

BEFORE I FALL ANY DEEPER

A Monologue.

Written by

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INT. CAFE

CRAIG, MID 30'S. HE TALKS FROM VARIOUS POINTS IN THE CAFE WHERE HE WORKS.

1.

CRAIG

I've never thought that I've got the arms for a sleeveless top, so I went for the blue and white checked shirt I bought from Marks and Spencers a couple of years ago. Denise said that checks are always safe. I'd promised myself... and don't assume I was looking forward to it because I wasn't. Truth be known I was petrified. Which is strange because I work with people all day. Pacing. That was the other thing. I enjoy a drink, but two pints and it all comes back up. Waste of money if you think about it. I needed something so I took a couple of paracetamol. Seven pints on a Saturday night? Honestly I'd be in A and E. I'd made a commitment to myself to do this and I always honour my commitments. I hate it when people say 'you must come round for dinner' and then you never hear from them. Integrity. People just don't seem to have integrity these days.

I didn't want to get there too early because people might think that I didn't have any friends. Nor did I want to be standing outside in a long queue to get in. You never know what the weather is going to do, even in June. In the end I timed it about right. The cloakroom chap in a skinny vest was very charming. I think he was pleased to be checking something in as everyone else had come sleeveless. I would have been happy staying in there all night. I'd have had all those hangers colour coded in no time. I'm more confident when I've got something to do, but hanging around hoping to meet someone was out of my comfort zone.

I ordered a bottle of lager. Well, shouted for it. Thank goodness it wasn't a round, I'd end up with laryngitis. I went for a Spanish one, I think the wedge of lime in the top looks sophisticated and no-one can tell if you're taking a real swig or not. Pacing. And I could always top it up with water from the gents. Which I later discovered only has hot taps.

I stood by a pillar, covered with posters for drag shows, lip sync competitions and whole fruit nights. Whatever they were it didn't look as if a greengrocer was involved. I found I could lean on it in a variety of ways and nod my head slightly to the bass to look as though I was familiar with the music. Of course I'd never heard of any of it, let alone begin to describe it. Not something you'd ever hear on radio two. I decided I was overdressed. A t-shirt and some jeans would have sufficed. But I did think that my arms were actually better proportioned than a lot of others out there. So I discretely undid my cuffs and turned them up twice. It was as I was swapping my lager over to the other hand to do the right cuff when I saw him.

He was about the same height as me nearly six foot, bulkier and by that I don't mean fat, he had a good solid frame. I couldn't quite see all his face because he was in front and to my left. He had dark hair. And I like dark hair. He was wearing a black shirt with cufflinks. I could see the fold lines as if it had come out of a packet, so it was probably quite expensive. He must have clocked me before, unless he had eyes in the back of his head because each time he readjusted his stance he slowly inched to his right and backwards. It looked very natural so with two paracetamol and a bottle of lager inside me I did the same only left and forwards.

I couldn't be sure if I was his destination but I noticed he stopped fidgeting when we were pretty much side by side. I could smell his woody aftershave. The two of us stood watching the dance floor. I think he probably spoke first. I know that he said his name was Ben and we shook hands. They were solid hands. I said, 'did your grandmother call you Benjamin?' Honest to god, I've know idea where that come from. Of all the moments why should I suddenly think about his grandmother? 'It's always been Ben' he smiled.

2.

Ben was staying at the Thistle hotel on Brighton seafront, he was from Leeds down on business, something to do with glass. It was his own company and had been delivering a glass brick for the Lego shop in Churchill Square. We held hands in the lift as we went up to the ninth floor. My heart was racing. My body was melting. In his room he took off his cufflinks and as he started to unbutton my shirt I looked down and saw the packaging in the waste bin. I was right. It was a new shirt.

Pause

In the morning the sun pried its way through a gap in the curtain, Ben's knees were tucked into the back of mine and his arm around my chest, he gave it a squeeze and I put my hand on his. This must be what they call enlightenment. In that moment nothing else mattered except that moment. You can't explain bliss to anyone. It's a rare moment, a peek into utopia, a privilege that doesn't last. But is never forgotten.

Pause.

At breakfast I suggested I show him around Brighton. 'Craig, I'm sorry. I have to drive back today.' 'Sunday?' I said. Turns out he has client to see about a glass lift. He does a lot of driving and listens to radio two in the car. He said it's the best radio station. I don't remember walking home. I don't know if I even went straight home. I was possessed by unfamiliar emotions that I had no control over. Now, I know you are going to think I'm stupid and quite honestly I did too. But... you're not going to believe this... we didn't exchange phone numbers. I kicked myself.

Pause

So, I decided that I would send him a card.

3.

There's a nice card shop in Kemp Town, that caters for its gay neighbourhood. I opted for an arty black and white photograph of two male torsos hugging each other. Not too explicit and had the right sentiment. I wrote how lovely the night had been and hoped that we could see each other again. Thought it best to keep it light... and added my address and telephone number. I deliberated about the address but I'd read somewhere that vulnerability is a strength and I thought he might appreciate my openness. I googled glass businesses in Leeds and there was only one address that looked capable of making a lego brick.

I wrote 'Ben' on the white envelope and then put that in a brown envelope to make it look more business related, adding 'private and confidential.' I sent it first class of course.

4.

