

That New Girl

by Brian Kirk

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I WAS OUT ON THE BALCONY having a smoke with Daniel when the new girl was brought in to Alastair's office. I had my back to the rail and was looking directly at Dan; he was telling me about some friend of his who'd mistakenly thought he'd developed a foolproof way of beating the house at blackjack. I wasn't really listening. I could see the new girl clearly as Sara led her through the open plan to the Chief Executive's office. The building is mostly glass and steel and you can see where everyone is at any given moment. For some reason I didn't point her out to Dan, even though a new girl always warranted attention from the guys. Perhaps I've matured since getting married. Or I like to think I have.

Later that afternoon Sara brought her around the floor making introductions. It's always pointless; the odds are against us in these cases. We all remember her name, but our names melt into the ether and she's compelled to admit over the ensuing days that she didn't manage to catch them. But there's always one guy she remembers straight away, and all across the floor looks are exchanged, eyebrows are raised. Everyone can see what's happening here.

By the way, it's never me. It's Dan, of course. It generally is. He has that geeky hipster look that girls seem to go for these days. His hair is cut short at the back and sides, but his dark fringe falls across one side of his bearded face when he looks down. Within a day or two it's like she's been with the company for years. She's been out to lunch with Sara and the girls from Legal and she's calling Daniel Dan like she's known him forever. She seems to spend an awful lot of time standing by his workstation on her way to and from the break out area, a cup of coffee in one hand, the other resting lightly on a file balanced on the side of his desk. Dan winks at me when I pass behind her on my way to the photocopier. I pull a face, but I'm not sure what it's supposed to signify.

She doesn't say much to me. I'm not complaining or anything. I'm a couple of years older than Dan and I'm married so I must seem ancient to a girl like her who's fresh out of college. I remember before me and Sara got married some of the older guys on the floor saying how getting hitched had suddenly made them more attractive to women. My experience has been otherwise. That's not to say I'm looking to pick up girls these days. I'm not; I'm very happy with the life I have with Sara. I shouldn't be surprised that they'd lie about

something like this because they lie about most things I find: golf handicaps, the quality of hotels they stay in, but particularly they lie about girls. Anyway, when I was single I was never that popular with the girls, so I can't see how my being suddenly unavailable would affect anything either way. Sure, I enjoy a night out and used to do my best with the chat up lines when I had a few drinks inside me, but I was never a player; not the way Dan is. All the clichés you hear about women liking a bastard appear to be true in his case. For some reason this bothers me; probably because I consider myself a nice guy. Over the years that he's been with the company Dan's dated most of his female co-workers. Some have been one-night stands, some longer, but never for more than a month or two. I don't mean to judge him or anything, but somehow it doesn't seem right.

It's always the new girls he goes for. Fresh meat, he calls them. We laugh, Sara and I, when we talk about this. Sometimes I wonder if I behaved the way Dan does would people indulge me the way they indulge him. But that could never happen. There's something about him that makes people – both women and men – give him the benefit of the doubt; something that I don't possess.

On Friday we went out for drinks after work. We do this once a month or so; Alastair, the Chief Executive, encourages it from a team building point of view, putting cash behind the bar for food and drinks. We usually have pizza and beer, and then maybe more drinks or, if we're really up for it, we might go to a club after that. It always starts very sedately, people chatting and gossiping happily while they sip bottled beer and tear pizza slices out of boxes. Later we fall into groups – gender based usually – where the men discuss football and golf for a while before the subject inevitably turns to women. I don't mind; I'm not a prude. Sara is with the girls and I know they do something similar in their group, the conversation inevitably becoming less guarded as the wine flows.

As each hour passes we lose more and more from our groups until only the hard core are left and the sexes come together then to drink cocktails or shots. At this stage there are very few boundaries left. Everything that needs to be said can be said. Chances are no one will remember the next day anyhow. It's just kicks, drinks and jokes, and maybe some karaoke if it really gets out of hand and we end up in that kind of place. Usually Sara and I give in by mutual choice before it descends too far and jump in a taxi. At home we make coffee and get

ready for bed without saying much. The next morning our heads hurt but we put on a brave face. We sleep late and have brunch in front of the TV, the weekend supplements shared between us on the sofa.

I could have kept my mouth shut and let Saturday just happen as usual; the trip to the supermarket, the walk in the park later, but I found it impossible.

‘So, what was she like?’ I asked, as we prepared dinner later that evening.

‘What was who like?’

‘That new girl.’ I stole a glance at Sara, but she was distracted, looking for something in a high cupboard. She didn’t reply.

