

God Coffee, I Miss You

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# GOD COFFEE, I MISS YOU

or, Another [Modern] Prometheus

by Matthew Hanlon

## c h a p t e r   o n e

My last girlfriend broke up with me with a Spice Girls song.

And the thing is, I think she even used the wrong one.

By the wrong one I mean that I think she didn't use the one she had intended, I most certainly didn't mean that there *is* a proper Spice Girls' song to give to the guy with whom you'd spent the last four years of your life. The last three and a half in fairly close quarters, both living and working. Not to put an end to that closeness of quarters.

I sincerely believe that, if it were to occur to one, a Spice Girls song would be the least ideal way someone could choose to break up with you. For fairly understandable reasons, the thought tends not to cross too many people's minds, that particular thought being the farthest thing from what one conceives as a painful enough experience in its own right. However, if it were to come into the popular consciousness as a viable manner in which someone could be broken up with, I am almost certain nervous laughter and awkward silences would follow even a joking mention of breaking up via a Spice Girls' song. *Faux pas*, without a doubt.

We ran, until sugar pop informed me, albeit obliquely, that "we" were no more, a sort of small-to-middling appliance store underneath our small-to-middling flat. It might seem an odd business for the two of us to be tending, she nor I having any particular

inclination for the mechanical sort of things. Or owning, for that matter. It all started when I accidentally sold my friend's television.

He had a tendency to visit, as friends of this humour often do, at all hours. However, he'd have the politeness to knock about in the shop below, which was a bookstore at the time, loudly for a little while before making his way near enough the stairs that I could see him. I'd be, after much ado, standing, at the head of the stairs armed with either a hanger or shoe from the closet in full readiness to defend the home from an intruder whom had apparently chosen to give a quick browse round the shelves before popping upstairs. He also had a tendency to bring objects by and leave them – objects large enough to arouse suspicion that whatever one might be carrying, a television or mini-refrigerator is not the sort of thing one carries around if one were just “passing by,” as it were. However, idiosyncrasies aside, he would stop by with his treasures, in the days when I was attempting to run a bookstore and dating a converted waitress who confessed to knowing little to nothing about anything but waitressing, though she was certainly done with waiting on people. As she told me the first time we'd met.

She had, to the great surprise of the person in the booth alongside the window, slid in to the booth on the opposite side of the table and slapped a menu out from behind the sugar shaker. The person greatly surprised, of course, was myself. I'd been sitting alone with a glass of water, presumably soon to be joined by a plate of fish and chips in a less than fashionable restaurant down near the river. And I was not, necessarily, expecting anyone to sit opposite myself at any point in the early, or even later, for that matter, evening. “Ehm, hey,” is what, for better or worse, I said, and, showing I could be

just as nonchalant about someone sliding into a complete stranger's booth as the person whom had done it, "how're you doing there?" subtly calling to her attention that I recognised herself as being "there," and not, as I might expect, in another, less attended booth, and, as a matter of fact, I was interested in how she was faring in her new seating arrangements. Across from me. In my booth.

"Horrible."

"Ah." There was a very interesting couple having dinner a few booths down, more than likely both having quite agreeable evenings and what looked like the fish and chips special each of them. There was also what looked like a lottery ticket slowly camouflaging itself with the dirt from people's feet and blending into the floor. A corner of the ticket had been folded up and on top of itself, but was now almost as flat as the rest of the non-folded ticket. My guess was it had been there for at least the day, if not more. I was also assuming that it wasn't, indeed, a winner.

She had brownish hair, slightly blond, too, sweatily stuck to her forehead and the ridges of her ears, as if to emphasise that she'd either gotten off work quite recently or had just worked out, and had enjoyed neither. It happened that it was the former, which I could have also gathered from the dress she had on, which looked like it was wistfully missing an apron. And it would have appeared she wasn't terribly happy with the job, as she grumbled something about regretting not staying in banking. Her eyes, I would find out later, were a bluish grey colour.

All right, I might have lied a bit when I said that she confessed to knowing little to nothing *but* waitressing. Because when she grumbled about almost wishing she'd stayed in banking she wasn't just attempting to make up a new expression, granted, an odd one,

to be used when extremely frustrated with one's job, she actually *had* been in banking.

And not as a teller, selected for her bright smile, pleasant demeanour and, well, rather attractive figure to take and give out people's money and all that sort of stuff, but as some sort of person who programmed the majority of her bank's automatic teller machines. Apparently, she was good at what it was she did, having received a degree in computer science from the University, and judging from the salary she'd commanded, which she would tell me about later.

She was waitressing, she said, because she was sick of banking and computing and its environs, and because prior to learning how to make an inordinate amount of money by networking and programming automatic teller machines she had had even more experience as a short-order waitress. Of course, she grew sick of that at a certain point and turned to banking and being a geek, which would later give way to the waitressing again in the hope that maybe it had gotten more exciting since she had last been there. But, to tell the truth, we would occasionally joke in our more intimate moments, I seem to remember dim lights with suitable accompanying music, about her knowing not much more than waitressing. This, of course, would be said while either sitting intertwined on the couch she had bought or lying in the bed she had, again, bought, with money leftover from her lucrative exit from the world of computer programming for a bank.

That evening, having nothing else pressing, either of us, we went to dinner. Granted, we had both just eaten at the diner, she was fairly sweaty from work, and claimed to be a bit rank, and I had no money left, the bookstore business not being exactly profitable at that moment. But somehow, after a cup of coffee and plate of fish

and chips, she was in a much better state than she had been sliding into the booth opposite a complete stranger, and she responded to my awkward “would you like to have dinner with me tonight?” at first with a confused look and by telling me that we’d just *had* dinner together, then finally, I apparently set her straight and told her we could walk around a bit, if she liked, before going to get something to eat. Again.

Which we did.

The thing with my bookstore was, there really wasn’t much to let someone actually *know* that it was a bookstore. The vast majority of the books were in boxes, and, sadly, not translucent ones. The boxes, I mean. So I fared quite poorly as far as sales went, and was quickly running out of means of keeping the store. Which is why selling my friend’s television worked out quite well, indeed.

