

### Three

Midday rolled around and so I figured I ought to go and meet my lunch date. I had no great wish to do lunch with this girl. I was still hung over, and she was generally too intense for me even when my constitution was at its strongest. She was a pleasant enough person, and no mistake, and not bad physically: a size ten, long, slender legs, small but perky breasts... it's not size that matters. It's not what you've got, but how you wear it. And she wore it well. More critically, she wore it obviously. Her skirts were belts, her tops were brassieres. She was a top grade tart, and no mistake. And she was one of the biggest flirts in the office. She tended to flirt with most people. 'My bloke keeps complaining and saying I'm a tart because I flirt with everybody, and he doesn't like it,' she'd once told me. 'But I'm not usually flirting, I'm just being friendly, you don't think I flirt too much, do you?' 'No,' I'd lied. 'And you don't think I'm a tart, do you?' she'd asked. 'No,' I'd bullshitted further.

I took the stairs down to the third floor and feigned casualness as I strolled queezily to her desk.

"Awwight?" a male voice to the left of me called as I sauntered through the aisle of the vast hangar-like expanse of the open-plan office. I turned and blearily observed a guy, about five-foot-nine, with brown short brown hair and a broad grin on his face. I couldn't for the life of me remember the guy's name. It was probably Andy. Or John. Or Steve. Or Simon. Or something. Everyone at Corporation HQ has a bland, almost anonymous moniker. I fitted in well on that score, if not on any other.

"Alright," I replied, lazily raising my left hand in acknowledgement. My brief response provided ample indication that I did not wish to stop as he moved toward me. Whoever this goon was, I had no wish to talk to him, and certainly not right now. Just because I didn't particularly want to carry out my lunchtime appointment did not mean that I was willing to be late for it. I had always believed in

punctuality, and still did, at least in principal. As it was, I was only three minutes late, which was forgivable by any standards. Even hers.

She was a chronic stickler for timekeeping, especially where I was concerned. And particularly just recently. I'd know her for a year or two: we'd got on well from the outset. But as time has worn on, she'd paid me an increasing amount of attention that no amount of concerted and tactless fending-off maneuvers had succeeded in abating. It was her flirtations and her intensity which bothered me so, and the intensity of her flirtations in particular. I'd been optimistic that she'd relent somewhat after she'd announced she was dating some other guy... but no. I'd been optimistic again when she'd told me that she was to marry this guy... but no. And, clearly misguidedly, of course, I'd been optimistic that once they had gone so far as to make their binding vows that she would finally relent... but again, no. Since she'd got married she'd grown to realize with alarming rapidity that all was not well in the confines of her conjugal creation.

The short distance from the stairs to her desk felt like an interminable journey: the dull sameness of each of the standard-issue desks and standard-issue chairs and row upon row of standard-issue PC terminals and VDUs filed their way into my semi-consciousness and succeeded in their primary objective of further dulling my senses. The low hum of chatter, the whir of Xerox Photostat and fax machines and the electronic chimes of a thousand telephones permeated my falsely-constructed harsh exterior and immersed me in emptiness and the mundane. Through the dense sonic haze I heard the grimly prophetic words of The Duke from a few weeks previous... 'She wants you, mate. And when she gets hitched she'll want you all the more. They've only known each other five minutes, it won't work, and when she realizes she's made a mistake, she'll be after you, the bored housewife looking for a bit of action...' I'd laughed his comments off, naturally. That I'm as harsh and cynical as the next man may well be true, but I could not for a second believe that The Duke's theory held any water. I just could not... Generally, The Duke's a reasonable sort of fellow to obtain an opinion from, but he was occasionally given to chunking the occasional line in bullshit, and I'd assumed this to be one of them. Now I was not so sure. What was that line..?

The name of Grace Jones cruelly forced its way into my consciousness. Damn! What unfortunate timing! The very name of Grace Jones gives me the fear. Some may say it is an irrational fear, but I can justify it with ease. Grace Jones is no

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ordinary woman. Grace Jones is one scary bitch... no, not bitch! It doesn't do to think defamatory thoughts in association with Grace Jones...