‘Well?’ I persisted.

‘Have you seen the soy sauce?’ She sounded annoyed.

I reached in behind her and put my hand on the bottle immediately.

‘Well, what’s she like then?’ I asked again.

She ignored me as she tipped soy sauce into a clean bowl. I turned and stood like a fool with my hands by my sides looking out the front

window where I could see the tops of some trees across the street. Our apartment is on the third floor and, even though we've been here for over a year, I'm still not used to living above ground level.

Eventually Sara finished juicing a lime and mixing it into the sauce. She turned to me then.

'Now, what's so urgent?'

'Nothing,' I said. 'I was just wondering what you thought of that new girl.'

'Not you as well!'

'What do mean, me as well?'

'Oh, you're all the same. Every time a new girl arrives you boys all go around with your tongues hanging out.'

'That's not fair!' I was hurt and wanted Sara to know it.

'Ah, come on, Mike. I'm just having some fun with you. But you know it's true. The way you guys go on.'

'Not me, though.'

'No, not you, pet.'

She leaned over and kissed me on the lips lightly. 'You're all

mine, and you wouldn't dare look at any new girl!

She laughed as she opened the fridge and took out a bowl of beef strips covered in cellophane.

I went to the bedroom and sat on the bed and read for a while. Or pretended to, at any rate.

When I came back to the kitchen the air was filled with steam and smoke and the sharp smells of spice and stir-fry. Sara looked up at me and smiled.

'Were you leaving me to do all the work? Come on, set the table for us now. It won't be long.'

I took two wine glasses off the shelf and some cutlery from the drawer, placed the salt and pepper pots carefully in the middle of our small round dining table. I rummaged in the drawer again and found the corkscrew and went at a bottle of red wine with it until it gave in with a satisfying pop. I poured a little into a glass and took a sip. The inside of my mouth felt like sandpaper, so I fetched two tall glasses from the high cupboard and filled them with cold water from the filter jug in the fridge.

'But seriously,' I said, 'what do you think of her?'

‘She’s alright.’ Sara drained the noodles as she spoke. ‘She’s very keen on Dan.’

‘I got that,’ I said. ‘Why is that?’

Sara laughed.

‘Why are you so surprised? And why do you care? It’s always the same with a new girl.’

Sara brought the plates over and I poured out two glasses of wine.

‘He’s charming, and good-looking too – it’s no wonder the new girls are flattered by his attention,’ she went on.

‘Was it the same with you?’ I asked. And immediately I regretted it.

Sara’s face hardened. She didn’t speak again for the duration of dinner. I didn’t either.

For weeks Dan and the new girl were inseparable. When I’d step out on the balcony in the afternoon for a cigarette they’d exchange coy looks and nod to me, but each time they soon stubbed out their cigarettes and left me on my own.

When I complained to Sara she shook her head and laughed.

‘Are you jealous?’ she asked.

‘Don’t be stupid,’ I said.

‘I’m serious,’ she said. Then she turned to me, smiling. ‘I’m just not sure whether you’re jealous of him or of her.’

‘You’re hilarious,’ I said, forcing a smile, wishing I’d never said anything.

When I finally got a chance to talk to Dan he wasn’t his usual forthcoming self.

‘Yeah, she’s cool,’ was all he said.

‘But, yeah, like... how?’ I asked.

‘A gentleman never tells, Mike. You should understand that.’

‘If I ever meet a gentleman I’ll bear it in mind,’ I said.

He didn’t react.

‘So, you two are getting serious,’ I said. It wasn’t a question; it was me commenting on his life, something which he would normally intensely dislike. But he wouldn’t be drawn.

‘If I may quote another bearded, charismatic man from the dim

and distant past: “it is you who say it”.’

‘What the hell is that supposed to mean?’ I asked.

‘What it says. I always loved that line,’ he said. ‘When faced with the accusation, “Are you the King of the Jews?” he comes back with that!’ Dan says it again slowly, nodding: ‘it is you who say it.’

‘So now you’re comparing yourself to Jesus Christ?’

‘It is you who say it,’ he said for the third time, smiling at me.

By the following Friday it was all off. I couldn’t believe it. It became apparent at work that there was a problem; she didn’t pause when she passed Dan’s workstation and at smoke time he walked straight past her and signalled to me to join him on the balcony.

‘Trouble in paradise?’ I ventured when we’d both lit up.

He exhaled a long plume of smoke and sighed.

‘I don’t understand women,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘She knew it wasn’t serious.’

‘So, you finished with her?’ I asked.

‘It just came to a natural end really.’

