

Friendship and Afterwards

David

David had expected shouting, screaming even. He had expected Sarah to throw something at him. She was drinking tea when he told her he was leaving, ending their eight years together, that he had fallen in love with someone else and out of love with her. All that came his way was a calm request: Sarah wanted his house keys, and him out of the house that day.

She wanted a clean break. A *clean break*. As if there could ever be such a thing when love has the energy crushed out of it. They had had sex the night before, the first intimacy of any kind between them in a long time, and something about the complete lack of connection, of passion, had acted as the catalyst for that following day being the one for his 'big news'.

After the initial request for the keys, she asked David again and again to hand them over. He knew he was being churlish in withholding the damn things, but he felt it was his right to keep them – in the short term at the very least. What's the rush, he thought, he was still paying half the mortgage and the utility bills. Didn't that entitle him to a key? She could

change the locks any day, but his name was on the **deeds**. **He** had some rights of free access and exit, he guessed.

He avoided giving them to **her because** it meant **the end**. **He** changed the subject each time, giving an acknowledging nod of the head when she pushed him to hand them over, and **making** some excuse or other about needing to collect the last of his **possessions**. **There** was so much to organise, he said; they shouldn't be hasty. He knew he was appearing to be flippant about many things in the initial period of **separation**. **He ignored** the pain in her eyes – they looked red and **sore – and the way** she continually scratched her arm and followed him around the **house, looking** over his shoulder when he took a novel from the bookshelves or selected a CD. They even disagreed about who bought the Roy Lichtenstein reproduction postcard on the fridge door.

David **wanted** to pretend everything was **normal**. **He** was pushing the pain of the open wound **into** a compartment in his **mind – 'File that for later'** – and dealing only with the immediate business of the everyday. He was a marketing manager for a recycled products **business and he** was attempting to deal with the break-up as he would a new **client; the** territory was unknown and he would obviously be nervous at **first**. **But this was the start of life after her**. He hadn't imagined he would ever be

with anyone else and he occasionally stopped and wondered who was this person **inside him** destroying an entire history and beginning an existential makeover?

Things didn't need to be chaotic and full of **recriminations**. **They** could split amicably.

He **spent his** time at work pretending he liked his **job**. He **drank endless** cups of **coffee with the odd cigarette throughout the day and made appointments** out of the **office whenever he could**. He **made** certain he was looking at some papers **when** his boss was in close proximity: he had read an article stating there was an automatic presumption of assiduous behaviour when a person was holding a piece of paper.

He had always wanted to sell their house and return to Florence, where they had travelled to five years before, and sit by the River Arno, sketching and watching her profile in the sunshine. He would have been happy to live and die **slowly**, existing simply in the hills outside the city, perhaps buried next to her **eventually** in the graveyard of the small church they had found: Santa Maria something or the other...

Had he ever told her about that dream? Would she have thought him **mad or feckless**, and perhaps ended the relationship herself?

Instead he had become a conventional desk-jockey, telling himself, when he first got the job, it was *cool* to work with recycled goods; it was an ethical career that would contribute to saving the planet. But he was pretending he knew what he was doing with the marketing of these expensive and unattractive recycled things. What was marketing anyway – making up lies about items you don't really like, need or want? Was it *normal* to work day after day without a clue?

The break-up can be treated as normal, he thought. We've come to an end, people do all the time, and what I'm doing couldn't really be thought of as callous. I am still paying half of everything and *I'm* leaving the house.

He *was* a good person. He reminded himself of that in his head throughout the days after he said he was leaving Sarah. He held doors open for people. He made colleagues tea or coffee. He had to be good, otherwise everything he had done could be seen as wrong, his entire existence tainted, and he would be nowhere, a loser.

Surely he had done enough good deeds in the world, even at such a young age of twenty-nine, to be given a free pass on leaving a relationship because he had fallen out of love with one person and in love with another?

He had kept his mother together mentally and emotionally when his father left **them**, helping her keep the family home going by ditching his university education and getting a job to pay her mortgage. And later, providing an alibi for his brother when he drunkenly **wrote off** a second car in twelve months, by saying he was driving the car instead. **He** had always tried to do **his** best in all **things - the** things people expected him to do - **to** earn his way in **life, to** be in the right place at the right time.

Now he was doing the completely unexpected and unwanted and he knew there was no *good* way of **leaving - that** was just a folly. The act of **leaving**, of destruction, could never be padded and cosy. There would always be words and **stares**, memories that scarred the soul and dreams that recurred and haunted the person who ruined everything.