He had stopped in, as I mentioned before, as was his habit, carrying a television. On previous nights he had been accompanied by a refrigerator, a toaster, the remains of a blender, and, on one ambitious night, a stereo system with detached speakers, which no doubt cut an interesting figure on the city streets that night. We had gathered in the small living room that doubled as my bookstore –himself, herself (yes, she had moved in by that time, probably three or four months or so after the two-dinners-in-one-night first meeting, or might as well have, at any rate), and myself around a few drinks in the midst of soft brown bookcases, soft brown cardboard boxes full of books, and the imitation soft brown of the television which was serving as an ottoman to the man who’d brought it along. And as the night progressed, each one of us, even my girlfriend and I, once having adjusted to being awake once again, faded from the hour and the drink until we were as

the rest of the room –soft brown light from the lamp with the off-white shade casting a dim yellow glow over slumped cardboard and disheveled people.

The next morning, between an uncapped bottle of Jamesons, a few glasses, and a pair of eyeglasses, a customer happened upon the television, brought it grinning to the pulpit thing at the head of the shoppe that served as a till, set it still grinning on the edge of the pulpit, and declared, with a nod, his purchase. Not knowing how to react to a customer wishing to buy anything, let alone an item which was distinctly *not* a book, I sold it, as herself nodded and agreed it was a fine sale from the overstuffed chair we'd fallen asleep in the night before, not thinking of the man who'd left the television without a word this morning as he dashed out of our shoppe and down to the post office, which had opened twenty minutes prior, without him.

We got seventy-five for it.

In the quiet afterglow of early afternoon and with the slowness of those just waking up, we didn't say a word until the door had shut in its' own special early afternoon substantial manner and the whiskey glass which had sat upon the television now rested partially between seat cushions on the couch.

It would make a brilliant story if we'd made love immediately afterward, right there in the shoppe, possibly scaring off a potential customer and maybe forever changing the course of education of a line of school children being led on their way to the playground by bespectacled nuns. However, such was not the case. I settled back into the space on the chair which I'd vacated upon hearing the door creak open and the man (the one who was now making his way down George Street with a television nestled boxily in his arms) tentatively poked his head in with a wobbly hello. After a little struggling, we

managed to find the proper tangle of limbs and torso that had been comparably comfortable to before, and we went back to sleep. It wasn't just a completely passionless sleep, though. It was the sleep of a new direction, and very, very comfortable –the way sleeping on a couch with a loved one is world's more comfortable than sleeping on a couch on your own.

After a few more dinners, on separate evenings and days and marathon combinations of the two in both directions, I'll spare the details for now, I took her along to my five year university reunion.

I would just like to stop for a moment, before people start believing the Spice Girls a fitting and proper end to me. Believing this while possibly exclaiming that you couldn't understand how it was I hadn't gotten the break off earlier. Especially as *you* aren't the sort (with, of course, the disgusted twinge on that 'sort' that suggest it's just a contraction of 'sordid lot') to bother hanging desperately on to the past. Clinging if only through a kind of perverse desire to show it you'd turned out all right after all (possibly despite it). And *you* wouldn't be the type to bring an unsuspecting date along, even if it was only an attempt to prove the past all a horrible mistake, and look what you've done with yourself now, you feel confident enough in your present position to bring someone else to see what you were like so many years ago.

I would like to say that I only offered in the spirit of ultimate resignation –I had no real money to show for my efforts at the newly revitalised attempts to run a bookstore (revitalised by that certain vigour being in love brings on, even after (or only after, depending on your take on it) three months), she kept harping on in that cruel baby



picture type of way about how adorable it would be to go, how much *fun* it would be, and I knew there would be loud pop music there, which she loved. Some people said they loved the way pop music would make them feel, like they should be jumping and bouncing around and screaming along, all sugary-like. However, she managed to actually *do* it without looking like an absolute fool. Though there was one time, at her own reunion-like thing a year later, that the power shorted and she did look a bit foolish bouncing and wiggling and sort of singing. As did I, I suppose, bouncing happily along with her.

So I feel vaguely vindicated having brought her along to this reunion, despite all prior common experience the world had to offer wailing warnings and horrors and please please for all that's holy and good will you please listen and please listen to reason and think, boy! at me. But ok, I did, and we did, we went.

She looked stunning, which I told her at the time, and meant it. She was wearing this black skirt and top, and there's not much else I can say that will describe it better. I could have described it worse, I suppose, and would have, in my pre-her days, perhaps referred to her top, for instance, as a shirt, but she'd taught me a fair amount, whether I'd wanted to learn or not, about fashion semantics. It wasn't even that it was a short skirt or a low-cut halter neck sort of thing or had been applied to her body with a paint roller prior to leaving her flat. Not that those qualities would qualify as a nice outfit, necessarily, I just know it's *some* people's idea of a nice outfit. Or at least something that will draw comments about how lovely it is, as an outfit, in a painted on sort of way. It was simply and truly, just stunning. Not terribly helpful, I know, and probably typically male, someone might be muttering. The skirt showed her leg just above the knee, right

where the muscles all came together smoothly at the kneecap and then it dipped without loosening at all around her knee and down into her pale calves, which ran on down into these black sandals with mesh tops that I'd never seen before anywhere in her collection where finally little reddish-brown painted toenails exited, looking quite happy capping off the little journey from skirt hem. It was quite a contrast to the slightly rumpled trousers and a slightly less rumpled white shirt underneath a blue and green explosion of a tie that thankfully hadn't been rumpled when I'd pulled it off a tangle of clotheshangers that seemed reluctant to let go. Especially when I hadn't even mentioned her top, which, of course, took into account her neckline and the brilliantly sexy decision of hair (which I had now firmly decided *was* brownish-blond, without a doubt) pulled back, occasionally wisping down in small renegade bands of strands, waving above a neckline that just as seductively as her legs wound slowly and smoothly down from her jawline and the stray hairs down her neck and with the contours of her shoulders and sternum collecting and spilling down her perfectly little round breasts and just down forever and ever.

So, stunning (myself bringing our average stunning-ness down a bit, perhaps, but stunning, still, as a couple, allowing her to assume the prime stunning position between us), we walked in to the hall in the St. Colm Hall, right into my past.

