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The Cappuccino Kiss

Written by Fiona McClean

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THE CAPPUCCINO KISS

Fiona McClean

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One
Baboon Bottom

Please let things be OK tonight, I pray.

The mint in my mouth makes my taste buds stand up tall and tingles my nostrils. I give my computer a brushing with a soft, thick brush, amazed at how quickly sinful dust gathers between the keys of the keyboard. I shudder. The neon light buzzes and flickers above me, its connection weak. I'm in a windowless room like a giant lift with doors as impenetrable as steel.

Five o'clock comes – shut down time, when computers gasp their last breath for the day. I prepare myself for the night shift, fill out my time sheet. Outside, under the oak trees, I will soon be breathing in enough fresh air to fill a giant balloon.

Time sweeps by like a furious wind, so, as quickly as possible in bright white daylight, I clack my heels on the pavement and when I walk into the café they make a dull, rapping noise on the linoleum floor.

'Could I have a hot chocolate, please?'

Wiping a hand on her apron, a hurried woman tilts the giant teapot and thick, dark brown liquid pours into a wide-mouthed mug. My hot chocolate comes to me with froth on the top, made with whole milk and proper cocoa powder. Turning down the corner of a page of my book, I make a dog's ear, and hear my old school teacher, Mr Humphrey say, 'Never turn the corner of a page down in a book. It's cruel! How would you like it?

And always keep books safe in plastic bags when you carry them around.'

I shove the flimsy paperback into my bag and clack my way back to the office. It's six-thirty. My desk stands tall with its computer but little more. Boxes of coloured paperclips, rubber bands, pens, ruler, notepaper, diary and a white mug are kept in the drawer, white so I can see the stains. At home, James has at least three cups on the go, stained brown with tannin. I don't want to think of what his teeth will look like in ten years' time. 'Tea,' he says, 'is too nice.'

I settle down to work, facing the blank wall behind my computer. I long for a view, but views come in smart offices where the company has lots of money to spend, perhaps selling expensive products. Our company produces educational journals written by researchers who, I imagine, have spectacles and are very bright.

The room is empty. I think I am the only one on night shift. What a relief. At peace with the silence, I know at least tonight I will produce a good number of maps, which will boost my units.

It's eight o'clock when I hear the double doors open and close with a bang.

'Hey, Juliet babe!'

The sound of a man's voice surprises me, shaking me right out of my chair, and I twist round to see Gregory calling out, opening his beer-breath mouth. His short-limbed body shuffles towards me; he pulls his jeans down, so they become wrinkly and pathetic, squashed against his shoes. His pale thighs are covered in more hair than I have ever seen on a man's legs; he pushes down his white pants, turns around, bends over, and shows me his pink, baboon bottom.

'Disgusting!' I cry, and throw the green company stapler, with its jaw open wide, his way. I hear it smack on to the desk.

'Hey, hey, Trouble, less violence.'

I look up to see Rick walking jauntily into the office. The big doors bang closed again. His arm swings, a limp cigarette attached to yellowed fingers; itching, cruel fingers. He lives with his mum,

who gives him packed lunches for work. His girlfriend, Sue, works as a waitress and wears short skirts, above her knees, looking terribly sophisticated. I can't understand why someone with such intelligent eyes could be with Rick.

'Do any women work in this office?' I'd asked my boss-to-be at my interview.

'Nope, all lads, though that changes with you joining us.'

Torn-out pictures of naked women, their breasts polished and their smiles Tipp-Ex white, slip stealthily into my desk drawers.

Just throw them in the bin, I tell myself. But I begin to feel worn and cracked, like an old tyre.

What I need to do is leave Linden Press. When I started working here, I wore nice skirts and make-up. That soon changed to trousers, and I stopped putting on make-up. At first, I always smiled when I came into work, but not long after I started my job, I began slipping sideways into the office, a shadow frightened to be seen.

Once behind his computer, silent, stalking his maps, Gregory becomes invisible as he puts his determination into his work. But his bottom-baring leaves me sitting tight in my chair, holding onto my breath, ready to leap up and go, the palms of my sweaty hands clenched and my eyes quivering near to my car keys.

When ten o'clock arrives, I heave an enormous sigh, click on Shut Down, and pick up the computer manual. My eyes open wide as I see the used pink condom stuck to the cover, looking like a rude sore. Gasping, I turn away, a bilious feeling lurching in my throat, and I spin around just in time to see the door shutting. Gregory and Rick have left. I throw the manual in the paper bin – company money wasted. Joy, the woman who cleans, will empty it into a grey plastic bag, but the image of the pink condom will float in my mind. How can I clean that away?

The night air breathes on me angrily as I walk through the company car park. Shift over.

'Bye, Juliet,' says a boisterous Gregory.

