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*By Adele Parks*

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Spare Brides  
If You Go Away  
The Stranger In My Home  
Love Is A Journey (short story collection)  
The Image Of You

**PLAYING  
AWAY**  
Adele Parks



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# Prologue

Before the invention of networking, people simply met, social-climbed or licked arse. Now it's more hygienic. Now we have networking conferences in Blackpool. I don't know which is more depressing.

I walk into the hotel lobby, late, to demonstrate my mind-set. I shake the April showers from my umbrella and I'm immediately splattered with boisterous laughter from the hotel bar. The evening's entertainment is already under way. My esteemed colleagues are tipping sand buckets down the stairs and racing shots, badly, so that pink, sticky liquid comes out of their noses. My heart sinks; I don't want to be here. I want to be at home with my husband, curled up in bed, reading or making love. Husband! I love that word. It's my favourite word and I've used it excessively over the last nine months since I netted him.

I know the whole conference will be a fearful bore: too much testosterone and not enough intelligence. I work for a large management consultancy (Looper Jackson) and in six months' time we are merging with a mammoth management consultancy (Peterson Wind) to form a huge, dick-swinging one (Peterson Windlooper – I'm unsure what is to become of Jackson). The purpose of this conference is for the management to identify natural leaders, team players and losers in a

bid to reconstruct departments. I imagine preferred scenarios. I want to be on a beach in Barbados, I want to be in All Bar One with the girls, the King's Road; I want to be just about anywhere other than here. I pause. Except the office. That was a very miserable thought. Best to check in, clean up and face it.

I drop my bag, sigh, cast a glance around the chintzy bedroom, then call my husband. Disappointingly but somewhat predictably, he isn't in. The bathroom is large and white, with hideous gold-swan taps; I turn the taps, breaking their necks, a butcher's window at Christmas time. I run a bath, emptying the Crabtree & Evelyn salts into the plunging water. After bathing I dress. It's a black-tie evening and every woman will opt for a conventional flouncy dress. To provide contrast I dress with a nurtured, rebellious streak, choosing a sheer black trouser suit. The top parts to show a tantalizing flash of my stomach – currently flat, brown and sexy. My hair is just long enough to wear up, so I pile it on top; it looks too serious, so roughly, hurriedly, I pull down random strands and twist them into dreadlocks. I check the result in the mirror and I'm pleased. I'm even more pleased when later I thread my way through the white tablecloths, black suits and predictable, unflattering ball dresses.

It's the usual corporate dinner thing: vast, unseemly and profligate. Everyone is really going for it, a scene from Sodom and Gomorrah. Beery, bleary men stand in pulsing packs leering at the women. Red, drunken faces lurch forward, slurring their words and thoughts. The women wear their make-up smudged around their eyes and their noses; their foreheads are shining, hardly vogue. Tomorrow will be the

day for embarrassed nods and painful headaches, but fuck it, tonight is the time to go for it. Sod them and tomorrow. By contrast my plan is: dinner, excuse, retreat, retire and ring husband. I find my table and name-plate, sit down and pull my face into a practised, polished, social smile.

His eyes are unfair.

Too big, too blue, too overwhelming to allow any female a reasonable attempt at indifference. He has fine, transparent skin with a sprinkling of freckles. He is lean, taut, well defined, athletic. Not an ounce of unnecessary about him. He smells clean but not perfumed. He looks at me and his eyes level me, slice me. He's exploded a kaleidoscope of emotion. Fizzy splinters of rich colours blast internally, lodging in my head and breasts. My knickers and heart pull together. I'm shivering. The predictable masses surrounding us merge into one pointless, homogeneous blur; we're left in an appalling clarity. I'm shocked and disturbed by my jumping M&S briefs. I immediately dismiss any semblance of disguising, polite, small talk.

'I'm married.'

'I'm a tart,' he smiles.

Both the defence and challenge.

'That's the introductions over with. Want a drink?' He is already pouring me one.

We are outrageously overt. We flirt to an awe-inspiring level. Within minutes I slip back into my flirtatious ways that were second nature before I married, but have been unnecessary and unseemly for some time. I am direct, evasive, sophisticated, straightforward, coy, seductive. Much more seductive than I've ever been before. He is also full of

contradictions. He talks about his job, which is dull, but he appears brilliant. He's jumped through burning hoops and balanced balls on his nose to secure his position at Peterson Wind. Now he can smell his own success, it reeks. He tells me he deserves the conference gig, the whole jolly. It's obvious he has no intention of doing any work, beyond scoring women and drugs. He stands up and is disappointingly short but seems majestic. It is devastatingly ambiguous. It is irreparably clear-cut.

