



First

Base

Saturday nights didn't really get busy until ten or eleven, but Malcolm wanted to be there early. He knew he had more chance of getting what he wanted – no, what he *needed*, that was the whole point – if he was at First Base for practically the whole evening. The guys he was coming with didn't have a problem with that, since their plan had always been to get bladdered, but after an hour or so they noticed that Malcolm himself wasn't drinking. Paul asked him about it, and he murmured something about being on antibiotics, and thank God that seemed to be enough for everybody, because he really didn't like the idea of telling these guys the actual reason he wasn't drinking.

Besides, it wasn't as if his friends didn't have enough things to rag on him about. Malcolm didn't mind that, it was all fair play, he did to them as well, but he didn't want it escalating far beyond the level of Simon's opening zinger: "Not baby-sitting tonight, then?"

Malcolm smiled at that along with everybody else and said "No, you cheeky fucker, I'm not. Kayla is working."

"And then she's going straight home to bed, right?"

"Fuck off."

"Or else her mum will be on to you."

“Fuck off.”

Kayla was eighteen and Malcolm was twenty-five. They had been together for just over a month. His friends joked about the age difference, but they never made fun of Kayla herself, because even the less perceptive of them were aware that she'd worked a miracle on him. He was still Malcolm, sitting across from them drinking his Tonic, but he was closer to the Malcolm they had known at school or college. The air wasn't weirdly, distressingly pregnant like it had been so many times when they'd hung out in the last few years, and they weren't to notice, because he'd done such a good job of keeping it together when he was around them, but the reason was because he wasn't miserable or angry all the time anymore. Whatever details Malcolm had been able to hide from them, they knew that this girl had put him at peace. Even if the conversation did turn to something like the job they all knew he hated, he would no longer talk about how much he hated it, instead sharing some lovely little trait he had only recently noticed in a long-time co-worker. He'd talk about Kayla, too: life experiences she'd had that he'd missed out on, or things about books and music that she hadn't known until he'd told her, and it genuinely was charming to listen to. His interjections tonight were along these lines, but while he was upbeat, he was talking less than he usually did. He mainly let the other guys talk and sat there smiling gently. You might have concluded that he was thinking something through. Actually, he had decided on something.

He didn't know Simon quite as well as he did the other boys at the table, but of all of them he was the one you were most likely to find yourself interacting with, since he was,

by quite a long way, the loudest. He was going for a cheap laugh when he said “Mate, look at all these fit old bitches,” and he got it, from everybody at the table. It was an old joke. Saturday night at First Base had long been colloquially referred to as “grab-a-granny night.” Women in their fifties and sixties dyed their hair, caked on make-up, put on dresses and crop tops and came out to dance to contemporary pop and flirt with young men. That demographic, however First Base had come by it, defined the joint. The women in their fifties and sixties more or less ran it. They multiplied over the course of the night and early morning and dispersed throughout the place: some on the dance floor, some at the bar, some sitting at tables with men they had run into. It was like the atmosphere at other clubs, but it was different. The hue of sexuality dominating the place was subtly distinct from that at Nightshade or Lewington’s. There were the same smells, the pervasive perfume and hairspray, the same rhythmic movements of women dancing or walking across the room in heels or boots, but the spirit behind all of it was tangibly different. These women had come by their confidence and their determination to have fun by a different route to the younger women. Life had given them more reason to do what they wanted to do tonight, and the mood they created between them gave the impression of a kindly defiant wisdom. On an instinctive level, the whole evolutionary habitat of the place thus seemed rooted in a sounder set of rules than most of the other clubs in town. Maybe that was why so many young men felt more comfortable here than in the other places: because this one just seemed to make more sense. Malcolm spent an hour or so sitting with his buddies whilst subtly looking out onto the throng. Its constituents, from the slightly weathered and territorial clusters of older men, through the boisterously drunk lads at the bar, to the groups of women talking animatedly at the edge of the dance

floor, somehow all looked like they belonged here, or, at least, like they belonged here tonight.

When everyone was either low or dry, Malcolm got out of his chair and volunteered to get this round. After scouting the territory and assessing his options accordingly, he was now fairly sure of how he should proceed. When he was a distance from the table, he actually said to himself, very quietly, “You’ve never done it before. That doesn’t mean you don’t know how to do it.” He chewed that thought over for a moment. Hey, sure. Instinct. That’s how, after making it to his twenties without ever having a real girlfriend, he now found himself with somebody as wonderful as Kayla. Both of them had been guided by powerful instincts, and one to another their instincts were in sync. That’s how you learned to do things, he knew that now: by feeling out which instincts to trust and which to disregard. That was easy enough once you’d done it a few times. Admittedly, it was probably going to be trickier than usual this evening, but any hurdles should be within his power to navigate, one way or the other. He had some initial thoughts as to which woman he might approach, but that was only the start of the process, because he had to be sure that whichever woman he ended up pursuing in earnest would understand what he wanted and give it to him. Obviously he’d have to take a few things on faith unless he wanted to interrogate every woman in the place, but he was confident that he could find out the important stuff relatively quickly and easily. Malcolm was a personable guy, and since he’d met Kayla he had grown remarkably more confident in most social situations. Surely he was in with a better shot than a lot of these drunken idiots?

