

## PERILS OF INFATUATION

The clock ticks away monotonously. I have not had a wink of sleep all night - just lain on my bed, staring at a tiny crack in the ceiling, which was barely visible by the gleam of the moonlight. Twenty past eight the clock says. It is no longer dark outside, yet the gloominess of night remains. The rain is thudding relentlessly on my window. I gather strength to get out of bed and walk up to it.

Lifting the curtain I can see spatters of rain crawling down the window-pane and lodging on the frame beneath. The view is of the entrance to our halls. Not a soul in sight. It is eerily quiet, only the distant sound of a dog barking can be heard. None of the students are awake – well, they wouldn't be after participating in the obvious exertions of Saturday night. Unless of course you're the nerdy type, that gets up early just to get a head start on an assignment that is not due until January, three months down the line! I've been in this category before, 'Anita, you're such a geek!' Steven would say, when I preferred to stay ahead of my work and meet deadlines, so I could relax during my time with him. I shudder. It is so cold - icy cold.

I remember when I first met Steven, a couple of months ago. It was the first time I'd been clubbing. My friends were adept at the party lifestyle, whereas I was still a virgin. But, that night it was my best friend's birthday, so I was persuaded into it. We got ready in Rachael's bedroom, which was on the floor above mine. It made sense that all of us used the birthday girl's room, so we could set off together. I wore a black dress with gold accessories. My friends did my make-up, as if I was a doll that they were dressing up for her big night out. They said I looked unbelievable. I thought I looked theatrical.

'Anita you look amazing!' Porscha told me.

'Somebody's gonna be on the pull tonight', teased Kareena.

'Whatever Kareena, I ain't like that!'

'Oh my days Anita! You have to be *like that!*' exclaimed Kareena.

Rachael joined in, 'Yeh Neet, tonight you'll have to dance with a guy, any guy, it doesn't matter, get at least two numbers and...'

'But guys, I won't know what to do.' I was in disbelief. Did I possess the skills to 'pull' boys? Although I was twenty, I'd only had one boyfriend, and that wasn't serious. Until then I'd been a bit of a recluse.

‘And you have to kiss a guy on the lips!’ Kareena had already started drinking so was more animated than usual.

‘Or... she could just go out and do whatever makes her feel comfortable’, interjected Porscha sarcastically.

‘Alright Porscha! Chill! Not like we’re asking her to sleep with anyone! Jeez! You always get serious!’

‘I’m just saying... stop putting pressure on her!’ Porscha smiled, Kareena looked the other way and sulked.

Now Rachael was getting tipsy, ‘A shag wouldn’t hurt though.’ Everyone laughed. Kareena started to do a pole dance. My feelings about the night ahead were a mixture of excitement and anxiety. I remember sensing that it would be life-changing. And it was.

The club, the people, the drink, the laughter, the drama, was all how I imagined it would be. I didn’t understand this culture and didn’t care that it wasn’t mine. I danced for a bit, had a few soft drinks, but was soon bored, so I sat down and watched instead of involving myself. It was then that I saw him. He was standing by the bar. Alone. Like me. The vile odour of fags and booze dispelled. The DJ’s ‘work of art’ fizzled out somewhere in the distance. Time stopped. The room started turning. I ignored my friends who were urging me to come back on the dance floor. I could only see him. So in awe was I that when he came up to me, what he said didn’t even register. ‘Hi there, you look bored. May I?’ He was referring to the empty seat next to me. I simply nodded. Silence. My face was on fire. I sat there in amazement, twisting a strand of long hair around my finger. Say something!

Eventually, I managed to speak. ‘So have you come here on your own?’ He explained that he was meeting friends later. However, he never caught up with those friends because he spent the rest of the night with me. I was flattered by how much attention he was giving me. That night we exchanged numbers.

When I went home I looked at myself in the mirror. The make-up exaggerated, my features looked darker than usual. The colours used complemented my olive skin. My face was glowing. My long, black hair was curled. The black dress accentuated my curves. Now I look at myself in the mirror and the person that is staring back at me is completely different. My eyes are black, swollen and empty, stains of dried make up have trickled down my face. My hair is much shorter. I look gaunt and unhealthy. Next to the mirror on my dressing table is a framed photograph of me and

Steven, he is pulling a face while I'm trying to look decent. Later, he said that he did it deliberately, to make it more natural. Steven always made excuses to justify his actions.

When we started dating, I was overjoyed. There was something different about Steven. It wasn't his good looks or his stunning smile. It wasn't his footballer body. It wasn't his charming personality. It wasn't his sophisticated intellect or his wonderful sense of humour. It wasn't the way he made all my friends laugh either. It was more a warmth that I hadn't felt from anyone in a long time.

Steven was so good to me, always showering me with affection, buying me flowers and gifts. He loved everything about me, the way I dressed, my laugh, even my flaws. I seemed to connect with him on so many different levels. Once, he drove seventy miles to pick me up from my parents' house, because I missed my train and would have been late for my lecture. That day I realised I had fallen in love with him and that no one else would love me as much as he does. What I admired about him most was the way he challenged me. I remember having a discussion about Smoky Bacon crisps. As a vegetarian, I said I didn't eat them because although they didn't have meat in them, they still promoted the idea. Steven chuckled, 'Anita, you eat veggie burgers!' I was defeated. I wasn't annoyed, but moved.

