

I WAS THAT CLOSE

‘It was him. I was that close, I’m telling you, as I live and breathe.’ Quite an ironic choice of words, as breathing was something I was having difficulty in doing at that moment. The result of an excited run of three or four blocks to our apartment.

‘No way!’ Mike’s jaw dropped as he went from slouch to sitting on the sofa as my news started to sink in. .

‘On my life. I was that close.’ I stretched out an arm, and nearly knocked Mike’s tea from his grasp. ‘I could have touched him... and her. They were that close. Can you believe it?’

‘Did you speak to him?’ Mike put his cup down on to coffee table as I paced the floor. ‘Did he speak to you?’ He aimed the remote at the TV, the VHS clunked to a halt and the image of Clint Eastwood juddered back and forth as if he were being electrocuted. ‘Did you shake hands, Pete? Did you get an autograph?’

‘No, no, no.’ I stammered in breathless excitement and picked up a banana from an empty Quality Street tin we used as a fruit bowl. I held the banana at arms length. ‘But I was this close. Can you believe it? Me here, and him, *him*, there.’ We both stared at the banana. ‘I was that close.’

‘But what did you do?’ Mike had to twist on the sofa to follow me as I walked behind it.

‘I think I smiled at him.’ I told Mike.

‘Get out of here.’ Mike roared in a bad American accent. ‘You think you smiled at him? Is that all you did? Did he smile back?’

I tried to remember. Did he smile? Did he look at me? I think he did. Not a smile but a grin. Yes, a grin, that grin, that sardonic grin. That famous grin.

‘Yes he did. He grinned at me.’

‘You lucky, lucky, stupid twat. That close and all you did was smile at him.’

‘I know.’ I smirked as I stripped the banana and fell into a magazine strewn armchair, which groaned with old age. ‘I love this bloody city.’

Mike and I had left university in the autumn, dumped our campus girlfriends, pooled our resources and caught the cheapest flight out of Heathrow and into JFK for a year of Stateside fun before real life encroached. Sex, drugs and rock and roll ruled the agenda and in the last couple of months we’d certainly had our fair share of each. We got the apartment for next to nothing, thanks to Mike’s job in a video store where he could supply the landlord with low quality porn in return for reduced rent payments. I had my dream job in a downtown record shop. Listening, selling and arrange vinyl by day, shagging and smoking to it at night, all very Nick Hornby, and it felt like it just couldn’t get any better. Then on the way home this afternoon, I’d climbed out of the subway, walked a few blocks, turned a corner and... and there he was, getting into a car. No tell a

lie, he was speaking to someone. Can't remember who. Then, he got in the car.

No he didn't. He grinned at me, and then got in the car. I think.

Mike heaved his bulk off the sofa. 'Well I say that this moment deserves a beer and a smoke. What say you matey?'

'Can't think of a better time.' I agreed as Mike swaggered into the kitchen leaving me telling the banana. 'I was that close.'

'Where's the stuff.' Mike shouted out a couple of moments later.

'Beers in the fridge.' I shouted back.

'Got 'em, but where the stuff? It's not in the tea caddy.'

'It should be.'

'Well it's not.'

I bit into the banana and stood up and had barely reached the kitchen when it all came back to me.

'Oh I'm sorry mate. It's gone.'

'Gone' echoed Mike as he appeared in and blocked the doorway to the kitchen. 'What do mean by 'gone'?

'Cassie and I smoked it, couple of nights ago. You were out.'

'Cassie?'

'Yeah you know, Punk Cassie. From the deli.'

'You didn't.' Mike's shoulders drooped, as did his mouth.

'I did and after we'd finished, we watched 'Alien', which is even more scary when you're stoned.'

'But Pete, we said...'

‘Look I’m sorry’ I apologised and it was genuine. The stash was for the both of us, what we liked to call our ‘joint account’ and it was wrong to have used it all up and not replaced it. I could have blamed Cassie, but it was my suggestion and like a lot of the suggestions I made that night, she went along with it. ‘What’s today?’ I asked.

‘Tuesday’ mumbled a disappointed Mike as he turned and shuffled back in to the kitchen and I made the armchair groan again.

‘I known that.’ I called after him, ‘But what’s the date?’ There was a fizz and a clink as Mike flipped the lids off of a couple of beers.

