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More like Wrestling than Dancing

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Extract

ONE

Everyone who lives in the city knows that the *Apollo* is Bradford's roughest nightclub: bouncers outnumber bar staff and frisk down the patrons not only as they enter but also as they leave. Statistically, *Apollo* customers are more likely to be seriously wounded on a night out than a soldier on active service.

The toilets were in the entrance lobby of the club, placed to service both sections of the *Apollo*: a bar and the club itself, which had an entrance fee. Anna and Natasha would routinely enter the bar, wait a few moments, then walk back into the entrance lobby, use the toilets then walk past the bouncers and into the club, without paying, as if they were returning.

Anna asked Natasha the same question they asked each other at this time every Saturday night, after they had found somewhere to stand which gave them the best possible view of the place.

'What do we come here for?'

The *Apollo* is the type of nightclub where lads tell their mates, 'If you can't pull in here then you might as well give up,' and women come knowing they will be propositioned several times – even if, to save having to buy them a drink, most men won't make an approach until ten to two.

As always, the memory of previous Saturday nights returned once the girls were inside, trapped, and saw the usual specimens: leering, sweating, swaying.

Anna had already made eye contact with one lad. He had grinned. She then made eye contact with another, who raised his

pint to acknowledge her. She pulled off the trick of having both know she was interested without either being aware of the other.

Anna's ex-boyfriends had described her with words such as slobbish, stoutish and shabby. Those who had disliked her were more brutal. They thought her shorter and larger than Natasha, though in fact the girls were the same height and a similar weight. Natasha's exes had described her as fussy, easy-going, complicated, difficult, each ex giving contradictory accounts because with each she had acted differently. Her hair was such a light brown colour that in some lights it seemed grey. She changed the style so frequently that few people ever commented on it. Anna had kept the same style all through her adult life: short, loose curls, a brown so dark most people would have said it was black. Their smiles showed the real difference in their characters: Anna smiled broadly, sneakily when she was verging on laughter. Natasha's smile was permanent but slight, but when she was having fun the smile changed her eyes, the shape of her face and the heart of anyone who might have disliked her. Natasha's exes invariably wanted her back; Anna's exes invariably wanted her deported.

Natasha answered Anna's question with the same reply they gave each other every week at the *Apollo*.

'We come here because we're skint and it's cheap and we can never agree where else to go.'

They were approached by a man. 'Did you know it's closing down?' he asked. He was shorter than both of them. He had a red dot on the tip of his nose – a scab from a burst spot. His hair had grown carelessly and had been given no guidance, lying on his head as if it were drawn on. He wore a black jacket and blue trousers. There was a strong possibility that he lived his life unaware of the invention of mirrors.

'*Here?* The *Apollo* is closing down?' Anna asked.

'No it isn't,' Natasha insisted.

The two of them stood closer to the man. This was the nearest he had got to female contact in years, and he tried not to smile, to demonstrate that he shared their concern. He stood on tiptoe yet

still had to crane his neck. He wished they would stand slightly further back so that he wouldn't feel so dominated.

'They can't afford the insurance since the riots.'

They quizzed him for more information, which he gave sparingly, conscious that once this subject was exhausted they would have no further interest in him.

'It's closing!' Natasha told Anna.

'Good.'

'Yeah, good,' Natasha agreed. Each girl took a drink of her lager. Then another, then another.

'Can I get you a drink?' the man asked, hoping to prolong their need of him.

'No, thank you,' Anna told him.

'Neither of you are . . . interested?' he asked. 'Interested' was a word chosen with a care rarely found at the *Apollo*.

'Of course we are,' Anna answered, viciously. 'You're gorgeous – how could we not be interested? We're both dripping like broken cisterns.'

He left.

'Oi,' Natasha remonstrated with her friend, 'that was a bit nasty.'

Natasha was careful not to sound too annoyed. Saturday remained the one night of the week that the girls still enjoyed each other's company, the one night when their past fondness for each other instantly returned.

