

Bloomsbury

Lyn propped herself up on an elbow and gazed at her lover. 'It's fantastic when we're together.'

Mark placed a gentle hand on the nape of her neck as they exchanged a long loving look. 'That's because we're made for each other, babe.'

Lyn smiled. 'I'll drink to that.'

'We're out of booze, but there's this,' he grinned, as he reached for his shirt and pulled a joint and some matches from a pocket. He lit it and took a long drag, holding it in while gesturing to Lyn to take the spliff.

She shook her head.

'Suit yourself,' he grunted, exhaling a cloud of bluish smoke.

'You have tea?' she asked.

'Boring,' laughed Mark, drawing slowly on the joint. He waved in the direction of the kitchen. After a moment he said, 'Check above the sink.'

He lay back on the bed and Lyn stole a glance at him on her way to the kitchen. She loved that slender naked body, the chiselled chin, the thick hair.

Making a cup of tea with one of the last teabags, Lyn returned to the bedroom and sipped the hot brew before placing it on the side table.

She slid onto the bed and moulded her body to his. His scent was intoxicating. She ran her hand up the inside of Mark's thigh, feeling her pulse quicken. She looked at him and felt herself drowning in his deep brown eyes.

'What time's your tute?' he asked.

Lyn glanced at her watch. 'Shit ... I have to run.' She kissed his cheek and scrambled into her jeans, T-shirt and sneakers. Casting a

glance in the mirror on her way out the door, she checked her own tousled locks, inspected her blue eyes for mascara smudges and noted the freckles from a long sunny summer. *No time to fix my hair or face properly*, she thought. *Let tongues wag.*

‘What’s the topic?’ Mark asked as he stretched with a groan on the bed.’

‘Bloomsbury,’ Lyn replied, wiping a finger along the undersides of each eye.

‘Oh jeez,’ he grunted. ‘A bloody pack of egghead wankers. ‘Privileged bohemians who led elitist lifestyles and dabbled in the arts.’

Lyn arched her eyebrows. ‘I wouldn’t exactly call Virginia Woolf a dabbler. And Keynes won a Nobel Prize for Economics. Besides, what do you know about them?’

‘Plenty,’ he snorted. ‘I studied it in Art History at uni a few years ago.’

‘Gotta go,’ said Lyn, ending the conversation by closing the door firmly behind her.

That evening when she returned, he was still there, waiting. Their disagreement over Bloomsbury seemed like ancient history as she slipped into bed beside him. They began to kiss and stroke each other. Time slowed as they caressed, tasted and savoured each other. Then, as smooth as coconut oil, she slid on top of him and they made gentle rhythmic love.

‘I love you,’ he whispered.

Lyn continued to ride him, looking down at his strong sculpted face.

Then, as they both climaxed, she collapsed back onto the bed with a sigh of sated passion.

After a few minutes of silent bliss Mark turned toward her.

‘How does Uber Eats sound?’

‘Perfect. *Aloo matar* from our Indian place.’

Mark nodded and typed away on his iPhone.

It wasn’t long before there was a knock on the door. Mark pulled on his torn tracksuit pants and disappeared into the hall. He returned carrying a bulging plastic bag and jumped back into bed.

‘Here’s your vegies and rice,’ Mark said, holding out two plastic food containers as he sat cross-legged on the bed.

‘What did you get?’ Lyn asked as she spooned rice onto her plate.

‘Chicken Biryani. It’s a rice dish, so you can have all of that,’ he said, nodding towards the half-empty rice container.

Lyn swept pieces of potato, tomato and green peas onto her pile of rice and began to eat.

‘Mmm,’ she groaned, ‘so good.’

‘Sounds like you enjoy it more than sex,’ grinned Mark.

‘Almost,’ Lyn murmured as she savoured the spicy food. Mark slapped her knee and they grinned at each other.

The next few minutes passed in silence as they focused on eating. Finally, they placed their empty containers on the floor and settled back on the bed with sighs of satisfaction.

‘Do you know how they started?’ asked Mark out of nowhere.

‘Who?’

‘The Bloomsbury Set.’

‘Do you really want to go into that again?’ she groaned.

‘It’s important that you understand the whole story,’ Mark replied.

‘In 1905, an artist named Vanessa Bell got together with her sister Virginia and some of their friends from King’s Ladies’ Department, where they had studied. They wanted to share ideas and support each other’s creative work.’

