

GOING UP WEST

I thought I saw Rob this morning. I got that funny feeling, half-fear, half-longing, and I was so sure, I called out his name, but he couldn't've heard because he didn't turn round.

“Pack it in,” Kelly says. “It’s not him, never is, never will be.”

“Whatever.” I sit back down, knowing that one day he *will* come and get me, get *us*, and then who’ll be laughing? Not her, that’s for sure.

I pull the sleeping-bag tight around me and watch the feet go by. City feet, shopping feet, places-to-go-people-to-see-feet, and sometimes, if I’m really lucky, there’ll be coins thrown into the hat so’s I can eat, but then I glance up at the faces, and they’ve all got that look: *Loser, waster, get a job....*

Dad never liked me, I dunno why, when I say Dad, he’s my stepdad really...but he managed to keep a lid on it while Mum was alive. After she’d gone, I stayed out of his way, kept my head down, went to school or round to Gemma’s, her mum and dad are lovely, or stayed in my room, but course there were times I couldn’t avoid him, and then he’d start having a go...the very sight of me seemed to wind him up.

Months after Mum died, he moved this Maureen in, snotty cow, with her Capo di Monte crap and her Strictly Come Dancing-type dresses (they’d met at some Ballroom class) and *she* soon let me know I was in the way. Wasn’t long before Dad called me in and said: “This isn’t working, Joanne. And Maureen needs more space for her stuff.”

I’ll just bet she does. But where does that leave me?

“We’ve had a talk, and we want you gone.”

“Gone? Where to?”

He shrugged, and I knew he couldn’t give a toss. “Your Mum’s Aunt Penny’s got a place in London:

here's the address and phone number, bus-ticket and spends. Best go and pack."

"But...what about school?"

"You're sixteen. Get a job. Pay rent. Now shift yourself, you've a bus to catch."

"Dad, please...."

"No arguments now. It's for the best."

I packed in a daze, unable to believe what was happening. Dad ran me to the bus-station, but Maureen didn't stir herself: too busy feathering her love-nest. Yuk. And I'd lay bets she'd have my old room gutted and stuffed with sequins and porcelain within the week.

When I got on the bus, it finally hit me: I was on my own, with nothing but the phone-number of someone I'd never met who most probably wouldn't want me either.

I texted Gemma and Molly, wondering if they'd miss me or if they'd airbrush me out their lives like Dad had done. The journey took ages. I bought a drink and a sandwich to keep me going, listened to my mp3, gazed at the other passengers and the passing countryside, slept for a bit and woke in a panic, not knowing where I was. By the time we arrived, though, I'd got my head round the situation, after all, I was well out of it, and I was like, whatever happens, this new life'll be a zillion times better than the old one.

When I got off the bus, I rang Mum's auntie. "Penny who?" the man's voice said. "Nobody of that name here, darling, you sure you got the right number?"

"Yes, yes, got to be....she hasn't moved on or anything?"

"Not in the ten years we've lived here. Sorry, love."

I felt sick then, realising Dad hadn't bothered contacting this Aunt Penny, if she even existed, and had probably got the outdated number out of Mum's address-book...and now I hadn't a clue what to do next.

"You all right babe?"

Eyes blurry with tears, I hadn't seen him approach....dark hair, nice smile, tall, and, I couldn't help noticing, really fit, although he was quite old, mebbe twenty-five....

"I'm Rob. You look a bit upset, not to mention cold. Can I buy you a cup of something? Maybe a burger?"

Okay, I know, stupid, taking stuff off strangers, but you know what? I didn't care anymore. Sometimes you just have to trust your instincts. Here was I, stuck on my own in a strange place, and suddenly there was this nice, genuine guy offering food, warmth and a friendly ear, how threatening was that?...no contest.

I blew my nose. "Joanne. And yeah, that'd be great."

I texted all my mates, but didn't bother contacting Dad, like he cared, and why should I waste talk-time on him? I told them all about Rob and how great he'd been to me, taking me in (spare room, no funny stuff) showing me round, even cooking for us...and I began to think that maybe London was a pretty cool place to be.

I soon got used to the streets, the buses, the Underground. Rob bought me an Oyster card and some phone credit. We went out a lot in the day, but never in the evenings, because he had to work. "It's business, babe," he'd say, "gotta earn the pennies, haven't I?" So I didn't really feel I could whinge about it, although a few beers down the pub sometime would've been nice.

