

Party Girl

A bizarre dream, yes, but definitely one that you'll snap out of any minute. – Etkar Keret

It was only going to be a one-night stand. That's what you told yourself. Leaving the bar together, holding hands outside, your place or mine, how'd you like a one-night stand. Who knew, you'd gone to a products launch in a skirt and jacket, believe me you still have to wear those clothes even here, do the networking thing, and there's a crew of these construction worker types at the other end of the bar, one thing after another, everyone's at every end of the bar.

You had practically stopped even wondering if this would finally happen. Sweet as, was going to make you smile for days. Time disappears and all that jazz. Then he gets up to go, saying he'd better not stay the night. You are falling asleep, it seems like part of his sweetness, keeping it perfect. Effortless, all of it, from a passing remark to a cute guy which turned into entranced conversation in a secluded corner banquette, not that you necessarily understood what the other one was saying, to let's get out of here, to as if you'd already studied each other's bodies.

So much for the cliché of ill-matched desperate pick-ups, all of it went a whole lot better than you have any right to expect under the circumstances. Now while you are limp and blissful, lying pressed along the length of his spine, skin on skin, drifting off, now he is slipping away.

You couldn't have gotten up if it had been his place, you'd have let yourself fall deeper into sleep and pretend there was no harsh morning light on its way to break the spell. Maybe you do feel a pang as you hear the door close behind him. It isn't all that late, but you're asleep again before thinking it might have been nice to find him there again in a few hours. But there's a lot of extra work at this crucial phase of things, no sleeping-in

possible, the new business is looking good but it still depends on your constancy, the brisk efficient daytime persona that runs your life. Just as well he left, really.

And then he sends a text a few days later and you're like, *what?*, but by your next reply you are arranging to meet again, at your place again.

His suggestion of coming over with a bottle of wine keeps everything simple, which going out together wouldn't have been.

You have a perfectly lovely time: great sex, able to also talk to each other, nothing heavy, just relaxing chat about this and that, he tells you how it was on the building site that day, you tell him there are some men who are real assholes. Different worlds so shared time has its own special zone. It's like it was before, again he leaves as you are dozing off.

It is just what you need. Not that you were complaining, your home loan was fixed at the lowest interest rate of all time and your investment properties had already doubled in value; there was satisfaction at the office; maybe too much work but in this world if you're not unemployed you're overworked and you have no interest in being unemployed. If you've got to work this hard, don't get stressed. Selected nutrition, three exercise sessions a week, plenty of sleep. None of this leaves you much time of course, for any social life or private life to speak of. From what you hear, you're not missing much. But you did think something was missing.

The second time you go to bed with someone is always the best. This time though it's even better the third date. But again he leaves your place just as you are drifting to sleep, him holding you, you thinking he is going to sleep too. But he's getting up.

You can sleep here if you want, you say.

He kisses your ear and says, I'd better go.

Hmmm, you assent, supposing he just can't sleep if someone else is there.

There's no doubt you're getting on well. Next time, he brings you a mix CD he burnt for you, and you've bought his fave brand of beer.

Mmmmm, you say in mild protest when you feel him stir as he always does just prior to departing, just do that a little while longer. Up to now he's done everything you wanted.

He waits only one second longer and then says gently, I'd better go.

Your eyes go wide for a moment, as you wonder.

Then a couple days later he calls you and says, I want to talk to you, I want us to talk.

Sure, you say briskly, do you want to tell me what you want to talk about?

He says, I've got to tell you something and you might not want to see me again and I understand if you don't.

He's maybe got some girlfriend, probably one he's been separated from for a while. Or boyfriend. Or he isn't sure where all this is going type of thing. Or he's hoping for a real relationship, commitment, coupledness and he needs to make room in his life for that. Or he has this close-knit tribe of friends you're not part of. You know, have no illusions or unrealistic hopes. He acted in a porno or did it for money or has done some time. None of this could bother you. What you have is good, there'll be no regrets.