Which is kind of a lie. At the point which I found myself walking into St. Colm Hall, past the mercifully discreet black and white balloons and unattended guestbook, the people and stories really didn't belong to me any more. I had been away from the university for five years, really away, both mentally and physically, and the vast majority of people I'd told I would write and call and email on the day of graduation I never saw again as the ignored invites to mini-reunions and get-togethers piled up on my answering

machine, next to the cardboard boxes filled with books, and on the shelves that were looking less and less enthused about being used for bulk mail when there were perfectly fine books lying not metres away.

However, I did run into a few people whom I remembered, and it wasn't nearly as painful as it might have been. We sat with a friend that I'd known vaguely and his attendant *wife*, who was pleasant looking enough in her own right, a matronly-looking woman already, at only twenty-seven, as well as a couple that had both attended university together (though not *together*), and now were just going, as good friends tend to do when they've found themselves stuck without a date to a major life-milestone marking event. Which I have to qualify by saying that I was fully prepared to ignore this particular event/milestone thing. Whenever I gave any thought to it (which may have been the minute after picking the invite out of the post the day it arrived and not one minute past that time), I'd imagined if I *were* to attend I would likely be all on my lonesome, and not ringing up any friend at the last moment to act as a stand-in date. So I was wildly pleased to find myself with someone to bring instead of just a friend, no matter what sort of veiled or misty sexual tensions may be going on underneath the friend couple. That may actually be all one word, 'friendcouple' –the appearance of two people who were previously friends and decided to go to an event or occasion together, one picking the other up and everything and maybe even giving the traditional kiss on the cheek, and it dawns on one or possibly the both of them (though rarely the latter case) that there are all sorts of questions about the true motives of the other half of this couple, and a tendency to examine the other's hair and profile and smile for signs of attraction. The evening wears on, and due to tiredness or alcohol or the myriad of thoughts that go

through one's head in situations like this that build up a whole scenario or two up out of more or less nothing or all of the above, the glances linger longer and longer, and sooner or later someone catches the other staring, and things either get awkward, or they go somewhere, and get awkward later. Or they go somewhere and it all works out and everyone's happy. Or something like that. As a more traditional couple, we were allowed to have our lusty and misty sexual tensions and staring at each other's eyes and smiles and so forth right out in the open, as it were.

I'd always thought the guy half of this friendship couple was named Albert, even after he'd corrected me numerous times in school and thankfully had the good will towards my own special and continuing social ineptitude to shake my hand warmly upon my taking a seat up beside him and then proceed to introduce himself to the table as part of the "infamous Albert," pointing at that to myself, and at which I had to grin slightly, "and Sean duo," whom apparently had had some wild times with the local peacekeepers in our university days. Alcohol and other memory-impairing toys aside, I didn't quite remember too many wild times, unless watching television programmes at odd hours in the morning down in the common room with a few beers counted as wild times, in which case I had to agree that we'd had loads. However, over the course of the evening, as you do when drink and people you've known in a former life are mixed, stories came out, and I would learn that once five years had past suddenly making off with a six-pack of beer (I could have sworn it was Kilkeny, he claimed it was Budweiser) and leering at women as they passed the gates of the university with a group of three other students became "wild times." Slightly less exciting than the escapades watching television, I have to say, but there you go. The rough times with the peacekeepers came at around eleven when we

were told to pick up our friend (a foreign student whom none of us had known, and had simply been on his way in when he figured he'd best sit down on the sidewalk so that he have the energy to make it up the stairs to his room, and, influence of too much alcohol being what it is, then decided it best he catch a bit of sleep while he's at it, what with having exams in the morning and all) and clear off, which we didn't, wild bastards we were, though we did drag the foreign student behind the gates, where he woke the next morning to no little surprise and confusion and slightly late for his exams.

It was a gorgeous night, now that I think of it, St. Colm's Hall not being the traditional sort of hall you'd, or at least I'd, anyway, think of when trying to imagine a reunion hall—one full of brown soft dust, streaked wooden floorboards with chipped painted lines for all sorts of indoor sport, off-white walls with bits of tape and poster remaining beneath and peeking around streamers, a bowed stage at one end, and stacks and stacks of folded chairs at the other. No, St. Colm's Hall was truly a gem in the midst of the city. There was, of course, the ballroom, with a gleaming floor playing host to the multitudes dancing to anthems of our schooling years (ehm, well, songs from the eighties, which we seemed to associate with our schooling years, anyway... just slightly earlier schooling years than our time at university), the chandeliers high above in their separate cupolas where dust would only dream of someday reaching, if only to be out of reach of the cleaners, the possibly overdone staging area where the DJ stood atop a solid black marble plateau and was framed by equally black marble pillars/podia at either side, and, most spectacularly of all, the extension of the ballroom floor that, this pleasant evening, opened out on to a balcony that had a view of the river in between buildings.

It was breathtaking that night, and so was she, as we danced to songs I'd last heard in the university, or whilst trying purposefully to invoke some sort of university memories, and we danced like they were songs from the eighties, and we danced as if they were the most brilliant waltzes.

And, inevitably, as the night wore on, and sooner or later Sean came to learn my name wasn't, in fact, Albert, and all the stories seemed to get depressingly defrocked and more and more lavish at the same time, herself and myself found ourselves, as happens on these sorts of occasions, together, and, amongst the other couples that had slowly found each other throughout the night, some not the ones they'd arrived with, became little detached icebergs, man and woman being an island, in some cases, and we made love. Just off the balcony, behind an elegant plant and occasionally against an empty stretch of white-washed wall and the thick velvet curtain hanging over.

It was that night that she moved in, and never looked back. Until, of course, the day I arrived upon an obviously homemade cassette sitting on the as-yet-unmade bed. Then she didn't even quite so much look back as trudge off somewhere forward. Or elsewhere, anyway.

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We were doing quite well with the appliance business, her experience with banking systems' infrastructure and years of table-waiting provided invaluable people skills and the knowledge of enough technical terms to confuse the most diligent student

setting out to buy an appliance, and my uncanny ability to take money from people's hands and put it gently in the till without wrinkling it created a situation in which we found ourselves with a bit of money on the side, so that, in addition to being able to afford the place we lived in and buy food, we were able to enjoy ourselves as well.

It wasn't that money was exactly buying us happiness, but it was doing a good enough job that we decided, very maturely, I might add, to not send it away for the moment and to keep earning more of it by doing what we were doing.

