

Cinderella in Reverse

Banbury was down home for the weekend. The doors of the hotel bar had been pegged open and through the burgeoning crowd that spilled into the foyer he stole glances at a blonde whose hair slalomed over her shoulders. In the summer she had reappeared after a spell abroad but this absence had contributed to making his shyness perversely grow until she ignored him completely, at least on the surface.

On his way through the crowd to the counter again he impulsively laid a few fingertips on her shoulder and said her name. She turned and the smile of surprise raised his spirits. In the disco at the back of the hotel, he used the presence of somebody he knew from school as a pretext to join her table. When the lights were up at the end she leant across and said something. Her confidant repeated her words to Banbury. There was going to be a party.

Banbury spotted another friend who had a Hiace van and told him about it. This chap agreed to drive out for a look. They took the van out of the town and sped uphill along a winding country road. Banbury had only received rough directions but the driver said he knew the house. He pulled into the roadside by the garden wall and as they watched the cars arrive they discussed what they might do. The driver didn't really want to go in. They searched for familiar faces in the criss-crossing headlights. She got out of a car with another girl.

"I'm not going in there, to those wankers," the driver decided.

"Well, I'm going in anyway."

Banbury slipped out of the van. The driver started up the engine and left. Banbury walked up the steps in the front of the house. The door was open. On entering the sitting room of the bungalow, he was asked to name a drink by a dark young man in a summer shirt. "Whiskey," he answered. The host took a bottle and filled a champagne glass almost to the brim before handing it over. All the bottles were on a cabinet by the far wall and Banbury took up a position there, entering into light conversation with people in the vicinity.

After a while a very slim, dark girl gracefully crossed the room to speak to him. She gave his full name and asked if he remembered her. He did. They

had been in primary school together. "I didn't recognize you." The blonde had told her who he was.

She pointed to a corner where the blonde sat surrounded but she in turn soon joined them by the drinks cabinet. Banbury refilled his glass, the music was turned up and a number of chaps who were really drunk started to dance in the middle of the floor. They exhorted the blonde to dance with them and she did so in a slightly teasing way but she didn't stray into the middle. She laid her hand on Banbury's arm.

Presently the lights in the room were switched off. The sofa was in the light from the kitchen doorway and he planted himself down there. In a few minutes she had gently pushed away the attentive drunks and was sitting beside him. Before sitting down he had filled his glass again. She said she didn't drink. He gave her what he thought was a judicious amount of charming bullshit and she laid her hand on his arm another couple of times. Then he told her he thought she was very attractive.

The whiskey, however, was beginning to take its toll and her pal was by then sitting on the far arm of the sofa, trying not to look at her watch. People with whom he could have got a lift home had been leaving but he ignored this ebbing tide. In the bathroom he leant against the wall in an effort to recompose himself. Toilet flushed, he looked in the mirror and his face warranted the same adjective. He emerged into the hall to see the two women leaving. The blonde turned and waved in a sharp movement. "Goodbye, John."

He returned to the sofa and the champagne glass. Few people were left and he fell asleep. An unknown amount of time had passed when he was woken by one of the inhabitants. He came round with difficulty as the man asked a bunch of women still there for some reason if they would give him a lift into town. These bitches naturally refused. He decided he would rather walk than demean himself by begging for a lift.

He left the house unsteadily. Away below, the orange lights of the town looked deceptively close in their bright congress but after a short distance he began to realize how far it really was. The last car from the house passed and he jabbed a thumb out but they sped by. He cursed them limply before getting a brainwave. It involved taking a shortcut through the fields. The fact that it was early November was brought home as he squelched through the first pasture. The whiskey had a numbing effect

against the cold air and the moon was full in a clear sky. The moonlight enabled him to avoid walking straight into a taut wire. He went to get over it. *Why am I feeling pain?* Then his hands let go of the electric fence and he scrambled under it.

The effects of all the drink probably reached their worst a couple of fields later, when he awkwardly traversed some lengths of barbed wire, tearing a hole in the crotch of his pants and landing in six inches of muck and water.

He floundered trying to regain balance but with the first step the muck had sucked off one of his shoes. When he was no longer in any danger of falling he cursed desperately and again and again plunged his hands up to his wrists in the mire. It was hopeless. The shoe was lost.

He limped on as the mud clung to the ends of his trouser legs. The initial cold shock to the foot passed and he came to his senses a bit. Silhouettes of cattle loomed and he felt he could sense their amazement. The main thing was to get back to the road, any road, as soon as possible but the surrounding barriers seemed to be getting higher and more impenetrable.

He walked into another electric fence and reeled from the shock but on hearing a car pass nearby he headed in its direction. He forced a way through thorny bushes that tore at his thighs, arms and unprotected foot and then found a road bounded by a concrete fence.

He came to a bridge over a river and knew then that less than an hour remained of the trek. On and on he limped. He had reached level ground and the road and the river swept in a wide arc into the town. The lights from there were temporarily obscured by tall trees. The wet sock was slipping off his foot so he stopped to pull it up with an icy sensation.

He met no living thing as he followed the riverbank. The lights came into view again and he soberly reflected that, had it been a household pet travelling such miles for a similar reason and had it come home in a similar sorry state, this might have led a conscientious owner to bring it to a vet to be castrated.

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