

Margins

I smelled the boy before I saw him; a scent of old, dark things kept too long in a trunk, so it came as no surprise to see he was dressed as a Goth. Not one of your middle-class imitation Goths, where the paint overlies bodies scraped and bathed clean, but black on black, nails coloured over dirt, teeth stained with malnutrition and too many drugs.

I was sitting staring into the water, smoking the cigarette I'd bummed off my last trick. Trade was slow. It was a cold night for the beginning of September and the men were stopping home in the warm, yet here I was, freezing my tits off in my fishnets and the brown boots with the split right across the sole, so, first off, I hoped he was a customer. Preferably one with a car, although right now I would have settled for a hand-job up an alleyway, anything to get out of this wind. Then, when I saw him properly, I realised he was in the business too.

"All right?"

I'd not seen him down here before. This used to be Suzie's patch until... well, we all know what happened to Suzie, don't we? The Waterfront Beat we called it, best spot in town because they knew where to find you. Worst spot for the same reason, but I'd never had trouble, not really.

"Cold, isn't it?"

Again he didn't answer, just looked down at me; hey, that's what I'm here for, I wanted to say, come stare down your nose at me but I'm doing all right. My girl got four GCSE's last summer, now she's off to college; I've got a flat up near the Hoe, I'm off the smack; how about you? But it doesn't do to look too smart or talk lippy to the boys, some of them can get really nasty especially if they're coming down and trade's not been good, so I just smiled.

He bent down and pinched the cigarette from between my fingers, dragging at it like he was kissing a lover, then handed it back, which was nice. "Nah, you keep it, love. I'm trying to give up."

He grinned then. "Me too. But this is a hard night and I needed something."

"You got trade then? It's been dead here. Wish I'd stopped in, with my knitting." He grinned again and wormed his way down to sit next to me, feet dangling towards the water. He was wearing boots too, great buckled things that looked like they weighed more than he did, huge big cloak wrapped round him, keeping the cold out but not quite keeping the smell in. He was pretty, in an understairs-cupboard kind of way, and I could see how he could have been earning tonight; hanging round the Devonshire Arms with that pale, big-eyed look, they like them like that up there.

"Have I missed them again? I was with a man... every time, I am with someone and they go without me."

“Sorry, love? Missed who? There’s been no-one down here but me all evening...oh, apart from the likely lad in the Renault, ten quid, now there’s a fucking joke for you!”

“My family.” He turned those eyes on me; Christ, he must clean up with the blokes round town with eyes like that... “They come looking for me.”

“Then maybe, if they care enough to come looking, you should go home.” He couldn’t be more than, what, eighteen? Twenty, at a snip. “How long have you been on the game? Not long enough, by the looks of you, you’ve not had your nose broken yet, you’ve still got all your fingers...give it up, love. Go home. There’s nothing so bad that can’t be got over, and it’s no life out here for anyone with somewhere else to go.” He didn’t answer, just stared out across the old docks at the water and finished smoking my cigarette, while I sat and shivered and the damp cold stone ate its way into my bum like I was dying from the fanny upwards. It struck me that maybe he was a bit...you know, touched, a bit wrong and I found I was moving away just a little bit, tucking up my legs in case I had to run. My friend Jo got a wierdo once, seemed all right to start off, chatting and such, then he got it out, only wanted her to bite it off! Well, she can laugh about it now, but he got really strange, shouting about God’s revenge and all that... this boy made me wonder. Usually the word goes out if there’s a psycho in town, but I’d heard nothing...But he sounded odd, foreign maybe. “What’s your name?”

“Will. For my father. Will Mullins.”

“And you’ve got a family?”

“I did. Do you?”

I widened my eyes at him. Everyone knows that us girls don’t have families. We’ve got no past, no present, we exist only in the time we’re on the street, we’re nothing but walking meat. “No.”

“They did not approve of my liking for men. They believed I would corrupt my brother and sister.”

“Oh, right. Narrow minded, then.”