You say, there's nothing I can think of that'd make me feel that so astonish me. You're trying to keep it light but you've never heard him sound like this.

Ah, look, just be prepared, he says, to not want to see me again.

He comes over as the day ends. You sit on the deck and you've brought out a couple of beers. It grows dark over the hills and later there is the glimmer of a rising moon over the sea way out in the distance. For a while you talk about the season, how the nights are getting a bit cooler at last.

Finally he says, I don't usually tell anyone this. But this is something about me that is extremely weird and if we're going to keep seeing each other you'd better know about it.

I'm listening, you say encouragingly.

You might think it's funny that I don't stay the night. It's not because I don't want to. But if you knew this about me you probably wouldn't want me to any more.

I don't know, you say, I think I will still want you to, no matter what it is.

What would you say, he said then, if I told you that every night at midnight I turn into a skinny girl with long fake fingernails and high-heel shoes?

Hmm, that would be very unusual, you say, wondering what he's getting at with this hypothetical prelude. Is this a test, or a delaying tactic? He wants to open up to you and is offering a ridiculous example to test whether you'd reject him for ... what? Does he want to wear your underwear? He only has to ask.

You think I'm speaking hypothetically or metaphorically, he says sadly. I mean it literally.

Literally? Too weird to work that one out. You'd never heard of this before. Look, you say, don't worry about anything, all right?

Later that evening, as you fall asleep, your arms reaching around your lover, pressing your breasts and belly to his back, you sense the extra release in his body and in his

breathing, as he allows himself to fall into sleep, the trust between you so sweet your eyes prickle as you slide into unconsciousness.

In the deep darkness you find yourself awake. What has woken you? The candles have gone out. Your lover is still pressed against you but no, it feels odd, what is this, you are now holding the body of a young woman, a thin girl with hard, high breasts cradled in your palms. She stretches straight, rolls over and looks at you, then jumps out of bed.

I don't need much sleep, she says, don't mind me.

She sits at your mirror and begins to comb her fingers through her hair to make it stick up, then she grabs hold of some mascara and begins to apply it, her long, glittery fingernails carefully angled away from her face. She's already wearing a bunch of glittery gee-gaws hanging from her neck and ears, and she pulls on a short dress, some kind of rayon jersey with plenty of lycra, with one of those uneven hemlines that fashion victims wear this season, and slips her feet into a pair of pointy-toed party shoes with silly little high heels.

She doesn't look like she's going home.

Could this kind of thing ever happen to anyone else? Hard to know, for clearly it wouldn't be an easy thing to talk about. Though what with all those women who have wished for a perfect someone who was both man and woman it is actually no wonder some guys had turned out like this. Wishes are a powerful force, often coming true long after they've been made or indeed cared about any more. It's usually a case of I got what I wanted but it wasn't what I expected.

I go to this club, the Nirvana? she tells you; it only starts to get going around now. She's punching numbers into her mobile phone.

Come with me, she says.

No! you protest automatically for this is preposterous.

You need your sleep, you know that, and there's a strategy meeting in the morning, but suddenly you want her to ask again, as she looks you over, while spraying herself with one of those chemical-smelling modern scents that usually set your teeth on edge and make the room smell like the cleaners have just been.

Oh all right, you say.

Yowza, you go girl, she replies.

You hastily pull on some jeans and a shirt. Outside you jump into the cab she had summonsed and drive into town. There's a little precinct where backpackers, tourists and young workers keep things going all night. In the hills and valleys around you most people are asleep, ready for the morning yoga class before going to check the internet for today's stock market. Or to feed cows, drive taxis etcetera.