I had been seeing Steven for a couple of months when my roommate Porscha told me she disliked him. I couldn't understand why. 'You're changing Anita. You don't go to half of your lectures, you're constantly out with Steven, you hardly ever chill with us anymore. You've started to lose a lot of weight as well.' I was shocked that Porscha said this to me. She was saying I was changing because of Steven. 'Oh shut up! You're just jealous!' I told her. 'I'm just concerned babe', she looked hurt. When I told Steven what she had said he told me I shouldn't be friends with her anymore if she couldn't be happy for me. I distanced myself from Porscha and the rest of them even further.

It was true that I was losing weight but it wasn't an issue. Steven said I should lose a few pounds for the Christmas Ball. He didn't mean it in a derogatory way, he was just being honest, and I appreciated his honesty. I was looking forward to it, as it presented me with the opportunity to meet his friends and work colleagues for the first time. It was a big deal for him, so it was understandable that he wanted everything to be perfect. He wanted me to be perfect.

Steven came to my room before we were about to go. I'd made a lot of effort to look flawless.

'What the heck are you wearing?' His face twisted into a look of distaste, one that I had not witnessed before.

'Don't you like it?' I was confused.

'You look like a slag! You're wearing so much makeup I can't even see your face!' I was horrified! For a moment I thought he was joking. But he was serious.

'Steven! I spent over three hours getting ready and planned this for weeks!'

'Whatever Anita! Change and do it fast else we'll be late!'

'Change? What do you mean change?' I was flustered.

'Do you want to come, or not? You look like you're in drag!'

His word was final. I changed my clothes into something more appropriate for his liking. I removed all my make-up. He seemed much happier then.

'That's how I like it babes, natural beauty!' he held my face in his hands and smiled. I didn't understand. I looked and felt much less attractive. For the first time I felt like I was under his control. I remembered what Porscha said that day. She was right. I was changing. I was being moulded. Like a puppet.

The whole night was unpleasant. Once we got there Steven abandoned me. He didn't introduce me to anyone, barely acknowledging that I existed. It was a slap in the face. It dawned on me that night that I may lose him. The very thought of it gnawed away at my heart.

Things started getting from bad to worse. We'd go out to eat and Steven would smile at other girls. If I confronted him about it, he blew me off. Not only that, he would tell me what he liked about them, and how I lacked in comparison. I remember one incident in particular. We were in a restaurant waiting to be seated. A woman was sitting at a table nearby with her legs crossed. Steven commented on how long her legs were, then he looked at mine and didn't say a word. But the point was clear. My legs didn't measure up.

Once we got to our seats Steven went to the toilet. I stretched out my legs underneath the table. How could he say the length of my legs weren't good enough? How could I change them? I had tried to change everything about myself to please him, and now with something I couldn't change, insecurity overwhelmed me. I couldn't take it anymore.

Five long months had passed and I decided to end our relationship. Steven didn't take it well. His eyes burnt with rage. He clenched his fists. I feared he was going to hurt me. Looking straight ahead he revved the engine aggressively. That was my cue to get out of the car. He sped off without saying a word. I didn't know if he was genuinely upset about losing me or whether I purely bruised his ego. I still loved him. At that moment I needed my friends, but I had abandoned them months ago to please him. I felt isolated.

I didn't hear from Steven until yesterday. He invited me out for dinner, as friends, he said. 'It'll give me a chance to make up for the hurt I have caused.' He seemed sincere and more like the Steven I had fell in love with at the beginning. I agreed. However, our time at the restaurant was awful. He was loud and obnoxious to the waiters. An unimpressed man sat at the next table, shaking his head. 'You got a problem mate?' The man ignored Steven, 'I said ... you got a fucking problem?' It was so upsetting. I didn't understand what I ever saw in this detestable monster. When he offered to drive me back to the halls after dinner, I didn't object. I was more than happy for the evening to end.

We didn't speak a word to one another in the car. I looked out of the steamed window instead. The rain was getting heavier, spoiling my view. Pitch black. It took me some time to realise that I'd been in the car longer than the fifteen minutes it should have taken me to get home. I wiped the window and not recognising where I was, I turned round and asked Steven where we were. He didn't reply. Why was he ignoring me? Where was he taking me? My head throbbed. This was a completely different person. He looked malicious, as he floored the accelerator and headed into a deserted countryside. I screamed, 'What the heck is wrong with you? You PSYCHO!'

I remember very few things about what unfolded last night. The car windshield covered with fog, the struggle, the moment I felt too overpowered to resist any longer. In that instant I realized there was nothing I could do to stop what was happening. He was simply too strong. I closed my eyes and saw a young girl playing in the countryside. Encircled in green fields, she stroked the assorted flowers. Beauty surrounded her. A white rose being the most striking. She went to touch it, but it was forcefully plucked out by a trespasser. He picked the petals off one by one. Stolen. I blinked and the image disappeared, like dust in the wind. The pain was excruciating.

I was lying down in an awkward position underneath him, paralysed and suffocated, eager for my nightmare to cease.

Once he had ended his deed, Steven took me back to the halls. ‘I’ll erm... call you’ he said, and simply left. I felt shaken and crushed. Dirty and alone. Even with my clothes on, I felt naked. Those following hours, I stood in the shower fully clothed, sobbing uncontrollably, desperately wanting the water to wash away the evening’s events.

The alarm blares. It’s nine o’clock. I’ve started getting ready, carefully applying my make up. My inner thighs ache. The bruises on my wrists have been covered with an old jumper. I can smell his scent on my skin, like an enduring disease. I mount on more make-up. No more tears now, just the overwhelming feeling of vigilance. Fetching my folder I walk up to the door, sigh and leave the room.