After a week or so, I thought it was time I started looking for a job. "Pay you some rent, buy a few groceries....." but Rob said:"No rush, little Jo, when you're ready," and kissed the top of my head in a way that made my heart jump. That very night, I moved out of the spare room and into his bed. It was my first time, but he was so sweet and gentle that come morning I was totally In Love.

Next day, he bought me some skinny jeans and a pair of Converse All-Stars. Dad's 'spends' were long-gone but Rob winked and said I could buy my own stuff once I got a job, so I didn't feel like I was sponging, and anyway, weren't we an Item?

Rob's business ("Boring stuff, babe,") took him out most nights, but I was happy to stay in and wait for him, tidying round, listening to music and dreaming about our future....

One night, he came back with a friend, the first one I'd met, who he introduced as Jerome. He was a short, hairy guy, and *so* not my type, but I made myself smile as I fetched him a beer, and I overheard him saying: "You've got *her* trained, mate!" To which Rob replied: "Oh, yeah, shaping up nicely."

Rob stuck the Kaiser Chiefs on and after a few beers, the party got going. To be honest, I was knackered and ready for kip, but felt I ought to make the effort. Pretty soon, the two of them started snorting, and that I didn't like, but Rob pulled me close and whispered: "Don't stress. Just my way of winding down. You should try it." I shook my head: the whole coke scene scared me. But Rob kissed me and said: "Jerome's a businessman and he's putting a big deal my way, so ... I want you to be nice to him."

"Nice to him?" he'd lost me. "I have been, haven't I?"

Rob's eyes were glassy and his breath stank of beer. "No, I mean *extra* nice, you know?"

I thought my heart would explode. "But, Rob, you and me, we're....?"

He laughed. "Solid. Just do this thing for me and I'll make it up to you, promise."

I could hear Joe running water in the bathroom: he'd be back any moment. Terror seized me: how could Rob ask such a thing if he really loved me?

"Here, go on, have some of this, babe...make it a night to remember." I eyed the neat lines of white powder, the rolled paper Rob was holding....would it really hurt to try it, just the once?"

I never knew it was possible to soar so high, or crash so hard. Rob brought me breakfast in bed, though I could only stomach tea.

"You were a star, babe!" He stroked my hair.

I sat up. “Was I?” My nose felt numb, my head throbbed and my mind was a big, fat merciful blank.

“Jerome was well-pleased with you....and so am I.” *Some sick memory: naked beer-belly, garlicky sweat, fat tongue invading my mouth....* “thanks to you, we did the deal, and he’ll tell all his mates how good my little Jo is...”

“What?”

“Chill, it’s okay to spread a little sunshine, and always remember, you’re still my girl.”

“Am I, Rob? Really?”

“Course you are. Right, celebrations are in order. Get yourself up, and when you’re ready, we’re going Up West.”

Days went by, weeks and months and hours and the rest lost to Rob’s magic powder. One hit turned me into the Ultimate Fox, Babe of the Century, Queen of the World, with power over all men, especially Rob’s friends....they’d be round every night and I’d take care of them all because I could, because I chose....because he asked me to.

And in the mornings, when I crash-landed, hating myself, remembering, Rob would be there whispering: “Hey, you did great, babe. They loved you....let’s go up West and hit the shops.” And I always did, living from one high to the next because after all, where else would I go? There was only him and me, and he did love me. Didn’t he?

....until I started throwing up and couldn’t stop. God, I felt rough. “Maybe I’ve got food-poisoning,” I moaned.

“Yeah, and maybe you haven’t.” He made me do a test: when the line turned blue, he went ballistic.

“You dozy cow! How could you let this happen?”

“Rob, it’s yours, gotta be.....”

“Mine, is it bollocks you slapper! No good to me up the duff, are you? Either get rid or go.”

“Get over it,” Kelly says, “you’re well out of it. Creep. Did you think you were the only one? He’s made a packet out of you and now he’s doing it to some other poor cow.”

It’s all right for Kelly: despite the streets, she’s pretty, and she’s got a dog. It’s a whole lot cuter than my bump, and people feel sorry for it, maybe they think dogs shouldn’t be sleeping rough, so they give her sympathy-money to feed it. And I don’t care for myself, but I reckon my baby’s really hungry ‘cos I haven’t felt it kick in days....

“You should go home,” Kelly says. “patch things up, get a place for you and the kid.”

As if. What does she know? Home’s here now, where Rob can come and find me when he’s ready...because I know he will. I bet he’s out there this very minute, looking for the two of us so’s we can be a proper familyin fact, I’m sure I saw him just now....