

The View from the Bushes

Wednesday, 2 July 2003

THERE MUST BE a small fortune in here, he thought as he stared at the contents of the bank box. Why didn't I know about this? Hundred dollar bills too; still legal tender. He bent over. Who said money doesn't smell good? Nice choice matey boy, whoever you are. Pity you didn't come back. He rummaged around a bit and his hands came across a lumpy envelope. 'Everton?' he read. 'Who the hell is he?'

ONE MONTH LATER Everton Jones was regaining consciousness in an alley in Golders Green, late on Saturday night.

He groaned and reached for his head. Fragments of reality danced into his mind, first the ground, cold and stony under his back and then the night air playing with goosebumps on his chest. Eventually, as the final piece clunked into place, he realised ... he was naked. 'What happened?' he asked feebly.

A car whooshed past on the road beyond and its headlights lit up a ragged bush hanging over a wall. Everton dragged himself away from the light and gathered his arms around him. I'm in that alley, right where I went with that boy. God almighty, my head. He must have really whacked me. Then he remembered. My bag, fuck my bag. That was brand new. And he's got all my best clothes. The bastard took everything!

He looked around. The lights in the house windows were out. Thank God, they're all in bed, it must be really late. The dim light filtering back from the street found the path down the middle of the alley. It's like somebody's just swept it, he thought. Just an empty alley and one stupid boy from Dudley who's let his dick get the better of him. Fantastic.

Thank God for that bend, at least I can't be seen from the road. I don't know anyone in London. What am I going to do?

What was I thinking of? Fuck, the address of the hotel was in my jeans! I don't know where it is. And that solicitor's letter. How am I going to know where to go? And all my money! Christ, I'm screwed ... And not the way I wanted either ...

A vision of that boy's bum pointing up at the ceiling over the pool table in the bar forced itself into Everton's mind. The curly black hair, those green eyes, the look he'd given him in the toilet. God he was convincing, Everton thought. He put all that on just to lure me here? Oh well, they warned me, in Dudley. But my clothes; why did he have to take my bloody clothes? Oh my God, I've been robbed by a label queen! The bastard. It'll take forever to replace them.

'Something of your father's to give to you.' That's what that solicitor said. That's what I should have been thinking of. What was the fucking point of coming all this way? I should have stayed on the bus. Why the hell did I get out at Golders Green? Nineteen years. Nineteen bloody years since anyone's heard from him. He's all I've got left, after Mum. I should have asked her about him when I could. But I thought he was dead too. I'll never know now. I've lost everything!

REGRET OVERTOOK EVERTON and he began to cry. The first few quiet tears giving way to deep retching sobs as his feelings overwhelmed him.

He cried himself out, slumped in the alley, and was wondering how he was going to get out of the mess he was in when he heard the sound of a bottle shattering in the street.

Someone shouted: 'Everton!'

He tensed in his hiding place in the alley. Christ! Who knows I'm here?

A couple of handclaps rang out.

'Everton.' The voice was louder and flatter.

He's just shouting it out, he doesn't know me.

Two more claps ...

Right, it's some drunk football fan.

He listened.

'Everton.'

He's getting closer.

Three more claps resounded this time down the alleyway.

Everton shrank back, crouched on the balls of his feet.

He's right at the entrance. His heart raced as he strained to hear.

Please, please go past.

But a security light blinked on and footsteps began to crunch the stony ground on the path.

Christ, he's coming this way!

'Ev - er - ton, Ev - ert - on, Ev - er - to - on - n.' It was closer now and more musical, echoing between the brick walls.

A dog barked and a window banged open in one of the houses. 'Who's there?' a woman's voice called out.

Everton jumped up and belted off in the opposite direction, down the alley, his arms flying. The woman screamed and Everton reached down between his legs and scrambled for safety in the darkness. By the time he stopped, he was surrounded by trees.

ON HAMPSTEAD HEATH, Kash and Édouard were manning their stall. A young black boy had just taken his free condoms and lube and disappeared into the night.

'Madame!' Édouard muttered under his breath.

'Hey, cut that out,' Kash replied. 'We ain't here ta pick up trade. An' ya can save the "Madame" fer Ricqui an' the rest a' ya' Girlfriends.'

'That's what he came for.'

'But not us. We're here ta give out condoms. Ya're such a dinge. Quit hittin' on all the black guys will ya? It's kinda flatterin' the attention ya pay ma people, but ain't ya seen a nice white boy who'd do just as well? Heck, there's enough of 'em in the bushes tonight.'

Édouard grabbed Kash's arm. '*Copine!*' he exclaimed.

'Look, I ain't one a' ya' Girlfriends, an' ...'

He stopped in mid-sentence as a naked mixed-race man came running down the path, obviously terrified, his big afro swinging about. 'Hey brother, are ya okay?' Kash shouted.