A lot of David's possessions were stored in boxes in the recently boarded and insulated loft. They had talked about a full conversion in the **future**; a decision about having four children had progressed to the subject of **needing more space**.

He made certain most of his 'visit time' in the first week of separation was spent sitting alone in the musty, humid space above their **bedroom**, slowly, painfully weighing up the pros and cons of various **LPs**, books and items of complete **disinterest**, which he felt ridiculous for having

bothered storing in the first place. A pair of re-whitened *Dunlop* tennis pumps, hardened by mud and damp, were a memory of his early attempts to impress Sarah with his athletic abilities. He watched thin shafts of sunlight illuminate motes of dust, daydreaming for a moment, letting his hands run back and forth through the light. Then he looked through a tiny crack in the brickwork that faced on to the back garden. There he saw the half-finished beds he had promised to create. 'I'll be like a modern version of Capability Brown,' he had told Sarah when they moved in to the house.

What a joyless experience that had proved to be: back-breaking Saturday and Sunday morning work. They used to make love at the weekends, but now it was all about the vacuum cleaning and mowing the lawn.

His eyes moved to the bowing whirly dryer he had convinced Sarah didn't need embedding with a concrete foundation. Half-finished this-and-thats in the relationship filled his head: the bathroom wall on which mildew kept re-appearing – he had promised he would find a way to solve that problem; the case of the food cupboard door hinge which persistently slipped to one side when you opened and closed it – he had used some newspaper to wedge it straight. Was he only capable of fifty

percent? Would this separation mean him living in the loft, eyeing the staircase and hallway from above to see when he could come down to eat, wash, use the loo and leave for work, half in and half out of the house?

David sat next to the water tank, listening to Sarah's muffled voice on the telephone two floors below. He couldn't hear what she was saying, but he guessed she might be complaining to a friend or relative about his continued presence. He looked at various photographs: weddings, days out, and the Italian holiday that had meant so much to him.

They had started that trip abroad – their first together – in Pisa, managing to locate a bed and breakfast villa just yards away from the Leaning Tower.

David looked at a shot of the two of them taken by some obliging local, their arms around each other, grinning like young lovers do, with the Tower behind them. David had been wearing the US Varsity imitation jacket he had bought specifically for the holiday, brand new then, stained, dusty and badly folded at the foot of the box of photographs he was looking through now.

He studied his younger face in the Tower photo. He looked genuinely happy to be there, happy to be with her. How had that evaporated? Was

his soul so wretched he couldn't hold on to a deep **feeling**, a sense of something good in his life? He could analyse himself in an amateurish **fashion and conclude**, as he had done hundreds of times before, that his childhood was to blame for all the bad thoughts, feelings and actions in his burgeoning adult life. But that was bullshit and he knew it. He was fond of Corinthians 1:13 in the New **Testament**, not because he was a Believer (although he re-read the extract **regularly**), just as a memory from enforced visits to Sunday School. He agreed with the idea of putting away Childish Things. He was at fault in this separation. He was the one leaving.

The Leaning Tower photo reminded him how young they had been when they got **together**: twenty-years **old**, both students at university, and new to life away from the confines of **family**, elated by falling in love for the first time.

Although his hair was cropped short in the photo, he knew he was thinner on top now; his scalp had started to burn in the summer **months**. **A** widow's peak had begun to **develop** over the last couple of years. He wondered whether his hair loss might eventually render him unattractive to Alison. But that was ridiculous, wasn't it?

He remembered he was supposed to call Alison **that** morning to let her know when he would be seeing her later. She preferred calls to text **messages**. **She** said it was because she loved hearing his voice and it showed more effort on his **part**. 'It makes my day to see your name on caller ID. I love that you care so much. You're so lovely,' **she said**.

The loft search and rescue was taking for **ever**. **He** couldn't exhaust all remaining signs of 'good will' with Sarah by coming and going over the same ground.

Sarah said he needed to take what ever he wanted from the loft on this visit and she would throw the rest away with the rubbish collection later in the week.

She was going back to Kent to visit her parents at the weekend and wanted him to **'finish your** business of leaving'.

Earlier that day, when **he arrived and she made** him a cup of **tea**, **he felt** a rush of desperate relief at such a small gesture of kindness from **her**, half expecting her to pour the beverage over his head when it was made. They exchanged a few excruciating formal **words**, neither of them able to maintain **eye contact**, like strangers at a bus **stop** - *How's work? How are you sleeping?* - **while** sipping **their drinks**. **Then** she left him alone for a **moment**, collected some papers - a large pile - opened the recycling bin

and shoved, pushed and generally forced them in. Then she went to the bathroom.