I hear him cough and his spit hits the tarmac. Ten more steps to my car, a red 2CV, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, and my hand reaches for the safety of the door handle. I protect myself by strapping myself in with my seatbelt, even though my 2CV never makes me feel I am on one of those scary fairground rides, more on a seaside donkey.

Every inch of the road where I live is brimming with cars, wheels squeeze up to pavements, garage doors are blocked, disabled parking spaces stolen; there is not a place to spare. I drive around the streets and think of James. My hands grip the wheel and I sigh another deep sigh. What will he be like tonight? Will he even be home? Do I want him to be there?

Between a motorbike and a wide-spreading tree is a parking place. The door, on opening, bangs into the tree trunk, but I manage to slip out. Puddles on the tarmac shine back at me like pitch-black mirrors.

The house whispers to me, furniture crawls; the narrow hallway crushes me as I walk along it. I feel Sandra, my black cat, her back arching, her fur against my calves.

'James?' I call. A dog's bark comes from the kitchen.

'Where is he?'

I see Dolly but avoid her. She smells of muddy fields and stagnant water. I am sure she has fleas, even though I have treated her with Frontline twice this month. On the round, pine kitchen table is a small, square piece of paper. In capital letters it says: 'STAYING LATE AT WORK. DONT WAIT UP FOR ME'. I look at the kitchen. A little pile of dust pushes against the broom leaning on the wall, a pack of biscuits on the table spills crumbs. A plate tainted with tomato sauce, on it a knife and fork lying at angles, forming a cross. I tense and wring my hands.

In a hurry, wanting to clean up before James comes home, I put on my rubber gloves and plastic throwaway overall and begin removing all the objects from the table, washing the cutlery, watching with disdain as the sauce runs off the plate and

disappears down the plug hole, my sensitive nostrils able to smell the odour of stale food. James sometimes eats lunch at home and goes to work late.

Unable to stop, deciding the kitchen needs a good clean, I clear everything off all the surfaces. Out with the bleach. Bleach is the strongest cleaner. I don't like the diluted versions the shop sells. With a toothbrush, I clean between the tiles. They were put there by James, against my advice. The gaps between tiles are dirt collectors and need a lot of maintenance. Every day I clean them.

I don't go near our garden. It's James's responsibility, out of my control. I admire his crazy paving though – it has even-shaped stones, and I don't mind the gaps. It's just gaps in the kitchen that make me feel uncomfortable.

The image of Gregory's bottom lurks in the back of my mind and I feel nausea coming on. I hope I am not going to be sick. But the more I concentrate on cleaning, the less ill I feel.

'Get out of the kitchen! You're insane!' James had shouted at me yesterday.

'It's dirty, James, think of the germs.'

'But, Juliet, I think if you had a real phobia you wouldn't go out of the house. It's a phobia if you are Howard Hughes – he washes dishes fifteen times over, or Marlene Dietrich, who disinfects the toilet seat with alcohol. You're selective. You just do it to get in my way.'

James treats the kitchen like his car – a container for bacteria. It's midnight and I am wide awake. Is he going to come home tonight?

Two
Wet and Windy England

Hours later, my eyes are unblinking and dry and James is still not here. Worries bash away at my forehead. The night is stretching out. It's four in the morning. Tension is building up in my chest. I have an aching feeling down the left side of my head. I don't normally have headaches.

'Time you grew up,' he once said, 'and managed your emotions.'

'What's that got to do with not being able to sleep?'

'I'm not your nanny!' he shouted and walked out, slamming the door.

There is something comforting about the settee: it clings to me, begs me to stay there between its wide, generous arms, smothers me almost, in cushions of various sizes, all with different textures and patterns. My favourite is a soft-as-dough maroon one. I don't want to be in the king-sized bed on my own. A bed which feels as wide as an ocean when James is not there, the bed upstairs in the room we have shared for nine years.

Morning arrives and the sun rushes through the large, handsome bay windows. The sitting room glares now, there's nowhere to hide. Even Sandra, stretching out on the carpet, gives up trying to escape from the bright, harsh light.

Dolly puts her head on the sofa, a hint to say she is hungry. I hate giving her her food, smelly dog meat, goodness-knows-what-it's-made-from tinned meaty chunks, a cheap variety.

The door opens and in steps James. His large frame fills the doorway, too big, too cumbersome. James has all the features of a good-looking man, but they are all set on a thin, pale face. Sometimes his face reminds me of a medieval warrior in a suit of armour and metal helmet. He looks important, James.

'Are you going to tell me where you've been?'

'Worked till eleven. Stayed the night with Joe. We had some beers. Wasn't safe for me to drive home. Work OK for you?'

'Fine,' I say, thinking of baboon-bottomed Gregory. 'How about a weekend somewhere?'

