

Aran's first kiss (aged 24^{3/4})

From the first time he'd heard that honeyed voice, with its soft North-East inflections, Aran had wanted to ask Katie out.

Half hidden by a coat stand, he'd craned his long neck in the direction of the hallway, to see that the owner of the voice was tall and copper-haired, moving in the direction of the accounts department.

'What's the worst that can happen?' James said, during one of their regular Friday pub lunches. 'You've been lusting from afar for three months. Just go for it - you've got nothing to lose.'

Aran looked at his friend's earnest, handsome friend.

'That's easy for you to say. I bet you've never been knocked-back by a woman in your life. Look at you; you've got it all. The spaniel eyes, the suntan, the hair – and you're funny.'

'Steady on tiger! I've had my share of knock-backs; it happens to the best of us. Anyway, while you've been mooning about, I've been doing some digging – she's friends with Jess in IT...'

'And?' Aran said, 'Is she even *single* - before I go wading in with my size tens.'

'Yep,' James said; 'She's single alright. Look, I might as well tell you – you'll find out soon enough.' James paused for dramatic effect, running a hand through floppy hair dark as a raven's wing.

'Tell me what?' Aran said, with growing impatience.

'Okay, well don't blow a gasket, but I sent an email from your computer just before lunch when you were making tea or something,' James said.

'You didn't! Oh god, no!' Aran was mortified. 'What did you say?'

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'I said – well, *you* said ...that you'd got two tickets for Street Car Named Desire at the National, for next Saturday – and would she like to come with?' James said.

'Christ on a bike. What possessed you? I thought we were friends!' Aran said, his Adam's apple bobbing and his face turning bright pink.

'Alright, calm down. You're a good looking guy, in your own way – I mean, you're not the coolest dude in town, but we can work on that.'

Being cool was the least of Aran's worries. *If* Katie said yes – and it was a very big if – top of his list of neuroses had to be that he had never kissed a girl in his life.

Aran thought back to his 18th Birthday Party, at the local Tex-Mex, where twenty or so friends had lassoed him into semi-adulthood. Feeling an idiot in a poncho and droopy moustache, he'd drowned his nerves in cocktails, and by the time Tanya Meyers, all knees and elbows and swishy blonde hair, had confessed she'd always had 'a thing' for him, he'd been too drunk on Margaritas to care.

Tanya, whom he'd met at school *art club*, had been so embarrassed by her own candour, that she'd avoided him ever since.

Then, last year, another opportunity had slipped from Aran's grasp during a slow dance with Alison Hall at the office Christmas party. She'd marched right up to him and asked him to dance, swaying unsteadily on skyscraper heels.

Aran had been appalled and excited in equal measure. Here was the office man-eater, PA to the big cheese, asking *him* to dance – it was baffling really.

Shuffling awkwardly, he watched her gyrating wildly in front of him, hips straining against her black lace dress, piled-up hair beginning to fall down at the back – all the while, holding his gaze with kohl-ringed eyes. And then a change of tempo, and she was leaning her cheek on his lapel with her arms draped around his shoulders.

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'I've always fancied shy men; you're not like the others,' Alison said, her breath warm in his ear. 'We can share a cab home if you like – we're practically neighbours.'

In the taxi, she'd snuggled up against him, while Aran had remained straight-backed and watchful. What was she expecting?

'Well this is me,' she'd said, as the cab stopped outside a Victorian terrace, with a row of buzzers beside a peeling front door.

'Aren't you going to come in for a bit?'

A bit of *what*? They'd barely exchanged five words until tonight. He had to extract himself without further embarrassment.

'I'm a terrible lightweight, I'm afraid – I really must get home. Thank you for a lovely evening, Alison; you're a great dancer. Goodnight.'

Then the taxi had sped off, leaving Alison pouting on the pavement; crisis averted.

But now, he found himself wishing he *had* kissed tipsy, sexy Alison – or gone even further. Because then Saturday wouldn't feel like such a big deal.

'James,' Aran said, taking a deep breath; 'Don't laugh, but I've never kissed a girl before.'

'Nooo, you're joking, right? You're twenty four! Seriously? Okay, well...then, even more reason to get out there. Drink up, we need to get back and check your email.'

'*Huge Tennessee Williams fan. Yes please!*' said the email beside Katie's name. He read it three times, before understanding that she had accepted his invitation. In a panic, he rang Ticketmaster, relieved that the show hadn't sold out.

'So what do I do now?' hissed Aran, standing by the water-cooler with James.

'Well, she's obviously seen you around and likes the look of you. I think just keep up an air of mystery until the big night. I mean, obviously send a couple of emails saying how much

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you're looking forward to the evening - and to make proper arrangements etc. Mate - you have to remember that Katie will be as nervous as you are.'

'I doubt that,' Aran said.

The week flashed by.

Aran's contact with Katie was limited to a flurry of sweet and funny emails and a shy wave across the canteen one lunchtime. By Friday night, he was too excited to sleep and by Saturday morning he was so wired and stressed, he rang James.

'Okay, any last minute advice?' Aran said, after James had talked him down off the ledge.

'Just be yourself. If she didn't like you, she wouldn't have said yes, would she? The play will be a great talking point and you can get to know each other over a drink afterwards. Must go, playing squash this afternoon. Have a great time - good luck!'

Butterflies the size of bats circled in Aran's gut; without his friend and coach he was even more freaked out.

They'd arranged to meet at the nearest tube and walk to the theatre together.

And there she was, in a red trench coat, which clashed beautifully with her hair, and long black boots. Smiling, Katie put out an arm, and there was a fumbling moment when he didn't know whether to shake her hand or hug her, until one became the other and he smelled her perfume; it reminded him of honey.

In the dark of the theatre, Aran stole glances at Katie's profile. She was leaning forward, deeply engrossed in the play as Blanche Dubois spiralled into madness before their eyes. Normally, he'd have hung on every word, too – but tonight, he couldn't wait to be alone with his date.

'Thank you,' Katie said, pulling her collar up against the chill and tucking her arm into his; 'Best production of Streetcar I've seen,' she added, as they wove through crowded streets.

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'Really? So you know the story well then?'

And before long, ensconced in the cave-like wine bar beneath Embankment, they were swapping stories about the best and worse shows they'd seen. Starving, they shared a plate of cheese, their hands grazing as they both reached for the celery.

'Shall we go for a walk along the river?' Aran suggested, as the bar emptied and the staff began wiping tables and sweeping around their feet.

They followed the Thames path in the direction of Westminster, the moon and London's night time glory lighting their way. The sounds of Saturday night revelry had begun to die away and they could hear the soft lap of the river rolling against silty banks.

'It's beautiful, isn't it?' Katie said, taking in the skyline.

'So are you,' Aran said, turning to her.

They stopped walking. Aran hesitated, and then taking her hands, he pulled Katie towards him, cupping her face as the wind caught her hair, blowing amber tendrils onto porcelain cheeks. Her expression was aching soft, expectant.

Aran bent to find her lips with his as she moved closer, putting her arms around him. Pulling back for a moment, to breathe and savour, he saw that her eyes were shining.

'What took you so long?' Katie said, laughing happily.

'I have no idea,' Aran said, kissing her again.

The End