

And So To Bed
BY
JAYE MORGAN

There was a time, when I was a kid, that I had control over that space in time existed between wakefulness and sleep. It was a rather wonderful state in which I was suspended, between floors, able to turn in either direction. I used to prolong the sensation: I was a great believer in the concept of delayed gratification before I'd ever heard the term. That pleasure, that ability to suspend myself, left me for good when I hit my second (also my final) year at college. Everything I did I chose to do, and I'm not trying to shrug off the responsibility. I stopped dreaming about being in flight the moment my conscious mind knew that I was doing the impossible. These days I wake when she wakes me, and there's no suspension any more.

There isn't much fun, either. Now when I wake it is to an utter awareness of the world into which I have been dropped. And when I sleep it is a dreamless world that I inhabit. I fall into a void and spend my hours there before her touch returns me to life. Sometimes I feel like a ship being steered through unknown seas.

I think that there used to be a smart part of me that got off on the idea of being controlled. There. Having made the admission on paper the fact looks less ridiculous. In fact, it looks a bit banal. I'd always had to be so very self-contained and confident. The ten years I'd spent in the children's home had left me half-formed and spiritually hollow. I had a dream of someone coming along who'd sweep me off my feet and lead me away into a new world. At nineteen that desire seemed like a pleasant dream. I'd never stopped to think about how I'd feel when I was twenty nine, or thirty nine. I'd always hoped that there was someone special out there.

Our first meeting took place at a party. In those days I spent a lot of time at parties, and I drank far too much. I was going through a stupidly self-destructive period; two weeks before I'd split up from the first woman I'd more or less fallen in love with, and she was almost the first person I'd bumped into at the party. So I drank too much, far too quickly, and soon after had to break out of the indoor world. I ended up leaning against a wall in the peaceful, rain-fresh, flower-scented garden, trying – with quite inordinate clumsiness – to light a cigarette.

“Here.” Someone had clearly become bored with my uncoordinated attempt to chase the tip of the cigarette with the cheap plastic lighter that I held, and, reaching out to take my wrist, held it in a steady grip until I'd achieved my intentions. Then she added, “You know that smoking is ridiculously bad for you.” A comment, not a question.

“Oh, yes. I know.”

“And hardly socially acceptable in these trammelled days.” This time I looked hard at her. I’d never heard anyone used the word trammelled. She added, “You wouldn’t be allowed to smoke if you were with me.”

If I was with her? My ears prickled with resentment. The alcohol in my system was enough to make my tongue sharper than usual. “Then it’s probably a good thing that I’m not.”

Her voice was mellow and almost resonant. Her words fell into the space between us like raindrops. Her eyes were bright and cold. “Apparently.”

Without another word she turned away and went back indoors. In a mood of rebellion I finished that first cigarette and lit another.

As I stubbed out the second stub on the damp ground there she was again, this time with a glass in either hand. “You smoke. I assumed,” she said, “that you drink as well.”

I said, “Yes. I drink. A little bundle of bad habits.” She gave me a faintly ironic smile and gave me one the glasses. “Uh, what is this?”

“Taste it and find out.” Oh, for God’s sake. I gave her back the ironic smile and since she’d just sipped from her glass, I decided to show my less delicate side, and drained the glass in a single swallow.

A beat, a moment when my trachea caught light and then tears flooded into my eyes. Because the liquid had been clear, and because there had been quite a lot of it, I’d assumed it to be something-with- tonic, but it hadn’t been. She’d given me a tumbler full of neat vodka. God alone knows what was in her glass. I did that trying-to-maintain-some-degree-of-dignity-while-being-unable-to-breathe. Eventually I managed to get some oxygen back into my lungs. Clearly amused, she smiled and looked away from me.

“Vodka,” I managed at last.

“It seems that you’re almost as inept at drinking as you are at smoking. Is there anything you’re good at doing?”

That stung. It didn’t strike me as in any way a flirtatious remark. I put down the glass on the wall and said, “Yes. Getting into unwanted conversations with people who point out to me my failings.” I went inside. I didn’t look back. Nor did I thank her for the drink.