He was curious to know what could have possibly annoyed her so much about those particular **papers**, or was it just being near him that made her tense?

He looked over his shoulder and listened out for **her**. **He** put his tea down and opened the bin. He could see half an image – a wedding dress – and knew immediately what the stash **was**. **His** body responded with a chill down his spine and a drop in his stomach. She had just ditched her wedding file in front of him. A fuck you, fuck you and *fuck you* again to him. She had probably gone to the bathroom to allow him time to look in the bin and realise how dead he was to her now.

The wedding file had been a source of hard work and **pride**. **It represented** three and a half months of **preparations: visits to civil ceremony locations; appointments with registrars, event-car companies and marquee owners; and the secretive collection of wedding dress images**, which were stored in a re-sealable envelope that he had promised not to look **into**, and hadn't. They had made up a guest list and decided on the right kind of invitation card. *Three and a half months*. And

for two months of that time he had been in love with, **although as** he kept telling himself, not actually cheating with, someone else.

Sarah had gone quiet downstairs. He looked at his mobile phone. He had been in the loft for nearly two hours. He must call Alison soon; he couldn't screw up two relationships in one fell swoop. It was a difficult **job being** a new boyfriend to **someone while** extricating himself from another person, and *not* being an arsehole in the process. He looked down from the loft hatch at the recently decorated hall, stairs and landing walls. They had decided on a terracotta hue and used sponges for a 'distressed' look. The job had taken much longer than he thought it would and he had never really liked the colour much. They had bought a new mirror for the hallway too – a faux-gothic frame that always made him think of *Hammer Horror* films when he arrived home. **He** knew he would miss the **house;** paint and mirrors could always be changed.

'Are you going to be much longer? I need to go out soon,' Sarah called up to him, at the foot of the loft ladder. He nearly fell sideways with surprise.

'No, no. Problem is, it's such a mess. Can I come back again and finish the job, maybe tomorrow? Or I could try and get it done now and let myself out?'

A moment's silence followed down below.

'No, that doesn't work for me. I want to be here when you are. I don't feel comfortable letting you wander in and out. It's not fair to put me under any more pressure. Please finish what you're doing now and perhaps we can talk later about a quicker visit tomorrow. All right?' she said.

What he wanted to happen next was to find himself walking down the ladder, stopping a few feet away from her and saying, 'Actually, no, that's not all right at all. I understand you're angry and upset. I completely get that. But I think we can safely assume I won't empty the contents of the house into my *Nissan Micra*. I'll only take what I'm sure is mine now and leave the rest to consult with you on later. That's my version of *all right*. I think we need to try and have a bit of separation between feelings and pragmatism, don't you? You want me out as quickly as possible and the only way for me to achieve that is to have the *time* to achieve it.'

But what he actually said in reply to her was, 'Okay, I'll be right down.'

He wobbled down the ladder carrying two smallish boxes, aware of her watching him all the way. I bet she would love me to fall and break my neck, he thought, but then he caught sight of the look on her face,

and it seemed to be full of anguish. He tried to smile at her reassuringly, but the smile turned **into** what felt more like a wince.

'I'll call you later, then,' he said, as he reached the front door.

'If you want, that's fine. I might be out, so call my mobile,' she replied, then went **into** the lounge and shut the door. He let himself **out**, put the boxes **into** the boot of his car and slammed it shut.

Surely I can do better than this, he thought. Surely I can make things end better?

He didn't want to phone Alison in the car right outside the front door and window of his ex-home. Sarah might be just on the other side of the net curtain, like a **spectre**, watching **him**, tuned in to the frequency of his voice after so many years **together**, or able to read his lips.

He drove away, around a corner and pulled **into** the kerbside.

'Hi, **it's... well, you** know who it is. How are you this morning?'

'It's *almost* afternoon. I nearly called you a few times to find out what you were up to,' Alison said. She sounded annoyed.

'I've been stuck in a loft for hours, wading through the debris of the past decade. Most of my **LPs** are warped from the heat and damp, my books are crinkled **too, and** it was all just unbelievably depressing.'

'Did Sarah make things hard for you?'

Hearing Alison use Sarah's name always surprised David. Ridiculous though it was, he wanted to imagine they were of different worlds and completely unaware of each other, but they did know each other, by name and face. They had spent an odd day together as part of a group of six people just a short while before.