*'I stepped into an avalanche*

*It covered up my soul...'*

See, with Grace Jones, things are a little strange. Indeed, she is a little strange. Absolutely bloody barking, I believe, but dare not say, nor even think as much too loudly. Grace Jones, you see, is not a human being. She's a scary, crazy fucking animal/machine/woman/alien/thing, and she's got the most phenomenal ESP, way beyond even the comprehension of a regular human being.

*'I myself am the pedestal*

*for this ugly hunchback at which you stare...'*

Not only could Grace Jones have me or any other mere mortal for breakfast, but if she catches you thinking ill thoughts of her, she'll have her winged dark angel minions set upon you, and they'll torture you before brutally murdering you for your callous thoughts against their mistress...

*'You who wish to conquer pain*

*must learn what makes me kind*

*The crumbs of love that you offer me*

*are the crumbs I've left behind...*

I pity Roger Moore, I really do. Simply acting alongside her in *The Living Daylights* must have scared 'the living daylight' out of him... Truly, I do not believe she was acting one bit when she was playing a mad, bad, scary fuckbitch... ouw, no, not fuckbitch! Please, have mercy! Poor Roger's face in the scene where he has to shag her... now there's a moment of classic cinema. Imagine bedding Grace Jones! It's probably best not to, actually. But the moment where Grace Jones drops her robe and heads toward the four-poster toward the totally hamstrung Bond... heh heh. And as for the 'imagined' pictures of Grace Jones and her 'twin' where the two of them are standing naked, and the 'imagined' picture of Grace Jones aged seven, lifting up her skirt and displaying her snatch inside the gatefold of the *Island Life* album... testament to her madness, and no mistake. Scary shit.

*'Do not dress in those rags for me*

*I know you are not poor*

*You do not love me quite so fiercely now*

*When you know that you are not sure...*

Ah! That was the line. It's such a major irritant when a half-phrase from a lyric appears as if from nowhere and demands to be contextualised, reunited with the verse from which it has been extracted. Many an hour is spent trawling the cavities of my memory trying to file away, compartmentalize or otherwise locate snippets of tune or lyric. It's a waste, and a headfuck, and no mistake. However, it's always satisfying when everything becomes perfectly pieced together...

I arrived at the side of her desk. She was bending forward, adjusting her shoe: I was perfectly placed to be presented with an unmissable eyeful of her cleavage. Sensing my presence, she raised her head, but not her torso, and she grinned at me as she shimmied her breasts for my benefit. I raised an eyebrow uncomfortably. As ever, she mistook my discomfort for feigned coyness, and smiled all the more.

"Come on, then," she said brightly with a flicker of her heavily mascara-coated eyelashes. I couldn't argue. I simply couldn't. It wasn't even a matter of weak will. I could only follow.

As we headed out of the vast hangar that is Corporation National HQ, she babbled on animatedly about what a boring day she was having and how much she detested her work. I nodded and smiled in all of the right places, but my mind was not really on the conversation. I was alarmed by the intensity of my mental focus on Grace Jones. It isn't that Clara looks like Grace Jones — she does have a quite concerning set of teeth and a mean pout, but that's where the resemblance ends in physical terms. She's not black, and so has none of the attendant Negro features. No, the reason I associate Clara with Grace Jones stems from other, more concerning similarities: attitudinal, predominantly. Primarily it's the obvious fact that, like Grace Jones, Clara could, and probably would, have me, or any other man, for breakfast. To reject her outright would be a cruel offense, and I know she is indeed a sensitive individual, and I have no wish to hurt her. Besides which, I believe it fair to assume that once she had got over the initial grief of the offense, she'd have me, or any other given offender, ritually slaughtered and derive considerable pleasure from it. On the other hand, keeping Clara at arm's length is equally imperative, because she could, I'm sure, devour any victim in seconds if her passion so took her. She has a fair set of gnashers in that gob of hers, and woe betide any poor male who finds himself hauled into the vixen's lair.

We arrive in a trendy wine bar, a venue of her choosing. She gets herself a half of lager; I purchase for myself a pint of Boddington's. Beers don't come much

blander than this, but such establishments tend not to cater particularly for the discerning ale drinker. In fact, they seem not to cater for the any discerning drinker: the wine lists are testament to this. I felt bad for my being unable to even shout her a drink, but I was pretty destitute, and I had not had the opportunity to withdraw my last tenner from an ATM that morning. I apologized for my apparent ungentlemanly conduct, and she waved the apology off dismissively. I believe she really didn't care.