'What do you think?' he replied. 'I've just been robbed.'

'Robbed? Ya've had ya' clothes stolen?'

'I'm not wandering round like this deliberately, whatever some people round here seem to think.' He looked over his shoulder nervously. 'But, yeah – and not just my clothes – I've got no money, nowhere to stay. I don't know what to do.'

'Oh ma God; they normally only steal ya' wallet.'

'Who are you guys and where am I? This place is mental.'

'Ya mean ya don' know?'

'No, I'm from Dudley.'

'Ya're on Hampstead Heath honey. But where are ma manners? I'm Kash an' this is Édouard, he has a room in ma house.' He extended a hand.

'And I'm Everton. Pleased to meet you ... only I can't exactly shake your hand.' He shifted the weight on his feet and looked down between his legs. Both his hands were wrapped firmly around his manhood.

'Oh I get it.' Kash grinned and reached under the table for a bag. 'Look, I think I'd better lend ya ma gym kit.'

'Could you?'

'Yeah, no problem. Here.' Kash handed the bag to Everton who went off into the bushes to change.

A few minutes later he returned. Kash's clothes fitted him perfectly. 'That's better. I don't know how to thank you.'

'Don' even mention it. Up to now the biggest drama we've dealt with was some guy who'd run inta someone he knew from work. In your case, I guess ya'll need a place ta stay?'

'You're right about that. The details of my hotel were in my trousers. And the address of a solicitor I'm supposed to see on Monday. God, this is a bloody nightmare.'

'I know some people I can call, but why don' ya come with us? I've a spare room. Ya're welcome to it.'

'I don't know. It's very kind of you to offer, but ...'

'But what? What else're ya gonna do? It ain't like I'm tryin' 'a get ya outa ya' knickers, quite the reverse. Anyways, I want ma clothes back. Heck, I can't just leave ya here.'

'I can't deny that. Yes. Thank you, you've saved my life.'

'No problem. Look we're about done here. Why don' we just get ya home? Come on Ed, let's get packed up. Ya can tell us all about it in the car, Everton.'

Breakfast in Kenton

ON SUNDAY MORNING, Kash and Édouard were in the kitchen of his house in Kenton, sat around a pile of *pain au chocolat* and a pot of coffee.

‘Look here,’ Kash was saying, ‘Everton’s had a terrible shock. Can’t ya see? I just don’ want ya takin’ advantage of ’im.’

‘*Me*, take advantage of him? You were the one all over him last night. I think it is *you* who should be keeping your hands to yourself.’

‘He sure is gorgeous. But how many more times do I have ta tell ya? I ain’t tryin’ a get inside ’is knickers. Believe me. It wouldn’t be fair. An’ I know you. What about that guy from Senegal last Easter? Ya practically had ta be held back, if I recall. That’s what I’m talkin’ about; hands off, right?’

‘As far as I am concerned, Everton is a Girlfriend. And that is my last word. And I think you should treat him like one too, even if you do not take the Girlfriends’ Code seriously.’

‘You an’ ya’ darn “Girlfriends”, I s’pose it’s a French thing; though I don’ exactly see Everton mincin’ around like Ricqui. Still, if ya wanna put ’im in that box, that’s fine by me. At least it’ll keep ya’ hands off a’ him.’

‘You can say what you like about my Girlfriends; but if it wasn’t for the Code we would all have fallen out long ago. “Girlfriends do not fuck with their Girlfriends.”’

‘“Or their Girlfriends’ boyfriends”, yada, yada. How many times? Whatever; we’re both sayin’ the same thing here. Just ya stick ta it; ya hearin’ me?’

‘Of course I am. And I will, if you do. Now shush. I think that is him. Quiet now.’

A MOMENT LATER, EVERTON tried the door. ‘Oh, you’re having breakfast, I’ll come back later.’

‘Waddaya mean? Don’ be so silly ma man, join us!’

'Oh no, it's alright.'

'So ya're goin' ta McDonald's are ya, even if there was one round here? An' waddaya gonna pay with? Come on man, sit down!'

'If you put it like that.'

'I do, it's just ma way.' Kash scraped back a chair. 'Here! Ed, pour this gorgeous man a coffee an' give 'im a croissant.'

'This is nice, thank you,' Everton replied.

'The French sure know how ta do pastry. Now relax,' Kash added, 'an' make ya'self ta home. Ma folks're loaded, so it's no imposition. But what's ya' programme? What does that solicitor want?'

'Yes, it all sounds very mysterious,' Édouard added.

'No kidding,' Everton replied. 'He wouldn't say over the phone. Just that he had something of Dad's to give to me.'

'An' ya' pa ain't around?' Kash asked.

'That's right, Mum said he went back to Africa when I was two and no one ever saw him again. I think he must be dead.'