'Too busy, far too busy.'

My head sinks and I look at the pattern on the carpet, feeling myself drawn towards the circling spirals.

I can't shout because James doesn't like loud voices, especially mine. It's years since I shouted at James – over him kicking Dolly when she got under his feet one day. He apologised to Dolly, but threw me the nastiest look, much worse than a shout. Now I know exactly the range to which my voice can go.

'Oh, what's the point?' I say.

'We'll go some other time.' mutters James.

It's a Saturday and I am not doing overtime because I keep Saturday mornings free to have coffee with Cindy. We go to a café in a side street, in spite of its sour-faced owner who doesn't look at you when he puts the drink on the table, or when he takes your money. He always looks in the direction of where he is going, back to the counter or to another table, but we like his café with its cheerful orange chairs and the mural on the wall of the river Thames. There are children's drawings hanging like washing on a line sweeping through the café, each drawing held on by a clothes peg. There isn't any free space on the wall – it's all covered in posters illustrating concerts and plays – it's a colourful display. The café is open seven days a week and we agree the owner deserves a holiday, even if he never smiles, though he did once when I dropped my handbag and all its contents spilled over his floor.

'France is a great place to chill out,' Cindy tells me.

Cindy is a good friend, my best friend. But she repeats everything I say to anybody who listens. Still, I feel compelled to talk to her. She is thin and reminds me of tinsel, her voice light and sparkly. The room shines as she walks in, with her elegant, thin-strapped shoes and her light, white skirt, almost transparent. You can just make out her panty-line in whatever outfit she wears, but then she has the figure of a woman in a perfume advert.

'I love France,' Cindy's eyes look up and she gazes into space, in another world.

'Never been there.'

'Go!' she says, emphatic, putting her hand on my knee.

'Go on your own if James won't go with you.'

'France sounds very sophisticated.'

'It is. They know how to dress there, for a start.'

As she talks, my mind fills with images of men with black moustaches and strings of garlic, on bikes that wobble and creak, and which follow winding roads.

'I can't go on my own,' I say after a long pause.

'Listen,' she says, in her calmest voice, 'I'll sort it all out and find somewhere nice. You won't be on your own. You'll meet other people, I'd come with you but Rob and I are going to New York for our holiday.'

I never feel I deserve Cindy as a friend, especially after she told me she had had sex with her doctor, in the broom cupboard.

'What about Rob?' I had asked.

'He'll never know. Besides you don't really think Rob is Mr Perfect himself, do you?'

Cindy, to me, is at least as sophisticated as France.

'Listen, don't panic, I'll have a look at flights. You don't have to decide now.'

'Not too expensive, please.'

'Oh, Juliet! Treat yourself. I'll help you out.'

We are sitting in the park, on a cold metal bench, legs crossed,

arms folded, fighting the wind, talking as loud as sirens, both excited about the holiday – my holiday.

'Is August possible?'

'Flights will be more expensive.'

My last adventure was a trip to Somerset for Easter, just before I met James. I have memories of scrumptious cream teas with real cream and strawberry jam.

I like new adventures. This is going to be my biggest.

It's already July, and I'm going in September. That night I scribble 'France' in my diary using a thick felt pen. I can hardly make out the bleeding-edged letters. But I know it says France and I know I can't forget, not like all the other smudged words written in felt-tip.

James's car, a lofty Volvo estate, is parked outside. So he is home this evening. With a weak hand I open the door, stroke a purring Sandra, and leave my bag by the coat stand.

'Hi.'

'That you? No shift work tonight?'

'James, I want to talk to you about something.'

'No time. Got lots of work to do.'

'I'd like to go on holiday in September.'

'I told you before, I'm busy.' James scratches the back of his neck.

'On my own.' I tip my head sideways, his back still turned towards me.

'Juliet, there's things to do around the house and in the garden. We need to sort out the loft.'

Our loft is full of giant bags stuffed with forgotten objects: unwanted planks of wood, dust-covered bags, last year's clothes to be sorted and recycled. It is a bigger dustbin than James's car. Spirals of dust float towards the roof, there are unidentifiable marks and homeless objects that are old and ingrained with grease, thick with more dust. When in the loft I can't breathe properly, I can't fill my lungs and the end of each breath seems far away. My hands tremble and sweat.

I remember the words of my doctor – they begin to turn around my mind.

'You don't have a serious case of obsessive compulsive disorder. It seems to be selective and you tolerate dust and germs when you have to, so I am not going to give you medication. We can provide behavioural therapy on the NHS.'

I feel fragile; I feel like a crushed baby bird. Sometimes I feel like a bird without wings, doing an awful lot of hopping.

James brings me back to reality; I hear his voice drumming in my ears: 'You don't ever think of these things, do you?'

