

THE JACKET TRICK

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For Dorota

“INCOMING!” Hugo yelled as he dove head first into Bernie’s cubicle. Bernie had one of the larger ones so there he could hide. He dove in and rolled on the floor like he was ducking a grenade. He banged his knee hard against the metal leg of Bernie’s desk. It stung like hell. He hit the nerve, of course, sending an electric jolt up his leg to his groin. He let out a shriek but quickly put a hand over his mouth to kill it.

“What the fuck, Hugs...?” Bernie said.

“Shhh! The Playboy boss is on my ass. He wants to meet and discuss what it is I do here.”

“So you wanna be quiet and not reveal your position, is that it?”

“Yeah.”

“Makes sense. Except for part where you yelled ‘incoming!’ at the top of your lungs.”

Hugo smiled as best he could. The pain still radiated throughout the leg. It was in his balls now too. Maybe he accidently squeezed one when he rolled around.

"It's a style thing," he said, grinning as the pain crept towards his tonsils.

Yep. Definitely squeezed a ball.

"You know," he continued. "It just had to be done. Come what may."

Bernie the *old-timer* looked more rugged today than he usually did. People called him *the old-timer* because he was the oldest employee at FastCredit, despite being only fifty-one. Like Hugo, he was an American, trapped here in London's financial sector. His job was to maintain the bank's various databases and provide hard numbers for the analysts. But just like Hugo, in these days of perpetual financial crisis, he probably didn't do much real work anymore.

Right now he was sitting in front of his screen, smiling so widely he was showing gum above those slightly coffee-stained teeth. When someone smiles or laughs in front of a screen in an office it's a dead giveaway that they're doing something other than working. He was probably amusing himself with that clip of a man getting his head stuck in an elephant's ass that had been passed around in a traditionally NSFW-marked email this morning.

Weird.

Bernie was the very one who had taught Hugo to laugh on the inside so it wouldn't show. He guessed Bernie didn't care if he was caught not working.

Bernie looked up from the screen and pointed towards the hallway.

"Speaking of... here he comes, Hugs."

Yep. There he was. The Playboy boss. He was the top dog here.

The big man. The numero uno honcho. The head cheese!

He wasn't Hugo's boss directly. His boss had quit yesterday and that's why the Playboy boss wanted to speak to him. Find out what he did here. Hugo didn't feel up for that talk today. So, hiding was the only thing he could come up with.

The Playboy boss's real name was Bryce. Hugo called him the Playboy boss because he looked like a Ken doll at the Playboy Mansion. Early forties, bleached hair, fake tan. He also wore some sort of lip gloss. It was discreet, but still obvious if you just gave it an extra look. He was, like everyone else in the top senior management of a bank, into golf. He practiced his swing in the hallway outside his office. Sometimes in his office, but then without the club. The ceiling was too low there.

He was approaching. Hugo dragged himself and his temporarily bum leg towards the corner of the cubicle. He pressed up gently against the inside of the wall, pulling his legs towards him in a sitting fetus position. He would be safe as long the bastard didn't enter the cubicle.

Hugo exchanged a glance with Bernie. He would cover for him. He always did. Bernie cared as little about this job as anyone and wouldn't care if he got caught in a lie. Even in one as ridiculous as this one.

"Have you seen Hugo?" the Playboy boss said.

Bernie shook his head. "No."

"Where is he? I've been looking for him all day."

"I was just with him," Bernie lied. "At his desk. Did you check there?"

The Playboy boss sighed. "I was just there!"

"Maybe he's just getting coffee or something?"

Then the Playboy Boss stepped inside the cubicle, just past the opening. He started talking shop. Data warehouse stuff, shit that Bernie worked with.

Fuck!

The last thing Hugo wanted was idle conversation. All the Playboy boss had to do was look to his right and he would be busted. Bernie was completely unfazed. Didn't even flinch and look in his direction, which certainly would've made the Playboy boss look too. The conversation droned on. Hugo's leg hurt. His balls hurt. He was suddenly aware of the fact that he was feeling queasy.

Must be from the ball pain.

Bernie did his best to end the conversation but people in the banking business love to chat about their boring jobs. Especially people at the Playboy boss's level. Whenever they said anything they had to follow it up with bits and pieces of conversation which would cover their asses if they happened to talk about anything that could be construed as a statement of fact, opinion, or decision. Avoiding accountability for anything and everything--that was the main purpose of any words that came out their mouths.

The conversation droned on. Hugo zoned out. He didn't catch anything of what they were talking about. He just registered the tone of voice. And when that tone signaled the conversation was coming to an end, he snapped back in. The Playboy boss would be turning to leave. The only question was if he would turn to his left or right. Left was fine. Right was not.

"Okay," said the Playboy boss. "If you see Hugo, let me know."

He turned. To his right.

“I will!” Bernie said. Loudly. It sounded unnatural, which of course was the plan. It worked. The Playboy boss turned back. Bernie got up and walked him out instead, making him turn to his left as they both left. Brilliant, as the Brits would say. Bernie had the kind of smoothness with cheating that only years of experience would get you.

