

It's Late

Ian Scott

With a jingle of keys, Nadine Palmer opened the door to her small Clapham flat, rolled around the doorframe and tripped the light switch with a random part of her generous physique. She shrugged off her black moleskin jacket, juggling her handbag and a grease-spotted takeaway food carton from hand to hand as she did so. The light in the tiny hallway shimmered off of the scarlet sequins sparsely scattered across her low-cut blouse and caught the single gold streak dyed into sleek black hair. A faint but constant creak came from the leather trousers that sheathed her long, fleshy legs, legs that ended in a pair of ankle boots sporting incongruously high and narrow heels. She sniffed the jacket as she hung it and made a distasteful face.

As she walked into her kitchen, something about the rake of the heels appeared to be impelling her forward, like a snowball slowly gathering momentum down a mountainside. She landed up against the small table at the end of her kitchen, parked under a window that looked out onto a quiet residential street. The carton and handbag were unloaded and swiftly joined by a large glass of chilled white wine.

Nadine settled herself down and started on the box of Kentucky Fried, long scarlet fingernails on chestnut-brown fingers, clamped around tan chicken flesh. For a couple of minutes she ate and sipped, occasionally smiling at some memory, gleaming white teeth bright against her skin and ruby-painted lips. She pulled a mobile phone from the depths of her handbag and thumbed through the list of contacts, a gnawed drumstick poised in her other hand. Amber, Bea, Brenda, Curleen, Diann.... occasionally she paused at an entry, her face indicating an internal dialogue: it was past midnight, was this someone she could call? Eventually she dialled.

"Nadine? Hey girl! How'd it go?"

"Hey Trish. Another fantastic night." Her voice was deep but light, laughter not far away. "I picked up a colonel."

"A colonel? What, an army guy? The guy Merlene brought along? Get away! What's he like?"

"Fairly cheap. A bit greasy as well, but he's got great legs."

"Legs? What you on about?"

"His legs. Six of them for three forty-nine."

A pause. "Ha haaaaah! Oh, you poor poor chickie! So, no Mr Right tonight?"

"So not Mr Right I decided to phone a friend instead."

"How was it?"

"We met up at The Fire Station then went on to some place called the Beach, near Battersea Park."

"The Beach? I think Mike used to do the doors there, before I met him. How was it?"

"Lots of girls with coloured drinks and dental floss underwear. More Merlene's crowd, you know?"

"I know. And the men? Any beef?"

"Men is not the word. I felt like a nursery nurse. Lots of bald-headed baby-faced boys staring at my tits, you know?"

"No, I'm not familiar with that - you've had better assets than me since we were twelve. Anyway, I'm usually out with Mike these days and nobody stares at me when he's around".

"He's a big boy, or so I've heard, you lucky lucky bitch!"

"Bitch! I'm saying nothing but I've been smiling for six months now! Anyway, how was the spare part, Merlene's guy?"

"Thanks for not calling him a blind date! Sweet enough, but young, you know? Twenty six, twenty-eight, but he's ordering bottled drinks by their colour." Nadine paused. "Who is Terry Henry, anyway?"

"Terry Henry? You don't mean Lenny Henry?"

"No not him. Some footballer. The guy kept mentioning him."

"Oh, you mean Thierry Henry? The French guy plays for Arsenal? The Va-va-voom adverts?"

"That's him. Merlene thinks he looks a bit like him."

"Tall, thin, bum-fluff moustache?"

"Heh! That's close enough. Might explain why he kept talking about getting into the box and scoring, anyway. Subtle as the 159 bus."

"Men. Themselves, sex and football, that's all they care about. And in that order."

"Seems that way. Perhaps I should become a footballing stripper?"

"Hey, listen, that's Mike back from the bar. He's gonna want some attention."

"So will you, right?"

"Bi-atch! I'm saying nothing! You seen the time?"

"I know. It's late."

"Yeah. Look, I'll call you again tomorrow, hear? Let's meet up, lunch and shops".

"Yeah let's do that. Take care, girl."

Nadine closed off the call and bit off some more chicken. As she looked up from her phone, she saw her reflection in the window, slowly chewing the lukewarm meat. She watched herself intently, studying the contours of her face, her eyes, the curves of her cheeks. She swallowed and dropped the remainder of the chicken back into the carton, which she dumped into the swing bin. Wiping off her hands, she wandered out of the kitchen, returning with a notepad and pen. A pause for reflection and she began to write. It took less than a minute. She sat back and re-read the three lines of handwriting. She took a final glance at herself in the window, then added the words "and into football" to the paragraph. She turned off the overhead light and sitting quietly in the darkness, sipped her wine and watched the dark, silent street outside.

"Vivacious, Black Female, 34, curvaceous figure and infectious smile wltm N/S male, 30-45, who is outgoing and into football. Call me now on ..."