

“Satchmo on the Sound System”

Though the wine bar was full of noise – a cacophony of mingled voices and saxophone tones on the sound system – Jonathan’s words could be heard above it all. He remained eloquent in spite of Clare’s impatience, which he sensed as he led her to the bar. She was mad, but he could fix that. The challenge fuelled and, strangely, aroused him. He turned around to speak to her directly.

‘We both know how this will go – we’ll argue, I’ll convince you, and you’ll change your mind. Why can’t we skip the middle part?’

She spoke to his chest, refusing to look up at him. ‘Because you enjoy that part too much. You want to argue.’

‘Why are you so mad about this? Does it really matter?’

‘To me it does. We always stay at your place. I miss my home. I want us to stay there tonight.’

They stepped aside to let another couple leave. Despite the noise, the bar was beginning to empty. The music continued to play, but the voices were thinning out, taking with them opportunities for conversation and argument. The night was winding down, and Jonathan wished it wouldn’t.

‘Clare, you know I love you, but I don’t love your place. It’s noisy, the neighbours never stop playing music, your bed is smaller than mine. I sleep better at home. So that’s my case in favour of my place. What have you got?’

‘This isn’t one of your debates. There’s no point system for winning.’

‘Speaking of, you haven’t said anything about tonight’s debate.’

The debate they’d just come from, held at Clare’s university and hosted by the English faculty she was a part of, had given Jonathan a chance to stretch his muscles of rhetoric. Even so, the debate had been too easy, his opponent had been sloppy. The moderator, who introduced Jonathan as ‘a pugilist in the world of political and literary criticism’, had been irritating throughout. He had taken issue with Jonathan describing his opponent as ignorant, as if there should be rules against being rude. (Besides, it wasn’t a mere insult but a statement of truth; the man had claimed that North Korea represented the secular ideal. Jonathan had demolished this nonsense, struck a few further blows and got a laugh at the moderator’s expense after he chastised Jonathan for ‘coarse language’.)

‘Well done,’ Clare said caustically. ‘You won. Again.’

‘Don’t be like that.’

‘Well, don’t smile like that. You think you can charm anyone into agreeing with anything.’

‘I’ve been able to so far.’

‘God, you’re smug.’

‘You find it attractive.’

‘No. Well, yes ... but it’s annoying.’

‘Too annoying for me to kiss you?’ He moved towards her body and paused precisely at the point where she might have felt imposed upon. He felt her hips shift lightly so that her waist touched his. Reading her movements, he used his body like an angler feeding out line to catch a fish that might be spooked.

‘Fine, you can kiss me ...’ Their lips met. ‘Mm, kiss me again ... You’re good at that.’

‘*Merci bien.*’

‘But I’m still annoyed!’ She stepped away from him.

‘Look, let’s order our drinks. What are you having?’

Standing at one end of the bar, Jonathan raised his hand and gave a smile to bring the barmaid over to them. Clare asked, 'What rosé have they got?'

'Only White Zin,' Jonathan answered. 'You don't want that, do you?'

'Yes. Why not?'

'Because it's piss. It's the fast food of wine. Look, have the Malbec, you'll love it.'

Clare rolled her eyes. 'Fine. A glass of the Malbec then.'

Her surrender depressed him. If she wanted the rosé, she should order the rosé.

'We'll have a large glass of the Argentinian Malbec and a Johnnie Walker Black, neat. Make it a double, thanks.'

The barmaid left to get their drinks. Clare turned on Jonathan and said, 'I'm not giving in this time. We always stay at your place. I practically live there, and I want tonight to be different. I miss my home. So – we're staying at my place tonight. I'm not arguing about it anymore.'

She became even more attractive to him with this fierce assuredness in her voice, even if her eyes, which gave away that she still feared looking foolish in front of him, didn't match the confidence of her words.

He said, 'Let's have a couple of drinks and talk about it after.'

She shrugged. 'Fine, we'll do that.'

Her voice had become softer, and she sounded like herself again, as if her assertive side had been exhausted. Jonathan desired the give-and-take of debate, of trying to win her over, of thinking on his feet and dancing with language. He was already bored, seconds after striking their truce. He picked up his glass and paid the barmaid.

