

Insignificant

by MJA Smith

Ryan wondered if he smelled of alcohol to other people. He was sat at the back of an Underground carriage and, admittedly, it was before the main rush hour had started, but he did wonder whether the reason passengers boarding the train from Great Portland Street onwards elected not to sit next to him – despite the empty seat – was because he stank. He also wondered whether it was because he was a dishevelled mess or because he was wearing sunglasses when it was still dark outside and he was on a train beneath the London streets. But mostly he just wondered if it was because he smelled of booze.

He had overslept; then again every morning he overslept. Consequently he had been running customarily late this morning, and that explained his appearance. He hadn't showered and hadn't shaved; instead of cleaning his teeth he had grabbed a packet of mints from the kitchen table, relics from a time months ago when he'd tried – unsuccessfully – to give up smoking, and legged it out of the house with his overnight bag; the overnight bag that he hoped that he had remembered to pack. He couldn't be sure and he hadn't stopped to check for fear of missing the Eurostar train to Brussels his assistant had booked for him. The assistant that he had left in the bed in her flat earlier that morning. He couldn't remember what the sex had been like; he'd fantasised about sleeping with her almost from the moment he had interviewed her three months before, and now it had happened he couldn't remember it; her flatmate may have been involved but he couldn't remember that part, though he wished he could. That was thanks to the copious quantity of booze he had consumed yesterday, from the liquid lunch, through the afternoon's 'fuck the diary' cancelled meetings spent in the bar below the office, and on to a club in Shoreditch with some girls from the office, including the delectable Ellen. So, that explained the smell of alcohol.

He couldn't explain the sunglasses, though that was probably easily attributed to the alcohol as well.

He began to feel the tiredness catching up with him as the Tube left Euston Square. His body ached – old injuries, general lack of care and exercise, and a specific sense of having overdone it the night before – and his head pounded; his mouth was dry and the caffeine craving was intense. He fidgeted and forced himself to stay awake, flicked his iPhone on and off repeatedly just to give him something to focus on, yawned loudly and wondered if his breath smelled anywhere near as bad as it tasted.

At King's Cross, he ran from the Tube only to find that all services to Brussels had been cancelled. He groaned in dismay, tried to find out what was going on from a distinctly unhelpful member of station staff, until he noticed the trolley with its compartments for newspapers, cans, general waste and sundry cleaning sprays and cloths and realised he was trying to extract travel information from a station cleaner.

He spotted the information desk and the long queue of assembled passengers trying desperately to find out what was going on, the solitary, clearly harangued Asian guy behind the desk flapping his arms wildly in a gesture that said to Ryan 'I don't know what the fuck is going on! Stop hassling me!' Nevertheless, in spite of or because of the futility of the man's gestures, Ryan nudged and pushed his way through the crowd to the front, ignoring the passive-aggressive tutting and just-good-old-fashioned-aggressive shoves and figured that if he did reek of stale alcohol, that would explain why as many people seemed to be recoiling as were regaling him.

'What's going on?' he demanded.

The Asian guy took off his glasses and slumped into his desk chair resignedly.

'Sir, there are no trains to Brussels this morning.'

'I know that. What's going on?'

'I have no information, sir. There may be trains later. There might not be.' He shrugged.

'Where's the station manager?' Ryan shouted.

'He's off sick sir.'

'Where's the duty manager?'

'On his break.'

'Then who's in charge?'

'I am sir. All I can say is that you need to listen for announcements sir.'

Ryan began to feel the rage bubbling up and he started spitting expletives uncontrollably at the sorry wreck of a man, making fists and leaning over the counter threateningly.

'Sir, please step away before I call the police.'

Ryan growled, retrieved his bag and slunk off to buy a coffee, commandeering one of the few tables that weren't occupied by unkempt travellers, each with that vacant 'I don't know what I'm supposed to do, but if I just wait, eventually it will be okay' look of nervous resignation. As he began to drink the coffee he began to nod off, spilling the hot liquid down his shirt. 'Shit,' he muttered as he frantically wiped at the expensive Thomas Pink fabric.

