

The Streets of London

"If it was meant to be, it will be." sighed Karen wearily massaging her face in an attempt to smooth away the worries and tiredness.

"Don't be like that." Nathan clasped the hand strap more firmly as the unit lurched and screeched its way around a curve in the flowing darkness. "You'll find another. There's several billion more out there."

"That just makes it harder! How am I ever going to find the one among several billion? And there's my job too."

"The job. Hmmm. The timing on that couldn't have been worse ... and they treated you pretty unfairly too."

"Here I am on the scrap heap. There's nothing I can do. There's no way up. Only down."

"Well what would you like to do?"

"I don't know." Karen slumped wearily in her seat.

"No up. Only down? You have sideways. Look at it this way, you're free. No ties. You can do anything you like."

Karen stared at the floor.

"Do you like being here? From what I understand, you only came here because Keith got a job here."

Karen nodded ever so slightly.

"See. You have an opportunity to reinvent yourself. Start afresh somewhere else. Go somewhere you would like. You never know, you might meet someone else out there too ... possibly ... I think there are a few people who live outside of London. Beyond Chelmsford even!"

Chin in hand Karen rolled a sideways glance Nathan's way and sighed. "You can be such a noodle sometimes."

"I'm sorry." Nathan looked sheepish. "You're not in as bad a position as you think is all I'm saying."

"Easy for you to say. You have a job at least."

"Sure. But I know I have good skills I can take with me to other jobs if I decide that my boss is treating me like shit. And you have the same skills. We studied together didn't we? Didn't you beat me on exam results every single time?"

Karen looked away with a slight nod.

"Yeah you always made sure I knew too." Nathan swung on the hand strap. "Your boss was a complete arsehole. A bully. You're better off out of there. Every time I saw you I could see the stress it was causing you. Not all jobs are like that. You'll find yourself a good one but take time for yourself. Have a think about what you'd like."

"I don't know." a dark cloud began to settle on Karen again.

"I have an idea." Nathan ducked and glanced out of the smeared window as the flowing dark suddenly gave way to the brightness of a platform. "Kentish Town. We'll jump out at the next stop, yeah?"

"But ..."

"Uh ah!" he chided. "You're coming with me."

Karen sighed "I just want to go home and be miserable listening to sad songs from my phone."

"And I'm going to show you things that will make you change your mind."

As the flowing darkness engulfed them again, they travelled in silence; Karen in her own lonely universe, Nathan an enigmatic smile on his lips as he gazed at the cable ways and openings that flashed past on the other side of their reflection.

"Here we go. Camden Town." Nathan reached down, took Karen's hand and drew her into a reluctant stand. "Got your stuff?"

An indistinct nod. Karen shrugged her pack straps into a more comfortable position.

Karen in tow, they ascended to the colours of late afternoon and the lingering smell of Indian spices and over-ripe fruit. A sudden chill caught them off guard after the cloying warmth of the Underground.

"Have you eaten?"

Karen shook her head. "No I was just going to have a sandwich or something when I got home."

"Great! Let's grab something here?" Nathan studied the range of takeaways rubbing shoulders with tattoo parlours, second hand bookshops and clothing stores. His practiced eye picked out a promising looking kebab stall. "Kebab? My shout."

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The kebab chef looked up from his smart phone as they entered. "Evening boss. What'll it be?"

"The Chicken Doner looks pretty good to me thanks." Nathan turned to Karen who was studying the menu board.

"Oh. Ahhh. An Adana Iskender for me please."

"Is that to have here or take away?"

"Takeaway thanks." said Nathan.

While the kabab chef corralled the two meals together with practiced ease, Nathan said "We'll take them over to the Market. It should be easy to find somewhere near the lock to sit."

The Market was empty. Where the day had been full of movement, colour, and enticing smells of ethnic food stalls, now the stalls were packed away, leaving a dreary dullness in its place. The only movement was a slight breeze toying with rubbish and faded banners, and an old man in a shabby coat kicking at the papers as they blew past him. From their seat at a picnic table nearby, Nathan and Karen watched the old man as he slowly ambled away, eyes downcast, and the remains of a crumpled newspaper in his hands.