The friend whose television had started the whole business had gotten over the fact that we'd sold his television. He had probably completely forgiven us once we'd bought him a brand new one –a decidedly *unboxy* television with really large screen and surround sound speakers and loads of other features that you never actually experienced, but the electrodes and transistors and such must have enjoyed. He occasionally came by with appliances for us to sell, continuing his odd habit of wandering the city streets at night with major electrical home furnishings.

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Of course, surviving a five year reunion, having a general wonderful sort of time that I've let on about to this point, and a boyfriend and business partner (admittedly, one who was incredibly poor at formulating any sort of plan), you may wonder how it was she threw all that away with a Spice Girls' song. A Spice Girls' song and an old toothbrush of hers we'd thought we'd lost months before, apparently resting the entire time behind a sofa cushion, though don't ask me how it had gotten there.

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At some point in most people's lives (not to generalise or anything, really), if not at multiple points, they might make an attempt to capture life as they have lived or are living it in a surrogate medium. It might be a kind of autobiographical urge, a desire to get everything down in order that someone else might understand what the hell it was we thought we were doing, or trying to do.

For understandability's sake, books don't fare so well, nor do newspapers, as they are too concrete, too blatantly unchangeable on the page. Too much reliant on a whole cast of characters to make up a story. Though a nice quote from some standard like Emerson or perhaps Laurence Sterne, if you've been having a truly post-modern experience, is a pleasant and slightly high-brow method of capturing life. But still, words. Sometimes words just seem sort of inconsequential, you know? Films capture it nicely occasionally, though they, too, also occasionally, have their story to tell, their point, which just unnecessarily ruins a fairly serviceable means of describing life. To cut straight through any number of alternatives, the most popular medium, and therefore perfect by my short-cut version of logic, seems to be music. For example, the song playing that night, entangled in the velvet curtains and behind a potted plant in St. Colm's Hall was the mostly suitable "Wake Me Up Before You Go Go," from Wham! All right, maybe not entirely suitable or sensible, but it's not like either of us heard much of it, anyway. And the break-up. Well.



Would that it were captured in some light airy pre-pubescent naïveté that seemed as if it were the product of the letdown after too much sugar! Or I'd even settle for the Stone Roses, New Order. Or the Wedding Present, that would have been *perfect*. Anything for marking a moment, so long as they stay out of affairs of the heart. Or at least affairs of the heart once you've passed twenty-six or seven years of age.

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“So, wait. You'd never actually *said* ‘I'll tear the vermin limb from limb?’”

“No.”

“Oh, all right, then, I may have taken a bit of poetic license. I *was* feeling a bit sick.”

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The tape continued after a distorted cut-out near the end of the Spice Girls song: “Oh, for f\*\*k's sake,” she liked to curse quite a bit, “look, what I mean to say is I think we both just really need to move on now.”

She sounded like she was packing while she was making the tape, and was having a bit of trouble with the strap on the army surplus bag she'd used for luggage at the point at which the music had cut out and her voice began. Lots of grunting-ish noises.

“I've been thinking about this for a long time now, and just feel I've, well, sort of got to move on—where the hell's my bloody toothbrush got off to now—I'm planning on

moving down to the coast, I'm thinking of leaving for France, maybe, and trying my hand at a nice seafood restaurant on the beach. If I move on down to the coast, that is, I don't know what I'll do if I leave for France, though they do have a few coasts, so that might still be on. I haven't thought ahead that far as of yet, but I was thinking even Rotterdam is pretty nice, just need a sort of look about, you know? Well of course you don't know, or you're not going to answer, at any rate, I'm talking to a bloody cassette recorder, oh sh\*t, which I may have to take with me, I've just realised I've got no radio for the bus ride out to the coast, f\*\*k. I'm sorry, I really am, I hope that you can understand, really. Not just about the cassette recorder, about the whole thing. Oh, do you remember that grand time we'd had off in Rotterdam last year? I mean, I still remember times like that, I do, and I loved you for that then, by the river prattling on about a sentimental journey and all, sarcastic, I think, which is your way, and that's all right, but things have changed now, I do hope that you realise that, as we've both changed, not just myself. You know. I mean, it is largely me, I need to sort *me* out. Oh man, I know that sounds so sh\*t.

“Who would have thought we'd have a decent time in Rotterdam, anyway, eh?”

Yes, I was sitting down, on the tattered quilted thing we'd had draped over the chair as a concession to it being an unbearably ugly chair, though it had to be the most comfortable one *I'd* ever sat in, anyway. Despite it all, comfort and functionality, some sort of style and decorum had to be maintained.

“I'm really, really sorry about the song, too, I hadn't meant to use that one, you know how it is, always think you have it queued up right and then you find out you'd listened to the song earlier in the day and simply forgot all about it and by the time you realise what's playing it's too late, and you're just going to make a mess of a formerly

fine tape, and you're stuck with it. Heh. Look." She paused to take a deep breath which almost made the tinny little speakers rattle. "Ah, well, I definitely think it will be Belgium, at the least, I like Belgium, too, though I don't recall ever stopping there for any length of time. The people just seemed nicer, you know? Very friendly and French, without being too... ehm... French."

I remembered buying the tiny portable radio and tiny speakers out of which she was just now speaking in Belgium on our way back home after our long holiday. A packet of crisps and a portable radio.

"Oh, f\*---"

It wasn't that I'd run off somewhere exotic while she was doing multiple takes for this recording, which I had to flip over to listen as she realised, too late, that she was about to be cut off. No, I'd just been at the bank, and then off to an old friend whom had held a few boxes of books for me when I had had the idea to start up a bookstore on a relatively quiet street in the city but didn't want to fully commit all my book resources, for some reason which I've never fully understood, leaving it to my subconscious as a little secret it could have from me all to itself. I had just deposited a cheque for enough of a sum of money to finally clear us enough to pack up all the metal and appliance-y things, unpack all the books from their various places of exile, and attempt to make a living at what I had originally intended. Those self-same boxes were now sitting downstairs beside the couch in approximately the same spot the infamous television had rested three years ago. An intentional, and quite possibly superstitious, placement on my part.