Hugo listened as the voices faded away. He got up from the floor and sat down in the extra chair and waited for Bernie to come back. He took a couple of deep breaths to force himself to calm down.

Bernie's part of the office was livelier than his. His cubicle was adjacent to the front office, which was always busy. Young Generation Y:ed boys and girls born in the Eighties populated this part of the business, constantly milling about between phone calls, printers, archives and their computers. FastCredit was the type of bank that only provided customer services by phone so there were only clients in the office on exceptional basis. The back office staff, which both Bernie and Hugo were part of, was a little bit older, if only slightly. FastCredit was a young business.

Hugo noticed the new art on the walls, rented of course. They were switched out every other week or so. Financial crises never affect this kind of fine polish that all banks love so much.

Bernie came back, now with a bunch of paper in his hands. Rule number one in a bank, or any office job for that matter, is to always carry papers in your hand when you are away from your desk. If you don't people will immediately assume that you're not working. Emails are

fine. Bernie printed every single one as soon as he got them. They look official and *work-related*. These particular emails weren't his, of course, since he didn't have them in his hand when he walked Bryce out.

"Grabbed it from the printer," he said and threw them in the trash as he sat down behind the desk. Whoever those papers really belonged to would simply have to print new ones.

"So, what's up, kid?" Bernie said. His voice was coarse. Hugo hadn't noticed before with all the commotion.

"Out trolling for booty last night?" he asked.

"Naw. Just wing-manned a buddy of mine. Took a hit for him so that he could get his hands on the pretty one. Hence the extra booze. Hence the hangover."

"Say no more." Actually, he wasn't completely sure what that meant. Hugo had never been that good at picking up girls.

Bernie had the reputation for being something of a pick-up artist despite not being all that attractive. A PUA, as he abbreviated it. He wasn't ugly or anything, just rugged and kinda worn out from hard living. Like an older James Franco. These days he wasn't that active. He was more like a grand master passing on his knowledge to the younger generation. He had offered to take Hugo under his wing more than once.

"With women it's all about *personality*," he always said. "What you say, your body language, eye contact, confidence. The right kind of *behavior* will trigger a woman's attraction buttons. Good looks will help you, of course, but it's not a deciding factor."

He never bragged about his conquests. *A gentleman doesn't do that*, he always said. An alpha male doesn't need others to validate him. He's comfortable in himself.

Usually Bernie wasn't this hungover. The girls must've put up quite a fight last night. Hugo could smell the booze from five feet away. Bernie's very distinctive hangover smell usually comprised of a mix of peppermint from his gums, mixed with coffee and just a hint of a pick-me-up. Today the emphasis was clearly on the pick-me-up. He fished the old pocket flask out of the bottom drawer. He looked around to make sure no one saw, then he took a sip and immediately after folded a new Juicy Fruit into his cheek. He offered the flask to Hugo who always politely turned the offer down.

"Mind if I stay here for a while?" Hugo said. "If Bryce shows up again we're discussing some pressing work issues. Okay?"

"Sure, kid." Bernie scratched his three day stubble and then took another sip. He put the flask back in the drawer.

"So," Bernie said. "What about the new boss?"

"Starts in two weeks. No more freedom."

His old boss had been the hands-off kind. She had let Hugo do whatever he wanted as long as he had delivered what he was supposed to. That sort of freedom was rare in this business. Hugo knew the chances of getting that again with a new boss, whoever it may be, were slim to none.

"Maybe it won't be that bad," Bernie said, as if he had read his mind. Hugo just smiled.

"Naw, you're right," Bernie said. "It will be that bad."

"I don't know, I just feel so demotivated lately. And a new boss won't help. Thinking about trying to revive my writing. Again."

"Yes, you've mentioned that a few times the last few weeks. Stop talking about it and just do it."

"I thought I was at peace with leaving it behind, but apparently I'm not. But it's not that easy to get anything done when you have work sixty hours a week. Which is what I will need to put in with the new boss. And during weekends I have to play house with Jess. She'd kill me if I'd spend our couple's together time writing."

"So quit!"

"Can't. Mortgage, student loans. Expensive lifestyle. The money prison, dude. You know, the more you make, the more you lock yourself in."

"Sounds like a bunch of excuses to me."

They were excuses. They were also real problems. How had other people who had succeeded in writing done it before him? Did they sponge off their respective others? Doesn't sound like the right thing to do. Did they live in a box on the street, with an old typewriter, writing on the back of old sandwich wrappers? He and Jess couldn't manage anymore without two relatively high incomes. Not without serious downsizing. Jess had never liked his writing interest. *A childish boyhood dream*, she called it. She'd never put up with living in a flat share out in Hounslow somewhere, eating beans and canned tuna for dinner every day, waiting for the bathroom while the weird roommate jerks off holding a pair of her dirty panties to his nose. All while he was waiting for his big break as a writer.

He could potentially put in an hour's work in the evening when he got home, when Jess was at the gym but he was just too tired. And he had to go to the gym himself. The body doesn't stay slim all by itself after thirty.