We seated ourselves at a table, devoid of beer mats, located toward the back of the characterless trendy dive. I took a large quaff of the watery, bloodless bitter. At least it had been on lunchtime offer, a fair cop at £1.50.

"Coo, look at me, I've been going on all about me... how are you?" she asked, bending forward and strategically resting her breasts on the table and angling her cleavage in my line of view. I adjust my focus and look hard into her eyes. It's a difficult strategy this, and a risky one. If she thinks I'm looking at her tits, she'll think I'm interested in some way. I'm not, but it's so difficult not to look at her tits. They're so... *there*. So I focus blatantly, overstatedly, overcompensationally on her face. In doing so, there is the danger that she will read that I'm hanging on her every word, captivated by her conversation and visage.

'I'm having a bad time... my girlfriend appears to be going mad and flies off the handle at me at every turn. And my job's driving me insane. I'm not just bored, or fed up, like you, but I can actually feel myself losing it. I keep having crazy, bizarre thoughts. And to make matters worse, I snogged the fiancée of one of my best friends at the weekend, and the guilt trip's enough to make me want to put myself under a bus...'

"I'm fine," I say, taking the safest option by a mile.

"You were looking a bit stressed out when I came up to see you this morning. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah," I bluff with a twitch of the eyebrows.

"But you look like shit!" she burst with a laugh.

"Oh, cheers," I slung back.

"No, no, I mean I'm actually worried about you. Is everything alright with your job?" she asked.

"No," I grimaced. "But then it never was."

"True."

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I sniff and take another draft of ale down, peering over the rim of my glass to observe her as I drank. She sipped at her beverage, then, noticing I had an eye on her, rubbed her breast provocatively. Christ, I wished she'd refrain from that blatant type of display of sexuality. I'm no prude; I'm not repressed, but... She looks back at me, straight in the eye as I place my glass back onto the table and sniff once more.

"So why do you stay here at The Corporation?" she asked.

"Why do you?" I was in no mood to go into the whole rent and food deal here or now or with her. I'd been through it countless times in the past, and doubtless would again in the future.

"I'm sort of trapped," she sighed.

"Exactly," I tonked with satisfaction.

We sat as I drained my glass. She waited while I revisited the bar for a second pint of the insipid brew.

"So what is it?" she probed.

"What?" I asked innocently. I could predict what her line of questioning was likely to be, and elected to feign ignorance.

"Well," she said, sucking on her finger, "if everything's okay at work..."

"It's nothing," I shrugged.

"Is everything alright at home?" she persisted.

There was no way I could be open with her. If I made any suggestion that there was a disturbance in my domestic life, she'd be on me, no doubt literally, I was almost certain. I was aware that she was sound in her morality, but has a hunch that she wouldn't consider 'cheering up' a needy friend to be cheating.

"Yeah, really, everything's fine," I replied, my cover as paper-thin as the taught, pallid skin on my drawn face. "What about you?" Damn this idle chitchat, the never-ending small-talk and issue-skirting... still, it beat the hazardous route of chewing any serious fat. Besides, I was fried, mentally, although the fresh alcohol which was beginning to circulate about my sluggish, toxin-ridden system was starting to loosen me up and improve the overall complexion of things.

"Oh, Chris, it's not good," she pouted.

"Oh?" My response was, I thought, suitably friendly and encouraging in a conversational way without being excessively keen or committal. Yet somehow it was still more than enough. She took the bait in her ample guppy mouth and bit hard.

“Lance just doesn’t seem as interested as he was. I don’t know what’s wrong. He just doesn’t seem to want to spend any time with me. He has plenty of time for his mates and I never stop him, I never really complain...but whenever I suggest we do something nice together he always says ‘I can’t afford it,’ or ‘I’m too tired,’ or ‘Aw, I don’t feel like it,’ and it’s really pissing me off, ‘cause he always feels like going out with his mates and spending twenty or thirty quid. ...I only want to go the cinema or something like that!”

“Oh dear,” I sympathized distractedly.

“And I really have been making an effort,” she continued.