‘But she didn’t see it that way.’ Again, it wasn’t a question. I stubbed out my cigarette and went back to my desk.

Later that afternoon the new girl asked for my help. She was having some trouble opening an application on her desktop and there was nobody else around. It was easy to sort out and I was happy to help. She brought me a coffee to say thanks and hung around my workstation for a while chatting. I could see Dan peering over his partition, probably wondering what she was doing with me. She was nice. Smart, but not overly confident; forward, but not so much to be thought pushy. She had blonde hair that fell to her shoulders, framing a clear-skinned face that held big blue eyes and a wide red lip-sticked mouth which broadened further when she smiled revealing even, white, American teeth.

‘So how are you settling in?’ I asked.

‘Pretty good. The work is interesting,’ she smiled.

‘And the people?’ I probed.

‘You know...’ I didn’t, so I asked again.

‘Everyone treating you well?’ I felt I had a right to ask, because of my age, my seniority on the floor.

She looked a little uncomfortable. She shook her head quickly.

‘No, no, everyone’s just great,’ she said.

I noted the mixed messages I was getting; her negative body language versus her positive words. I knew the score. I smiled.

‘If you ever need anything you know where I am,’ I said. And I meant it.

‘I wouldn’t ask, only I know you’re a friend,’ she said.

We were having a smoke out on the balcony, as we had done most days during the week. Dan was away for a few days and was not due back in work until the following Monday. She still talked about him from time to time – much to my annoyance – but not as much as before, and anyway I was happy enough just to be in her company.

‘It’s no problem,’ I said.

‘Are you sure?’

I could see Sara passing by my workstation on her way to Alastair’s office. I noticed how she didn’t look up to see if I was out

on the balcony as she passed.

‘Honestly, it’s not a problem.’

‘But I feel bad for asking. Maybe Sara has plans for you on Saturday morning,’ she said.

Why would she mention Sara? This was worse than her going on about Dan all the time.

‘Listen,’ I said, ‘it’s just to move a few boxes and stuff on a Saturday morning. It won’t take more than an hour or so, so don’t worry. Okay?’

She stood up and stubbed out the remains of her cigarette. I stood up too. I felt like we were in a glass case – which we were in a way. Her hand brushed my arm; it was simply a gesture of thanks, signifying our new closeness I thought. But I was dismayed that I found myself anxiously scanning the floor for Sara.

Later I scolded myself for feeling guilty. We were just friends sharing a smoke break at work. But that night at home Sara seemed much quieter than usual.

On Friday night we went out again, but this time things were different. The usual staff groupings did not assemble on gender lines;

instead the sexes chatted together in three or four mixed groups. I wasn't sure how this had happened. I wondered was it somehow because Dan wasn't there, but no one else seemed to notice or care. People moved between groups freely, chatting and sharing jokes, and I remember thinking that Alastair would be pleased; that the atmosphere was truly one of a team working in harmony. I looked around and saw Sara deep in conversation with two guys from marketing who wouldn't normally have been close to her, and as I did I noticed the new girl beside me, smiling, looking straight into my eyes. We were in a large group, but as we talked we moved away a little and stood by the bar together.

'I hope you'll be okay to drive tomorrow,' she said.

I held up my beer bottle. 'I'll be fine once I stay on this stuff,' I said. 'It's the shots that do the damage.'

She looked younger than ever, her face flushed from the wine she was drinking or the heat of the packed pub. She seemed vulnerable. I wanted to put my hand on her bare forearm – not in a creepy way – but to reassure her that I was looking out for her, that I understood the insecurity of her position in the company and I was offering support. But I resisted the temptation.

We didn't talk much but the extended silences we shared as we stood at the bar together were not uncomfortable. Eventually some of the others pushed in beside us to order more drinks at the bar and our moment together was over.

People left one by one until there were maybe four or five of us left. Someone ordered tequila and then Sara was at my side. She smiled at me.

'You okay?' she asked, and she took my hand and squeezed it.

I nodded.

'Fine,' I said.

'I think it's time we left,' she said.

I looked across at the new girl as she took a shot glass from the counter and knocked it back. Her eyes glazed momentarily and then re-focussed. She was looking straight at me.

'Have a shot, Mike,' she said, reaching over and taking my arm. For a moment I was held between the grips of two women and I didn't resist either one.

'We're going now,' Sara announced to the small group that remained. The new girl let go her grip, which was not very firm to

begin with, and we found our coats and went out on the street. I felt light headed in the cold air.

The next morning my head ached when the alarm sounded.

‘Jesus, Mike, why did you set an alarm? It’s Saturday for Christ sake!’ Sara rolled over in the bed and pulled the duvet over her head.

