

Exams

Didn't think I'd actually be nervous, it all went down years ago. We'd moved on; different people, different lives, all of that. We were kids then. I used to be a proper idiot and she didn't know any better either, both of us figuring shit out. Still, I'm fucking bricking it¹ as I walk down the high street on the way to pre-game² it at the house. It's cold and dingy, cheap orange streetlights shining off the greasy-looking ground. [...]

5 Danno had called soon as he saw.

"Ay, Grant bruv³, you seen that Abs is coming to Kim's birthday thing at the weekend? You gonna be able to be all cool with it, yeah?"

10 I played it dumb and shrugged it off but, yeah, obviously, I had seen. We still had mutuals all these years later and hadn't taken each other off our *Facebooks* fully, so it'd told me she clicked she was going. I'd poked around her profile to see what was new too; did that sometimes, nothing creepy about it but just to see if she had any new pictures up and check she hadn't taken me off it fully. Never liked anything or nothing, just looked. She had a new profile pic up which annoyed me as I loved her old pic; used to be an arty one of her in a little black bikini on some beach from her travels, big sun hat on looking out over the ocean. Looked like a dream, and sexy as fuck. The shame was her latest upload was one of her at
15 some fancy dinner thing in a white dress, next to that tall, rowing fuck. [...]

It's about half-ten when we get to *Winks* [...]. When we get up to the bouncers they're mostly hanging around chatting and it feels like we're bothering them by asking us to be let in. It's the usual shit with IDs out, check the girls' bags and pat the blokes down for knives. I used to resent it when I was younger but now at least they check everyone. We start to wander through but I hang back to make sure that
20 everyone gets in drama free because it's an absolute nightmare when half of you head in and then one person has forgotten their ID or is on a bouncer's shitlist or something. I watch as Abs takes her turn to get processed and all of a sudden the bouncers look a bit perkier. [...]

25 She takes her ID and waits for her friends, and when I see they're all going to be let in fine I head inside and upstairs to track down Danno and Kim. They're at the bar to the surprise of precisely no one, him with a beer and her holding a cocktail that probably has more sugar than drink in it. They've got me a beer too, and shots for all three of us. I take it and it is absolutely fucking vile. I need a swig of beer to try and rid the taste of it, and as I swing around I see Abs heading towards one of the other bars. Fuckit, she'll come over when she's ready. We haven't seen each other since we broke up five-odd years ago now, it's got to be a lot for her.

30 I get on with dancing and drinking and try to put Abs out of my mind but I can't. We got a lot of history, me and Abs, and maybe it's harder for her to shake it and just come say hello. I know she has her new rowing fuck boyfriend but we had that young love thing going on. She was the year below me at school and we were together right the way up from the end of her Year 10 until she did her main exams. I know her family didn't like me because we used to hang out down the rec⁴ and drink and smoke on the
35 swings a bit, and she never used to do that, but to be fair what else is there to even do around here? Reckon they must've got to her in the end. After it went down it took her a while to get over it [...]. Things got rough towards the end, they do before things end, but we'd been each other's firsts in every way. Alright, fine, I'd had a few things but she was the first one I was with proper, where we explored and shit.

¹ *bricking it*: to be afraid of something

² (here) to drink alcohol before an event

³ slang for friend

⁴ recreation ground

You don't forget your firsts, you'd think she wouldn't be in such a hurry to forget me.

40 The dance floor is filling out as more people make their way over, and the couple of extra drinks are beginning to hit me and all⁵. I look around for Abs' red hair but can't see it anywhere. [...] It's only when I look over behind to see where the nearest ashtray is so I don't just chuck it on the floor that I clock⁶ the sea of deep red hair, and we meet eyes proper for the first time. She holds my look for a little and I shoot her a smile, but she turns away and angles back in towards her little group of friends until I can just see
45 her toned back.

She's really going to make me make the first move, again, isn't she? Fine. [...]

"Alright, you win," I say to her, grinning wide as I can, "I can't play it cool any longer. Long time no speak. How are you?"

50 "Oh, hey, yeah, good thanks," she says, bit off but I suppose I had brought a lot of energy over. I'll try to tone it back.

"How are you enjoying being back around the old place?"

"Not much has changed. Been a while."

She isn't giving me much to work with, and I notice her uni mates looking a bit awkward as they give each other side eyes and look into their wine glasses.

55 "How long have you been back? Saw you away travelling on the socials."

"You did?"

"Yeah, wasn't it Bali or somewhere like that?"

"How ... but yeah, Bali and then up through Vietnam and Thailand, yeah."

"Christ, that's all a bit different from here."

60 "Yeah, it was good to celebrate finally finishing up uni."

"I saw you went in the end. What did you study?"

"Look, I think we're going to [...] get a drink."

"Want me to get you one?"

"It's okay, we're doing rounds and stuff."

65 "I'll get the whole round, my treat."

"Don't worry about it, but thanks."

"Aight⁷," I say, and put an arm out to hug her but I barely get an arm on her upper back before she slips away. The fuck was that all about? That was weird. I give them a second thinking I might catch them at the bar and get Abs to change her mind, or at least get a round of shots in to loosen things up a bit, but
70 when I go back I see them hurry into the loos. [...]