Oh well. I'll retire someday.

"Let's go get coffee," Bernie said.

They stopped by Nella's desk first. She wasn't there so they waited. Unlike Hugo and Bernie, Nella was still ambitious about her job. She was still partially in the management's corner and rarely agreed with the criticisms Hugo and Bernie slammed them with (behind their backs, of course). She was part of their gang anyway. Besides, Hugo and Nella went way back, to their college days when they had met in Economics 101. Mornings were not her strong suit and it was best to stay clear before ten. She joined the living after a few cups of coffee.

After a few minutes she swaggered in with her slightly tomboyish walk, hair up as always, with a smile on her lips. She wore make-up but it was very discreet, so discreet that you didn't notice it at all unless you had seen her without it for comparison. Hugo had, so he knew. The smile revealed that she had had her coffee.

"More coffee?" she said.

They both nodded. Her full name was Petronella but everyone just shortened it to Nella and had done so since she was a little girl. Only customs officials and other government authority figures ever said her real name. Hugo sometimes called her Nells, or even Nellysy. It was only fair. After all, she was the one who had come up with his nickname, Hugs.

"I only have a few minutes before I have another meeting, so we can't go downstairs," she said.

Downstairs meant the lobby down by the main reception. There was a small corner with a sofa group and a better coffee machine. It was slightly secluded and almost always empty, and could therefore be used to safely unload about your idiot boss, or anyone else that annoyed you for that matter.

Instead they went to pantry number two in the back office section. They each got themselves an acid-loaded cup of coffee and sat down in the IKEA sofa.

Nella had the most dangerous job in the entire bank. She transferred money between the front end computer system and the back end computer system. These two very costly systems didn't communicate with each other so it all had to be done manually using a simple spreadsheet. Non-communicating patchworks of systems is a disturbingly common occurrence in banks. If people only knew.

The risk of screwing up those transfers was enormous. A simple typo, a zero too many or too few would result in a total clusterfuck. Management, of course, preferred living with this risk over investing in a proper solution. It was all so stupid it was almost beautiful. If you did screw up it would mean that management could think they had more money to play with than they actually did. They would then spend it and then it would all be fucked. But Nella wasn't scared. She faced the stupidity head on. And so far no incidents.

"So, what do you think about this afternoon?" Bernie said. He almost whispered. In the pantries in the office you had to watch what you said. There were many ears, and office people love to gossip.

"I don't know," said Nella.

"Maybe it's time?" Hugo said.

Nelly was immediately annoyed. "Let's not take anything out in advance. You don't know it's about cutbacks."

Hugo smiled but didn't say anything. He didn't have to.

On the way back to his desk he took the short cut through Management's corridor. Bryce was in his office, practicing his swing. Hugo scurried past undetected.

By all means. The business is going down the shithole. Why should he work?

The meeting turned out to be just another piece of corporate team-building bullshit. Strategies and goals and whatnot. Hugo slept through most of it. No cutbacks announced this time. But they would come eventually.

Friday afternoon. Reporting week. Hugo had submitted everything and was done for the day. The week had eaten away at him with ten hour workdays every day except Monday, but he had made it. Now his reward was waiting for him with the weekend and dinner with friends. He should have felt content, proud, maybe even happy? But there was something missing.

He packed up his laptop and a few reports that were going to require some attention over the weekend. That used to be okay for a while. The first year after he had started here. But now he mentally threw up on anything relating to work, especially if it was outside office hours.

He waved goodbye to Bernie and headed for the front door. The front office had been empty for two, three hours now when everyone had rushed to pick up kids at school or to get a bottle of wine for tonight's dinner.

Hugo didn't know why exactly he felt like he did. Sure, the work was crap but he had liked it at least a little in the past. Tolerated it, was perhaps a more appropriate word. It definitely wasn't the pay. Of that he was sure. In the past he had been able to drop things once he was

out of the office but now it was spilling over into his private time. Everything seemed kind of...*deflated*. Like a flat beer. Sure, it goes down but the taste... He wasn't angry. He wasn't depressed. But he wasn't the opposite either.

Lethargic?

Apathetic?

Isn't that the same thing? What was the word he was looking for? Maybe he was just tired?

On the subway home he took out one of his old short stories he had written in college. He had planned on editing it for a long time now. Maybe bang it into publishable shape so that the story he had miraculously sold to Science Fiction and Fantasy five years ago could have its follow-up.

He read the text. Was it good? Was it not? He couldn't tell. A few years ago he would've known exactly what was wrong, exactly what was right and then made the necessary changes. Now he had stared at the same line every day for three weeks and come up with nothing.

Nothing.

Maybe he was just tired? Or maybe he just was an untalented hack? Writers, the good ones, always had an interesting history to pull from. An abusive childhood. Maybe they had done time. Killed someone, whatever. Hugo's demon was that he had no demons. He had had a nice, safe suburban childhood. No crime. No abuse. No painful losses of loved ones. Nothing to draw on. No wonder he had constant writer's block.