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“Sorry, the tape ran out. Look, so, right, I’m off, and don’t... Ah, well, look, I’ve really got to be off now, so I’m really sorry, I had a wonderful time, you know? But it’s just time for me, like. Bye.”

I’ve just finished cleaning my apartment. I think it looks quite good.

## c h a p t e r      t w o

Everytime departure, or some sort of change seems imminent, other people's hands assume the utmost importance. At least that's how it looked, in this case, or I've always pictured things, I think, so much and so often so that she commented on it once.

“Why are you shaking my hand all of the time now?”

I stopped in mid-shake and mid-rise, squatting in a fairly awkward position with one leg out from underneath the table, the other still hovering inches above the booth's cushioned seat. Now that she mentioned it, I *had* been shaking her hand an awful lot, as well as the hands of a good deal of other friends with whom hand-shaking was not usually a custom nor a formality. We had been together for eight months and a couple of days, having met on the third of March, in a diner specialising in fish and chips.

And, eight months plus later, perhaps one Sunday morning we'd slept in and on which you never expect thoughts of anything different than waking up in a nice comfortable sunlight-through-the-blinds type comfortable feeling wrapped vaguely around a gorgeous woman (granted, with her hair in your mouth and, as the thought suddenly jolts you, possibly *underneath* your own head while it's over on your side and all, causing her no end of pain each time you move or moved, which was something slightly less than blissful thoughts, especially considering no major fights or arguments had passed between us just then to the best of my recollection) to arise, those thoughts being in general concordance with the state of affairs being all right and happy. However, throw in the certain random worries and concerns that tend to pop up (in my case at around the eight month mark, for others much earlier, others later, still others never, fully

aware that at some point in time it's possible that I have or will have fit into every one of those categories) concerning just that sort of waking up in the sunlight next to a gorgeous person. And lying there, after eight months plus a little stoppage time, I was not moving my head for fear of uncouthly yanking bits of her lovely blondish-brown hair from her lovely head, and also out of a fear that I didn't want this kind of thing to face on the morning, every morning. And I wasn't clear what "thing" it was I didn't want to face. I wasn't really sure what the hell I was talking about. I'm still not sure what the hell it was that I was talking about, if that's not readily apparent. I don't know what I'm talking about, full stop. I wish I'd been heavily involved with drugs at the time, for a slightly simpler explanation than "I'm an idiot who probably shouldn't be allowed out in public to meet other people, at least not unattended and wearing some sort of safety harness for my own and others' well-being."

I mean, and here continues the idiotic train of thought, or thoughts, I kind of got cheated, not chasing down this one, but rather having her slide right into my booth, without the slightest bit of chase. Granted, my dashing charm being what it is, I'm sure there were moments I almost lost her in the beginning there, even despite the lack of chase. I hadn't been in a club (not that I did that kind of thing often, or at all, really) or pub, and eyed some incredible creature across the room, remarked on my incredulity that any single human could possibly be that beautiful to a few of the surrounding patrons, the exact number depending how much I'd had to drink, and begun to seek her out in my mind and, unfortunately, out loud, designing some sort of plan to get her to at least talk to me, which, her being across the room, was a large enough problem to tackle, as it would be quite likely I'd have to let go of the bar at some point, and I couldn't really be sure

exactly how much support it'd been giving me over the last few hours. As a matter of fact, sometimes that distance of a room, even a room full of dancing or talking people (in which, by the way, I highly recommend *not* doing the following) can be enough of a chase. There was, in my university days, such an instance whereupon I'd either just been pondering the great mysteries and allure of the chase, perhaps comparing it to fox-hunting or some other such for-literature-only comparison, or I'd had entirely too much to ingest, and, either way, was not quite right in my head.

Nevertheless, there I stood/sat/leant, against the bar, vaguely amongst a few other university students of pretty much consistent gender, as happens, and I spotted a woman, I declared, just to the lads, that is, for whom I was prepared to die. Whether she was actually a mannequin just nailed to the opposite wall of the room or whether she had an interesting reason for remaining in the exact spot she was for two and a half hours, I managed to remain at the bar, amongst the crowd where I'd been building up some siege of Troy situation, steadily being bought pints to continue on with the story. The benefit of a literature degree. Unfortunately, at the end of two and half hours, I fairly had run out of steam, though to my credit for keeping it up that long, and needed something more fantastic and stunning to keep my crowd plying me, as talk only goes so far.

I remember announcing that I would charge off, succeed in my previously stationary pursuit, win her with my obvious and glowing love for her, and career off with her to distant lands or whichever euphemism you want to or I did use for it. The unfortunate downfall of an early Romanticism course.

The only thing was, I had gotten it into my head at some point during the course of my monologue that the best approach would be to take a running start, possibly in

order that my courage and resolve wouldn't give out on me on the long walk over there, or possibly that I feared she might leave suddenly after having stood there for the better part of an evening being immortalised in prose, or maybe because I thought she might like an athlete, to which I could vaguely make a claim, after having run over there to meet her. Whatever the reason, with one hand pushing myself off the bar, I hit the trail running, dodging artfully around fellow patrons whom had had only vague notions of what they were about to witness. And, for the first seven metres or so, they witnessed a thin student from the university bob and weave horribly around people, spilling drinks in his wake, as they and he misjudged how close the passings were. *After* those first seven metres, they saw the lad misjudge which way a stool was prepared to leap, catch his foot on the self-same stool as he realised his error in mid-hop and attempted to correct himself, and go diving, luckily, in some sense, across a relatively open stretch of floor, spilling a few patrons with his flailing limbs, though damaging no major property of the pub. It turned out, though I didn't realise it at the time, when I found myself at long last beneath a table not an arm's length from the object of my desire with my head pressed against the support of a hard wooden chair, that I'd sprained my shoulder with my airborne acrobatics and the predictable landing that accompanied the attempted flight.

Now, in this case, the chase hadn't treated me quite so well, as I never saw the object in question again, nor, upon reflection, was I quite sure why I'd taken to damaging my body to get to try to talk to her. Nor has my shoulder ever been quite right after that incident –it makes this awkward clicking noise occasionally that I'm loathe to reproduce, as it's quite uncomfortable. However, as anyone will tell you, the chase could possibly be the most thrilling part of love, which it was in that case, though love never got it's head



extracted from the chair under which it found itself lodged and did find itself in a sling for about a week afterwards.

