re up early,’ said Mo.

‘I was on the phone to my aunt in Hong Kong.’

‘Oh yeah, it’s Friday isn’t it. Did she send you money again?’

‘Yep.’

‘Nice.’

It wasn’t nice, Rob thought. It was annoying. He needed to get a job.

‘Oh, by the way, it’s pissing it down and I said Rach could borrow your coat, I hope that’s okay.’

‘What?’

‘She borrowed your coat. Is that not okay?’

‘Well, what if I need it today?’

‘Why, are you going out anywhere?’

He didn’t have an answer to that. But he only had one coat. And he thought it was a bit strange that she had borrowed his when Mo had so many.

‘Can I borrow one of yours then?’

‘Yeah of course. Sorry, I honestly didn’t know you’d be leaving the flat today.’

‘I don’t know if I am. But just in case.’

‘She did say you should text her if you needed it. I said that it wouldn’t be a problem, but I’m sure she’d be happy to drop it off for you if you want.’

Mo said he was sorry again and then left for work. After breakfast, Rob sat down on the sofa and sent Rachel a text asking her if she still needed his coat.

Within a few minutes, he got the reply back:

You can pick it up whenever, there’s nobody else here. I’ll be at the house all day.

Rach x