'Imagine,' Anna offered by way of explanation for her bad temper. 'The *Apollo* closing!'

'Good, though, we said,' Natasha reminded her.

Natasha and Anna had been told – though their earliest memories are from long after this date – that they had met at infant school. At the very end of their school life, to avoid receiving poor exam results, they hit upon the genius scam of simply not taking their exams. They left school the same way most other girls from their estate did, as quickly and as unqualified as possible, educated only to pram-pushing level. They didn't care: all they knew for certain

was that they each had one true friend, someone who had been there all their life and would always be there, the most important person in their world. When they acquired passports and had to fill in the back page with two names to contact in case of an emergency, each girl defied its purpose and put one name only – each other's.

Natasha and Anna shared a comfortable, modern Housing Association flat, a sanctuary against the outside world. They understood their situation was unusual and would not stay the same for ever. Everyone they knew who was their age had suffered a stream of serious partners and was now entrenched permanently in a stultifying relationship. It had to be their turn soon. In their world it was conscription. But by moving in together they hoped they had found a loophole. Until they had lived together each had believed that there was nothing they didn't know about the other. They were very wrong. To avoid their growing resentment showing, they would make a joke out of each other's bad habits. Natasha made fun of Anna's scruffiness, her lack of organisation, her tendency to leave the bathroom partially demolished. Anna, in turn, mocked Natasha for her terrible ironing. Natasha regularly ruined clothes by making the material shiny or adding creases which should not have been there. There were hundreds of smaller incidents which annoyed them both: washing-up not done, bills not paid on time by the person responsible, fundamental items of food, such as milk, used up and not replaced.

To begin with the agreement was that Natasha would clean and Anna would cook. This arrangement failed as Anna's cooking became worse, and her definition of cooking became broader. 'Toast is not cooking,' Natasha had told her.

Their first-ever real argument was after Natasha ruined a silver wine rack. The rack had been all Anna had kept of her mother's possessions. Natasha, unaware the silver was only plating, washed the rack with a pan scourer, removing significant sections of the silver plate.

The second time they fell out was when Anna had an abortion.

Natasha was never anything less than supportive, but Anna had the operation, then returned to work less troubled than if she had returned from the dentist. They argued after Anna made a silly, distasteful joke to Natasha: 'Well, that's one way to lose weight quickly.'

There had been a truce in recent months, in spite of money becoming a greater worry. There was a period of severe hardship when they had to replace their washing machine and were forced to save to buy another. They had to set off earlier for work, walking instead of taking the bus.

Having to stay in on Saturday night was Anna's greatest test. She began a jigsaw but became bored before she had collected all the straight edges. Natasha had taken a very long bath. She dressed in her pyjamas, made herself something unhealthy to eat, then crashed out on their settee and watched junk. Anna began to pace around, pestering Natasha by reminding her of the time, and which pub they would normally be in if they had gone out. The next day, the conclusion of a week of poor diet, Anna accompanied Natasha to her mother's for Sunday dinner. They returned home from that ordeal reminded of why they were such good friends and were temporarily happy not to be in a settled relationship with a man.

TWO

For Natasha and Anna the determining factor in taking the job in the shoe shop was that there had been two vacancies, and they could work together. Years later, both girls had realised how depressingly long their futures were going to be and had independently reached the same conclusion: 'I want change.'

The shop was always busy in spite of being expensive, and even with their thirty per cent staff discount Natasha and Anna still bought their shoes elsewhere. On Saturdays, in snatched moments, they would anticipate the night ahead, the clothes they might wear, who they hoped to see, any new bar they could visit for a change.

After leaving work they grabbed a hamburger, fries and a shake to eat on their bus ride home, flirting with the driver if he attempted to forbid them boarding with food.