We talk about sex and not much else, establishing the things we have in common. He confesses that he has an unquashable habit of immediately identifying the most desirable woman in the vicinity. Wherever he is – a bar, at work, the pub, the tube, in a shop. I remember that skill and tell him so. He nods and simply affirms, 'It's compulsive. I don't think this talent is a unique one. Many a time a mate and I have settled on the same sleek bob of hair or slim set of hips. The odd thing is finding a woman who tells me she does the same.' He shakes his head in disbelief. 'Sometimes if I am on the pull I don't bother with chasing the most attractive. I mean it's a waste of fucking time if you just want to get your end away. So I identify the most readily available. Quite distinct and apart.'

'What am I?' I ask shamelessly. I know he is unlikely to admit he is keen for a quick shag and I'm giving off available signals. But I *so* want him to flatter me.

'You, Gorgeous, with your crazy, curly, blonde hair, beautiful face, cracking figure, full round tits and tiny waist –'

He touches my knee with the edge of his whisky glass. I shiver but drag it away.

' – you with your intelligent eyes, eyes which you turn on me with cold indifference, are undoubtedly the most attractive woman here.'

He touches my knee again and I don't move it.

'But you are different. Because, while being undoubtedly the most attractive woman here, you are also the most unobtainable. You see, I never dip my pen in the company ink, and besides which you're married.' Yet habit compels him to add, 'I've slept with ninety-nine women – how do you fancy being the hundredth?'

'Does that line ever work?' I ask, laughing at his audacity despite myself.

'Ninety-nine times, to my certain knowledge.'

'You're pathetic.'

'But it doesn't worry you.'

He is right. I fancy him so much I think I'm going to be sick. I fancy him so much I think I *must be* sick. He leans toward me. I'm so very close to his mouth I can taste, on the air that he expounds, beer and cigarettes, an intoxicating perfume.

'You fascinate me, Sweetie, you are fucking fascinating.'

I bristle with the excitement, have I ever fascinated my husband?

'You are so bloody cocky, full of your self. I like that in a girl.'

He adjusts his trousers, fighting his erection.

'I like your calmness of manner. It disarms me slightly that you are so confident. But, fair play to you, I admit, your assessment of your attractiveness is in no way over-ambitious. You are a very beautiful woman. You're also very clever, more

intuitive than intellectual, and to tell the truth I rate the latter higher than the former, but neither should be ignored.' Without giving me time to be offended, he continues, 'You are dead amusing. You really must be, because I've laughed all night and I can't imagine that it is all motivated by my desire to flatter you.'

I nod, momentarily too hoarse with desire to answer. I sip some water.

'But we agreed I am unavailable.'

He smiles. 'Yes. Having said that, it seems odd to me that earlier, when I smiled and nodded to you, you returned with a smashing smile. It seemed to me that your eyes, well' – he shrugs – 'I'm experienced enough to know that your indifference is feigned. I think you are quite capable of myopic and hedonistic fucking; your brazen frivolity is obvious.'

'I'm married,' I insist.

'You mentioned that.'

'Blissfully so.'

He grins. 'How long?'

'Nine months.'

'Nine months and you are behaving like this?'

For a second I despise his smugness.

'We've been together for four years.'

He raises his eyebrows as if he's heard it all before. I'm furious with myself for trying to justify my actions.

'I've never looked at another man in all that time –'

'Until now.' He finishes my sentence with appalling accuracy. 'Can I get you another drink?'

I hesitate.

'Go on, a quick one,' he coaxes. He stands up and makes

towards the bar. I look at the gold and diamonds on my left hand and throw out a final, desperate clasp at respectability.

‘It’s OK our flirting like this, as I really *am* happily married and it can’t go anywhere. I will never, ever have an affair. I will *never, ever* have sex with anyone other than my husband.’

I spell it out plainly before he gets the wrong idea, before I get the wrong idea! But just as I settle into smug self-righteousness, I hear myself add, ‘But if I’m wrong and if ever I were to have an affair, it would be with you.’

‘Yesssssssss.’ He punches the air and practically skips to the bar.

*Noooooooooooooooooo.* I sit alone in the crowd, horrified with myself. As soon as his back is turned, I run to my room. I close the bedroom door behind me and lean heavily on it, shaking. I kick off my Gucci steel-heeled shoes, slowly undress and climb into bed.

‘Shit. That was close, too close.’ Angrily I punch the pillows and make a feather husband. Curling tight into the effigy I vow to spend the rest of the conference arduously avoiding him.