"I think you have a wee way to go yet." said Nathan.

"To?" Karen was puzzled.

"Before you end up like him. Directionless. Lost. Alone."

"I guess."

"You've got friends for a start, yeah?"

"Only a couple though." Karen put down her plastic fork and pushed the unfinished meal towards

Nathan. "That was a big Iskender. Do you have any space left?"

"You know me. Of course I do. I'll borrow your fork though."

Nathan started into the remains of Karen's meal. "Mmmm good choice."

Overhead an early evening British Rail bound for Richmond clattered and clanged past. Nathan waited for the noise to recede. "They say that when a woman settles down with a man, the man gains a best friend, and the woman loses all hers. It's a bit harsh, but there is some truth in it. Now that you are single and free, you can gather up a new group of good friends."

"How do I do that? I don't know anybody."

Nathan's enigmatic smile was back. "We'll see."

They walked along Regent's Canal towpath. The shadows lengthening and the canal waters becoming the colour of lead.

"Thanks for the takeaways." Karen smiled. "It was much better than what I had planned."

"That's quite alright." Nathan returned the smile. "I was pleased for the company."

Turning into Oval Road, they side stepped to avoid being run down by an old woman dressed in rags pushing a decrepit shopping trolley loaded with a random assortment of goods. She muttered and mumbled to herself lost in her own internal version of London. A golf club clanged to the ground at Karen's feet.

"Here. You may want this back." Nathan swept the club up and passed it to the old woman. She snatched it from him and clutched it close, glaring at him.

Nathan shrugged at Karen and they continued down the street, lined with brick terraced houses. A skateboard rumbled by. The smartly dressed young man riding it checking his smartphone as he went.

"Contrasts." said Nathan. "I see the old woman we encountered most times I come this way. I have no clue where she is from. Where does she go each night?"

"And I don't know where I'm going this night either." Karen frowned at him. "Do you want to tell me?"

"You'll see. We'll go through the park. Where we're going's just on the other side."

"Okay? That doesn't really answer my question though."

"You'll see."

Dusk was approaching as they entered Regent's Park, the trees casting long shadows across the path.

"The parks closing soon." Karen looked concerned. "Will we get across before they close it?"

"Sure." Nathan waved a hand taking in the joggers, the mothers with their all-terrain buggies, and the executives on park benches tapping away at laptops. "It'll take them a while to clear us all out."

On autopilot, they walked in silence, the wide pale tree lined strip of the Broad Walk guiding them. Breaking out of his thoughts, Nathan said, "So what happened between you and Keith?"

"I don't want to talk about it." Karen muttered.

"OK. I won't press."

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They had just passed a person taking in the sign for the café when Karen said, "The relationship was very one way with Keith. He was nothing but take take take. I gave him everything but never got anything back."

Nathan was quiet and waited for Karen as she wrestled with herself.

"He had been acting strangely for a while and began drinking more heavily. I was feeling totally ignored and ... even, *used*. I finally asked him for a bit more in our relationship. I just wanted to something to let me know that he still loved me." Karen swallowed as her eyes began to glisten with tears. "He got angry. Called me all sorts of horrible names."

She turned to Nathan. "Was I wrong to want more?"

"No. Of course not." said Nathan. "Any good relationship is an equal, sharing thing. You had every right to want that."

"After that he kicked me out. All I had with me was a bag of clothing, my blue-tooth speaker, and my smart phone. I barely had any money either. All the bank accounts were in his name. Getting my flat set up swallowed most of that."

"Ouch!"

"The worst thing is that my boss and Keith are best mates. Keith made up some lies about me having an affair and my boss sacked me!"

"Holy crap!" Nathan clenched his teeth in anger. "What an arsehole!"

"All because I asked for more in my relationship."

"You deserve better than that prick." growled Nathan. "What he did was immoral and what your boss did was illegal. Something sounds suspicious here. Is it possible Keith was having an affair?"