And in the case I was examining that Sunday morning it just sat down across from me and said, “Hey, I’m yours to lose at this point. How can you go wrong?” Of course, I didn’t see it that way at the time, or much of the time, either, but this morning, eight months and change from the moment of the meeting, I was almost disappointed that I had been given this kind of stripped version of a relationship, without the added feature of a chase. Oh sure, we had gotten dinner together, a long walk around the city that nearly drove me mad at the time trying to figure out what was actually going on, and another dinner a little later, which drove me still more mad, as she paid for my dinner, and found myself, to give an abridged version, sitting with her on a park bench, slightly wet with dew, as the sun was rising.

With slightly affected maturity and hindsight, I may have been pushing her away with this kind of affected formality of the handshake, becoming distant so I could try to run and catch up again. I was just trying to create some kind of chase. Cat and Mouse. Idiot and Mouse.

And now I found myself shaking her hand in the middle of a crowded restaurant, telling her I’d see her back at the flat, I just was going to pop off for some cigarettes and a walk.

However, I don’t put all of my faith in that explanation. Not to say I’m quite clear on why people’s hands become so important, but I think it might be a matter of proving that I, or the person I’m contacting, exist. You’ll take care to note this is probably part

two of my attempt to explain my own rubbish, which is part and parcel (the rubbish, and ability to both talk and write it at great length) of getting a literature degree.

Instead of whinging over missing out on the chase (which was probably for the better, as if I'd had to chase her she'd more than likely have let me catch her, beaten me senseless when I did, left me bleeding on the pavement, gone off to get something from the shoppe, snuck back about behind me, and walloped the hell out of my poor bleeding form on the ground just for presuming to think I could chase her, and then left me there. Again. I liked that about her.), I think I might, for some reason or another, have sensed that either she, or I, or both of us, were having doubts as to where this arrangement where she (or I, or both of us) would routinely come home to this odd other person, or come home *with* this odd other person consistently, night after night, share fairly intimate... well, you know how it is... breakfasts (though I generally skipped that meal in favour of sitting at the kitchen table trying to sort out in which direction it was I wanted to get my body off and moving in while the paper chattered on about bus strikes, some political leader promising to take more of an interest in the cheese farmers of the country, and another proposal under consideration regarding the recent bus strikers decision to smear themselves in butter and roll about the roads outside of the government houses which would finally allow that the bus strikers were probably just doing it for kicks), and other general functions of life was going.

I've never been much good at sorting out a sense of what anyone, even someone as close as we had apparently become, is thinking with any degree of success, at any given time. Not so that I realised it, anyway, which is where it would do the most good. I believe, in this time shortly after we'd been together eight months, that I sensed that one

or both of us was considering moving on and out of the little apartment at No. 17 George Street, leaving the small appliance store with a surprising amount of books in boxes and the other person behind to sort out both themselves and the flat and the shoppe. This taken into consideration, I think my thing for shaking other people's hands, and even, on one occasion, making a big show of kissing her hand (the show probably more for myself than anyone else), was only a way of trying to make sure there was someone still physically there. Neuroses and the like aside, touch is probably the most concrete sense with which we can tell whether something is still there or not, or, possibly, if *we're* there or not. Many philosophers will argue with me on that one, but then they're an argumentative lot of people.

So it was never quite a conscious, Descartes-popping-off-to-the-shack-to-attempt-to-see-what-it-was-he-could-believe-in type experiment, this hand-shaking, but it may have been a gesture very much grounded and worried about the possibility, skeptically, that one or the other of us was not really there. Thinking of it now, it was kind of a pathetic gesture, pathetic and a bit lame, if I do say so myself, as talking to her about it would have probably been the infinitely more well-adjusted and sensible thing to do, and might have possibly prevented the Spice Girls bopping about a little too cheerily at the thought of leaving me.

In the end, the alternative to choosing between these two rudely constructed analyses is to believe in both of them, existing one on the top of the other, and vice versa at various times. This way I have better odds that one of them is close to the truth, and a feeling that at least I've gained knowledge out of the whole thing, right?

God Coffee, I Miss You

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How did we solve this feeling of distance, then, of separation? Well, we finally coupled in that most evil of senses, we became business partners.

And what is truth, anyway? Does it matter?

# c h a p t e r   t h r e e

## :the guide for the perplexed

The first day after the Spice Girls, taking advantage of the freedom to pout and feel miserable in public that I hadn't been able to utilise for four years, I temporarily closed the shoppe and took to wandering the city streets. In the days before I'd met her, when I was thinking of attempting to put a literature degree to a vague sort of use by running a bookstore, I spent my weekends looking in the papers and out on the streets looking for a suitable space that I could possibly use for a bookstore and as an apartment. When I'd finished poking through dusty storefronts and around buildings that, without fail, had a ladder set up in some part of the space that was covered with paint chips and spare dropcloths, I would stop and sit in a park just off of George Street, the street on to which I would eventually move, the park being a huge factor in choosing it, as a matter of fact. In fact, I often suspected the only reason I was looking for a place to live and work out of was for the walks.

Even after I'd signed the papers on the dropcloth-covered shelf of a ladder in the shoppe I'd decided to lease, I didn't rush off to the pub to celebrate, but I went off to the park, sat on a sun-warmed bench, and looked satisfied with myself for a while. Then, of course, I popped off to the pub, but I was composed enough to enjoy relaxing in the park (something which just *sounds* unbearably pleasant –afternoons in the park), first, and with all the requisite airy feelings in the pit of my stomach that were meant to accompany a sit in the park. And then get pissed down at the pub.

So, on the day following on the heels of my receipt and playback of the cassette, I took to wandering the streets, that afternoon ending up on a bench at the park, facing the raised marble garden-like thing they had in the upper circle, explaining that you happened to be visiting Summit Hill Park and could you please not litter; that's it, nothing inspired, nothing by someone like Maimonides or a local poet's words of wisdom, just "don't litter." Older Middle-Eastern men played dominoes at heavy tables around the garden, and a few children imitated their elders on the cobble bricks in between and shooed pigeons away from their game.