David, his best friend, Ben, and mutual friend Richard had decided the previous year to set up a film production company and begin by concentrating on short films. Ben was the screenwriter, Richard the director and David had taken on the job of producer.

They shot their first film with a handheld digital video camera. The set was built in the flat Ben shared with Richard and Richard's girlfriend, Kate.

It was a one-actor film and the actor was Alison.

She and David worked together, and over various coffee breaks and lunches she had told him of her drama school days and her decision to 'get a real job' after countless rejections.

'So it's a short film, no budget, no frills, maybe a sandwich and cup of tea, shot in one day. How does that sound?' David had said to Alison.

She had laughed and said yes. She had touched his arm in a way that filled him with sexual energy. He spent the rest of the day thinking

about her **hand**: the shape of it; the feeling against his arm. **That** was the day **he started** to think of her as not just a lovely co-worker **but** as something else entirely different.

The storyline of the script **was** Alison's character, a medical **student**, **giving** a statement to the police about a hand **she amputated** from a **stranger**, a homeless man. The statement was full of Kafkaesque allusion to secrecy and conspiracy. The medical student never **revealed** why she **chose** the victim, why she wanted the hand, or what **she intended** to do with the severed body part. **During the interview she held the neatly sliced hand, giving a detailed description of how she carried out the amputation, and allowed by the interviewer to paint the nails - David borrowed the fake hand from a department store mannequin. Alison's character punctuated her statement** with looks, smiles and nods to one side as if there were someone coaching her in what to say and how to say it.

The video shoot was a paradoxical day for David. **For a long time, he** had been focusing on arranging a film, *a real film*, something the three 'production company' members could call their own **and use** as a **calling card** to obtain a real **budget with real actors so they could produce polished** work for short-film festivals. He *hadn't* conceived the shoot as a

ruse to ingratiate himself with **Alison**, especially with Sarah in the **room**, **but** as the day wore on he became aware of how much he liked the way Alison **spoke**, how she **smiled**, the way she caressed the severed hand. **He liked everything about her. As** that realisation took hold of his senses like a narcotic, another part of his personality began to **compensate**, as if it felt he was a traitor to the very cause of love itself.

He deliberately diverted his attention to Sarah at inappropriate **moments, such** as breaks between **set-ups** when he, Richard, Ben and Alison were discussing a particular script idea or brainstorming other ways to place emphasis on words or phrases.

‘What do you think, Sarah?’ David said on a few **occasions** when it was obvious to everyone else in the flat that Sarah and Kate’s **opinions**, valid or **not**, should perhaps come second to the director, writer, producer and actor.

As the group watched the unedited footage playback at the end of the day, David felt happy with the authenticity of the performance and, what he perceived, depth of the script. He had attended a short-film course at the National Film School some months before, and the central ideas he had come away with relating to the type of low-to-no budget filmmaking he was involved with **were** *Interesting* and *Memorable*.

He also felt gripped at the throat by guilt having Alison and Sarah so near each other. Alison had a boyfriend at that time and made a couple of sarcastic references about him to Sarah and Kate, but even those didn't prevent a build-up of sweat under David's armpits. He half expected Alison to say to Sarah, 'Of course, I won't be with that loser for much longer, because I'm going to steal your boyfriend, okay?'

The drive home after the video shoot was quiet and strained by unspoken tension, not because of any arguments but because he was living a lie now: walking, talking and breathing lies, damned lies.

He spent a few minutes running through a set of potentially stress-inducing scenarios in his head; reasons he could produce for his silence, if Sarah asked: pressure at work; planning the wedding and jitters about getting the Big Day right; fatigue after a long day out. He forced his mind to begin the process of convincing himself that perhaps, just perhaps, there was *no* genuine reason to feel the weight of guilt he was feeling about such an innocuous meeting between the two women.

Nothing had happened between him and Alison, and, probably, nothing would ever happen. He pulled the car into the space outside their house and was about to get out.

'You never told me Alison was so pretty,' Sarah said.

Sarah

When David announced he was leaving, he had stood in front of the lounge fireplace to tell Sarah and, for some reason, her first thought was that he looked like a man telling his wife he was 'off to war'. Sarah cried and asked him to stay. It was a kneejerk reaction, something she found herself saying without having the time or mental energy to think through what that would mean. He *wanted* to leave, so why would he suddenly say, 'Oh, all right then, I'll stay.' And why would she want him to stay after treating her with such contempt?

He had drawn the departure announcement out over that previous weekend.