He'd stopped at the edge of the dance floor for a more detailed examination of the environment, and was standing there sifting through thoughts such as these when he felt somebody rubbing against his side. He looked to his left and saw a woman in at least her late fifties dancing, rubbing her bottom against his leg whilst running her hands over her hair. She was wearing a long red dress and matching heels: kind of a femme fatale look. He guessed she must have done something to help her long black hair keep its colour. It was odd that he hadn't noticed her before. Whether coming over and dancing on him was intended as mockery or not, the confidence it took implied a woman who knew what to do. If he'd seen her, she would have been a leading candidate. Maybe she had only just turned up.

Malcolm cautiously rested his hand on her hip. A safely trivial gesture – in this place, it didn't mean anything at all – but one that got the woman to turn and look at him.

“Good evening,” he said.

“Smile,” she said. He hadn't realised that he wasn't smiling, and he normally did. The alien nature of this situation was already throwing him off. He instinctively obeyed her instruction and summoned a smile.

She leaned in, kissed him on the mouth, then turned on her heel and walked to the bar.

None of Malcolm's friends saw it, and nobody else acted as if they had either. It was a wonderfully theatrical and impressive little moment, something out of a movie. It put her at the top of Malcolm's list right away, although he was no closer to knowing whether he had just been teased, either cruelly or joshingly, and not in the sense that his mates might use the word – "That sket's a total fucking cocktease" – but in a playground sense. Was she a little old for that? Well, Malcolm wouldn't be surprised if some girls never outgrew playground cruelty. He knew for a fact that some boys never did. Whatever. She was his best lead. This wasn't going to work if he didn't follow up on something so promising.

It was his good luck that she was standing at the bar completely alone – once again, very movie-like – so that it made sense for him to come and stand next to her. She had just ordered her drink, and the bartender was off getting it when Malcolm leaned towards her and asked, "May I get this one?"

She turned to him and smiled with amusement. As he braced himself to be shot down, she said, "If you're sure." Then she held out her hand and said, "My name is Melanie."

"I'm definitely sure," he said. "I'm Malcolm. Lovely to meet you."

They shook hands. "Who are you here with, Malcolm?"

"My friends, sitting at that table over there. How about you?"

“Tania, my BFF,” Melanie said, cautiously imbuing the phrase with just enough irony by means of a little smile.” She nodded towards Tania, a woman of Melanie’s age with dyed blonde hair, standing near the dance floor in a low-cut black top and jeans, talking to a guy with a shaved head. Tania’s whole look was transparently trying harder for the impression of youth than Melanie’s was, and as such smacked far more tangibly of wanting to be accepted. No matter: the shaved head guy seemed to be doing pretty well with her.

“How long have you guys known each other?” Malcolm asked Melanie.

“We’ve been working together for two or three years now,” Melanie said. “We go out whenever we can; sometimes here, sometimes London, you know.”

He said, “Yes, I’m so glad that I still spend time with my friends. I don’t know what my life would be like without them.” Sincere joi de vivre: post-Kayla talk. Melanie could tell that he was completely in earnest. That honestly intrigued her. It’s probably what bought him the time that he asked for while he went to give the other guys their drinks, then told him he was going back to the bar to get his own (“What, you’re not Tonic-ed-out?” Jonathan asked him) and when he came back he and Melanie talked for closer to fifteen than ten minutes. He knew he had made the right choice. This was so obviously the woman he was looking for. She put him at ease and was funny and displayed with every sentence and gesture and joke the sensitivity and patience that a woman would need in order to provide what Malcolm was hoping to ask from her. After a while, he



decided he'd been talking to her long enough that he could make his play without offending her and not so long that he couldn't move on to another possible if she said no. So he finished his drink and said, "I think I might leave soon."

She said, "Oh, you shouldn't."

"Well, you should leave with me." The words poured out before he could take them back. She cocked an eyebrow and said, "Why, young man," amused by both the words and his transparent unease at having said them.

He said, "I'm a good guy. Do you think I'd try to hurt you? Do you think you couldn't overpower me if I did? I'll do everything I can to make sure you have a great evening if you finish your drink and leave with me."

He waited for a minute while she studied him. He didn't even try to guess at her thought process. This whole situation would probably never have arisen if he was the kind of guy who could pull that off. Then she downed the remnants of her vodka and lemonade and said, "Well, I want to have one more drink before I go home. Come and see me in The Gallery in ten minutes." She touched him on the elbow and smiled into his eyes, then went and talked to Tania for a moment before they kissed each other on the cheek and Melanie headed for the exit. At no point did she look at Malcolm.