At home they would burst into the flat and put the CD player on, the volume up as high as they dared, audible over the sound of showers and hair-dryers. They plucked or shaved, applied make-up, fixed hair, dressed, re-dressed, dressed again. On Friday night Natasha would always ensure that whatever clothes she had decided to wear were cleaned, ironed and laid out ready. Each Saturday, at the last minute, Anna would go through her whole wardrobe – then look through Natasha's. In desperation she would often revert to rummaging through the washing basket.

Finally ready, they braced themselves for the walk to the bus stop. Before they had set off this particular Saturday night, Natasha had called Anna into the kitchen. She'd pointed to a

couple on the street, play fighting, the girl hitting the boy for having made some teasing remark. Then they embraced before the boy gave the girl a piggyback, him running so as to scare her, she screaming hysterically.

Natasha wondered if the couple were faking their fun, then she wondered if all those other couples she knew, the wretched, bickering, defeated couples, had also played those games, though they had long since accepted that their fate was miserable.

Natasha checked the *Radio Times* and set the video for the programmes she didn't want to miss; Anna checked that her sheets were reasonably fresh. Just in case. They left for their night out, catching the bus back into town, self-conscious in their showy clothes and thick perfume.

When they jumped off the bus, Anna told Natasha: 'A girl just can't have the same fun with a bloke she can with her mate.'

'I suppose we'll settle down. Everyone I know says it's bound to happen.'

'It's Saturday night. Let's forget everything other people think.'

Natasha had been going out with Derek for three weeks. She had stayed with him this long as a result of no one else asking her out. Through all these three weeks the only occasion she believed anything he said was when he had told her his name.

'Did Derek tell you where he was going tonight?' Anna asked. Anna had seen Derek: he was at the edge of the *Apollo*'s dance floor, tormenting some girl's tonsils with his tongue.

'His mum's in hospital. He's broke anyway, I had to lend him money so he could take her some Lucozade.'

'How much did he borrow?'

'Twenty quid.'

'Twenty quid? Where the hell does he buy his Lucozade?' Anna knew that if she told Natasha of Derek's infidelity Natasha would confront him and there would be trouble. Being thrown out of the *Apollo* came easily: the bouncers hated everyone, to cover all eventualities.

Anna bought fresh drinks. When she returned, Natasha was having fun: she was giving out a phone number.

'A false number,' Natasha clarified after the boy had left. 'You've seen him before, haven't you? Every time I come in here he pesters me for my phone number. I had to get rid of him.'

'Whose number did you give him?'

'I just made up some numbers.'

Another boy made his approach. 'I've seen you in here before,' he informed Natasha.

'I think I can account for that – I have been in here before,' she answered, smiling to confuse him. Not able to judge whether this was encouraging or dismissive, he abandoned foreplay and spoke his mind.

'Can I bash your gash?'

Natasha had been coming here too long to be so easily shocked. 'It's sweet of you to ask, but I'll pass if you don't mind.'

He left. Another came along. By *Apollo* standards this one was a catch – at least he made an attempt at charm; some didn't even attempt standing.

'Now then, ladies, I was wondering what you were drinking.'

Until now Natasha and Anna had both been drinking lager. Anna told him, 'Smirnoff Ice.'

He constructed an equation around the formula of the cost of the drinks against the chance of either of these two girls consequently sleeping with him. 'Well, thanks for telling me. Now I know.' He left.

'I'm glad this place is closing down,' Anna told her friend. 'I don't want to get involved with any more men from here. I can't afford to take any more time off work appearing in court as a witness.'

Anna decided to point out Derek. Natasha, for want of any better entertainment, was over by him within seconds. He pathetically moved away from the girl he was with and said a feeble 'Hello' to Natasha, as if nothing was untoward.

'Where's my twenty quid?' she shouted. The raised voice alerted the bouncers. They were standing behind her before she had finished the question. They allowed her enough time to

collect her money before escorting her away. The club was still quiet so they took the risk of not expelling her.

'Why did you even go out with him in the first place?' Anna asked.

'Because he has nice hands . . . I'm really going to have to tighten up my vetting procedure. You know, I'm finally beginning to come to a conclusion about men, at least the men I've met . . . What it is, I think . . . What I need to do is find a better prospect. I need to find myself a man with money.'