I pulled back the covers and stood up unsteadily before making my way to the bathroom. I tried to be as quiet as possible, but when I sneaked back into the room to get my clothes I was surprised to find Sara sitting up in bed wide awake.

‘Where the hell are you going at this hour?’ she asked.

‘I’m just running an errand,’ I said. ‘You go back to sleep. I’ll be back before you get up.’

I found a pair of jeans and an old sweat shirt and pulled on some trainers.

‘An errand,’ she said. It wasn’t a question, so I didn’t reply.

‘I’ll be back in no time at all,’ I said.

‘It’s her, isn’t it?’ she said then.

‘Sorry?’

‘You should be! You were all over her last night. It was embarrassing.’

‘I’m just doing her a favour. She has some boxes to move to her new flat, but she has no one to help her. Dan was supposed to do it weeks ago, but he never got around to it.’

‘I saw the way you were looking at her last night. Don’t think I didn’t notice you both going off on your own during the night to have some time together. Do you have any respect for me at all?’

‘I don’t know what you mean. I hardly know the girl. I just offered to help her out. If it’s a problem, I’ll phone and say I can’t do it.’

‘Okay, you do that!’

‘What?’ I didn’t expect that.

‘Phone and say you can’t do it. Go on. Tell her anything! Tell her your jealous wife doesn’t want you to go! But just do it.’

I went into the kitchen and shut the door behind me before dialling her number. She answered on the first ring. She sounded bright, as if she’d been up for hours.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, ‘I can’t do it today. Yeah, I know it’s short notice, but the car won’t start – I think it might be the battery.’

‘That’s okay, Mike,’ she said. ‘Don’t worry. I feel bad for asking you anyway. I’ll figure something out.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said again foolishly.

‘Hey, it’s no big deal. Last night was fun though, wasn’t it? You guys should have stayed. We went to that karaoke place and it was the best!’

I rang off, not sure what to do now, resenting the way Sara had forced my hand when I was only trying to do a girl an innocent favour. I boiled the kettle and waited for her to get up. After an hour she arrived in her dressing gown. She looked exhausted.

‘I made coffee,’ I said.

‘Are you still here?’ There was acid in her tone.

‘Looks like it,’ I said.

She poured herself a mug of coffee and put some bread in the toaster.

‘I can’t believe you let her wrap you around her finger like that! You’re no better than the rest of them in there – with their talk about girls! New girls! Fresh meat!’

‘I’m not like them!’ I said.

‘You’re all the bloody same! And her, she knows what she’s doing alright!’

‘She doesn’t deserve this. I was only trying to help her out.’ I tried to be as calm as possible.

The toast popped.

‘Oh yeah,’ Sara laughed softly without much humour, ‘and if she let you kiss her, what then?’

‘Jesus Christ, Sara!’

‘Struck a nerve, have I? You’ve thought about it though, haven’t you?’

‘I’m not listening to this. I’m going out,’ I said. I got up to leave.

‘Going to see what’s-her-name?’ she asked.

‘Her name is Megan,’ I said. ‘You know her name, you could at least call her by it.’

I walked straight out then and I think Sara was surprised because she followed me out to the front door.

‘Hold on, hold on,’ she said. ‘We both need to take a moment

here. Don't go running off. I know nothing's really happened here.

We just need to let ourselves cool off.'

I shrugged her off and stepped outside, pulling the door behind me with a bang.

The car started first time and I remember being surprised even though I knew that the flat battery story was just a lie that I'd made up. I drove around aimlessly for a while, but I think I knew I was always going to go to Megan's. I wanted to help her as I'd promised and show her and Sara that a guy can offer to help a girl out like that from time to time as a friend without any strings attached.

When I turned on to her street I saw Dan's car immediately. I kept driving, even when I saw them standing on the street. I kept driving even as they tried to flag me down, and I kept on driving until I took the slip road for the motorway. I drove for hours even though I knew that all roads would lead home eventually. I wasn't upset exactly. I was confused. I wasn't sure about anything anymore; about Megan, Dan or Sara, but most of all I wasn't sure about myself.



Brian Kirk is a poet and short story writer from Dublin. He was shortlisted twice for Hennessy Awards for fiction. His first poetry collection "After The Fall" was published by Salmon Poetry in November 2017. Recent stories have appeared in The Lonely Crowd Issue 7 and online at Fictive Dream and Cold Coffee Stand. His story "Festival" was long-listed for the Galley Beggar Press Short Story Prize 2017/8. www.briankirkwriter.com.