I was at work when the phone rang. I'd just served a cappuccino and a skinny latte to table six, which was fortuitous because it's outside under the canopy, so I just slipped to the other side of the plastic bay tree. 'Is this Craig?' It was a northern accent. And didn't sound too pleased. I said 'Yes' rather slowly trying to place it. 'This is Ben,' he said. I was silent for a moment. 'Ben?' I said. 'Do I know you?' he said. 'I don't know' I said. 'You sent me a card.' I could tell he was angry. 'Oh?' was all I could muster. My stomach turned over, my face went hot and sweat started to roll down the back of my neck. 'Is this a joke?' he sounded threatening. 'Why are you sending me a card at work?.' 'I'm so sorry I must have the wrong person' I said. 'Who are you?' he jabbed. 'I don't know anyone in Brighton.' 'It wasn't meant for you' I said. 'I'm the only Ben who works here. Who's it for then?' He kept asking questions that I didn't know how to answer so I kept apologising feebly. I was pathetic. My hands were shaking so much after he hung up that I had to ask Denise to clear table four.

I didn't think this Ben was going to come down and smash my face in, because that's quite a trek from Leeds and then there is the overnight accommodation to consider. But I will say I was on high alert for a couple of weeks. Once my adrenaline levels had returned to normal I began to puzzle about Ben. Just having him occupy my thoughts gave me hope.

That was until I got a text message. A long one. Thankfully the cafe was quiet and I was having a flat white.

It was from Ben. He said that he had been thinking about me a lot and was feeling guilty because I was a really nice guy and that he liked me but he needed to tell me something. His name wasn't Ben. His real name was Keith. That's one thing I like about Northerner's you know where you are with them. They don't beat about the bush. He was very apologetic and then slipped in that I should also know that he was married with two teenage daughters. I'm not sure if a text message was the appropriate medium for such news, but there it was. Like a bullet. He signed off by telling me he would be in London on Tuesday. Shot, I sank into a quagmire of broken feelings. I ached and powerless to hold back I unashamedly wept. Denise brought over a tea with two sugars, I don't normally take sugar but she said it's good for shock. I said that I felt as if I had been punched in the head by Mike Tyson. Denise said rather too cheerily that at least I knew I was alive. I thought that was quite profound.

5.

Of course I went to London. I dropped everything because... I still believed I had met my forever one and I needed to untangle the spaghetti that was in my head.

Keith chooses his hotels well, this one was a boutique type in Covent Garden. It felt odd calling him Keith. A bit surreal. It was like I knew him and yet he was different.

Neither of said anything as we hugged each other. I felt safe and the silence bonded our souls. The smell of his cologne was reassuring. It was one I'd never heard of by Vera Wang and I had made a note to get some for myself. He gave me a kiss and said I had lost weight. 'That's your fault' I said, and poked him hard in the ribs. Keith opened a bottle of wine he had on ice and while we waited for room service he said, 'you sent me a card didn't you?'

6.

It transpires that I did have the right address. It also transpires that his wife is his secretary and opens all the mail. Ben is the supervisor and doesn't normally get mail so this did pique some curiosity around the factory. Keith said he saw her pull the white envelope from the 'official' brown one. I said 'I wrote private and confidential in block capitals on that.' He said that wouldn't stop her. I took an immediate dislike to her. Lack of integrity. Ben is also a family friend of Keith's and was the first name that came into his head when we met. And of course as mates a baffled Ben shows him and his wife my card.

We'd ordered two club sandwiches. I've never seen the appeal of layers of dry scratchy toast, so while Keith devoured his I picked out the bacon, lettuce and tomato. I wasn't really that hungry. Being together was all the nourishment I needed. And yet somehow I sensed that this wasn't enough to survive on. 'Stay the night' he said. 'I can't,' I said. 'Please,' he begged. 'You're married, you have a wife and two daughters.' Truth be known I didn't give a shit about them. But I did want him to feel some hurt.

And by not giving him what he wanted was the only weapon I had. 'Please?' I did want to stay, so, so badly and just as I was about to capitulate, I thought of integrity.

7.

Bloody integrity. I cursed the word as I sat on the train home. Bloody, bloody integrity. Really? I don't know his wife. I don't even like her. 'I miss you. Please come back. I'm sorry.' A string of texts came beeping through for the rest of the journey. And by deleting them I had whipped and lashed us both.

8.

I did hear from Keith again. A text message. He said that his wife had found out about us. I took 'us' to mean other men too. Women are particularly intuitive when it comes to this sort of thing. She had eventually put two and two together and had my details from 'that' card. He said that if she contacts me I was to say that nothing happened. He signed it with a capital X. She never rang. Pity, because I wasn't sure if I still had one more lash left.

9.

I never went to that club again. To be honest it's not my scene, although the fruit night did sound intriguing. I joined a walking group for gay men, thought that might be more my style. They were a jolly lot, friendly but that's about as far as it went. It was there that I thought about getting a dog.

All this love I had was going to waste, so I rescued a black Labrador. A couple of lesbians ship them over from Greece. He's a cross with something else we can't quite work out. I named him Ben.

Pause

Funny thing this morning he took a liking to West Highland terrier, never seen it before. I'm not too keen on them myself, nightmare to walk, cock their legs at every lamppost. It's owner and I gave up calling them so we just watched them play and chase each other. 'How long have you had him?' I asked. 'He belongs to my grandmother. She's having a new hip.' I noticed that he took a tiny step closer. 'Vera Wang?' I said. It took him a few seconds to realise I wasn't referring to his grandmother. He laughed. 'You know it?' he beamed. 'Intimately.' I smiled.

END