'I'll do them before I go. I have time. Give me a list and I'll work through it,' my eyes plead. I look up at his and see how grey and cold they have become. Did the war start? Was it my fault?

'By the way, I'm moving into the spare room. I've a bed to go in there. It's not a bad idea to have our own bedrooms. I've been saying I will for ages.'

'You can't, we need that room for guests,' I start to stutter, my weak legs only just holding me up and my hands clutching the banister.

'You'll end up leaving me. This is just the beginning!'

The words come out as though I am a puppy yelping, its toe trodden on. I walk away and for a change it is me who slams the door.

'Don't slam the bloody door!'

James's words chase me up the stairs, where I sit on our double bed, twiddling my fingers. The bed is covered with a patchwork quilt. My mother Edith had sewn the pieces of diamond-shaped material together, patiently, sitting on her favourite sewing chair opposite my father in his favourite watching-TV chair. There was never enough noise in my parents' house, until I came home. My voice has shrunk since then.

Like a sandcastle dissolving in the waves, James seems to be receding from my life. I can feel him shifting under my feet. Later

that night, in the shower, standing still for a moment, digging a nail into the white bar of antiseptic soap, I stare at the small, square, pale pink tiles. What will happen to Dolly and Sandra? And what will happen to the house? And then I remember it's James's house.

'Goodness gracious me!' cries Cindy. 'Haven't you got anything other than black, white and grey?'

'James likes black and white on me.'

'We're going shopping. I know somewhere reasonably priced. You can't go to France dressed like a panda.'

If there is anyone else's opinion which matters more than James's, it is Cindy's.

Cindy's favourite shop happens to be an out-of-town discount store which sells seconds and well-known brands at knock-down prices. Favourite days are spent with Cindy, floating in and out of cafés, and now this is an extra-special day, wandering the aisles of Burton's Store.

'I'd like to put the clothes on now,' I say excitedly to the shop assistant.

'Make sure you take your receipt into the changing room.'

'Red's your colour,' Cindy had said, squinting at me, and as if by magic, we come out of the shop with me looking like a tropical bird.

'Your ticket is coming by post,' Cindy says. We are clutching glasses of rosé in the pub nearby. It is a horrible pub with table football, shouting teenagers, men hanging over the bar with their sad faces, and grim, sneering bartenders.

'How am I going to get to the airport?'

'Rob can take you.'

'Haven't told James the date.'

'But you have told him?'

'As long as I sort out the things in the loft, I can go.'

'Loft duty! What's loft duty? Talk about keeping you on a string,' Cindy tutted. 'How's things at work? The lads?'

'Piss me off no end. Gregory pulled his trousers down on me on Monday.'

'Christ, Juliet! You've got to go to your boss.'

'My boss, Mr Pigeon, is just as bad. Told me he liked his women in mini-skirts.'

'This is not good for you, Juliet. Human Resources?'

'They don't do it often. Only when bored. I have to pay off the loan for the car, then I'm looking for another job.'

'Much to pay off?'

'No, not a lot.'

We drive back to the centre of town, past industrial estates with grey, one-storey buildings, their company logos on panels adding colour. Cars fill up small car parks. It's three in the afternoon, so people will be working. I imagine each building containing rushing, writing, phoning employees and feel alive and free being out at this time of day. What it must be like not to work!

'One last coffee, then let's head for home.'

Cindy drops me off at my house. She doesn't come in, even though I invite her. I hope she will make me feel normal in my red, yellow and blue dress and defend me if James makes horrible comments about it, but recently Cindy hasn't come in.

'Don't want to disturb domestic bliss!' Cindy's face screws up. 'I don't like the way he treats you. He's changed.'

'It's because of his new job; it puts him under pressure.'

'You always find excuses for him.'

September arrives and so does my ticket to France. I read the words London Waterloo to Valence TGV station several times throughout the day, as if reading them will bring me there quicker.

In the bedroom, quiet and dim from an economic light bulb, which I dust every day, I start to put clothes into piles ready for packing, lined up, neatly folded – my holiday beginning. James has started to move his clothes into the other room. At least now I have more space in the wardrobe, though some days it feels as if someone has died in this room.

Chewing gum, furious at thoughts of the lads and work, I sling my bag over my shoulder and cycle to the office for a change, enjoying the shady trees with their arms extended and their leaves shaking above me. Soon I will be in a different landscape; a French one. It says in the brochure the accommodation is a farmhouse with rooms that have terracotta-tiled floors and wooden beams, basic rooms, most of them with good views of mountains and forests. I have the cheapest, which doesn't have a view, and I don't know what terracotta means but I don't care – it is in France and away from Reading and a James who wants to sleep in the other bedroom, lads who put used condoms in my manual, and wet, windy-even-in-summer, England.