Let me just state, to make myself clear, that I was *not* depressed in that post-break-up suicidal way. Which was surprising, considering the manner in which I was informed of the break-up, with it's distinctly teenage romance flavouring, the manner in which I was informed that 'we' were not anything anymore almost begging for some sort of (melo)dramatics. And I found myself sitting in the park ("Oh, hey, fancy seeing you here, Self, hadn't been by in a while, how's things with the missus?" "Eh." "Oh, not good? Arrah, that's too bad, dear, but isn't that the way of the world now?" "Oh piss off with you, please." "Ah, well, you'll be fine." "Ach, just pleeaase." "Fine, then, fine. Just been meaning to say you're looking a bit thin..."), thinking how impressive it was that I wasn't suicidal, considering the almost nuptial state of our relationship, prior to this, that is, of course. A little worried that I was talking to myself, at least in my head, but past that doing relatively well, if a bit thin, as I'd commented on. Four years was a long time, especially three and change of those living together. Sharing a business. *Money* matters were involved. Can't get much more serious, deadly serious, than that. Besides, four

years was, like, a quarter... maybe a fifth, something, of my life, the time I'd been on the planet, A good chunk, whatever state your maths skills are in.

Of course, dwelling on it wasn't likely going to be too helpful, probably driving one more mad, talking to oneself even more and more, and then eventually to teenage sort of suicidal thoughts, so I switched to just thinking about how impressive my reserve was in the incredibly bizarre turn events had decided to take without thinking terribly hard about what the exact turn events decided to take was, exactly. Sort of like driving and squinting your eyes, seeing how close you could get them completely closed before you couldn't see the road and began to have worry about things like physics and how it affects large metal objects carrying smaller pink fleshy ones and such, especially when the pink fleshy ones aren't devoting their complete attention to the road. Ehm, not that I played that game often, nor do I recommend it.

The situation even reminded me slightly of the day I'd first signed the lease for the bookstore, as it was supposed to be at the time, and headed to the park first, rather than the pub. As if I'd told my thoughts I'd let them kind of sort themselves out, and they could catch up with me later at the park, and then we'd all pop off to the pub for a few pints and quite possibly get rid of them again at some point later in the evening.

*When I met her, she was, granted, a waitress.*

This first basic assumption I had made about her was, in and of itself, true, but very very misleading. All right, maybe I wasn't given much of a chance for impressions other than "Err...", but it was definitely an "Err..." tinged with vague notions of the hard-

up waitress-type, surviving for the most part on leftover food from the restaurant at which she worked. Which might have explained why she was so stunningly thin. And which was also why she was so hardened, socially, and keen to sit in with this admittedly scruffy character sitting in a booth by himself.

I know that I wouldn't have sat down in a booth with myself at that point if I weren't going to get a free meal and maybe a bit of extra cash on the side. But I was very wrong, possibly about my sex appeal that particular evening, but definitely about her situation.

First of all, it turned out that she had more money than I have or probably will ever have at any point in time in my life. Secondly, before I happen to sit down in any restaurant any time soon and get beaten to death by a few angry waitresses upset about being poorly portrayed, I was perhaps only associating a poor financial state with her being a waitress because of my own rather dismal fiscal situation, and maybe hoping she was in as dire straits as myself, and we could bond in our poverty and scrape out some sort of wild romantic lifestyle for ourselves, free and, well, wild, against all the will of the world. We tend to project our own tendencies and situation on events and others and their situations whenever we can.

Leaving, for a second, the waitress/poverty issue and the scores of irate foodstaff across the world now, she had worked, as I've said, for a bank, designing and administering their computer network, bits of which was included automatic teller machines, cashpoint machines, trading floor systems, internal bank sort of networked things, personal computers in the office, and the network and cables and things that held all of it together and relatively secure. However, it wasn't working for a bank that got her



the salary she had been getting, but it was her computer background. *And* working for a bank. Hell, banks pay well.

So when I said earlier that neither she nor I were terribly knowledgeable about mechanics, I might have been lying about that, as well.

With all that, I still can't figure out why she ever left it to *waitress*, of all things, when she could have done some other computer business and gotten along just fine. So rocked with disbelief was I that she could throw away a life of leisure and not having to touch anything that squirmed overly much for bringing food to ungrateful people for minimal thrill and even less prestige, one of our first evenings together, as soon as it could be reasonably breached, I asked her basically that.

“Now,” you're thinking, “I know exactly why it is she left you off with the Spice Girls, you ungrateful bastard, lopping up the golden goose and looking a gift horse in the gob and milking the dreadful cow and all those sayings about being an ungrateful little weasel!

“Why else would you bring up money and the like in a romantic-like setting if not to sabotage it? To drive it ruthlessly into the ground with money matters and potential related petty jealousies, which have no place in love, a place which has more than it's share of completely unrelated jealousies and such, that's why! Ah *ha!*”

But again, I have to defend myself, perhaps somewhat pathetically. I was daft. Still am, probably. That's all there is to it. I didn't think of it being an odd question, nor did I think it intrusive; I was just curious, nothing more. Attempting a life as a businessman for himself, attempting life as a *bookseller*, having a degree with which I had fostered in myself no significantly marketable skills at all, I had a decent handle on

how important money would be, if I were to have an extra bit of it or two hanging around. Or how nice it would be if I could trick people into paying me for anything I could manage to do.

And she, apparently, in addition to having better social graces, also having a much better knack for money than myself, gladly gave me the answer. And somehow I survived stupidity from that point for quite a bit further, again, as far as the Spice Girls let us get.

I found out, for sure, that her eyes were blue at about the same time we began having all the trouble with her toothbrush. *Her* toothbrush, mind you. I've never had the slightest trouble with a toothbrush of mine, not ever. Well, except for the time she confused mine with hers, but I don't think that counts because her general sort of toothbrush vibes had been transferred to mine once she assumed it was hers, and those properties, whatever they were, of hers induced the trouble, almost as if the toothbrush knowing it was mine didn't count for a thing, as I'm a firm believer in the right of self-determination of toothbrushes and most inanimate objects, but then that's *way* off the topic, and we'll get right back to that now.

She was sitting out front of the library, just by the giant statue someone'd seen fit to drop there, behind her. Fittingly, she was reading a book. However, it was a book she'd just pulled out of the black bag beside her, and which she'd also just bought three or four blocks away, at a book shoppe.

