

Death by Heartache

By Francesca Baker

‘Mate, will you just settle on a station.’ Said Rob in frustration, as Mark pressed the tune button again.

He’d been in work thirty seven minutes. It should have been fifty four, but alarm clocks and such binary measures of life had become insignificant since Anna left. He’d spent the whole time trying to find a song that didn’t remind him of her. He had had high hopes for the music, wishing each pulse would jolt away the pain, but it was just making him feel worse.

That was the trouble with a life lived alongside someone else. Every significant moment, and thus the soundtrack to them all, was bound up with them. The song that was playing when they met, the song they used to sing around the house, that tune they heard every bloody night in Spain. She was the only person who also knew all the words to Spandau’s Ballet’s Gold, and he loved the way she used to come in from a sweaty gig and switch the radio to Classic FM to fall asleep to. Now he might never be able to listen to music again.

‘Fuck it, I’ll put on a CD.’ He pressed play, hearing the familiar tone disc whirling in its spin of anticipation.

‘Leave him alone.’ Said Alex. Any other day Mark would have been shocked at this apparent gesture of warmth from the office wanker, but today his mind was so full of drizzle that it barely registered. Alex however immediately affirmed that he had not had a personality transplant.

‘It’s the only way he’ll get his knob twiddled.’ And he spluttered little specks of tea on his desk with a self-satisfying guffaw, like a sneezing and proud elephant.

Rob glared at him, which Alex read as a need for clarity on his hilarious joke.

‘I mean, now that Anna’s not there, twiddling his.’

Piles of paper flurried across the room, and a coffee cup shattered not far from Alex’s ear. It was a good shot, deflecting from the way the office chair flung across the floor and that

Mark was now pacing towards Alex. He grabbed his collar and shoved him against a filing cabinet, tripping on the strap of a satchel in the process. His pulse seemed less like a rhythmic reflection of his blood pumping than a ricocheting shuttlecock coursing through his veins.

Rob just sighed. 'Go home, go on.'

Mark didn't want to go home. There were still two coffee mugs on the table, her books on the floor, and the sheets still smelt of her hair. He'd been at home, and the empty flat, a humming fridge, a cool indoor chill, the inspiring drone of a snowy television and the taste of luke warm tea on his tongue wasn't doing him any good.

She had got bored. They had been living together for so long that she wanted to live separately. She wanted a beginning again. A heady, breathy excitement where anything could be, and in that moment lives the potential. Mark had never been one for the frivolities and flirtations, but he loved her. He knew to make her morning tea when he heard the shower click off, so when she came out of the bathroom it would be the perfect temperature. When she sat on the sofa and hunched her legs up, he knew to sit on her feet to keep them warm. He always put her bookmark in when she fell asleep with limbs flailed and the pages flapping in her hand.

That first night, when he saw her at the bar, her fingers wrapped around a glass of wine. She sat twiddling the curl at the nape of the neck, presumably aware that the action entranced him. But really she had danced him into loving her. Her hips shimmied with delicate sexuality, her eyes flickered through her dark hair, sending electricity like jelly fish clamping around his heart. Her arms waved sporadically as she lost herself in the music and Mark lost himself in her.

He felt his heart had been wrenched from his chest and trampled on in front of him, forced back down his throat so he was forced to taste the loneliness and rejection.

'I'm going to the pub.' He picked up his parka and stormed out.

Bars in the day, especially a week day, always seemed a bit curious to Mark. There was a certain type of person who spent all day in the pub that still had a musty scent of stale cigarette smoke and squashed dreams being channelled out every time that someone passed through the doors. The room always felt somewhat jaded. This suited him just fine. Right now he just

wanted to stare into his pint and drink the hurt away.

The afternoon passed in a blur, and as he drank more he found himself speaking to anyone, splurging the thoughts he would rather remained hidden, but something was necessary to remove the edge. He looked outside, where the soft embers of the day were fading into evening. He used to like this time of day, a time of transition and change. Now he did not want anything to change. He just wanted Anna back.