Friday evening was full of silences – words unspoken on a subject she could see was burning a hole through him. She thought he might want to explain why he had been making so many withdrawals from their joint bank account. She was planning to ask him about that shortly. Or perhaps he wanted to say he was leaving his job. She knew he hated it, and who could blame him: he wanted to be an artist, and he *was* good.

Saturday was busy with food shopping in the **morning**, seeing her parents for lunch – they were passing through on a trip to see old friends in the north – and going **into** town in the evening to watch a film.

Sunday was just plain **quiet**, a difficult state for her to comprehend or put **into** words when she thought through their last hours as a **couple**; attempting to slow-motion the last part of their relationship in mostly failed attempts to analyse why and when things had finally collapsed.

She spoke a lot about that last weekend to her closest friends and family later on.

David had made her a cup of tea and brought it to her in bed, a regular gesture of kindness, which if she were being honest, she had come to expect.

He left the room quickly – he usually sat on the bed with his cup of tea and chatted – and she remembered when they first moved **into** the house and made love throughout the week, and always at the weekend. But that was then, and now weekends were all about **seeing friends** and family, watching films or gigs, or the planning and implementation of home improvements.

As Sarah looked back over the lead-up to his **departure**, she realised they had slowly constructed a life where they didn't really talk to each

other about anything other than what would, could or might happen next. Was that what other couples did when they had nothing *real* to say to each other? Weren't there **causes to find** and **people in need** around the **country**, the world – something that could have enriched their lives by becoming a part **of**?

They had joined a local anti-hunt group once, but **David eventually** talked her out of demonstrating and in to leaving the group as he said they were being hypocrites by eating meat while trying to stop animals being killed. **He said** the same thing on another occasion when **she signed** an anti-vivisection petition.

Did her experience of his methods in living mean she should have had some kind of foreknowledge that he would be leaving? Didn't she know him so well that she should have seen, or felt, that he was planning a big move? She **guessed**, sitting alone, partially drunk, on the second night after he **left**, that she had been blinded by the wedding plans. **She assumed** he was as mentally tied up in knots of anxiety and excitement as she was. But no, the bastard was planning to leave her at the same time as he was opining on civil ceremony locations and the **invitation designs**. **He seemed** so interested in her wedding **file**, leafing through the pages and opening discussions on the order of the day: photographs

with family and **friends**; setting a website address for music **suggestions**; and whether to have an open bar, or place wine and water on each table and let the guests pay themselves to reduce overheads.

Jesus, he really was a complete bastard, a **liar**, a soulless pig. She was well rid of him. True enough it hurt to be left **alone after** so many years as a couple. **The** act of *being together* was an addictive habit, but she could beat that **addiction**, perhaps by becoming addicted to someone **else**, and move on. She was young and practical, and he would soon miss her, **probably knocking** on her door in a few weeks or months, begging her to take him back. And that would be *her* moment.

At least they hadn't spent any wedding money yet. **Thank** god she **wasn't jilted** on the day itself. **He humiliated** her by leaving, but being left alone in front of a grimacing, sweating registrar, who had probably overseen many jiltings, surrounded by everyone you know – whispered conversations of sympathy, shuffling feet and embarrassed coughs – would have smashed her **into** a catatonic hell.

Sarah suggested they make a real effort to finish some work in the back garden on that last, oblivious day. **It bothered** her to watch weekend after weekend slip by as they approached autumn without the garden features being completed. It seemed to signify a gremlin in their way of

life, the opposite of the wedding planning, which was fervent and active, alive and full of order. After he said he was going, she wanted to ignore the flora and fauna, let it all grow into a wilderness and take over, like a Nature version of Miss Havisham.

He seemed less than enthusiastic about the garden work, but that was normal. He couldn't be called habitually lazy, just occasionally indolent when he found a task so boring and inconsequential that he could barely think of actually participating in it.

Her father offered to team up with David for an hour or two the previous day after lunch, cut the grass and put in some bedding plants.

That approach seemed to annoy David, although he tried to hide it by joking with her father about not wanting to rush a work of art. He had a plan for a Piet Mondrian-inspired design: vivid colours and blank shapes that would make looking out of the windows a magical experience. All lies.

'You up for the domesticity push today?' Sarah shouted from the bathroom, after her shower. No reply came back.

She found him downstairs holding his mobile phone, his face deadly serious, finishing a text. He put it back into his pocket as if it were

something he wanted to keep out of **sight**, maintaining eye contact with her.

'You all right?' he asked.

'I am. Are you?'

'Sure. I'll make a start on the grass.'