Some three hours later, Ryan missed the first train out of King's Cross to Brussels because he was fast asleep outside Starbucks, his head resting on the holdall in a pool of dribble. When he woke up and adjusted the sunglasses onto the bridge of his nose, he noticed the time and decided to go home. He phoned Ellen at her desk to cancel the Brussels meetings; her colleague Maria grunted that after what he had done to Ellen last night he could manage his own fucking calendar.

Ryan smiled, thinking that this implied a reasonably adequate performance from himself last night, brushing aside worrying thoughts that another harassment case might be on the cards, and then realised with dismay that he'd now have to cancel the meetings himself. He clumsily and slowly tapped out emails on his iPhone, knew they were riddled with spelling mistakes and grammatical errors, caught a cab from the rank and went home to bed for the rest of the day.

At about six, he took a call from Marcus Wallace saying he needed to see him that evening, that it couldn't wait until the next day. A table had been booked at the restaurant near the office for 8.00. Ryan knew that from Marcus's tone that it wasn't going to be good news, was sure that this restaurant was where a number of his colleagues had been invited to dinner before being summarily dismissed, pay-off in hand and tails between their legs.

Ryan showered, poured himself a large vodka and tonic that he drank while he dressed, then took a walk down to the restaurant. It was a warm evening and the bars were spilling out on to the pavements. If it wasn't for what he knew was about to happen, he would have considered the atmosphere convivial; instead it was something to be ignored. Time to focus on the sensation of a knife being driven squarely between his shoulder blades.

At the restaurant Marcus greeted Ryan with an uncomfortable handshake. They'd been put in an unoccupied corner of the dining room, away from all the other diners which added to Ryan's sense of foreboding. It didn't help that Marcus seemed evasive whenever Ryan tried to ask questions, checking his BlackBerry and watch alternately. The waiter asked if they were ready to order and Marcus shook his head.

'Some drinks, perhaps?' Marcus ordered a sparkling water; Ryan ordered a Peroni.

'What's this all about Marcus?' Ryan asked, the beer loosening him up after a few sips.

'It won't be a terrible surprise, put it that way. Ah, here's Victoria,' he said, rising to his feet and smiling with evident relief as Victoria, their elegant HR director, made her way to the table.

'Ryan,' she said. No hello, no smile, just his name. Perfunctory, functional, accurate.

'Come on, let's get this fucking over with,' said Ryan testily, his cool shattered and his patience worn down. He drummed his fingers against the side of the beer bottle.

'Are you ready to order?' said the waiter, appearing out of the shadows.

'Another minute,' responded Victoria curtly and the waiter shrunk away silently.

The sacking took next to no time at all, Victoria delivering the sentencing while Marcus just sat there, arms folded, nodding occasionally, relaxed in his complicity. They brought up various conduct points, the missed meetings, phony expense claims, feedback from other members of the team, all of which Ryan ignored, waiting for them to get to the fucking point. And then it came.

'...and then there's a complaint about sexual harassment from Ellen in the office. What do you want to say about that?'

'It takes two,' Ryan grinned. 'You two should know that.' Marcus and Victoria's affair was one of the worst kept secrets around the business.

'We have to take this seriously, Ryan.'

'Oh come off it, she played along and you know it.'

'Ryan, stop for a minute and think about that. She's a new member of the team, very young and

wants to get on in the company. She doesn't know any different. She looks up to you as her line manager and is easily influenced by you.'

'That's why I'm the firm's top salesperson.' Ryan was beginning to revel in this.

'She says you practically raped her. More than once. She's threatening to go to the police.'

'That's bollocks and you know it,' he stammered, spitting drops of beer with indignation.

'We don't know that, Ryan. We just have the word of a deeply unsettled young woman.'

'Well, she wasn't unsettled last night, I can tell you. She loved every second of it.' At that Victoria looked away, offended, shaking her head slightly, staring hard at Marcus almost in disbelief.

'Ryan,' said Marcus, suddenly locating his testicles. 'You know this isn't the first time. We've paid off every PA you've had in the last three years. One a year. It's got to stop. We can't afford to cover for you any longer.'

'So you're going to put the word of some effervescent blonde bimbo ahead of mine, when I've single-handedly delivered you the sales that have kept this fucking business afloat?'

'Yes, Ryan. Enough is enough.'

He left the table enraged, knocking over a chair as he went, slamming the restaurant door behind him.

'Are you ready to order now?' said the waiter.