‘It’s the ninth.’ He said as he came back in to the room carrying the two bottles. He put mine on the table, deliberately just out of reach and held on tightly to his own as he fell back on to the sofa. ‘1980, nearly Christmas and we’ve nothing to smoke.’

I reached for my bottle. ‘I know Mike, I’m sorry. But, hay, Wakky’s back in town tonight. Give it a couple of hours and I’ll go get some more.’ Wakky was from Manchester, and apart from respectability, there was nothing the guy couldn’t get, especially decent gear at a reduced rate for those he termed as ‘fellow immigrants’.

‘Don’t bother.’ Mike took a swig from the bottle and started to search the crevices of the sofa. ‘Where’s the remote gone?’

‘It’s no bother.’ I told him. ‘I’ll get some stuff, then we can have a celebratory puff. It’s not everyday you get to meet a living legend. Your hero.’

Mike was still searching for the remote and was now pulling at the cushions. 'And smile at them.' He threw me a knowing glance. He wasn't going to let me forget this once in a lifetime missed opportunity.

Mike found the remote eventually and we both watched Clint do what Clint does best and then fuelled by a few more buds, fell asleep when he tried to act.

It was nearly ten thirty when Mike's snoring woke me up. Clint had long gone from the TV screen and been replaced by an American football match that I turned off as I passed. Mike mumbled something from the sofa about he was watching it, then snorted, farted, scratch his balls and keeled over, without opening his eyes once. I left him there, happily dribbling onto a cushion.

They call this place 'The city that never sleeps' and there's a reason for that... it's so bloody noisy. Back at home, come this time of night, my town's as raucous as a shut library. Here, the noise of the city is as loud and as exciting as it is during the day. A symphony of sirens accompanies a cacophony of car horns, chatter and the clatter of the overhead subway trains. It's not only the sounds either, the smells and sights just make your senses tingle. To the end of my days, I'll never be able to smell burgers and ketchup or see an incandescent display of neon without thinking about this city.

I was on my way to 'Rubiks', a dive not far from the apartment and a second home for Wakky when he was in town. Part bar, part derelict dump, 'Rubicks' was as popular as herpes, which was exactly as its clientele of pimps,

prostitutes and drug dealers liked it. No one in their right mind went to 'Rubiks', unless they had to and that included the cops, so for Wakky and his dubious friends it was the ideal trading centre.

I side-stepped a puddle and was about to cross the road, when a bloody big car drove past and pulled up a few yards further down the street, outside an exclusive apartment block. I sort of recognised the car, but thought it too much of a coincidence. I loitered by the kerb and watched as the driver got out and opened the rear door. It sounds so lame, but when the figure emerged for the limo, my heart felt it had missed a couple of beats, let alone one and my throat tightened as I swallowed. Twice in one day. I couldn't believe it and began to walk towards the car, I wasn't going to waste this opportunity. Treat this afternoon as a rehearsal I told myself. It was only a short walk from the car to the entrance of the apartment block and there was someone else approaching him, I guessed it was a photographer. I quickened my pace realising that in a matter of seconds he would be gone. 'John' I called, the same time as the approaching photographer addressed him more formally. He turned to look at me as a car backfired close by and a camera flash lit up the night. He grinned and for a moment I actually thought he recognised me from earlier. 'Hi' I said one arm outstretched, too far away for his raising hand to reach, but ready, I was that close. 'This is such a...'. The car backfired again, interrupting my gushing as his grin became a grimace and his hands clutched at his shoulder and chest. He pirouetted like a badly controlled marionette as another explosion echoed

from behind him and another. His glasses fell to the floor and I felt his blood splash against my cheek. I was that close.

The fifth crack brought him to his knees. I couldn't and didn't want to believe what I was witnessing. My hero was being gunned down right in front of me. I wanted to turn and run, but I couldn't. Blood stained his shirt and I could see holes in his jacket and flesh. I could smell the acrid stench of cordite. I could hear him cry. I was that close.

'I've been shot.' He sobbed as he fell and the screaming and confusion began. The photographer was wrestled to the ground as a small oriental woman wept uncontrollably and the doorman from the apartment block rushed forward with a jacket. Rooted to the spot, invisible to those around him, I watched as he lay dying at my feet. I was that close that I could see the life drain from John Lennon's eyes.

I was that close.

END