

ODE TO THE NEW AGE MAN

The train from Edinburgh pulls into the gaping wound of York Station and hisses to a stop. Paul glances at Michelle and with a brave smile picks up his laptop. She manages the barest suggestion of a smile as they move towards the train.

“At least you’ll get some sleep,” he tells her.

She shoots him a strange smile.

“It’s express,” he explains.

Her eyes shift slightly and he straightens his tie, a nervous habit he picked up when he first started work. He takes the lead, recalling an article that claimed women liked their men taking the lead.

Gone were the days of her gay best friend, welcome the man who just wanted to give her a good shagging. *Be strong, assertive even; but above all be compassionate, the perfect man.* The last word jolts in his brain, such a different word; he frowns as he tries to remember the exact wording.

They sit across the aisle from each other and he takes out his laptop and plugs it in. A bored seasonal worker looks across and Paul suddenly feels superior, the archetypal superman with his ultimate weapon of mass destruction. The report is on CD and he pops it in, waiting for the familiar icons to populate the screen.

The meeting had been tense. The three executives had thought that they could impress the toe cutters from London by bringing in their chief web designer, himself a Londoner. Little did they realise that Michelle was a web designer by trade, despite her high sounding job title of Regional Manager. She’d rolled their eyes when they said they’d merged their APIs with their own, and by the end of the meeting, the tone had been different. Michelle had grilled them mercilessly her eyes narrowing as she uttered the death knell.

“We’ll be in touch.”

Paul scans through the report, his mind still trying to grasp what an API is supposed to represent. She was hired for her web design knowledge, the regional manager title was tacked on afterwards; he was hired for his accounting skills. He goes through the figures and steals a glance at Michelle.

He can see the outline of her bra, earlier in the day when she had bent down to pick up a pen he had seen it was red beneath the black blouse. The scent of her perfume drifts past him. He forces himself to concentrate but all he can hear is her voice, APIs, shared components, violation of intellectual property. He focuses on the report and adds the figures. They look wrong, why didn’t he notice that at the meeting? He flips through the pages on the screen and mutters under his breath.

He glances at Michelle, something she hasn’t seen yet.

“You’ll never guess what I found,” he calls out.

She looks up from her book and squints through £200 spectacles, and Paul suddenly loses his nerve; she looks annoyed.

“Uh, I’ll tell you later.”

Her mouth twitches in the barest representation of a smile and she returns to her book. He looks past her; she has been with the company for three years, two and a half years longer than himself. Long brown hair hangs in wind-tossed locks to her shoulder blades, framing a tanned complexion; her expressive, brown eyes seem to drag him in and dominate him completely. It’s like she knows what he’s thinking and doesn’t give a toss. Scottish born and Edinburgh University educated, her accent is not too strong. He doesn’t know too much about her past, she doesn’t give much away; her skin is flawless and she haunts his waking moments the moment he steps into the office. She wriggles in her seat and glances momentarily across the aisle.

Paul feels the hardness between his legs and adjusts to hide the erection, mustn’t let her see that, must stay professional, like Michelle the Ice Queen.

He eventually manages to open a running report he’s supposed to have finished last week. He closes his eyes and tries to focus, but all he can see is Michelle crawling on all fours towards him; the bed is strewn with flowers, there is a hungry look in her eyes.

“Something wrong?”

He jerks out of his reverie and realises he is smiling, his erection now plainly obvious, he blushes,

feels sweat dripping down his sides and coughs.

“Just working on my report.”

“I wish I could feel so happy about writing reports,” she turns back to her book.

Paul breathes an inward sigh of relief, had she noticed?

He forces himself to concentrate on the report. She had been wearing a crisp, white polyester shirt, and three-quarter slacks the day he started. He had pulled his eyes from her plump breasts, wondering in a moment of panic if she had noticed his gaze.

She is wearing a black, crushed silk blouse, and grey skirt; two rows of buttons rakishly sewn down each side form a shallow V. The skirt is so tight he wonders how she managed to fasten the zipper this morning. Her legs are casually crossed and he pulls his gaze from the black fishnet stockings, imagining the suspenders she must be wearing.

He forces himself back to his report but the words have run together; he corrects a couple of misplaced apostrophes and maximises the window. APIs, .NET, terms that mean nothing, maybe he should do a course in web design.

He pulls himself out of his reverie just as the train pulls into Peterborough and opens up a desktop notepad.

MUST INQUIRE ABOUT ONLINE WEB DESIGN COURSE.

He closes the note and thinks, *now John would know.*

He opens the note again.

CALL JOHN?

If he knew about APIs and .NET then at least then they'd have something to talk about. He could talk about APIs all night long and what a night it would be; Indian curry washed down with Newcastle Brown Ale, maybe a glass of port to finish up, Michelle crawling on all fours across the flower-strewn bed; the blouse is unbuttoned to her waist and she has a strawberry in her mouth.

The bulge between his legs is threatening to burst through his pants.

“We will shortly be arriving Kings Cross, passengers are reminded to take all luggage off the train with them, please take care when alighting onto the platform.”

The screensaver has kicked in and he touches the pad, the note jumps out at him.

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He goes through the motions, a message flashes across the screen. The May report has been modified does he want to save it? He almost clicks ‘No’ before realising his mistake, he saves the note as well and shuts down.

With the laptop packed away, he mentally prepares himself for the journey home. It's nearly five, the tube will be packed. Home to St John's Wood, maybe a couple of pints at his local. He will grab an Indian Curry and sit in his flat opposite Lord's Tavern and watch the people coming and going. It's all he seems to do these days.

If you can't get laid in London, you can't get laid someone had once told him.

Michelle is rising and he meets her in the aisle, they serve Thai food at Lord's; she lives a couple of stops from him, he had heard her giving out her address and had written it down in neat script in his Filofax.

She smiles at him.

Be strong, assertive but compassionate.

His legs turn to jelly.

“Fancy a pint somewhere?”

She smirks and he can almost taste her contempt, his suit is ruffled and the cologne he sprayed on this morning has worn off. She looks past him for a moment as if mentally dismissing his clumsy attempt at seduction.

“Sure, why not,” she replies casually, “where do you want to go?”

She is crawling across the flowers, a strawberry in her mouth, where could he take her?

Her phone rings just as they step onto the platform.

“Hiya sweetie,” she speaks a moment later, “you're where? Here? Why didn't you warn me,” she chuckles and then a moment later looks up.

“You naughty boy,” she giggles, “you didn’t tell me that.”

The flowers are dead, their prickly leaves irritate him.

“Aye, I ken, I ken, okay I’ll see you at the flat, cheerio.”

She flips the phone shut.

“Sorry, an old friend,” she explains, “another time?”

“Sure,” he mumbles.

“See you bright and early,” she smiles, “keep working on that report and keep smiling.”

She flashes a smile exposing perfect teeth and then she’s gone, threading her way through the crowds, her buttocks twitching seductively while Paul stares after her.

Another night of quiet desperation looms.

Written by Alastair Rosie 2006 ©