He told himself he'd give the story another try sometime during the weekend, but he knew he wouldn't feel like it then. On weekends his brain wanted to shut down.

He wanted to go downtown. Shop a little and have some lunch with Jess. Things that didn't require any intellectual effort. He wanted that. He *needed* it so that he could recharge.

Tonight the reward would consist of a dinner at Will and Sarah's place. Hugo and Jessica were to bring the wine so he stopped at Tesco. There was a line. Everybody wants booze and snacks for Friday night. He picked up two bottles of Cabernet-Sauvignon-something. Some French stuff. Nice. Since he got the job at FastCredit they could afford more expensive wines

At least something is moving in the right direction.

He remembered how excited he had been the day he got the call back from FastCredit. Now he was going to make a lot of money. Work long hours, but that was okay. He had taken on everything thrown his way with the greatest enthusiasm. The first year he had even had energy left over to write in the evenings. He was still ambitious at work. Enjoyed it, really. Jess had even been fine with him spending a few hours after work writing. The protests that it ate up all their couple time came later.

Jessica was in the kitchen when he got in the door. She had prepared a whiskey sour for him and put out some light snacks before dinner.

"Hey, baby," he said and gave her a kiss on the cheek. He took the drink and smiled. "You read my mind."

"A lot at work?"

He nodded.

"We have to leave right away."

That's right!

He had already forgotten that he'd come home almost three hours later than normal. It was almost eight already.

"Can't we be fashionably late? I just have to kick back a little first."

He sank down on the couch and threw his feet on the table. He tossed his tie on the floor and unbuttoned another button on his shirt.

Maybe this very moment on Friday nights is the entire reward for working?

Jessica gave him an annoyed look. He knew she didn't like it when he had his feet on the table (which was some expensive Danish designer thing she had picked). But she didn't say anything. Maybe she just wanted him to get a move on.

She was already dressed. Black party dress cut just above the knee and high heels. Maybe just a little too much make-up but he'd take it in a heartbeat. Hair up. Maybe new highlights. Jessica was a brunette but he had never seen her in anything else than a light blonde except in old photos from before they met. Tonight she looked stunning.

Maybe stay home and do something else...?

"I have to take a shower," he said. "Put some other clothes on."

"But get moving then!"

British accents are cute but can be so annoying when they take on that whining tone. He moaned as he got up from the couch. A bit higher than necessary. It wasn't just the going out part, but also to whom. Hugo hated Will and Sarah. They were Jessica's friends originally and he had never really gotten along with them. There were

no open conflicts or any such thing, of course. He just thought they were so unbelievably boring.

He chugged down the rest of the whiskey and went to the bathroom.

"Just a quick shower," he said again. "Three minutes. Tops. Got to wash away all the office dust."

Okay. I don't hate Will and Sarah. Right?

There was nothing wrong with them, really. They were good people. They had similar jobs to him and Jessica. They were business majors, just like they were. Didn't like the same kind of movies but you can hardly hate someone for that, can you? Anyway, Hugo never wanted to go and yawned reflexively inside himself whenever Jess told him they had been invited over to them, or when she had invited them.

Maybe it was the entire concept he hated? *Couples Hell!* Apparently, it was a phase in life everyone had to pass through, except that once entered, the phase never seemed to reach its end. It was cyclical. It was like an eternal purgatory where Paradise always remained an arm's length away. Bad analogy. There probably isn't any paradise.

Couples Hell is the last gasping breaths of your youth. It starts with childhood. Everyone complains about their childhood but Hugo really couldn't say he had a bad one. As an adult it is comforting to have a bad childhood on which you can blame everything that goes wrong in your life. Even a dead writing career.

As a child he had to put up with a few nicknames. Hugo became Hugh, which became Hugh Hefner. Hugo didn't know who that was until much later but he still didn't like it. Sometimes it became Huey which became

Chopper. He did have wild hair which conceivably could have been the rotors of a chopper, but it was farfetched. He thought so already then, but sometimes the imagination of children is as endless as their cruelty.

After childhood come the awkward teen years with all their rebellious antics and debuts of various kinds. Sex. Alcohol. Weed. The intensity of those memories had started to fade away. Today they belonged to a different reality. He sometimes wondered if other thirty-plus people felt the same way.

The twenties is all about rambunctious single life. Nightclubs. Lots of booze and weed every weekend. In those days he had had a remarkable resistance to hangers. Where was that today?

At thirty your friends start to pair up and after a few years you have no social contacts whatsoever that do not include couples. Quiet evenings, dinners with two or three pairs, with wine, coffee and liquor on the side.

Liquor!

Is it a sign of maturity when you take your coffee with *liquor* on the side? Or even worse, is a sign of maturity when you realize you actually *like it!* Every Friday evening the ritual begins again. Sometimes even on Saturdays. After a few years all possible conversation topics have been run through so many times you start to contemplate suicide. But at the same time you don't want to go back to any of the previous iterations of the cycle. They're history. You long for something else but you just don't know what. It is exactly this lost longing that defines Couples Hell.