She *should* have known at that very moment he was covered in deceit and lies. The way he leapt to his feet, smiling as he passed by her and **stroked** her shoulder. He had been **inflated**, transformed **into** a different person by something or someone else. Transformed by *her* – by that *fucking Alison bitch*.

They worked for a few hours, stopping every so often to confer on the placing of the colours and whether **they needed** to dig deeper here or there. David's mobile phone beeped with new messages a few times. He wiped his forehead each time, removed his gloves and read the texts.

'Important news?' **Sarah said** after the third message.

'Just Ben, blathering on about the editing,' he replied.

He looked her in the eyes and lied through his smiling teeth. He may as well have slapped her with his gloves and whacked her over the head with his spade too.

Sarah hadn't decided whether or not to be angry with Ben yet. She liked **him**, always **had**, and she had no idea how complicit, or not, he had been in the **Alison deception**.

She always enjoyed seeing **Ben**. **He** made her laugh – really laugh. In fact they had shared a strange moment a couple of months **before**, a moment when she had questioned her future with David.

The three of them – Ben was often between girlfriends – had been out for an evening. **They had** a few drinks in a pub and then decided to have a meal in a local pie restaurant. At one point during the meal, **Sarah quizzed** Ben on his use of the word *beatific*. **Ben insisted** its meaning was based on the ideas of the Beat **Poets**; he was a big Kerouac, Burroughs and Ginsberg fan.

'Its origins are in the rhythm of life, the various beats of the feelings you get when witnessing different art forms or artistic inspiration,' **he said**.

'What? It *means* blissful, bestowing happiness. You're joking, right?' she said. **She was a bit tipsy and certain** he would grin any second and admit he was deliberately being a **fake**, winding her up.

'No it doesn't, that's nonsense,' Ben said, and exhaled from the corner of his mouth in frustration.

They continued to argue the pointless point until David asked if anyone wanted another drink and left them in annoyed silence. **That** moment could have opened a raw fissure in their usually light conversation/jokey relationship. But something about the intensity of the conversation, the way Ben had tried so long and hard to convince her he was **right**, how important her approbation seemed to be to him, reanimated a part of her mind that used to buzz with interest in subjects and ideas she hadn't thought about, let alone talked through, since **university** days.

Ben was all about **ideas and** projects: **photography**; writing poetry and **prose**; travelling abroad to paint. He was a *doer*.

The evenings with Ben usually ended after food and one or two more drinks in the pub, and then he would sleep in their spare bedroom. But on this particular night, as they walked home, Sarah suggested they join a nightclub queue.

'I *really* want to dance,' **she said**.

David pulled his usual bored **face, but** the look on Ben's face was the complete **opposite**. **It** seemed like the exact thing he had wanted to happen too.

The club was hot, crowded and **loud, and** Sarah couldn't have been any happier.

'I might not stay,' David shouted in her ear.

'What?' she replied.

'I'm really tired. I think I might go home, unless you want me to stay?'

'No, that's fine. I'll walk back with Ben. See you later.'

David kissed her on the cheek, waved to Ben and walked out.

Ben had managed to get to and from the bar with their drinks reasonably quickly, **and they** sat at a table watching other people dance.

'Shall *we*?' Ben said, his breath and lips **brushing** Sarah's ear.

She looked at him with a frowning smile. He smiled **back**, wriggled an upper-body dance move in his chair and pointed to the floor. She nodded and they stood up together.

At first she felt limited by inhibition in the way she moved. Even with the ease that came from alcohol, she fell back **into** her usual sway-dance style – David had rudely described it as like watching someone practice skiing while standing virtually still. **That was typical of his sense of humour, making fun of other people's faults to show how clever he was.**

Even though she often found herself laughing along with **him**, especially after a few **drinks**, Sarah had always disliked such a cruel

streak in her **partner**. **She** put it down to the chip he carried on his shoulder from never having achieved as much as he felt he should after attending university, then **living** every day **after, regretting yet never admitting it** or **talking about it to anyone**, even his closest friend or partner.

As she watched Ben move – he seemed to her to be a *very* good dancer – she felt her body free itself and go with the pulse of the music.

Then their eyes locked and they danced *together*, close and in time, watching only each other as if the whole floor was theirs.

Sarah momentarily thought of Uma Thurman and John Travolta at the beginning of their dance in *Pulp Fiction*, but then she lost control of her thoughts and just revelled in her emotional **responses**, perhaps the **messages in** Ben's eyes.

And then *she* felt beatific.