'Let's find a table,' Clare said. 'Over there, away from everyone?'

'Would *you* like to sit there?'

Another shrug from Clare. Jonathan pushed harder.

'Tell me where we ought to sit.'

'I really don't mind.'

She went to the table in the corner, and Jonathan swallowed his rising frustration. He wouldn't hold it back for long, but he would give her a chance to prove wrong his worry that she might be too passive for him. Four months, the length of time they'd been together, was too soon for him to know a person well enough to judge compatibility. He could evaluate their political positions and tastes in literature, but their character was something entirely different. He'd fallen in love with a Tory once; party affiliation was no indicator of what his heart might feel.

'Jonathan, isn't that ...?'

Clare was looking past his shoulder, so he turned to look at what she was seeing. Three women were sitting at a table on the other side of the wine bar. One of the women was laughing more loudly than the other two. Jonathan noticed the sexy mess of dark hair piled on top of her head, held in place with a chopstick.

'Yes, it is.' Jonathan turned back and saw the expression on Clare's face. 'Don't look so worried! She's not the devil. Well ...'

'I just thought you might prefer to go somewhere else.'

'Like hell! I'm not being chased out of anywhere, and certainly not by her.' Jonathan looked back to the women. 'Besides, it looks like she's leaving. Her friends are off.'

'Jesus, did you see her neck that drink?'

'That's nothing to her. She'll barely feel it.'

The other two women put on their coats and left the bar. Jonathan tasted his drink and shifted in his seat so that he was sideways at the table. He could see the woman in his peripheral vision while talking to Clare. The woman could, potentially, see him too. There

was no predicting her reaction, her behaviour, especially with Clare here. Had she met Clare formally? He couldn't remember. But Jonathan was curious and itched for antagonism.

'I think she's clocked you. Don't look – Jonathan, don't look! She might ignore us ... Too late. Here comes Hurricane Rebecca.'

The woman came over to their table.

'Jonathan! Is that you? That is you! How are you?'

'It's too soon to tell.'

Rebecca laughed.

'The wit's still sharp, I see.' After a pause, she turned to Clare and said, 'I'm Rebecca.'

'Clare. We have met before. At the "Intersection of Art and Politics" lecture last year. We both knew Julie ...'

'Of course! I've had few drinks – how many drinks have I had? Either way, the alcohol has done its job!'

Jonathan noticed how Rebecca swayed lightly and her hand touched the table, seeking stability. She was a high-functioning drunk, usually able to hide her inebriation. Her natural disposition was often so manic that being drunk did not make for much contrast. He knew the signs, but he didn't think Clare could tell that Rebecca was well beyond tipsy.

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Clare could tell that Rebecca was drunk, she could see it in the other woman's eyes. Clare had been anecdotally warned that Rebecca was frenzied at the best of times, but this was more than that. The slight disconnectedness of her gaze and the way she leaned against the table for support could only be down to alcohol. Rebecca sat herself on the end of Jonathan's bench. Clare watched him for a reaction. She thought being joined without an invitation was rude, unexpected at least, but Jonathan seemed undisturbed. Of course, his composure would never be compromised. Was this 'progressive' then? Would it be too quaint or conservative to take issue with spending the evening with her lover's ex-wife?

'Clare, how did you meet Jonathan?'

'We met at a dinner party. It was for a friend who'd just had a book published.'

'Actually, I didn't know him,' Jonathan said. 'Alas, poor what's-his-name! I knew him not. No, I was invited by a friend of a friend, and I never turn down an opportunity for conversation or wine.'

'Right, so we met at this dinner party, at a restaurant.'

'We had met before, though. I'd given a talk at the university Clare lectures at.'

Rebecca said, 'That's right, you're a teacher! What do you teach?'

'Greek Mythology in Contemporary Culture. Anyway, the first time we really had a conversation was that night at the restaurant. I was so intimidated by him.'

'I don't remember that. You were eloquent and kept me on my toes.'

'I barely spoke, Jonathan. I was worried I'd say something dull.'

'Well, something attracted me to you.'

'You were drunk.' The three of them laughed at this. Clare stifled her own laugh after realising she found it strange to be sharing such a casual moment with Rebecca. She didn't want to share anything with her. 'You were drunk but still on top form. The table was centred on your conversation. I could tell you weren't even trying. I was almost put off by how charming you were.'