After the shower he went to the liquor cabinet to pour himself a new drink. Bernie called it a *perseverance drink*.

Alcohol consumed for purpose of making something unpleasant go down easier.

Social lubrication. Keep it greasy so it'll go down easy.

Hugo needed one of those now.

What's the difference between a drink and a cocktail?

One of life's really big issues. He, Nella and Bernie had discussed it animatedly at the last company thing. After drinking several of them, of course.

"Cocktails are not something hip young people drink," Nella had said.

"A cocktail has more than two ingredients," Hugo had said. "A drink only two. Booze and soda."

"No, no, no. It's..."

Blah, blah, blah. Drunken gibberish...

Finally Bernie, who had been quiet up to this point, had banged his fist on the table so hard he knocked over his scotch and said:

"If there's a fucking umbrella in it, it's a cocktail."

And then that was that.

He dressed. A suit and a white shirt, no tie. Dressed down in Hugo's world. He would remove his jacket once he arrived and that would be as casual as he ever got when seeing other people.

"The cab is here," Jessica said from the kitchen. "Hurry up, Hugo!"

Jess never called him Hugs.

He downed the drink in one sweep (and it was a drink since there was no umbrella) and put on his shoes and overcoat. He was just the right amount of tipsy now. He would manage until the conversation wine was served.

They didn't say much in the taxi. Hugo felt how a week's hard work began to take its toll. He wasn't sure

Jess felt the same. She didn't have the kind of periodic pressure he had, even though they had similar jobs. For her the burden was spread evenly, something he sometimes envied. But she didn't have those nice stretches of calm that he had. He appreciated the exhaustion from the peaks. The silence that followed in their wake was refreshing.

A year ago Will and Sarah had taken another step in the cycle. They had had a kid. Hugo found it both strange and disturbing that whenever someone has a kid their own identity takes off into nowhere. Only the kid exists. You know that for years to come that every Christmas card you'll get will have a picture of the kid only, even if the greetings are from the entire family. Every profile pic on Facebook will be exchanged for a picture of the child and you'll know that you won't be able to have a conversation with any of the parents about anything except matters related to child-rearing without them suddenly losing interest. No more beer nights. No sports talk. No movies talk. No nothing.

Hugo and Jessica had congratulated the lucky parents with a card that said "Congrats to the boy. See you in twenty years!" Jessica had only reluctantly agreed to buying it. Hugo had found it in the novelty section but he failed to see the humor in it. He was still baffled by how Will, who had dove head on into the role of being a dad, had just let go of everything he was before. Now he could just interrupt a conversation, mid-sentence, to attend to some need the child had. And it wasn't just when the kid had fallen and hit his head or the like. But for *any little thing*. The thought that one's identity could just sink in and wither away like that amazed him. It scared him.

I'm such cliché sometimes.

Hugo liked kids. At least that's what he told himself. He thought they were cute and all, like puppies, but the thought of having his own frightened him. Jessica, on the other hand, was absolutely delighted. She was fluent in cuddly baby talk. Better than the kid's parents.

They all stuck rigidly to the script for the entire dinner. A sweet aperitif was served (and this was definitely a cocktail since it had an umbrella in it). Sarah said it was a Cosmopolitan. For the appetizer they had asparagus soup. The entrée consisted of a chocolate-marinated tenderloin. Everything was amazing, of course. Cooking was all the rage now with all those damned kitchen TV shows. Will and Sara had jumped on the bandwagon accordingly. For dessert they had a panna cotta and then coffee. And *liquor*.

Will and Sarah were dog people. Or used to be. Before they had the kid they (and Jess) had cuddled with the dog the same way they now cuddled with the baby. These days the dog was always locked out on the balcony when Hugo and Jessica were visiting. Ostracized. Made redundant. Out in the cold, literally since it was January and freezing outside. Hugo had thought many times about saying something but never did.

The dinner conversation revealed that another step in the cycle was about to be conquered. The move to the suburbs. When a couple buys a house, all the time that is not spent on the kids will be spent on the house. You could tell already. Amortizations, interest rates, new kitchen, interior design issues all dominated the conversation solidly. Hugo was quiet most of the time but Jessica was enthusiastically engaged.

Hugo had found Will obnoxious already way before the last steps of the cycle had been conquered. He had been the type who cited famous scholars and thinkers in conversations as soon as the opportunity presented itself. And sometimes when it didn't. He inserted Latin and French into his sentences whenever he could. He would say things like "*Le Boulangerie is de facto vis a vis the Palais de Justice.*" Or incomprehensible things like, "you can't assume *a priori* a *tabula rasa* within a *post-modernist ethos.*"

You wanna seem educated. We get it!

All of this was now blown away when diapers and mortgages started to dominate. Hugo was pretty sure he liked the old Will better, even if both of them were decidedly tedious.