Malcolm sighed more heavily than he could readily recall having done before, then went over to sit with his friends. He didn't hear a word that any of them said. He finished his drink as quickly but inconspicuously as he could, then said, "I think I'm going to go home."

Paul, clearly a little concerned, said, "Alright. Are you not really feeling it tonight, Mal?"

"No, I'm fine, just more tired than I expected to be. I'll call you tomorrow." They all shook hands with Malcolm and said that they would all meet again soon. It would subsequently come to make sense to them that he had left because he could tell that they were well on the road to being drunk and could vividly imagine how it would be to spend a whole evening as the only sober guy at the table.

The Gallery was a far more subdued venue than First Base, even on a Saturday night. Chilled-out music played quietly, a handful of couples and college reunions huddled in booths. For some reason, Melanie actually looked more at home here than she had done in First Base. When Malcolm came in she was sitting on a barstool a fair distance from the other drinkers, making a show of being preoccupied by something on her mobile phone. Malcolm first assumed that it was a measure to make sure nobody else approached her before he arrived, then wondered if it was vain of him to think so. He temporarily considered the possibility that this whole thing, her telling him to meet her here, might have been the setup for some sort of humiliation or rebuke, which, if it came,

he would never be able to divert himself from the instinctive feeling that he deserved. If so, it wasn't due just yet, because when she looked up and saw him standing over her, Melanie smiled and gestured for him to sit down. This time it was she who bought him a drink, and when they had both been served, she said, "What does a fine young thing like you want with some old skank like me? Don't you have a girlfriend, Malcolm?"

He could have told her all sorts of lies and wasn't sure why he decided not to. "I do. Kayla. She's a girl in a thousand." Melanie looked at him and waited. "I've known her for about two months. I haven't had sex with her yet and I haven't told her that I'm a virgin. It's not because of embaessment – well, it is, of course it is – but, listen, she's told *me* that *she's* a virgin. I think she wants it to be with me when it happens, and imaging how she'll look at me when I tell her that I don't have any more idea what I'm doing than she does... the happiness she's brought me, she deserves better than that. Well, she deserves better than *me*, but..." he chuckled lightly. Melanie, who had been smirking incredulously throughout, now laughed outright. "Oh my God! Was this your plan all night?"

He said, "It was."

She dialled it down to an arch smile. "You came out with your mates on Saturday night because you knew you could find some girl?"

He said, “That’s right,” but he noted that she hadn’t acknowledged the whole truth, if she was aware of it: he had come to First Base on Saturday night because he knew he could find some *old* girl. Melanie reached out and took both his hands and said, “So that great night you promised me was...”

He cut her off. “You’ll get it. You’ll get every second of it.”

They went to her place, not his. That was her idea, and he didn’t object. He had some condoms that he had bought earlier that day, but she insisted that they use some which she had in her bedside drawer: “Trust me, would you?” She asked him to unzip her dress, then she eased him onto the bed. She was wearing black panties, no bra. He removed them with his thumbs, a tad clumsily. In retrospect, a little alcohol might not have been a terrible idea. It might have slowed him down a bit. The only reason it wasn’t over in seconds is because she was sternly, steadily instructing him through every phase. Exactly what he had wanted, in other words, and he tried hard to commit to memory everything that she told him. He came, but had no way of knowing whether she had or not, and after she informed him that she hadn’t, she showed him a few alternative ways of achieving that outcome. Then she said, “You need to sleep now, baby. Go on. Go to sleep.”

Melanie didn’t see Malcolm again until four months after that, but she knew right away that the girl he was sitting at Costa with was Kayla. It was one of the strangest moments of Melanie’s life. If she had been completely unprepared for the thoughts and feelings she had experienced after her night with Malcolm, how could she possibly explain them to a

man in his twenties? She couldn't. She had only exposed it to her closest friends as a giggly anecdote. For it to still be in her head and her heart was all so childish. She was supposed to be the one who knew what she was letting herself in for: the pleasure she took in that thought had been part of why she had left The Gallery with Malcolm. To still be thinking of him, and wondering why he hadn't given her his number, not that he'd asked for it, and to be thinking how her daily routine might be different if he figured in it, God, how ridiculous. She couldn't approach him, and at the moment of seeing him with Kayla – she was absolutely sure that adorable young lady was Kayla – she didn't want to approach him. It had been for something. It had achieved something. Melanie knew that meant a lot to Malcolm, and that it should mean a lot to her. But what probably meant more was when, Kayla sitting right next to him, Malcolm looked Melanie in the eye across the shopping court and smiled with his whole face, and she smiled back at him just as wide and sweet and true.