'Really?' Jonathan frowned as if in disbelief.

'Yes! I thought that even if I got close to you and didn't make a fool of myself, I would be competing with other interesting people for your attention.'

‘As soon as we started speaking I knew you were someone special.’

‘Nonsense. You barely noticed me until I got drunk enough to speak freely.’

‘No, I definitely noticed you. And before you were drunk I asked you to join me for dinner another night.’

‘Drinks. You asked me to go for drinks with you.’

‘No, we had dinner. We ate at Zane’s.’

‘We came here for drinks,’ she said. ‘Zane’s was a few weeks later.’

‘I’m not sure that’s right.’

Clare knew she was right. She remembered the date of the night they met and the date they ate at Zane’s, which was the night she first slept with him. Throughout dinner, they had playfully and self-consciously tried to one-up each other with literary references and witticisms until it became so pretentious they had to laugh at themselves. Then Clare took him to her favourite place for dancing. It was a small club that, once a week, played Latin music (usually tango, her favourite). She had wanted to go there because she was feeling good, and dancing was her first choice for such good moods. More than that, though, she thought she could impress Jonathan. She was a great dancer, and she’d also decided to seduce him that night. Dancing made her feel as sexy as she knew it made her look. The dance floor was the place she felt most confident in life, just as the centre of attention was where Jonathan was most at ease.

Jonathan didn’t dance, but he watched her dance. When she sat with him, they talked to some of her students who had turned up. They were full of alcohol, ego and recycled ideas from pop-philosophy and *Das Kapital*. Jonathan tore them apart, left them floundering for rebuttals to his side of an argument about Trotsky. It seemed to give him a second burst of energy, and he barely stopped speaking during the entire taxi ride to his flat. There, his books overwhelmed her. They filled every shelf, were stacked in corners, and in every room there was at least one book left face down to keep his page. Jonathan had turned on his stereo, and jazz began to play.

‘Who is this?’ she’d asked.

‘Satchmo. There are better musicians and better albums, but nothing touches me in quite the way he does. Whatever else is going on, I hear his voice and it makes me feel ...’ That was the first time, possibly the only time, that she’d seen him lose his words, unable to articulate this feeling. Since that night, the music of Louis Armstrong had taken on the same quality for her. His voice forced an emotion inside her that she couldn’t describe, let alone understand. It was something like happiness and the sensation of perfect sense, something logical and geometric fitting perfectly into place. It didn’t matter if she was depressed or angry or tired, this music made her feel this way, and she became open to possibility. ‘No’ became an effete reply to anything. Jonathan had described it as the Pied Piper Effect. She called it Orphean.

Jonathan had picked out a book from a shelf and read something to her, a poem she’d forgotten now. She realised his eyes weren’t following the lines on the page.

She interrupted him. ‘You’re reciting from memory.’

He smiled, a cheeky and self-assured grin. ‘I didn’t want to show off.’

She took a step toward him and dropped her coat on the floor. ‘Go on, show off.’

He dropped the book on a chair and continued reciting the poem, even as she approached him and then pressed herself against his body. She almost broke off from the kiss that followed to tell him to keep reciting poetry because it turned her on. Instead, they went to his bedroom.

Clare realised that Jonathan and Rebecca had been speaking while she had been lost in her memory. Jonathan’s glass was empty, he’d finished his drink quickly, perhaps catching up to Rebecca. A waiter passed their table, and Jonathan ordered a triple Jonnie Walker

Black. Clare sent a warning look his way that she hoped Rebecca wouldn't see, an expression of her discomfort at his drinking.

'I'm celebrating a good result at my debate,' he insisted.

'Oh, of course,' Clare said, feigning nonchalance and fuming in her mind. She didn't enjoy being unable to express what she really thought, restricted by Rebecca's presence. 'Maybe take it slow. All things in moderation, after all.'

Jonathan said, 'Moderation means having less of something than you'd like, a principle I'm fundamentally opposed to.'

'Like staying at my place?'