The rest of the evening ran by in sort of a haze. Hugo had consciously downed one or two extra glasses of wine to make everything go by easier. The three of them droned on for the entire evening about IKEA furniture, various living space measurements and station wagons. Hugo nodded whenever he suspected they wanted something from him. Late in the night they said goodbye and the obligatory "let's do this again soon" and then they were off.

In the cab Jess had that look. She was horny from all the talking about kids, family and suburban bliss. She always got that way after cuddling with babies. The idea of starting a family of her own was her trigger. In fact, these days it was her *only* trigger.

"Let's get one of those ourselves," she would say.

"Sure," Hugo would say, even though he didn't really mean it.

He had used this many times to get himself off. He'd cuddle with babies of friends and relatives, he'd speak baby talk with them, all in an effort to manipulate Jess into having sex later when they were alone. Tonight he hadn't done anything like that but she was still horny. Or *randy*, as she would say.

She was all over him. Kissing him, whispering naughty stuff into his ear.

"Maybe I'll give you a blowjob right here in the cab?"

"You wouldn't have the guts to do that."

"Really?"

Her hand went down to his pants. She unzipped him and grabbed his cock. He was getting a boner. She had a most delightful look in her eyes, he had to admit. One of both embarrassment and naughtiness. The cab driver probably saw it but it didn't matter. It was one of those funky English cabs with a lot of space in the back. She went down.

Hugo had to admit to himself that he was a little shocked. He had never thought Jess would ever do such a thing. It was nice but he wasn't really into it. It wasn't that it was public--he didn't care if the driver saw anything. It was the reason for Jess's excitement that bothered him. Before he wouldn't have minded that it wasn't really him that made her horny, but tonight it annoyed him. It couldn't go on this way forever. Sooner or later he would have to deal with the fact that it wasn't Hugo himself that got her going, but some evolutionary-instilled imperative to procreate.

Isn't it always like that? It is, isn't it? So why should he care? She's horny, so just man up and hit dat ass! It still

bothered him, though. It still wasn't him. It was the image of a nursery with pink elephants and rainbows on the walls, a cradle, a luxury kitchen, of a picket fence, of IKEA furniture that got her going. It was like she could do it with anyone, as long as this dream was the end result.

She didn't have time to finish before they were home. Hugo zipped himself up while Jess paid the driver.

"Good evening," the driver simply said like nothing had happened.

In the bedroom they continued. She ripped his clothes off and pushed him down onto the bed. She straddled him and rode herself to a furious orgasm. It didn't take long at all. Hugo thought he'd finish himself off quickly with some regular mish but he couldn't come. He was too bothered by the cuddly baby crap.

She turned over and got on all fours. It usually helped. Everything became tighter doggy style. Heavier stimulation. But he still couldn't come.

"You want the ass," she said.

He thought about it. He was bothered but still worked up now and wanted to unload. He had always found anal to be a little overrated. Fun the first few times, but then just tedious. It wasn't like in the pornos. In real life you can get dookie all over your dick.

He remembered a friend telling him how he had fucked this girl in the ass, doggy style. He was drunk and a bit nauseous to begin with and when he came and pulled out, a glorious mixture of cum, blood and shit had oozed out of the girl's asshole and he had shit all over his dick. He had been so disgusted he threw up all over her back.

Fecal matter aside, you can't just do it like Rocco and spit on it and shove it in. At least not with Jess. It would require an exorbitant amount of lube and twenty minutes of easing it in gently. He didn't think he was up for it tonight.

"Let's just call it," he said. "I probably drank too much wine." A good lie, wine did make him sleepy and gave him a blocked nose. Sometimes his performance would be affected. Credible, but still a lie.

Jess wouldn't give up. She took him in the mouth again and kept at it until he started feeling raw but nothing happened. It was good but he just couldn't get over that final hump and shoot his load. Eventually she gave up.

"It's okay," he said. "It's not you."

Why is it so hard to be honest with the person you're sharing your life with?

In a way it wasn't her. Visual cues were usually enough for Hugo to get turned on and Jess was grade A fuck meat. A real trophy. Very beautiful, doll-like facial features, perfectly delicate and symmetrical. Flat belly and round hips. Not model skinny, but still not an ounce of excess fat. Her breasts were crazy beautiful, smallish the way Hugo liked them. Today it wasn't enough.

They lay on the bed and didn't talk for a while. To Jess this probably wasn't a big deal. Things like this happened from time to time, to both of them. But it was usually because trivial reasons like too much booze or physical fatigue.

Ahh, fuck it.

He had a tendency to over-analyze everything.

"You were so quiet tonight," Jessica said.

"I was just tired."

"Were you bored?"

"No. I was just tired."

He sensed that she wanted to talk more. She wanted to dig into it, his insistent silence during the evening, turn it inside out, turn it into something big. She always wanted to do that, but she didn't say anything else. He was grateful. He just wanted to sleep it off. They held each other while they drifted off.

The week started off easy. It always did after the monthly reporting is done. Monday went by, Tuesday went by. Not much to do. It was as if the entire business had a hangover and needed to chill a bit from vomiting all those work hours the week before. Hugo spent most of his time surfing the net. Benzo's and Bernie's various YouTube clips and some other junk also kept him busy.