Lyn sighed. 'Mansplaining again? We covered this in class today. They would meet at her home in Bloomsbury in West London. Hence the name. They also stayed at a farm in Sussex where Bell lived with Duncan Grant, the painter.'

'Correct,' said Mark. 'They called themselves the Friday Club. Do you know why they met in private locations?'

Lyn nodded and smiled. 'Because they could engage in adultery without attracting public criticism. But that makes me wonder.'

'Wonder what?' asked Mark, his brows arching.

'Why you despise them. After all, you're a bit of a libertine yourself.'

'Hardly,' said Mark, but he looked pleased.

'Well, bohemian then. Over the six months we've been together you've couch surfed with at least four or five friends. I mean, I love you and love making love with you – but your drug habits ... well ...'

Mark pouted. 'Don't give me grief, babe. I made a mistake experimenting with smack and got hooked before I knew what was happening. You know I'm trying to kick it.'

'I know the story,' snapped Lyn. 'I was with you, remember? I listened to your groans and sobs as you tried to go cold turkey. I wiped the tears from your face and the sweat from your brow. And I know you were doing it for me – but that wasn't enough, was it? At the end of the day you're going to have to quit heroin for yourself.'

'I ...' he fell into sullen silence.

'Babe, I love you,' she said, 'but it will be the death of you. You're either going to end up in the morgue from an overdose, or in prison for dealing.'

'I know, I know,' Mark sighed. 'But let's get back to the Bloomsbury wankers.'

Lyn took his hand in hers and looked into his eyes. 'You're going to have to fix this.'

'Not now, babe,' he moaned. 'Please?'

She let out a sigh and nodded. 'So tell me why you despise them?'

'Because they were poseurs, self-indulgent poseurs,' Mark replied, as he rolled another joint. 'They made a big show of rejecting the social conventions of the English upper-class establishment, while continuing to enjoy the wealth their privileged background gave them. They were just horny hypocrites.'

'Horny hypocrites,' laughed Lyn. 'I like it. But to be fair, love, can't you see the similarities? Son of a prominent heart surgeon drops out of university and fucks his way through half the female population of Melbourne.'

'Until I met you,' said Mark, one side of his mouth turned up in a cheeky grin.'

He sniffled, wiping his runny nose with the back of his hand. Then she noticed he was sweating profusely and the pupils of those irresistible brown eyes were unusually small. Lyn felt awash in a sudden wave of fury.

'You're high right now, aren't you?' she demanded, her voice rising an octave in rage. 'You shot up when I was away at class!'

'Ouch,' Mark said. 'I thought we were talking about Virginia Woolf and her fellow Bloomsbury wankers. Although, in a way I'm a bit jealous.'

'What?' barked Lyn, her face frozen in a grimace of indignant incredulity.

'C'mon, babe, you have to admit there's something fascinating about all their torrid love affairs, both gay and straight. Lytton Strachey

and his cousin Duncan Grant. Grant with Vanessa Bell, Adrian Stephen, John Maynard Keynes. You know how American poet Dorothy Parker described them?’

Lyn nodded. ‘Yes, we covered that in class. Our professor said something about them living in squares, painting in circles and loving in triangles. But I don’t get it.’

‘What don’t you get?’ asked Mark.

‘One minute you say you despise them, and the next you say you envy them.’

‘What can I say?’ Mark shrugged and gave Lyn his most charming smile. ‘We artists are a complicated lot.’

‘We’re an artist now, are we?’ Lyn said, with a hard edge of annoyance in her tone.

‘Of the aspiring struggling variety. But yes.’

‘Hmpf,’ she grunted.

‘You know Virginia Woolf described life with her husband Leonard as rather ascetic,’ said Mark.

‘A likely story. I think they were more libertine than puritan, but there’s no denying their achievements,’ Lyn said.

‘Well yes,’ Mark conceded, ‘they were on the cutting edge of artistic innovation prior to World War I, but they faded later. A new generation of artists emerged during the 1930s. People like Paul Nash, Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore became the new avant-garde.’

‘Still, the Bloomsbury Set certainly left their mark,’ Lyn argued. ‘Keynes was a Nobel Prize winner. Duncan Grant was a well-respected painter who was admired by Picasso. And, of course, the iconic Virginia Woolf ...’

Mark simply shrugged.

