

Be Careful....

A short story

By

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Be Careful...

I woke, my alarm was buzzing. My head throbbed; I had drunk far too much beer last night. Then I realised it was quiet. There were no traffic noises. There was no Mrs what's her name upstairs clattering around. There was just the sound of silence. I wasn't used to it. And it deafened me.

I got up and crossed to the window, pulled back the curtains and looked out on the street. The window was already open, that wasn't the reason that I couldn't hear the sounds of the city waking up. The streets were empty in the early morning sunshine. I looked at my watch, it was time to get up, there were cars on the road and I could see a bus at the end of the street. It was just that none of them were moving. And no-one was walking on the pavements.

I felt the sun's warmth through the window; the sky was dotted with a few small clouds. It was going to be a beautiful summer's day. But there were no people, anywhere. If I strained my hearing I could just make out the sounds of the main road, a quarter of a mile away. I went to the bathroom, the light worked and water flowed, just as normal. I washed and dressed as fast as I could and grabbed a drink from the fridge. The light came on when I opened the door. The news on the radio was the usual boring old stuff, nothing about a mass disappearance of the population of SW18. I looked online, there were no local traffic problems and no roads closed. No gas leak had caused a mass evacuation that I had slept through.

There was just an alarming absence of other people as I walked down the road towards my workplace. I saw a few cats in the windows of the houses; they watched me pass with that unnerving cat-stare. Televisions were on in front rooms. I started to feel fear, just a prickling sensation in my shoulders at first; it took over from my headache.

I only lived a short way away from my office job and unless it was pouring with rain I walked every day. I usually bought a newspaper at the local shop; it was open as usual but deserted. I took the paper and left the money on the counter,

by the till. A quick glance at the headlines confirmed that the news was the same old normal. As I neared the main road the sound of traffic, the sounds of life got louder. But when I turned the corner and saw the junction, there was nothing. Again, there were the rows of cars, lorries, and buses but there were no people? What was going on? I could still hear the noise, but now it sounded like it was in the next street. It was almost like I was in a bubble, all around me outside the bubble life carried on. Inside it was deserted. I lost it for a second and shouted: "Where are you?"

I ran down the road in a panic, turned left and reached the source of the noise. It was silent and deserted, just like where I had come from. Now the noise sounded like it was behind me. Not knowing what to do I retraced my steps. Back at the junction, it was still deserted but I could see that the traffic had moved in my absence. The pattern of vehicles was definitely different.

What was going on? I was really frightened now; I just stood by the traffic lights, I shook and I screamed, "Is there anyone who can hear me?" shouting it over and over.

As I turned around and around, I saw a lone figure, standing and watching me. I ran towards them, shouting out in the silence, "Wait, don't go."

As I reached them I realised that I had seen her before. She was tall and olive-skinned, with thick dark hair and piercing blue eyes. Where was she from? Was she like me, stuck in this bubble? I was shaking and grabbed her arm as if to anchor myself to something that wasn't part of the crazy world I had found myself in.

"I know you," I said, realising that it sounded stupid, all the things I could have said and I said that.

She looked at me calmly, as if being grabbed by demented people in a deserted street were the most normal thing. "Last night," she said, gently removing my hand. "We met at Greg's party; you were in a foul mood."

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I remembered it only too well, I had had a bad day and things were going wrong at work. No matter how I tried to sort the situation out people either wouldn't listen or said they'd get back to me and didn't. Then my boss had started hassling me, blaming me for others errors and by five o'clock I had had enough. I was sick of them all. I got home to find that Mrs. Upstairs was all too ready to criticise my lifestyle.

I walked away as she started on my music choices and volume. All this had coincided with a fall out with my family and to top it all I had a party to go to. I certainly didn't feel like spending the evening in the company of a bunch of happy people. Even at the best of times, I wasn't really a party person. Tonight I just wanted to be left alone to sort my mind out.

My girlfriend, Sal, arrived after I'd eaten and persuaded me to go with her. "It'll do you good," she said, "cheer you up a bit."