He thought more and more about how boring his job really was. He worked with what the banking world calls risk management, a prestigious analytics job requiring years of training, without really being all that complicated. It is a job that impresses people. Hugo worked with *mathematical models*. Forecasts and whatnot. It always sounds good when you say you are working with *models*. It seems sophisticated, advanced and fun while at the same time being incomprehensible to laymen. Incomprehensible must mean difficult and if you work with something difficult you must be good? But all it really meant was that you spent your days shuffling decimals around in spreadsheets.

Wednesday drifted by in the same pace as the two previous days. Maybe there was a slight tendency for the wheels to start rolling again. He spoke to a few front-of-office colleagues and they were quite busy. Not so strange, really. Departments who had customer contacts didn't have the same rollercoaster workload as Hugo's job had.

He studied the rental art on the walls. These were new (they were switched out every third or fourth week or so). There was some nudity this time, naturally surrealistically portrayed. A boob here, another one there. Crooked, off angle. Etcetera. This nudity had stirred up some indignant emotion in the management team and with some others. All water cooler jabber was about this for the entire past week.

Apparently people in this place have missed that the net is full to the brim with porn. Just three clicks and you can watch some hairy guy sink his entire fist into the ass of tiny Asian girl while she has her mouth full of BBC at the other end.

In a world like that, how can a fluffy little oil-painted boob be so upsetting? The perversities the net offered of course can't be enjoyed in a bank. The security filter saw to that.

Wednesdays was after work night. He, Nella and Nicolas met for beers at a place called *The Red Tick* in the City of London. It was a tradition dating back to the days when they all had just landed their first job after college. Nella and Hugo had eventually ended up here at Fast-Credit while Nicolas had stayed with Chase, where they had all went through their financial services boot camp.

When Hugo arrived Nella and Nicolas had already parked themselves in their regular booth in the back, in a corner by the bar. They sipped cautiously on their beers

as if they didn't want to start their regular binge drinking before Hugo arrived. He was forty minutes late so he hoped they were still on their first one. It's always tough to be left behind.

Peter Lawrence was the proprietor of *The Red Tick*, and a fat bastard. He was better known as Lardence, or Lardy for short. Lardy didn't mind. He liked food. Especially deep fried food. He had no problem admitting he was a fat bastard. He had no plans to stop eating either. When someone brought up that he shouldn't tolerate people calling him fat he always just shrugged and said, "I am a fat bastard. I'd rather be a fat bastard than a model if it means I have to eat salads."

Who wouldn't?

Lardy finished up their little quartet. They had all spent so much time at *The Tick* he had almost become a friend. Lardence had a distinct small business owner background and had opened *The Tick* about the same time as the others had started their jobs. He had to manage the bar but mostly kept within conversational distance, ready to throw in some annoying comment in between taking customer orders.

The Tick was named after a beer that Moe the bartender had served Homer in an episode of *The Simpsons* when Homer had asked for something special besides Duff. Lardy, who possessed surprising artistic talent, had himself painted a portrait on the wall above the bar of Moe holding one of the Red Tick bottles saying, "Needs more dog!" Most of everything was else was standard British pub. Dark wood, some carved inlays for decoration, chalk board menu, the works. Everything looked

worn and old as hell but it was made to look that way. Fake. All of it. Nobody cared.

"The prodigal son," Lardy said as Hugo sat down. He already pulled a beer that he gently slid over the counter to Hugo's hand.

Lardy almost always wore t-shirts with prints on them. He wore a new one almost every time they met. This one said 'Enough about me, let's talk about *me*'.

"The boss-less son," Hugo said as he took his seat next to Nella.

"So what?" Nicolas said. "Shit like that happens all the time in this business."

"Yeah, poor you," Nella said.

They all mistook his comment for whining. Hugo liked having no boss.

Nicolas had also taken quite a few steps in the cycle of life. He had met his Anna fairly quickly after graduation and now had two kids. A boy and girl? Hugo didn't keep track that closely. But yeah, he was almost a hundred percent sure. Boy and a girl. Around two, three years old now.

Hugo wasn't sure if it was Nicolas's newish role as a father or something else, but he gave a much older impression these days. Like, really old. He guessed it was true what they said, you only fully become an adult when you have kids of your own.

It wasn't just that he felt older, he looked older. He was a victim of a typical thirty-plus syndrome. His hairline had receded somewhat and left a thin tousel at the top of his forehead which he still styled in a bedhead fashion. He picked at it constantly, as if to make sure it was

still there. Hugo found the whole thing incredibly entertaining.

"So what are you going to do about it?" Nicolas said.

"With the boss, you mean?"

"Yeah. What else?"

"I guess there's nothing I can do."

"Why all the whining then? I know you. You have something on your mind." There! He picked at his bed-head tousle again, restyling it a bit, so it would point straight up.

When Nella finally arrived she had Benzo with her. He was welcome, of course.