‘C’mon,’ Lyn protested. ‘Grant, Roger Fry and Vanessa Bell were the first British artists to produce abstract paintings. Their work was a watershed in the history of English art. Fry’s *Vision and Design* and Clive Bell’s *Art* were instrumental in helping shape the development of modernism.’

‘Yes, yes, I know,’ sighed Mark. ‘And I’ll concede that the exhibitions they organised before World War I introduced a whole generation of British artists to impressionism and post-impressionism.’

‘So, we’re agreed,’ grinned Lyn. ‘It can be argued that Bloomsbury facilitated the emergence of English abstract art, and the literary contributions of ...’

Lyn stopped, mid-sentence, as she saw Mark squint, his mouth contorting in a grimace. Again, he sniffled, wiping his nose with the back of his hand, a hand she saw begin to twitch. Beads of sweat broke out across his brow.

‘Fuck,’ she muttered. She hated the way the drugs made him a stranger. ‘Are you okay?’ she asked.

‘Fine,’ grunted Mark, shaking his head as if in denial. ‘What were we talking about? Ah ... Bloomsbury, that’s right. The whole thing began to disintegrate during the 30s. Strachey died of cancer in ’32, Dora Carrington and Virginia Woolf killed themselves. Julian Bell was killed fighting on the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War ...’

‘So, I guess they weren’t such dilettantes, after all,’ quipped Lyn.

Mark snorted and flung back the sheets, leaping from the bed and striding to the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

The sighs and groans from within told her all she needed to know.

But Lyn remained silent when he reappeared with a euphoric smile. He looked at her and winked. 'That's better.'

'I can't do this anymore,' she whispered as she rose to her feet.

'What's wrong, babe?' he slurred, sinking into a sea of opiate sweetness.

Her anger was overtaken by a sudden wave of empathy. She recalled how he'd sat on the bed with his back to the wall, head on his knees recounting how he'd discovered his adoption at the age of ten.

'Don't worry,' his mother had told him. Stealing a sentiment from Harpo Marks, who had four adopted children, she had said, 'Being adopted means that you're doubly loved because we chose you.'

However, Lyn knew he'd never really gotten over it. His abandonment by his birth mother was corroding his soul. Over the months of their relationship, she had come to understand that his charm and bravado were a thin veneer covering a festering psychological pustule of low self-esteem.

'Back to Bloomsbury,' Mark said in a dreamy tone that Lyn recognised for what it was. 'Their most important achievement was the cultivation of younger artists.'

'Virginia Woolf?' Lyn queried.

Mark turned his head and gazed at her, his eyelids drooping. 'What about her?'

'She filled the pockets of her overcoat with stones and walked into the River Ouse,' Lyn replied. 'They found her walking stick by the riverbank, but it was three weeks before they found her body.'

'I don't understand,' he mumbled.

‘Of course you don’t,’ Lyn sighed. ‘Right now I feel as though I’m standing on the bank of a river myself.’

She looked down at him splayed across the bed. The beautiful body that for so long had ignited her passion and lust now generated pity and a sense of disgust.

‘Mark, you’ve crossed the bridge that connects us and burned it behind you. I’m done with this mess you call life. Just like you need to wean yourself off smack, I need to wean myself off you. Starting now.’

Lyn gathered her things and strode to the door, pausing to cast a backwards glance at him.

‘I hope you get the help you need, but I can’t be a part of your life anymore. I’m not going to let you drag me down the drain with you.’

She turned, opened the door and firmly shut it behind her. As she walked out into the street, Lyn felt a mixture of sadness and relief. She was surprised that her sadness wasn’t so much over the demise of her relationship with Mark, but rather the time she’d wasted on what she now recognised as a lost cause.

But in a way, Mark was right ... about the Bloomsbury Set. They were a bunch of Cambridge-educated upper-class toffs who could afford – literally – to spurn the traditional values of society that conferred upon them their privilege. Strange that Mark couldn’t recognise the same privilege in himself, or the same impulse to rebel against the conventions and expectations of his upbringing and class.

As she pushed her card into the ticket machine to get through to the platform, Lyn recalled a saying her grandmother used to trot out whenever she thought Lyn was being too critical: ‘Your own besetting sin you notice more in others.’ Perhaps that’s why Mark was so critical of the Bloomsbury Set, because deep down he recognised the similarities

between his own privilege and theirs. She hoped that he could conquer his demons and, like those extraordinary women and men, contribute something of remarkable to the world.

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