Back inside the house I saw Lisa. She said, “You met Elise, huh? She used to have a thing with Casey.”

I blinked at her. “Casey?”

This surprised me. I knew Casey from the Restoration tutorials we shared each Tuesday, Lit Hall, room 7C. Very serious. Very studious. I didn’t even know that she was gay.

“I got the impression from her that Elise has this strange tendency of draining all the life out of her lovers. They were involved some months back and Casey’s only just beginning to look like herself again.”

I cast my mind back. Casey was a competent student, one of the serious few who’d always read the text we’d been set the week before; she always had something to say and she was obviously very smart. I couldn’t visualise her with the woman from the garden. Then I cast my memory further back and then did recall that Casey hadn’t been quite as voluble or as much in evidence in the weeks leading up to the Easter break. “I don’t applaud her choice of partners,” I said.

“Did Elise come on to you?”

Did she come on to me? I thought back. Then I said, “No, I think she was trying very hard to piss me off.”

“I don’t remember inviting her along tonight – Casey’s one of my friends, after all – but you know how it is: everyone brings somebody.”

“Except me.” That came out sounding horribly pathetic and I wished I’d kept my big mouth shut.

Lisa, politic to the last, said, “It can be really nice to have time to oneself.” I thought about how empty my room had seemed over the last couple of weeks. What was the line? ‘I could be bounded in a nutshell and still consider myself king of infinite space.’

“You and Katie. There’s no chance of the two of you getting back together?”

I smiled at her. Was there any way in which she could possibly have missed the front-room spectacle of Katie swapping spits with Ruth? Lisa was too polite by half. I said, “No. We just... weren’t right for one another.” And then I excused myself, collected a fresh drink and went back into the garden. I figured that the vampire should be long-gone.

It was rather a lovely night. Disregarding the risk of getting my jeans wet, I sat down on one of the garden chairs and looked back at the moon as it emerged from behind the clouds. A new moon.

“You should make a wish.” Very slowly I turned around. Casey’s ex was back.

“Oh, right. Good idea.” I said. And I wished very hard. Then I glanced at Elise and said, “Doesn’t seem to work.”

Elise pulled up another chair and sat down beside me. “You’re not here with anyone?” I blinked: I’m not blind to come-ons but even I hadn’t ever met with one so very matter-of-fact.

“Not this time.” I took a sip of my drink and realised that I was far too drunk.

She said, “You drink and smoke. What a very dangerous life you seem to lead.” Her tone was lightly mocking.

I didn’t need to respond. I don’t know why I did, except that she made me feel rather awkward and very young. “I like doing the things that are bad for me.”

She smiled at me then. “I saw you looking at your previous girlfriend. Was she bad for you? Do you miss her?”

I shall get a shirt printed: *please don’t ask me how my ex is because she’s inside showing off her latest*. I shall wear it only when I go to parties. I said, “We were never much of an item.” And it should be noted for the record that the ground didn’t crack open and swallow me up. Who did I think I was kidding?

“She looks pleasant enough.” She regarded me again as though searching for the missing word before adding, “but too thick-skinned. She looks much less... easily bruised than you.”

A chill ran down my spine. “I don’t bruise easily,” I said, quickly. She put out a hand and gripped my wrist for the second time that evening. Her thumbs caressed the blue lines there. Her touch was infinitely confident. Then she let me go.

“How unexpected. I must have misread your signals.” I was getting progressively pissed off. Another moment of holding me before she let me go. I touched the skin around which the ghost of her touch still lingered.

She said, “You really didn’t like that, did you?”

“No,” I said. “I really didn’t.”

“You don’t like being controlled.”

I said, “It’s funny: if you’re so good at reading me, why keep doing things you must know I won’t like?” I reached into a pocket for my cigarettes. Normally I got through no more than ten a month, but I smoke more when I’m stressed, and up ‘til that day I’d been stressed over losing Katie. Now my demons had taken on a new form. Neither form helped my nicotine addiction.

“Some people might find it erotic. Some people like to be controlled.”