"I'm so fucking sick of office work," Hugo said when everyone was seated (they never stood outside). "It blows even under the best of circumstances. I mean, consider what we do for a second. We shuffle paper, then we shuffle more paper and then we shuffle some more paper again! I'm sure Hell is a place where everyone is forced to do office work twenty-four-seven. Put papers in binder, take them out of binders, move them from one binder to another, sign them, attest them, edit them, void them, copy, revise, file, destroy, collate until your fingertips bleed ink.

"And that's not all. We also have the paper-shuffling's computerized cousin, moving decimals around in a spreadsheet. Everything to the beat of some toxic boss's drum."

Hugo took a sip from his beer. A big one. He looked at Nella, who gave him the ol' stink eye. She didn't like it when he picked on the banking industry. Like she took it personally, or something. He didn't care.

"This has been my life the last five years," he continued. "Up early, Corn Flakes and coffee for breakfast every goddamned morning, the Tube to work, shuffle papers, surf the net, shuffle some more papers, more surf, move around decimals, surf even more, put papers in a binder, move decimals, surf yet again, the Tube home, work out so you don't sack up, watch a little TV with Jess, possibly some routine sex if I'm very, very lucky, then finally sleep. And then as soon as your head hits the pillow the alarm goes off and it starts all over again. Up early, Corn Flakes, Tube, shuffle papers, et-fucking-cetera.

"Every fucking day is the same. I just don't know if I can do this for another *four decades* before I finally get to retire. Life's not short, it's *too long!*"

He took a sip to wet his throat. He was getting sore. "I'm letting the days go by, I'm letting the water hold me down. Then after a lifetime of paper shuffling I'll be old and arthritic. A crumpled-up geezer dreaming about the good ol' days. Too worn out to do anything, let alone revive those youthful ideals and dreams that I'm at this very point in my life unmercifully drowning. What's the point?"

Nicolas smiled, one of those sarcastic smiles people give you when they don't take what you say seriously. "Welcome to adulthood. That's what life looks like for all of us. Just join the rat race and try to look happy. I mean, I also have dreams about doing something more exciting but you have to work, don't you?"

"I just want my life to have some sort meaningful purpose," Hugo continued, unabated by Nicolas's protest. "Something measurable, something that proved I was ever here. A contractor can point to a house he built and

say 'I made that', the writer can say 'I wrote that book'. What can someone working in a bank say? 'I shuffled those papers'? No, you can't even say that because after five years they're moved to some storage in Alaska or who knows where and after another five they're destroyed. What's left after that? What have you left behind that you can say 'I did that' about? It's like you never even existed."

He paused and took a sip. "I need to be *reborn!* Reborn into something else. And if anyone of you say 'why don't you work in an advertising agency, they're creative' I swear I will smack you. That's not what I mean by being reborn!"

They all laughed. Possibly a pity laugh, not a ha-ha funny laugh. It was hard to say. He gave them the finger for good measure.

"Working in a bank isn't that bad," Nella said. "It's what I *want* to do."

"*Want* to do? Nobody *wants* to work in a bank, Nella. It's just something you do when your real dreams didn't come true. Ask a thousand kids what they want to do when they grow up. Not one of them is gonna say 'work in a bank'."

"Way to shit all over my career choice."

She looked angry now but he couldn't stop himself. Couldn't or wouldn't? It didn't matter. On he went.

"Saying it's a choice is just a rationalization to convince yourself your life isn't crappy. It's a compromise, a lie you tell yourself so you don't have to face the fact that your life didn't turn out the way you wanted it to. But one day it's going to hit you. And you'll want a do-over. Well, guess what? You can't have one 'cause now you're

old and your ball sack is hanging down between your knees. Fuck, fuck, fuckity, fuck-fuck-fuck!"

Now she looked really angry. Her eyes burned through his skull. Nick looked okay. He had chosen banking as well. He was a few years older so maybe he was past that naïve 'I'm gonna make it big' career phase. And he was such a bore he might have actually genuinely chosen it.

"I guess that's why people have kids," Nicolas said, breaking the now slightly awkward mood. "To leave something behind, I mean."

Hugo chuckled. "Your kids are not you."

"Sure they are," Nicolas said. "Literally, since they're carrying your DNA."

"You are not DNA. Your kids are completely separate entities from you. It may feel like they're part of you now when they are young and they need you to survive, but they grow up, you know. They become individuals, independent, with separate identities and separate lives, who won't even call you more than once every third month while you are rotting away at some old folks home. Even that precious bit of DNA will be bred out of your bloodline in a just few generations. And after you're gone you won't be sitting on a cloud somewhere watching what that little stain of yours has accomplished with the chance at life your cum squirt gave him. You'll be *dead*. The idea that we live on through our children is an illusion."

Silence. They both stared down their now empty glasses and looked both angry and uncomfortable. People don't like it when their lives are being called pointless.

The situation was relieved when Lardy came down to their corner and offered a refill. The rest of the evening went in a lighter tone. Movies, work, politics, the usual stuff. When they left, that little piece of line crossing seemed all but forgotten.