His legs took him back to the bar in which he first met her. He wanted to be there, to feel as though he was near her again. The fizzing neon sign looked cheap, and the lights flickered rather than throbbed down on the empty dancefloor. A group of girls stood chatting, all dressed in black. He winked at the blonde one, and she looked away.

‘Double whisky and a shot of tequila please.’ He said to the barman, slapping his note on the sticky surface. This was an order repeated again and again.

Suddenly the lights came on, and Mark had flashbacks of being at a school disco. He couldn’t remember the last time he had stayed at a club until closing. He wasn’t sure he would remember this. Stumbling down the stairs to the door he was hit with a waft of cold air. Pin pricks of hurt were felt in his eyes, a tingling throat slowly morphing into sobs and large, round, wet tears rolled down his cheeks.

The sun’s firey haze started to illuminate the morning streets. Coffee shop windows glowed with a dull orange light. Piled empty boxes with slightly sodden corners from the morning dampness stayed resolutely forlorn. The ever present police sirens called in the distance, a smooth melody over the pumping bass lines emanating from the dark windows of cars etching down the road. Everything seemed so sad. Isolated, he walked alone.

He could feel his bladder swelling, the pints and shots filling up inside him. He teetered like a penguin as he ran down the stairs of the public toilets.

Mark’s head was spinning, and he rested his head against the cool stone. Briefly the

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thoughts of germs flashed in his mind, but he was too far gone to care. The toilets reeked of stale piss and fractured dreams, the weird lighting making him feel dizzy.

He read the tales of love, loss and lust scrawled on the walls to distract him from his own wasting life. Maybe he should call Claire – apparently she ‘gives it good.’ Or ask Jake and Laura what the secret is. They are going to be in love ‘4 eva.’ Apparently. He used to think that of himself and Anna, when things had not just started, because no one really falls in love straight away, but after time, when his joys become hers, and her woes his pains. Maybe that was it/ no longer two separate people they had dissipated into one another, ebbing and flowing into one another until no clear lines existed. He had thought that was falling in love; perhaps it was fracturing her soul.

He would let her get on with it then. Drinking until his mind was a fuzz, seek solace in lines of powder, and sit crying down here in a fucking public toilet whilst she lay in bed with the dark rich arsehole she had been shagging. He slid down the door, feet up against the trunk of the toilet and started to moan, tormented waves of anger shivering within him.

Within him was a sudden surge of feeling, that it was his fault, and with that sense of culpability came a need for action. Jumping up he bounced from foot to foot, and swung open the cubicle door. The steely mirror shows him dilated pupils, a face raw from the wind, and magnified every crease, all the evidence of a worn out man. He needed to see Anna. He needed to get her back.

He ran up the stairs to find air, Anna, and a sense of soul.

The door was locked. ‘Fuck, don’t they check these things?’ he shouted.

Life was now ruined. He was going to rot down here whilst she wrapped herself around some other guy, the first steps of that dissolution into one another. The rhythm of his soul started to feel taut and his head swam with distortion. His chest hurt, like the embedded dagger of rejection was still hanging from his ribcage and he felt an endlessly abrasive ache. He needed to do something. He needed to get out. Swinging his left arm back and against the metal door did nothing but bruise his arm. He kicked, yelling in angst. The door stood firm.

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Finally in desperation and anxiety he head-butted the door.

Blood spattered, and he stumbled to the floor. 'Screw you Anna.' he mumbled as he hit the ground. The hand dryer started, chugging out its warm air.

It was a cleaner who found him. He had been working all night at a fried chicken shop and was only doing this to make extra cash for the family. Cleaning up piss and shit was enough. Cleaning up blood and bodies something else. Rifling through his pockets he pulled out £34.67, a hip flask a quarter full of whisky and a pack of chewing gum. There would be questions, so he might as well get something from it.

A few days later the summary of the coroner's report was printed. 'Death by heartache' it read.

The End

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