'But you do not know that, perhaps he has come back and wants to get in touch?' Édouard suggested.

'Or they've found 'is will an' he's left ya a fortune,' Kash added. 'Look on the bright side. What does ya' ma think?'

'I can't ask her now, she's dead,' Everton said. 'She had a heart attack two months ago. And he couldn't have left me anything; they had nothing to start with.' The room fell quiet for a moment.

'Sorry, I didn't know. That's awful.' Kash broke the silence.

'Thanks, but it's okay, we weren't close. Mum found me in bed with a guy when I was in the sixth form and chucked me out. We never spoke after that.'

'Was she ...?'

'English, yes.'

'So how're we gonna find that address?'

'He emailed it to me, so if I can just get online ...'

'No problem, there's a computer in ma study.'

'That's brilliant, thanks, but ...'

'But what?'

‘Look, I haven’t got any money, or anything to wear; just what you lent me last night. How am I going to get there?’

‘Don’ be ridiculous. Let us look after ya.’

‘No, it’s asking too much. I can’t.’

‘Ya ain’t got much choice, do ya? If it makes ya feel any better ya can give me somethin’ once ya’re sorted out, then I’ll refuse ta accept it. Now get ya’self upstairs. We’re about the same size. I think I’d better lend ya some a’ ma clothes.’

‘WOW!’ EVERTON GASPED as he stepped into Kash’s bedroom. In the middle was a huge bed framed by gilded dogs. ‘Where on earth did you get that from? It’s like Tutankhamen’s tomb.’

‘I had it made. “Kashta” was the first black pharaoh.’

‘You’re Egyptian?’

‘No I ain’t. I’m from downtown Atlanta an’ proud of it. It’s a long story. Right now, we need ta get ya kitted out.’ Kash opened a door to a walk-in dressing room lined with clothes.

‘Let’s see,’ he said, casting an appraising glance at Everton, ‘they say it’s gonna be “hot” today. I guess ya’d be “hot” in linen.’ He laughed and pulled out a pair of white slacks. ‘Come on, get those off an’ let’s see if they fit.’

‘You do know I’m not wearing any knickers ...’

‘And? I bet ya’d look good without ’em. Don’ worry, I won’t look!’ He handed Everton the trousers and turned the other way.

‘WADDAYA THINK ED?’ Kash asked as he came back into the kitchen with Everton. ‘I only wish they looked as good on me.’

Édouard whistled. ‘*Ouaw!*’ He rolled his eyes. ‘But you are not wearing any underpants. That trouser shows everything.’

Everton blushed. ‘You don’t think it’s a bit too daring?’ he asked, looking down. ‘Kash persuaded me.’

‘It will certainly get you noticed. Just hope it does not rain and God forbid you get an erection.’ Édouard grinned and drained his coffee. ‘I can’t stay and chat, I have to go to work.’

‘You give out condoms in the mornings too?’

‘No,’ Édouard replied, looking at his watch, ‘I was only keeping Kash company last night. I work for Eurostar, and I

have to be in Waterloo in an hour. I must hurry. Just you remember what I said, Mr Kashta!' he added, and rushed out.

Everton looked puzzled. "'Mister" Kashta?' he asked. 'Kashta's your surname?'

'I said it's a long story. I changed ma name when I became a Muslim.'

'Muslim? But you're black?'

'Ya've never heard a' Louis Farrakhan then?'

'Who?'

'"Louis Farrakhan". He's a black activist in the US – converted ta Islam in the fifties – changed 'is name an' all. It's all about denyin' the slavery culture. Come on, I've somethin' ta show ya.'

HE LED HIM into the lounge and sat him down on a stylish white leather sofa. 'I've seduced a few guys on here in ma time but, don' worry, I'm not after ya ... yet. Check this out.' He reached for the remote. A huge plasma screen came to life and he flicked over to a religious American satellite channel.

'See that guy in the suit? That's ma pa. He owns the whole church, this TV channel, you name it. He pays fer all a' this outa small change; religion's big business in the States.

'When I was a kid he used ta send me ta these Christian summer camps ta "convert" me fer the Lord. I hated it. So I converted ta Islam an' changed ma name from "Tobias Napier" ta "Taurique Mohammed el-Haji Kashta".'

'So that's why you got that amazing bed. I get it now. What did your dad make of it?'

Kash laughed. 'Waddaya think? He was furious! Banished me ta good ol' London Town, or else he'd cut me off without a penny. Now I live the life of a playboy, an' all ta keep 'is precious reputation intact, neat, huh?'

'And all I have left of my father's a big, fat mystery.'

'Hey man, it's gonna work out. It could even be good news.'

'I wish! Look, will you come with me Kash? Now it's getting so close I've got butterflies.'

'Are ya kiddin' me? I wouldn't miss this fer the world. Sure I will. Now let's go find that email, so we know where ta go.'