Anna might have believed the sincerity of this statement if Natasha had not immediately begun smiling at a thug. Anna knew he was a thug, because the tattoo on his neck said so, in gothic lettering. To her amazement and horror she saw Natasha walk up to the thug, flirt, touch and talk. A moment later she was back.

'Let's go,' Natasha said, 'before the fight starts.'

'There's not usually any fighting till much later.' Anna was distracted by the noise of the thug fitting Derek with a buffet-shaped hat.

'Come on,' Natasha said. 'I've got twenty quid – let's get a kebab and a taxi home.'

In its beginning, the early rumours about the *Apollo*, like most new clubs, were that it was busy and exciting. Situated outside the city centre, on the route towards the estate where they had been born and grown up, Anna and Natasha, on their first ever visit, expected to see lots of people they knew.

Inside, their first impression of the place was aided by arriving knee-bendingly drunk, each needing the support of the other to keep upright as they collapsed through drink, then laughter. In some clubs this spectacle might have singled them out, but at the *Apollo* everyone was paralytic. The bouncers preferred drunks; they fought less harmfully. A cross-section of Bradford's drinkers – ranging from the casual drinker to the career drinker – had all found a home in the club. Within the first hour, Natasha and Anna, in equal measure, were both approached by many men, each with a story to tell.

'It's like a club for divorcees,' Anna told Natasha. 'Every bloke who's spoken to me has just come out of a long-term relationship with a woman who – according to them – was an absolute *bitch*.'

'It makes you wonder why they're so keen to find another,' Natasha replied. Anna was grinning, enjoying herself. After two hours Anna and Natasha had met up with people they knew from their old school; the estate; friends of friends; ex-girlfriends and boyfriends of friends, and people who knew their brothers and sister.

At midnight a fight broke out. This didn't ruin the night; it was simply another item on the entertainment agenda. The DJ had played U2's *Sunday Bloody Sunday,* which had encouraged gangs of lads to gather into circles and jump up and down, eventually falling onto people and tables. When apologies were not forthcoming, glasses and tables were launched. When the gangs were evicted the DJ chose to follow U2 with House Of Pain's *Jump Around,* which encouraged more jumping – which vibrated the dance floor so much that the DJ's turntable was knocked and *Jump Around* came to an abrupt end. The DJ responded with, 'Keep away from my decks, you wankers,' then played the record from the beginning.

Anna danced with some lad, then later they kissed for twenty minutes while Natasha listened to some manic depressive explain to her why he could never make his former wife happy, no matter how hard he had worked, or how much attention he had paid to her. Natasha kept the thought to herself, but would have loved to tell him that perhaps all he had to do was clean his teeth.

'His teeth looked like he had a mouth full of Sugar Puffs,' she told Anna as they later made their way from the *Apollo* to a nearby curry house. Anna was exercising her jaw, trying to regain some feeling.

They didn't go to the *Apollo* the following Saturday. And for the first year they only went occasionally, when they were exceptionally short of money. In the last year or so, after the two girls had moved into their flat together, money became even tighter, so the *Apollo* became the only club they ever went to. On

some nights they didn't even go to the pub first, but got drunk at home and made their way to the *Apollo* at ten.

Some months back Anna had been barred from the *Apollo*. She had met a boy and gone out with him several times. In the club she met an ex-girlfriend of his and they compared notes. It turned out that everything he had told Anna – about his job, his history, where he lived – was a lie. When he came in the club she attacked him, and was barred for a month.

'I don't like being lied to,' she needlessly explained to Natasha. 'It's like they're saying I'm stupid, or gullible – or not worth telling the truth to. You know?'

For four Saturdays the girls had to go once more to other nightclubs but found that they were unable to relax there; they knew few people and were conscious of their dress and their age. They seemed to receive very little attention from the opposite sex, and the music they played was designed for serious dancing, rather than as a background to chatting and having a good time.

