

Night Out

Dom Howell

Out of the stillness, out of the silt, out of the unkempt canal, we triumphantly arrive from our separate journeys. Big teeth smiles, we're hungry for the carnage. The room starts to gently turn with excitement. Ornate gold-edged pictures of people from eras no one remembers along with mirrors, and soft and sharp coloured light-shards are smashed up and licked onto the wall of this big, glitzy, snake-tunnel we're about to fall down, the pit of my stomach starts to move like a pirate's ship at a fairground, all I know is – the arc will get bigger. I'm not sure any of it's real we've collectively imagined it, so say the theories that whizz through my head. I want them all to love me, but I need the toilet first. I see her beaded necklace and her mauve square earrings framed by blonde curling hair, and the pistachio green of her dress, and I catch my breath and lose myself in her smell.

"Dominic, pleased to meet you."

A slight rub of the shoulders brings a closeness that neither of us run from. I'm white hot already.

"Me, me, me, me"

"You, you, you, you."

The sound of a cork pops out of a bottle-neck piercing the background babble for a moment and we all grow hares' ears. The bench moves, the jaws of punters start snapping their way through the air making their red lips blubber, and we sit there careless and free. Cigarettes disappear, and ruddy cheeks of fattened men wobble and tremor like slices of ham as people make points with a pantomime of seriousness sipping pints that grow as long as flutes and are held up as trophies. We're surfing the fun, the froth, and the fizz against seas of guilt-black starless skies. Plates of shells with squirmy things inside are spiced up and swallowed, and everything that was worrying you before is now being vomited onto beer trays as people tap you on the back and tell you all you need is love, love.

You're elated at this news and promise to find it as you skip to the toilet again to blast out the tension. All water and air you think as you head back to your group, smiling at other faces in the room when they catch your eyes.

This time we'll be independent, you hear across a table.

You allow your mind to bathe in the numbing liquid and just stare at lights and leaves. You catch the eye of Kirsty and chasing her round the table, she lets you suck her fingers and everyone appears to like it. There's a guy at the bar who looks like a wolf with the stillness of a heron throwing you sharp looks that make your heart thump, you're throwing them back, you should stop it, but you can't. Enormous shiny sleek-black beetles are now cushioning your buttocks and you're holding onto their antennas for reins. Crawling out of one palace into another, it's all starting to get looser as you scuttle through grand doors and take in hoppy damp smells with the occasional whiffs of piss, shit, and perfumes. More pops and your friend wants to try and find a particular set of stones. This sets up the game for the latter half of this glorious reach for air. But just as you relax it all starts to go wrong. You said 'fliff' instead of 'fluff' and Kirsty now thinks differently of you. You can't bear it, "damn her, damn her" and then she makes a joke, smiles, and lakes of forgiveness burst inside you. This process then

repeats itself with subtle variations several times an hour; the flutters of trust arising in the distance.

The moon is fat and you ask your friend if he found the stones he was looking for. He says his friend is going to bring them along and that I really ought to have a look at them because they're quite special. You say 'ok' with apprehension and drink more of the liquids that bubble and shade from deep copper to transparent air. More faces arrive bringing different energies, which you either instantly latch onto or reject. Eventually the balance is tipped with energies you've rejected and you immediately walk away lost and misunderstood. Your friend says his stones are on the way. You move out into the fresh air and watch the rain fall from the black depths, silver pin-drops cooling your reddening face, geochemistry becoming biochemistry. A gummy smile in the smoking area reminds you of a squished half-moon slice of tomato, their teeth the yellowing seeds, you make a note of this and pledge to tell the group when you get back in. You glimpse Kirsty with someone else now head thrown back in ecstasy. Crestfallen you try and force out some words to intimidate the silence, but you're kidding yourself, you have no song. You want to leave. The stones have arrived, but they've cost you dear. The wolf looks at you as he props his head on Kirsty's shoulder.

They've come from the other side of the world, your friend says.

Bollocks, you say.

They have.

You look at the stones in the palm of his hand, they did, it had to be said, carry a certain allure.

How did it all come to be, you ask.

In an archway sheltering from the downpour you each trot out your theories for the creation of life as we know it. Your stories carried on the surface of meteorites. Big booming sounds ring out across a dancefloor, and any thoughts of hunger have now disappeared, but you're empty. At one stage, your friend loses the stones but then finds them again in the toilet. You stay in the cubicle for a while begging the insects to take you back to the canal, as the moon scars time across its face you're all water, air, and stone dust.

You look back at the bar and see the fangs of the snake mouth enlarging as it nears, it's about to enclose on you, so you throw a stone into its belly, and watch it subside into its pit, knowing

it'll be back. Moss-clad cornicing begins to fall and the ground starts to shake. This used to be a church you announce to the group, and everyone rolls around laughing showing their tails.

"Me, me, me, me."

"You, you, you, you."

It's all thinning out.

A wet slip of a trumpet

a bell clangs

rafters break

the snake snaps

shut

eyelids

fall.