"I don't know. He spent a lot of his time in the office or out playing golf. I never noticed anything to make me think so."

Nathan walked in thought for a while. "You may not think it now, but you are far better off with him out of your life. I think getting anything out of him will be next to impossible and would be extremely painful. Starting over completely will mean you can build something that is entirely your own. Gather some new friends to help you. You'll see. You're smart. You can make it work. I can help."

Karen sniffed and nodded. "Thank you. I guess you're right."

Chester street was quiet. There were still a few other people around heading in the direction of the gates. Amongst the beautifully manicured lawns and regimented flower gardens, Nathan suddenly stopped short.

"Ah! 'The Wintersmith'." Off a park bench he picked up a ziplock bag containing a battered paperback novel. He turned it over and read a small tag stuck to the back. "A 'Bookcrossing' liberated book. Cool! I've been meaning to read this. I'll have to think of somewhere to release it again when I'm done."

He dropped it into his pack. "This reminds me, have you heard of the 'Twelve Bonk Rule'?"

"No."

"I read about it in another BookCrossing book several months ago. It was called 'Mathematics and Sex'. Apparently, the optimum strategy for finding an ideal partner is that you sleep with twelve people, not all at the same time of course, and you settled down with the next one who is better than all them. This should net you someone in the top twenty five percent of your selection criteria."

"You are such a nerd!"

"Wait 'til I get going."

They wandered along in silence. Karen's dark clouds lifting with the chilly air. There were fewer people around now and the sky was beginning to glow red.

"I bet that's not official!" Nathan nodded to a rope swing slung from an over hanging branch a few meters off the path. "C'mon!"

While Nathan tested his weight on the rope, Karen asked "So this 'Twelve Bonk Rule' ... You've practiced this rule?"

"Er ... well ... no." Nathan looked embarrassed.

"So you're all talk then."

"It's a theory yeah? And besides I'm not that brave. What about Nude Speed Dating? Have you heard of that?"

"Now you're making it up."

"No I'm not." Nathan was indignant. "There's a dating service here in London that does it. Apparently it gets all that side of things out of the way quickly."

"...and you've done this then?"

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The rope creaked alarmingly. Nathan stopped swinging on it. "No. I'm definitely not that brave and not brave enough to try this swing either. Anyway, I'm a scrawny weedy nerd as you say, and would probably embarrass myself walking around with a huge hard-on."

Karen smirked then went red.

"Ere! You two love birds! Out! The park's closed." A park warden was approaching like a storm out of a blue sky.

"Love birds!" Karen snorted indignantly. "With him. He's a complete twerp."

Nathan chuckled. "I think we'd better go."

As the gate clanged closed behind them, Nathan turned to Karen, his eyes alight with glee. "We got told off! I feel like a five year old."

"We're so naughty," laughed Karen. "So where to now?"

"Okay. We're just about there."

"Where are we going?"

"Have you ever done Ceroc?"

"No. What is it?"

"It's a type of dancing. It's lots of fun. I think you'll like it."

"I didn't know you danced?"

"I've done it for a little while but still have plenty to learn."

"So what's it like?"

"Maybe a bit like Rock and Roll, and a bit like Latin, and all done to modern club music. Are you keen to give it a go?"

"Can I just watch?"

"No. It's easy. You'll be fine and there will be other beginners there too."

Karen drew a deep breath and squared her shoulders. "Okay. Let's do this."

After the class Karen collapsed into a seat beside Nathan. "I had a great time."

"...and you met a few people?"

"I danced with some really nice guys. You're a great dancer too."

"If you want it, I've the music collection they use here on a USB Stick. You're welcome to borrow it if you want to practice the moves."

"It would be hard to practice them on my own though." Karen cocked her head. "What say you bring it around to my flat on Friday and we can practice together?"

Nathan smiled, reached out and squeezed her hand. "I'd like that."

Karen leaned close and kissed him on the cheek. "Nathan, I've had a wonderful evening. I feel the sun beginning to shine again. Thank you."