Inside of Nirvana the music's loud, the lights are blinking colourful and swirly, the air is hazy, people are drinking, smoking, yelling at each other over the music, or jumping around on the dance floor under the DJ's charm. Your girl pulls you along to a bar and yells to the bartender, who grins like an old friend at the sight of her, that she wants two cocksucking cowboys. Two shimmering drinks in tall glasses appear, and you each drink one very fast, something intensely sweet and creamy and alcoholic. Your head suddenly feels like it's been punched hard, but in a good way.

She's quite at home here, and begins to rush around to hug people she knows, jump around on the dance floor to the boppiest tunes, and stop here and there for a hilarious exchange. Like most of the other girls here, she's wearing potent amounts of make-up, her tits are pushed up high and firm and together in her shiny little top. You examine the

uneven hems, one-shoulder tops, bare bellies, tiny skirts, flashes of bums, silly adorable shoes, peeling tattoos.

You sit quietly on the bar stool, drinking more cocktails with ridiculous names and improbable colours.

Next day it all seems very unreal, but it wasn't a dream. There's a little paper umbrella on your bedroom floor. Maybe you have a bit of a hangover, maybe you're kind of tired, but you work hard and perform with your usual efficiency all day, then go home for an early night.

You have a date with your lover the next evening, and when he arrives you hug each other with some new layer of affection. There is trust, acceptance, the arrival of tender knowledge of usually hidden parts of the self. You don't need to say much, either of you; you begin to watch a new DVD, then kiss each other with your mouths filled with wine.

You go to sleep in the embrace of his firm, masculine body and wake soon after midnight holding on to a wriggling, bony female, who squirms playfully away from you, jumps to her feet and begins her nightly ritual. She sticks a ruby-coloured glass bauble through the piercing in the side of her nose, and pulls on a cropped top to display a similar jewel in her navel. She switches on the radio and taps impatiently through your pre-set stations - the repeat of a discussion on the science of consciousness on the national broadcaster, couple bars Mozart on the classical station, a captivating discord on the experimental music and she manually twiddles the tuning dial to find some catchy hit songs. Funnily enough, this doesn't irritate you, as you find you hope she thinks you'll be coming too.

Or what about this one? she asks, pulling off her top and showing you one with sequins picking out a camouflage pattern in shades of blue. No, you can wear it, she answers herself, tossing you the garment, which you pull on over the black jeans you've had for seven years.

The club is fuller than before, as it's the weekend now, but the bar attendant, busy as he is, waves at you like an old friend. You drink a cocktail called shark bait, which is so oddly delicious you finish it in five seconds and laugh with delight as the bar guy places a fresh one down just as you place your emptied glass on the bar. You never normally go to this kind of place, but no-one here looks at you as if you were any different to them, for your friend is so well-known that it's taken for granted that if you're with her you belong here. Anyway, everyone's had a few drinks by now. They are all elaborate mixtures, these drinks, of liqueurs and spirits, juices and sodas, syrups and essences, unnatural colours and occasional playful decorations in plastic and paper. They affect you with an immediate sense of the hilarity and exhilaration of being in a place made for laughter and dancing, for people to hug strangers and laugh at lame jokes and buy everyone drinks. Your friend pulls you on to the dance floor, and you begin to jump around to the entrancing beat, not minding when people crash into you.

Things get even better with your lover. He is a secretly sensual, peacefully intimate presence in your life. He massages your feet for as long as you want. You learn exactly how to do that thing he likes. And every night he metamorphoses into your new friend, with whom you dress up in good-natured impractical clothes, swapping eye-shadows and hair gel, giving each other little gifts of face glitter and glass rings. In the club you are game to try all of the bar guy's new cocktail recipes, and find yourself laughing uproariously with your friend and all her friends at nothing you ever can ever remember. Sometimes you congregate with them in front of the mirror in the female bathroom, peering closely at your make-up, or else soothingly patting someone vomiting into the toilet or crying her eyes out over a bad boy. Pretty soon, though, everyone cheers up and the bar guy lines up awesome alligators for everyone, and hear that music, you gotta move, everyone's on the dance floor.

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