“Uh-huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Mm?” I sniffed and raised an eyebrow. She leant forward to provide me with an optimal view of her cleavage.

“Lance always used to like it when I dressed up, but now he just doesn’t seem very interested. I mean, only the other night I was home from work early, and so when Lance came in, I came downstairs in a French maid’s outfit,” she candored. “And he just wasn’t up for it. He just gave me a quick peck on the cheek and said ‘I’m just going to get changed — I’ll get something to eat while I’m out — I’m off to shoot some pool with Rob and Matt’ And he was gone again in five minutes!”

“Eh?” My incredulity was only partly feigned.

“Yes!” Clara balked indignantly.

“Well,” I lubed, “The problem’s obviously with him.” I was hamstrung on a treacherous tightrope here. I had to be seen to be supportive, encouraging to her, a friend with a ready shoulder, but by the same token had no wish to risk being seen to be overly critical of her husband or their marital situation, which had, without doubt, been a bad idea from well before the start.

“He used to love me, and make love to me, all the time,” she continued. This was too much information for sure.

“Ah.” Surely my growing discomfort was apparent to her.

“He used to fondle my boobies all the time, and try to cop a feel wherever he could, even in public,” she persisted.

“Uh,” I squirmed.

“There’s nothing wrong with them, is there?” she asked, cupping her breasts and thrusting her bust over the table toward me.

“Ur, no,” I managed to fluster. This really was too much.

“Come on, Chris, cop a feel, and check ‘em out properly!” she almost demanded, her voice a little raised.

“I’m sorry,” I declined, “but we *are* in a public place...and besides, I’m in a relationship myself, and, moreover, I’m not in the habit of making that sort of contact with other people’s partners.” The graze of the lie thunked into the side of my head like a raw 16oz prime steak, but I kept my double-cringe well hidden.

“Of course,” she conceded quietly. “I understand.”

“I know,” I replied, emollient, placatory.

“Oh, but Chris,” she fused, “it’s driving me mad! I feel so inadequate, so like I’m not good enough, like I’m not doing enough to try and satisfy him! He keeps going off to strip clubs and when I tell him I don’t like it he just says ‘Tough,’ and ‘I’m a bloke, I have needs and want to check out other women and their bodies.’ That’s not on, is it?”

“No,” I replied.

“And what’s wrong with my body?” she gruelled.

“Nothing,” I cheesed. I was hemmed.

“I get so lonely,” she moaned.

“Er...” I felt her hand on my knee. She began to stroke my thigh. I downed half of my pint in a single gulp. “Toilet... gotta go,” I blustered. I rose sharply and beat a hasty retreat to the gents.

When I returned, she had emptied her glass. I made a show of glancing at the tasteful silver timepiece on my left wrist. I didn’t resume my seat. Instead, I downed the remainder of my room-temperature beer and announced that I needed to return to work. Clara agreed. She gathered her bag and we made our exit.

When we arrived at the main entrance to the office, she headed toward the lifts, and I the stairs.

“Will you come to lunch with me again soon?” she asked, a pitiful look in her eye and a pout to beat many pouts.

“Sure,” I replied. “Next week?”

“Sure,” she nodded before I ascended the stairs with great haste.

I arrived at my desk to discover another ream of papers and letters had been deposited for my attention in my absence, and a large wadge of post-it notes had

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accumulated too, each one signifying a different call I'd missed during my hour and four minutes of absence.

I sat down heavily in my seat and began sifting aimlessly. I was full of resolution: I would get through at least half of these tasks before the end of the week, I wouldn't take any shit when I got home, I wouldn't be so weak and I'd have the spine to turn down the offers of lunch I didn't want to attend, I would forget all about the weekend and I'd steer well clear of other people's women from hereon in...

I gathered a clump of letters marked for my urgent attention and filed them recklessly at the bottom of my 'work in progress' tray. I *was* dealing with them, in a manner of speaking. Well, they didn't constitute work new in, as they'd been on my desk a fortnight already, and they certainly weren't ready for the 'out' tray... I stuffed a handful of the most chronically backdated letters of complaint into my HMV carrier bag which contained a couple of audio-tapes, some spare batteries and my diary, and got on with my work. The afternoon floated by without event and with a smile I logged off my terminal and ambled home for some sonic therapy.