I said, “I’m not one of them.”

That was when she really smiled, her eyes holding the same emotion. “Oh, I think you might be,” she said. I began to shake my head. She added, “What if there had been love in that grip? Affection? Compassion? What if someone cared so much for you that it was part of their remit to hurt you if necessary?” She was beginning to really bother me. She seemed to sense my mood and moved closer to me. Now I could see that the light eyes were too bright and too fixed on me. I shook my head again. No wonder Casey had had trouble with this one.

I said, “I don’t believe you can combine violence with caring. Not real caring, that is.” For the second time that night I walked away from her. This time I walked further into the safety of the dark garden.

I should have gone toward the house but the alcohol I’d drunk was making me feel sick and dizzy.

I leaned back against one of the mature cherry trees that held sway over the central third of the garden and closed my eyes. Bad idea. With my eyes closed the whole world began to shift around me, rolling over and over. Oh, God, how I hated the sensation. I could feel the alcohol pushing the motion of my heart harder and harder; it felt as if I had a fist inside my ribs that was beating against my heart. Dizziness and nausea were unpleasant enough, but there always came with the palpitations a disapproving chorus that reminded me that I was poisoning my body. At the back of my mind the little voice of conscience pointed out that I had been doing far too much of this stuff lately.

I felt hands on my shoulders. I forced open my eyes and looked at her. The moonlight caught her and turned her more beast than woman. Her smile hadn’t faded any. Then she let go of me and bent to pick up something: a glass of water, ice-cubes clinking. I held the glass, shut my eyes again because I couldn’t withstand her expression, and drank steadily. The nausea was going;

the dizziness was not letting up. Opening my eyes the world was beginning to slide.

What happened next I'm not looking to explain away. I could have done things differently had I just been willing to stagger through the party, past Katie and her new lover, looking as lost as I felt. But I didn't want to sacrifice before Katie the last of my pride. I accept that I was misguided, but my sins amounted to this: I let Elise put an arm around my shoulder – me, who never cared much for the touch of strangers – and shepherd me out of the party and outside, into the street, into her car. Then I let her drive me away.

The fullest extent of my shortfalls in a couple of sentences. Some crimes are eternal: you never stop paying for them.

“I guess you scored at the party.” I held the phone in unsteady fingers. I was clear-headed, clear-eyed and sober. “She’s quite a looker.” Lisa was like that: to the day of judgement she’d be nice enough to put a good interpretation on my disasters. Her former comments on Elise forgotten, Lisa was just trying to be nice. I felt as if I’d just been awarded some kind of consolation prize. I put a hand to the sore patch an inch or so below my right ear, where the skin is soft and yields easily to lips, or teeth. “Did you guys have fun?”

Did you guys have fun? She added, “I did try calling you earlier, but I guess you didn’t get back until late.” A little teasingly: “I guess you were pretty wasted after the party.”

“Uh, yes. Yes, I was.” Driven through the dark, quiet streets to the house where Elise lived. On the way there she told me why her relationship with Casey hadn’t lasted. There were sacrifices Casey hadn’t been willing to make. The little wound on my neck felt hot and cold at the same time. “Did everything go off alright?”

“Oh, yes. Katie stayed to help me clear up.” I heard the name and shut my eyes. “You know, I think that much of last night’s show was, well, was just that. It’s not been long since you two split up. I think that maybe last night she was trying to make you jealous.” Jealous? Oh, yes, I remember that sensation. I think I’ve not just mislaid my emotions: I’ve had them cut out and the wound cauterised. Lisa added, “What’s she like? Elise, I mean.”

What’s she like? Well, you were right to call her a vampire. I didn’t realise you meant it literally. Casey got off lightly: there wasn’t enough of a desire for harm and hurt in her head. But there was in mine, and I stepped from self-destruction into real destruction without more than a passing thought. And I’d

been naïve enough to claim that I didn't like being hurt. I could still feel the touch of her teeth and the sting of her hunger. It made me burn.

“She’s different,” I said at last.

© Jaye Morgan 2006