“Narrow? Yes, you could say that.” The boy, Will, smiled again. Even with his blackened teeth his smile had a lazy, sexy charm. “But my siblings, Joe and Sil, for them I would go when they come to fetch me. But every time...I miss them.”

“Well, like I said, I’ve seen no-one.”

“May I sit with you while I wait?”

I shrugged. “Free country.”

Again we sat a while in silence. Beneath us, the water shushed and clopped against the wall, I rested my chin on the warped iron railings and thought about the job - OK, it might not be everyone’s idea of a fanastic career, but I earned, didn’t I? We didn’t

have to rely on the Social; I was my own woman, no pathetic bloke draped in bling and fake fur pretending he'd grown up in the ghettos of LA rather than the back streets of Plymouth 'managing my workload'; no more than my quota of nasty gits and most of them sent packing with a couple of sharp words. I chanced a quick look at Will, swinging his legs beside me, and knew that, however badly my Jenna might push her luck, I'd never kick her out onto the streets. I'd spent the last eighteen years working my way up from blow-jobs behind the Working Men's Club to picking my tricks on the Waterfront Beat to pay for her fancy school uniform and her riding lessons and even if she did sometimes behave like a complete cow, I knew secretly she was grateful. And that, even more secretly, she loved me. Whereas, this poor lad...

"If they don't come, why don't you stop at my place for a bit? My daughter'll be moving out soon to go to College, you could have her room..."

"You are kind." I was rewarded by another smile, another glance from those black eyes. "But I think I must stay here. By the Steps."

"That's your patch? The Mayflower Steps? God, you must coin it in the Summer, with the tourists... but, I meant, you could give up the game. Get back into school... you seem like a bright kid..."

"No." Finality. "I must stay here." A sudden gust, straight off the water, blew across me and I shivered. He'd sounded so...*absolute*... "You are chilled. Here. Take my cape..." and he draped the foul-smelling wool around my shoulders, crackling with dirt; bare of its cover he was skinnier than I'd imagined, his exposed skin stained with rent-boy bruises, like a tattoo. "Why are you concerned?"

"Because..." Why? Because if someone had given me the chance at eighteen, I could have turned my life around, been something other than a haunter of the margins of life? "Because I don't want you to wind up in a gutter with a needle in your arm and a positive test result in your pocket."

Black, black eyes. "I think I will not."

Sarah, David, Jon, Karen, Caroline, Debbie... "A lot of people have thought that, Will." I shivered lower into his cloak. "They were all wrong. Look, I have to go home now, Jenna will be... I have to go." I went to unwind the dark wool from my shoulders. "Thanks for this."

"Wait." He grasped my arm and his fingers were cold as metal, bracketing through the inadequate cotton of my sleeve. I stiffened my body, ready to push him off if he came at me. "I believe they are coming!"

"There's nobody around! The place is..."

And then I heard it. The soft, organic bumping of wood against the stone of the waterfront, the gurgling creak of oars. The voice,

"Will? Will? 'Tis the appointed day! Are you there, boy?"

“Aye, brother! I am here!” Will turned to me, the whole shape of his face changed with joy. “It is Joseph! I knew he would not forget me!” A momentary embrace, ice-cold lips against my forehead. “Thank you. Your company has kept me from distractions which may have delayed me. This night, at last, I leave for the New World.”

Two paces towards the Mayflower Steps and he was gone, the smooth lines of his body blending with the stone, the angles of his shoulders and hips becoming nothing more than the bobbing decks of the pilot boats at anchor in the harbour beyond.

I stood and waited a while, hugging myself in his cloak as the needling wind tried to find its way through, but there was nothing more. He was gone. I walked slowly back past the new Barbican building, housing the Mayflower Exhibition, pausing to read the plaque by the Steps ... ’ On the 6th of September 1620, the Mayoralty of Thomas Townes after being kindly entertained and courteously used by divers Friends there dwelling, the Pilgrim Fathers sailed from Plymouth in the Mayflower’.

All but one.