We have some more drinks and chat some more shit and step outside for a smoke and a bit of air – you know how nights go – and soon an hour or two has passed and I'm back on the dance floor. It's well crowded now and you can't tell where anyone is but we're all just a mass of bodies moving as one, until I see a flick of that red hair in front of me. It's her. Aight, fine, I can get her attention this way. I dance over
75 to her and I put my arm around her shoulder. She whips her head around and her hair swings about my face. It smells of coconut and chocolate and I don't think I've ever liked her more. She clocks us finally and looks confused, it's too loud to hear but I can see her mouth go 'what are you doing?' to me. I want to pull her in to explain that I just want a dance is all, like we used to, and put a hand on her hip to bring her closer so I can lean into her ear but when I do all I get is a push in the chest.

80 "Fuck off," I hear, Abs screaming it loud enough to hear over the sound of the club, "just fuck off and leave me alone, will you?"

She storms off out with her uni mates in tow and I'm confused as fuck. What have I done? Tried to have a chat? Yeah, we got history but I know she's got the rowing fuck and all that, just wanted to have a talk and maybe a dance with an old mate. It's just a dance. Nah, bruv, I'm going to find out what's going

⁵ and all: too

⁶ notice

⁷ alright

85 on. [...]

I see Abs roll her head back and then start marching my way. Kim and her other mates try to pull her back but she tells them it's okay, and she carries on [...]. Abs stops her march about ten feet away from me and stares at me with her ice blue eyes.

90 "You treated me like shit when I was too young to know any better," she says, her voice real steady all of a sudden, "and I want nothing to do with you. All I wanted was to be able to go out with my best friend on her birthday for the first time in forever, but you couldn't even let me have that."

I don't know what to say but don't get a chance anyway because Abs has turned and gone off the other way. She stops to say something to Kim and they hug. [...]

95 "You know why she finally dumped you, yeah?" Kim says to me, squaring up like she was a bloke. "Shit got bad, we were young, but I'm happy to let bygones be bygones if she just could, yeah? What's her problem?"

"You know why she stuck around that extra year after school, working here?"

"Shit ended bad, guess she needed time."

100 "Fucksake, get out of your own arse, alright? She came back to the college to do her law A level so she could go to uni to study it. The exam you told her she was too fuckin' stupid to do, that you convinced her she couldn't hack⁸."

"You what? I didn't do that shit, man. I wouldn't."

105 "You did. Don't matter if you don't realise it or not, fact is you did. And now she's finally back from studying and can come out for – for my fuckin' birthday, Grant, yeah? – but you can't leave her be. She got out of here and is a lawyer now, or nearly one anyway, and that ain't no thanks to you."

"Nah, you're chatting shit," I say as I turn on my heel and go. What the fuck was she playing at? Neither of us did that good at school, but the schools around here weren't meant for people like us to do that well in, just in and out and off the street. I never would have told her not to do it, just that it'd be pretty hard.

110 I stop and light a butt and I hear Danno telling Kim that he'll meet her back at hers. I look over to them and he's jogging back over to me.

"The fuck is she saying, man."

"You could have just left it, bruv," he says to me with a sigh and a pant.

"I ain't like that, bruv. I'm not. Why's she even saying that to us?"

115 "I know you're not."

"Then why's she saying it?"

"Because, bruv."

"Because what? You think I'm like that?"

120 "Nah, cuz, calm it," Danno says, and I must've been shouting. "I know you ain't like that and if you were we wouldn't be boys⁹, you get me?"

"Alright, then why's she saying it?"

"'Cause to Abs it's how it went down."

"That's bullshit, bruv. She can just say that, make me out to be the cunt in all this?"

"I ain't looking to dredge it all up."

125 "You could've told me."

"Yeah, and I should have, cuz. That's on me, alright?"

"I didn't do this shit, you all been walking around here thinking I'm the arsehole all these years?"

"Nah, bruv. Just calm down, get some sleep. It'll be calmer tomorrow, fam¹⁰."

130 Fucksake, man. I'm done with him and I turn and head off down the road, both hands deep in my pockets. He shouts something after but I don't got the interest. I ain't like that. I know blokes who are,

⁸ manage

⁹ (here) friends

¹⁰ (here) friend

135 who treat their boyfriends and girlfriends like utter shit; like maids or like idiots or like cashpoints. I'm not like that. I got a good job – alright, I'm no lawyer, but still – and I treat people well. I've never been like that. Alright, fine, sure, I might not have told Abs to go for it when we were younger but that was the reality of it; we weren't meant for stuff like that. They didn't take people like us anyway, least not then. It's good they do now, she's doing well, but I'm not like that, bruv. I'm not, and I hate people who are. And now, what, people who are my mates have been walking around here for the last five-odd years thinking I am that kinda bloke? Nah, allow it. I'm not. I never have been. I can't be held to blame for maybe one thing I said years ago, it's not like that. I'm not like that. I'm not. I'm not.

(2020)