'I'm not against staying at your place, but I'm in favour of staying at mine. Any sane person would be.' He turned to Rebecca and said, 'I have a memory-foam mattress,' as if that ought to settle the matter. Clare resented that Rebecca now knew what their bed at Jonathan's flat was like, and enjoyed less that Rebecca was being invited into their private argument.

'I wish you would stop acting so cocky,' she told Jonathan.

'God, he does that a lot, doesn't he?' said Rebecca.

Clare kept her words directed at Jonathan. 'You're not the gift from God that you think you are. You can't win everyone over to your side on everything.'

'Clare, this is getting a little old.' Jonathan finally sounded earnest. The teasing tone was gone, and he looked her straight in the eyes. 'I play up sometimes to this arrogant character, but you can take it too far. It seems like you really believe it, like you don't know that I'm open to being proven wrong.'

Clare wanted to attach herself to this sincerity he'd extended, so she offered some to him in return. 'To be honest, I make jokes about you winning everyone over because it's often true. You have this way ... Even my parents' dog loves you! He hates new people, but you – although my parents were a different story.'

'Your parents love me.'

'Now they do. I didn't tell you, but they sat me down when we visited them, while you were on the phone. They weren't convinced by you. They thought you were bad news, but they didn't really explain why. Anyway, I told them you were good for me, and we are good together, and I love you. They were impressed by my speech and let us leave together with their blessing.'

'Well, I'm glad you stood up for yourself.'

'That's your influence.' She smiled at him. Then she set her face into a frown. 'Damn it, you're doing it now. You're winning me over and making me think I should give in and stay at your place.'

The argument subsided and nobody spoke. She noticed the music on the sound system had changed. Satchmo was singing, 'Oh ... What have you done to my heart?' Tonight, for the first time, she understood the feeling that his music gave her. It was the feeling of knowing who she wanted to be, something which she had no words for but which this music and this voice described inside of her.

Clare asked him, 'Don't you get tired of having everything your way?'

'He's very good at getting what he wants,' said Rebecca.

Jonathan looked at Rebecca as if she had reached into his pocket and taken out his wallet without shame. 'Are you serious? Do you think I *ever* got my way when you and I were together?'

Clare asked Rebecca, 'What do you think went wrong between you two?'

A clumsy moment of uncertainty and hesitant vowel sounds passed between them. Even Jonathan looked stunned that Clare had asked this. That made her feel proud of herself. But her victory was interrupted by the shrill ringing of her mobile phone in her pocket.

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As Clare searched for the phone in her coat, Rebecca was glad for the distraction. She was, unusually for her, stuck for an answer. Clare's question had caught her unprepared, and even Jonathan appeared lost for a response. Clare had her phone in hand and asked to be excused while she took the call. The waiter brought a Jonnie Walker to the table, and Jonathan swallowed a large amount as soon as he'd paid. Rebecca told Jonathan that she was going outside for a cigarette.

The air on the street was almost tangibly cold, it felt like a physical object pressed cruelly against her skin. Autumn was finally on its way, and warmth was now a memory. She pinched her cigarette between her lips and searched her pockets for a lighter. It wasn't there. Then Jonathan came outside. He lit up his own cigarette and offered her the lighter. Once the tip of her cigarette was glowing, smoke sliding down her throat and into her lungs, she dropped the lighter into her pocket.

'That was mine,' Jonathan said.

'What was? Oh, right.' Rebecca shuffled her hand around the pocket as if searching for the lighter. 'Are you sure you need it? I don't have one.'

'Becky, I'll have my lighter back.'

'Alright, alright. Considering how well you're doing, I thought you could spare a ninety-nine pence lighter.'

'That's not the point.' He took it from her hand.

'You've changed, you know that? You've got more bite than you used to.'

'I've always had a bite, Becky. I should have used it with you a little more often.'

Rebecca liked this strength he was showing. When she'd met him fifteen years ago – was it fifteen? Jesus, it was – he'd had a reputation as a bad boy. She had heard about his boisterous drinking and bawdy conversation, as well as having lost his job at a magazine over an ill-advised affair with the editor. It turned out the last rumour was untrue, and as for his drinking, his argumentative and bold nature was often mistaken for being drunk. Rebecca had been startled to find, however, that he was a novice in love. His own emotions toward her seemed to catch him off-guard. His confidence vanished when they were alone, and he became eager to impress her.