'I think so,' said Marcus. 'Victoria, some champagne to celebrate perhaps now that the Ryan problem is solved?'

Ryan stormed through the streets, uncertain of where to go. His first thought was to find where Ellen lived and give her something to really call the police about, but instead he called Simon.

'They just fucking fired me,' he blurted into the phone.

'Yeah, I knew that was coming. You did too didn't you?'

'No.'

'Really?' Simon, usually so calm and level, sounded positively shocked. He sighed and went on, more steady. 'Ellen was just the final straw for the firm. And you have to admit that it wasn't exactly the first time.'

'Well you haven't exactly got a clean sheet there either, have you?'

'That was very different. And besides, that was three years ago.'

'It was only different because we were both involved.' Ryan sighed loudly down the phone. 'What the fuck am I going to do?'

'They've let you go. They'll give you the pay off, give you a decent and plausible reference and you'll find something else pretty quickly. They've let you off again, and you know they could have made it significantly worse for you.'

'Come and have a drink with me,' said Ryan, a note of pleading in his voice.

There was a pause.

'I'm not sure that would be a good idea,' said Simon. 'I have to be seen to support Marcus on this.'

'And do you?'

'Do I what? Support Marcus? I have to. I have to stand by the firm on these decisions.'

'You and that fucking toe-the-company-line bullshit Simon! Give it a fucking rest. I remember when you were just like me. The drugs, the girls. We did it all. And then you took that fucking promotion.'

'People change,' he replied. 'I have to go to a meeting.' It was a lie. Ryan knew it was a lie. It was nearly 9.00. Simon's line abruptly went dead.

Ryan kicked a set of railings next to where he had made the call in rage, feeling the floor of his world falling away from beneath his feet. He broke two toes, which a mortician would find evidence of a few weeks later. He walked into the nearest off licence and bought two bottles of Absolut and proceeded to get himself wildly drunk back home, at some point calling a dealer he hadn't phoned for years for coke and weed. Later that night he sent offensive texts to Ellen, Marcus, Victoria and Simon and a bunch of other people from the office. It was a pattern that he kept up for about a month.

Every day at around midday, with his head pounding, Ryan would wake, shower, shave and dress as if he was leaving for the office, call a few head-hunters and contacts and arrange expensive lunches to try and get himself a new job. On the way into the City he would drop suits and shirts to his local cleaner to be pressed and laundered. He played golf prodigiously and his handicap improved immeasurably while his

recruitment options declined almost as quickly. On the way back home, after a day of whoring himself unsuccessfully, and feeling thoroughly disenchanted with the process, feeling positively insignificant, he'd check into the off licence and start all over again. Ryan thought of himself as a functioning fuck up.

By the end of his bender his apartment looked like a crack den. Empty bottles littered the floor; roaches were stubbed out into the carpet; the toilet was encrusted with dried vomit; porn DVDs flickered silently across a broken TV. And so on. The cleaner had long since stopped coming, appalled at the state of what had previously been a modern bachelor apartment.

Ryan was nowhere to be seen at the denouement of his lost weekend. He was in the hospital. His dry cleaner had dropped some shirts round, pushed the door open when there was no answer, and had found him, prostrate and naked in a pool of vomit, blood and excrement. Ryan seemed to be bleeding from a wound to the head. When she had recovered from the shock of seeing the bloated, grisly, gristly mess she was confronted with, she had called an ambulance and the comatose Ryan had been hauled to the hospital for a series of pointless stomach pumps, tests, stitches and monitoring. Catheters and tubes were inserted into every orifice, leaving him looking like a spidery fish yet to be discovered in the weirdest ocean depths. He died three days later. No-one from the office visited him.

Simon read about Ryan passing away in a trade magazine a few days after. For some inexplicable reason, they'd run an obituary taking up half a page. They had called him for a comment, which Simon's assistant, Emma, had refused. No-one in the firm would comment.

The journalist had said it signalled the death of a certain breed of salesman, the likes of which their industry would probably never see again. Reaching the end of the article, Simon shrugged to himself and shook his head, vaguely bemused at the coverage that Ryan's death had garnered, tossed the magazine into the recycling bin next to his desk, and dialled into his fourth conference call of the day.

Simon felt nothing.