I was carrying a bag of chips from a shoppe around the corner, possibly fittingly, possibly not. It all depends whether grease and vinegar-soaked chips befit a man of my mettle.

...

For those of you wishing to know, it was before we'd moved in together. Well of course it was, I couldn't imagine moving in with someone if I weren't fairly certain of their eye colour. All right, maybe I could imagine it, as I'd probably done it a few times, or once, at any rate, and possibly had in this case. But I had a very strong belief formed, not wholly based upon my imagination, by the time she moved in that her eyes were quite probably blue. And part of my conviction was based on that day in front of the library.

Upon seeing her and feeling confident enough (or made stupid enough by how giggly she had already started making me when I happened to see her on the street or in the restaurant, where, by all reason, I should have been most prepared to see her, seeing as how I was going there for the express purpose of finding her there) in myself to slide abruptly down next to her, spilling a chip in the process and almost jarring one of her teeth loose.

“Oh, J---, sorry about the tooth, look, are you all right? Oh no, let me see...”

“Mm, fair. I'll love.”

“Live?”

“Mm hmm.”

I began a bit of concerned-face-making, and, luckily, when she took her hand away from her mouth there was nary a drop of blood, just a little reddish spot where she'd been rubbing, and, of course, another one where I'd accidentally bumped her.

“I’m really sorry about that, it’s just that I’d thought I mastered coordination by this point in my life, and had been getting on quite well with it for the past few weeks, but, obviously, I’m still having my difficulties. I’m really sorry, I am, oh, what is that you’re reading...”

“Ah,” thankfully, she seemed recovered enough to have forgiven me for the physical harassment, though she did take care not to make any sudden movements, “It’s just *Tristram Shandy*.”

And my heart leapt in that sort of way it does when a heroine in a romantic novel sees the gardener’s son in the field (or garden, whatever), or when your team wins with a dramatic last minute goal and you suddenly know exactly why it is you didn’t leave the pub a half an hour earlier when it all looked hopeless. Very clichéd, really, and I thought so at the time, but didn’t care, that was the extent to which my heart leapt. Not only had I contrived to manufacture my own luck by happening down all the streets and by all the places she would logically hang out or have to walk to get around the City from her flat over on Judd Street, but here was a woman, a *woman*, this was no university scene where people were *required* to read *Tristram Shandy* for class and moaned on and on about it, here was a woman reading it for pleasure, right outside of the library! And she had sat down across from me!

While my heart was going on, getting it’s own cardiovascular workout and tumbling and spinning like an Olympic champion and chattering on about this wonderful new development, the rest of myself, for once, sensibly, after looking at the last of the water being blinked away from her blue eyes, employed my lips in the best possible of pursuits I could think of at that moment.

Suddenly, the missing toothbrush she had called enquiring after that morning, maybe she'd left it on my vanity or in the bedroom, was more trivial than it had been, but now trivial in a conspiratorial kind of way.

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“I left it because it takes a hell of a lot out of you, it's not terribly creative –suits, long hours, panic attacks, the trading floor going down just before close of markets, no one knowing what's where, attempting to make sure all these systems people have forgotten about can work together, forgetting about them meaning forgetting their physical location, not having ordered enough cable to wire the basement room you'd assumed was for garbage but finding out it was, in fact, for some old VAX system someone still used for payroll for overseas accounts. I left because I'd forgotten how to talk to people in a non-angry tone and felt like my eyeballs were vibrating entirely too much in my eye sockets after not enough or too much coffee. I left because I'd spent two nights of one weekend sleeping at a remote office on the floor we were supposed to have setup for that Monday, and because I'd done that sort of thing before. Because I knew the support people at NeXT and the banking software company better than I knew anyone at the office. Because I was sick of taking lunch at my desk, or in a frigid computer cocoon with fans whirring at every imaginable decibel level and from all sides. Because the bank tellers wanted the latest and greatest stuff on their station, but didn't want to have to learn it, nor did they want to have a few hours of downtime while I tested it and installed our new software and cables. Because it's not terribly exciting, when you sit down there and

think about it, dust and gunk and who knows what else from the internals of some shell of a computer on your hands, and no matter how much stuff comes along or whatever you do it all seems frightfully similar, and frightfully pointless. And you begin to hate the shouting, from all sides, because you haven't moved to the next thing or you have but it's not exactly what everyone thought it would be, or because someone new's been hired up above, and they've never worked with it before and they need to be seen to do *something*, and changing systems is as good a change as anything. Because after a while you find you have enough money to do without all of that for a while, anyway." And she shrugged. I'll admit, the words she used sometimes sounded very sci-fi-like, anyway, so she probably knew what she was talking about. There was that and the hunted look in her eyes when she talked about it for any length of time. She was *not* referring to the toothbrush, mind.

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Leaving the park, walking slowly back to my flat above the bookstore, is when I, walking with my head down and my hands in my pockets in a manner that might prompt someone to describe me as 'disconsolate,' had there been anyone so inclined watching (my transcendent self, for instance, or maybe Thomas Hardy, if he tends to look down on the City occasionally and describe it's occupants from wherever he is right now), was when I first found the flattened cardboard box that read, along the side, God Coffee.

Someone had scrawled, in black marker, 'GOD COFFEE' –presumably some good coffee spelled wrong, coffee intended for that Sunday's services, or perhaps it was

really heavenly coffee (I know, I know, I think I may be making an inadvertent case for someone leaving me, rather than defending myself).

But, as accustomed as I'd become to rubbish on the streets of the City over the years to the point of not noticing all that much of it any longer, this box stood out. Probably partly because of the presence of writing, and the ever inquisitive eye, perhaps also because it hadn't been trod upon and slowly nudged to the gutter, but had been flattened and yet remained in the middle of the sidewalk, for me to step over, glance back, stub my foot against an uneven flagstone, glance quickly forward again as my arms shot out to either side searching for some sort of balance, and I came to an utterly graceless halt, leaning against/in a hedge in front of an apartment building, one arm still out-stretched.

That helped enormously in cementing God Coffee into my imagination. It also probably helped cement me in the imagination of the children playing on the stoop behind the hedge, too, though with different import for us all.