'Why weren't you more assertive with me, Jonathan?'

'You really want to have this conversation?'

'Why not have a peek at our past? We were strolling down Nostalgia Avenue with Clare. So, why weren't you more assertive with me?'

'I was young and naïve,' he answered. 'I thought that's what love was – giving someone else the power.'

At first, his sweetness had been cute. It became cloying after they'd been together for a year, and she had hoped that after accepting his proposal he would bring his backbone into their relationship. When they were with other people, the public Jonathan took over, and she pretended that this was her Jonathan, the one she shared a home with and woke up every day next to. After they were married and it became clear that he wouldn't change, she hated being alone with him.

'God, I wanted you to be that Jonathan that took charge and didn't take any shit.'

'You realise, of course, that most of any shit I took came from you.'

She looked at him through the smoke she exhaled – he was smiling, so she knew he wasn't really upset. Besides, if she had been so awful to him, it had started because of his apathy. His passive way with her had allowed her to act out at first. Eventually it provoked her into it. She was screaming at him for passion, deliberately taking advantage of his leniency and pushing him around to make him push back. This became a series of

transgressions with an ex-lover, which Jonathan found out about and forgave. Not as easily as that – there were fights and nights when it seemed like it was all over, but Jonathan forgave her. She let him find her out on three occasions, and Jonathan got upset for a while, but eventually he caved each time.

But the third time, in the midst of a three-day fall out over her cheating, she had started throwing out his books. She tore pages from them until Jonathan bellowed at her and grabbed the book from her so hard he almost pulled her over, and she thought he might hit her – she wanted him to. She immediately knew she should not think such a thing, and he would never do that anyway. But he had told her, a new strength to his voice, that this was it: if she ever acted this way again, ever cheated on him again, that would be the final time. He wouldn't take any more. For a time, this worked, but eventually she grew bored again and began an affair with a new man at work. When Jonathan found out, he left immediately. He boxed his books that evening, then a duffel bag of clothes, and by the end of the week, all traces of him were gone from their home.

'There you are.' Clare had come out to the street. 'I had to take that call.'

Clare was speaking to Jonathan, not acknowledging Rebecca. She sounded tense. Rebecca recognised the tone that lovers employ to let the other know that things aren't all right without having to argue in public.

'What's the plan?' Rebecca asked. 'Are you two up for some more drinks?'

Clare spoke without looking at her. 'We didn't invite you to join us in the first place.'

'That's a "no" then?' Rebecca was still able to laugh at Clare's temper, but she wouldn't be spoken down to by this woman.

'That's "fuck off" then.' Clare faced Rebecca, but Jonathan decided to intervene. He stepped between them, facing Clare, and told her to calm down.

'I won't calm down, Jonathan. Why the hell are we out here talking to your ex-wife?'

'You are not acting like yourself tonight.'

'I'm acting like you. That's what you want, isn't it? Someone who will give you a run for your money? I'm not stupid, I know you think I'm too quiet. And you –' Clare turned on Rebecca again. 'You really messed him up, didn't you? And you think you can still mess with him. Well, if he won't tell you to fuck off, I will.'

Rebecca tossed her cigarette end into the gutter.

'See you around, Jonathan.'

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As Rebecca left, Jonathan waited for her to disappear around the corner. He knew Clare would not say any more until they were alone. At the corner of the street, Rebecca looked back at him. He turned away from her, back to Clare. She appeared calmer, but he really couldn't tell. He was on unfamiliar ground here, so he tried to coax things back to a steadier dialogue.

'Right,' he said to Clare, 'I'll call a taxi to take us to mine.'

'Bollocks to that. We're not staying at yours. I'm not, anyway.'

Clare set off down the street while Jonathan finished his smoke and waited for her to change her mind. She continued to walk away. She didn't look back. It took him longer than it should have to realise that she meant it this time. Impressed, he couldn't help himself smiling as he stubbed out his cigarette under his shoe and then followed her up the street, toward her place. As he caught up to her, she chewed her lip to disguise a brief smile, but he'd seen it. They walked together, hand in hand. She had got her way, and he had got his.

"Satchmo on the Sound System" is taken from the collection "Burn the Pages". It was first published by Cracked Eye