I had been bad company and by ten Sal had got fed up with my moaning. She told me in no uncertain terms to sort myself out before I bothered to call her, and then she had left. I felt bad, I hadn't wanted to go and now she had made me feel worse. I liked Sal a lot and didn't want to lose her; despite my black mood, she was special to me. I just needed a bit of alone time.

Everyone else was having a good time but that only made it worse; I couldn't join in the dancing and singing. I just sat in the corner and drank beer. The only bright spot was at about eleven when the girl had turned up. She had a face you wouldn't forget in a hurry. It had a kind of haunting, hypnotic quality and it had cheered me up a bit when she had ignored everyone else and come over to talk to me.

We chatted and although I told her my life story she gave little away. Refusing a drink, she said she had recently arrived from abroad and was trying to settle into life here. I asked her how come she was here alone. Her reply was that she wasn't good at relationships; people always got fed up with her in no time. I couldn't see why, she was intelligent and witty, not conceited like so many beauties are and easy to talk to, it didn't make sense. She was sympathetic to my tale of woe and talking to her helped me calm down a bit.

She gazed into my eyes sometime after midnight, holding my hands and looking into the depths of my mind, “What do you really want?” she asked, “just imagine that you could have three wishes.”

The idea was appealing to my semi-inebriated state; I tried to marshal my thoughts.

“I just wish that everyone but you would just get on with it and leave me alone,” I said it confidently, hoping for a spot of sympathy and understanding. Instead, she nodded and got up. “I understand exactly what you mean,” she said. “Back in a bit,” she gave me an enigmatic smile.

“I don’t mean you,” I called after her, “you’re the only person who’s been willing to listen to me tonight.” She waved her hand and laughed as she turned and walked away.

That was the last I saw of her, I waited a while and when she didn’t return I sought out Greg, the party giver.

“I’ve lost a girl,” I told him.

“I’m not surprised that Sal’s gone home,” he answered; “you’ve been like a bear with a sore head all evening.”

“Not Sal, another girl, you must have seen her, you couldn’t miss her,” I described the mystery woman to him.

“Dark hair, blue eyes, no, not one of mine,” he shook his head, his eyes thoughtful. “I would have shoved you out of the way if I had seen her, anyhow you shouldn’t be chasing other women, Sal will kill you. She won’t be thrilled if she hears that you’ve been you pouring your heart out to some stranger.”

“Sal got fed up with me going on, at least this one listened.” I said and Greg laughed, punching me on the shoulder as he told me off, “Well, I wouldn’t tell Sal that, she might not be too sympathetic. You’ve been an old misery tonight, but if Sal finds out, well, that’s how jealousy starts.” He was right of course, I needed to lighten up and sort myself out.

**“Oh well if she isn’t coming back I might as well go home and sleep it off,” I told him, “see you tomorrow.”**

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**“Where did you get to?” I asked her, “you never came back and I looked for you.”**

**“I had things to do,” she said with that enigmatic smile, “nothing personal. How’s your day? Are you feeling any better?”**

**“I can’t understand it,” I replied, “I can hear life going on all around me, it’s on the radio and the internet but it’s, well it’s just not here. I feel like I’m alone, but surrounded, if you know what I mean.”**

**“Don’t you remember what you said?” she asked me.**

**“What?”**

**“What you told me last night. I said what do you wish for. You went on about how you wanted to be left alone, isn’t this what you wanted? Do you mean that now you’ve got it you think it was a silly thing to wish for?”**

**“But you don’t mean this is...” I stopped; she had to be playing with my mind. Did she want me to think that she had...? That was a ridiculous idea. There had to be a rational explanation, it just needed finding.**

**“Anyway,” I reminded her, “I’m not alone, you’re here.”**

**“Yes,” she said, “you said everyone except me. It took a while to set up, longer than I thought but I had to do it properly. You’d gone home when I got back so I waited to catch you this morning. I thought you’d be pleased with me.”**

**None of that made any sense. “Can’t you just tell me in simple terms? What’s going on?”**

**“OK,” she said, the blue eyes sparkling and the smile playing across her face, “In simple terms then. What are your other two wishes, Master?”**

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