



LUCKY DIP

Simon Lake

Jon didn't win me in a raffle, but sometimes it felt that way.

I sat in Richard's flat. We both knew it was over. We were drunk. I pulled out the photograph album and said, 'Pick one.'

'What the fuck?'

'Pick one. Go on. Pick one of your friends. Go through all the photos and pick one out. Then you can drive me round there in the morning.'

'Huh?'

I was laughing now, my skin flushed. 'I'm the hottest girl in this city and you know it. Who'd turn me down?'

Richard seemed neither shocked nor upset by the notion. Maybe it was the alcohol. As for myself, once I'd stopped laughing, all I felt was numb.

In the morning Richard was still drunk. He drove in that manic way that would've scared me if I wasn't on my third joint of the day.

He knocked on Jon's door and then drove off. He didn't even wait to see if anyone was in. Maybe I should've got him to stick a note on me, like mothers do when they abandon newborn babies on a stranger's porch. But it was too late for that – so I just grinned stupidly when the door was opened. Thirty minutes later I was asleep among fresh sheets.

I think I'd have been okay, if only Jon hadn't gone and fallen in love with me.

Jon was so easy to break that it troubled me. He had pale thin skin through which all the veins in his body seemed to show.

'I never knew you were a model.'

I'd dumped a pile of my belongings in the middle of his living room. He flicked through my portfolio, his fingers lithe. I was fascinated by which pictures he lingered the longest over, and which he only skimmed.

'I'm not a model...'

'But you used to be.'

I nodded my head slowly. 'I was spotted by an agent. I was appearing in a police reconstruction. I was only fifteen at the time. A girl had been abducted from Hampstead Heath.' I paused, stubbed out a cigarette. 'Sometimes it feels as though I'm living someone else's life.'

'How odd.'

‘They found her body a week later. Hacked to pieces, stuffed into a trunk and dumped by the roadside. That was my “lucky” break.’

We sat drinking red wine together. I explained to Jon that the way this worked was that we shared the same bed.

He laughed. ‘You make it sound like a game.’

Maybe it was. I didn’t really know. But I’d already defined the rules in my head.

‘I’m afraid of sex,’ he admitted suddenly.

That threw me for a moment. I leant across and kissed him, paused to run a finger across his lips and whispered, ‘I’m afraid of sex too...’

Jon kept terrapins and wrote sad little songs on a battered old acoustic guitar. I’m sure there were plenty of women out there who would’ve found him sweet. As for me, well not much freaks me out, but those miniature turtles just bugged me. Crawling around all day in their tank. I always had the sense they were watching me. I was scared of being judged, even by tiny reptiles.

I took to spending all my time in bed. It was the easy option. Jon was growing more comfortable with our ad hoc arrangement. Sadly he had no technique. I ended up teaching him a few tricks – at least that way it saved me the trouble of faking it. I tried to be tender with him, but mostly I just took what I needed. I slept a lot. It was easier when we shared the bed. I hate sleeping alone.

One time I woke up in the middle of the night. I’d had a nightmare, but I couldn’t recall any of the details. Jon held me in

his arms. His body felt slightly damp, but I was glad of the contact. I lit a cigarette to calm my nerves. We chatted for a while about inconsequential things.

It was nice to be talking in the dark. I'd grown bored of my good looks years ago. Darkness evened things out. Maybe I should be dating a blind man. My mind seemed cluttered with random thoughts. Eventually I came upon what was troubling me.

'I killed that young girl,' I whispered.

'You didn't kill her.'

'No. But I took her life. Literally. I had all the chances she never got ... and look what I did with them.'

Jon held me closer, kissed me. 'That's faulty logic.'

'Well, maybe. I don't understand logic.'

I'm killing him too, I thought to myself. It had taken less than a week to alter the fundamentals of his life. Soon there'd be a growing list of victims. I was a disease passing through the community ... virulent and out of control.

Of course Jon fell in love with me. Men can be really stupid like that sometimes.

His songs were rather good. Simple little folk pieces, a few delicate chords etched out on that guitar. He could sing too, a sad crooning that always caught me at the point where he changed key. I wasn't sure I liked the effect he was having on me. I wasn't used to being needed like this. If I stayed too long I'd end up being suffocated by it all

I wondered what it had been that had made Richard pick him. It was useless. We'd been drunk at the time. There was no logic to it. Or faulty logic. But then I found out Jon had stolen one of my pictures from my portfolio and stuck it into a frame. I think if it had been one of the naked ones I'd have been less concerned. I told him I wasn't worth falling in love with.

'You don't understand. I have no morals. I'm just using you. Find someone else.'

'I don't want anyone else...'

It was like the air was being sucked from my lungs.

'I know.' I hit him hard across the face. Hard enough to draw blood. It didn't seem to matter. The terrapins still watched us. And he was probably composing more sad songs in his head.

In the end I decided I preferred games to real life. I needed to firm up the rules in my head. At the end of the month I'd move on. I told Jon one morning while he was fixing me coffee. He didn't say anything, but I could see that his face had lost all its colour. This time I tried hitting myself, but it didn't make me feel any better.

I still had a key for Richard's flat. One day I went back there and copied out all the phone numbers of his male friends. I put them onto bits of paper and folded them up. I'd draw them out one by one like a lucky dip. There were eighteen numbers. A year and a half of living to be done.

I'd stolen a half empty bottle of Polish vodka from Richard's freezer. I sat by the river in Bethnal Green park and drank it greedily. I smoked ten cigarettes and chatted with the ducks. It was

raining, a soft, continuous drizzle, but I didn't really mind. The vacant sky suited my mood.

When I got home Jon wasn't around. It took me a while to spot that the guitar was gone. I wandered back downstairs. The terrapin tank was empty. I had a hangover. Even though I hated sleeping alone, I managed ten hours that night.

A couple of days later two policemen called round at the house. One of Jon's friends had reported him missing. They were curious to know what I knew, why I hadn't reported anything myself. I invented a believable enough excuse, but they hadn't finished draining me of information yet.

'We need clues as to his state of mind. Anything you think might be relevant.'

They wouldn't find him. I knew that. After a few weeks they'd give up searching. Or maybe they'd stage some kind of reconstruction. I wondered who they'd get to play him. I imagined myself sleeping with his doppelganger, dreaming of all the different lives we could connect if we had children. Then when I tired of that notion, I returned to my pile of folded up pieces of paper. Lucky dip.

Who would win the wooden spoon next?

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