It got to the point where even Natasha was looking forward to returning to the *Apollo*. After this, they went almost every Saturday. Natasha's only qualm was that going so frequently was like an acceptance of the fact that they fitted in there and were happy to do so.

'But we don't fit in,' Anna argued. 'We have fun because we take the piss out of everyone.' And some Saturdays were still good; they still got drunk, they still danced, they still got chatted up by imbeciles, which was fun, or by nice lads – which was even more fun.

One night, they asked each other for the first time why they still went to the *Apollo*. They had had a sober night during which they talked about the future, the inevitable future that creeps up on everyone, when you stop going to nightclubs without realising you've stopped.

Though neither girl was that drunk, the harsh lights of the kebab shop sobered them up completely. The maxim of the shop was printed on a sheet of A4, now stained from grease and heat:

IF YOU DON'T EAT YOU DON'T SHIT; AND IF YOU DON'T SHIT YOU DIE.

'I can't get my head round it – the *Apollo* closing down.'

'The odd thing is, I thought I wanted it to close down.'

The climax of their week had been – as all too often – a disappointment. To strengthen their resolve to find themselves better men, they reminded each other of the boys they'd met at the *Apollo.* The list was a horrific litany. Of the two, Natasha was the one who didn't easily recover from these men, each time taking their offences too personally. Natasha's fault was that she was too trusting, Anna's that she always saw the best in people. Both conceded this.

'But hold on,' Natasha said. 'Since when did those things become faults? It's not us who are in the wrong. It's good to trust people, it's good to see the best in people.'

Though it wasn't their turn to be served, the lad in front of them was so blathered, barely standing, his head on his chest, that they pushed past him to place their order – belligerent with a new sense of ruthlessness.

Outside they continued talking, holding their kebabs in front of them with one hand, like hymn books, picking at the soggy salad. Anna was giving Natasha a description of her ideal man.

'I'd like someone who doesn't think that making a phone call is the greatest romantic gesture imaginable. A male equivalent of you, and a relationship like I have with you. And honesty. Honesty is important. None of that is unreasonable, is it?'

They passed an alley; at the opening a couple were arguing, the boy attempting to persuade the girl to have sex with him in the alley.

'It's already being used,' she told him. Through drunk-blind eyes he saw nothing.

'Come on, I'll be quick.'

She relented. 'Have you got a johnny?' He shook his head; she walked away. 'Forget it, I'm not using a crisp packet again.'

Natasha tasted a slither of the lamb: the grease had already congealed and it tasted of snotty salt.

'I want someone who's down to earth but isn't an arse. Not cocky or full of himself,' Natasha replied. 'And – you're right – it has to be like it is between us. I don't want confusions or misunderstandings. He has to *get* me. So if I want the impossible, I might as well be ambitious. I'm bored of having boyfriends who borrow my money. Or steal my money,' she told Anna. 'From now on I am going to have nothing to do with a man unless he has money.'

'Mercenary bitch.'

'That's me. Day one.' Natasha was finally deterred from picking at any more of her kebab as they passed a lad on all fours, spewing as if cheering a football team. He wiped his chin, flicking the remnants across the pavement.

They heard a vicious shout behind them. 'Oi! You! You owe me a shag – it was a deal!' They turned and saw the thug Natasha had conned into beating up Derek. She threw her kebab towards him, even though he was hundreds of yards away. By good fortune a taxi was passing – and was persuaded to stop by Natasha's good looks and by Anna stepping out into the road, flapping her arms.

When they arrived home they quickly changed into their night-clothes, and settled together on the settee to watch the trashy romantic film Natasha had taped: happiness, tragedy, complications, triumphant love against the odds. They turned all the lights off so the only illumination was the blue cast of the TV screen.

Derek phoned. Natasha had expected he might and had planned a suitable response. She put the phone to her arse, farted, then hung up. Anna was crippled with hysterics, then moved off the settee for a few moments.