

NOT YOUR ORDINARY LOVE STORY (2893 words)

“It all began, as it usually does – once upon a time I met a girl and my life, as I knew it, had ended.”

My new friend laughed hoarsely, and pulled down his hat, revealing an almost non-existent hairline.

“I mean that’s what everyone says, don’t they? Once you meet the ONE, your world suddenly flips upside down. Like a rollercoaster. Well, at least in an amusement park, you can see that loop approaching, and you shut your eyes, and grip tight on the bar handle. In life, and in love for that matter, all these dips and turns come as a total surprise and not always a pleasant one.”

Baldy smirked and leaned towards the fire to light a joint.

“Her name was Jessica. In a sexy dress, with her pouty lips and butterfly lashes, she looked the picture-perfect dream girl, so I swiped right. My ripped torso, a labour of hours slaved in a gym, seemed to have attracted her too.

When we first met, there were fireworks, and a deep animal urge. After a few dates we discovered common interests – fancy restaurants, expensive cocktails, designer outfits – and, when a year later, Boris had instructed all the British people to stay at home, we decided to move in together.”

“And they lived happily ever after!” Baldy took a deep drag, held a puff in his mouth, and then released it through absent front teeth in a series of misshapen rings.

“I don’t want to disappoint you.” I took the roll from him.

Baldy’s lips twitched as I choked on my breath. He nodded for me to pass the joint to the girl sitting next to me and offered a bottle of strange yellowish liquid.

Not giving it much thought, I gulped it down. The heat spread from my chest into my stomach. My legs turned to cast iron, the complete opposite of my head, which was already buzzing somewhere high above.

A high-pitched ring filled my ears, and then the space around me began to tilt from one side to the other. The flames in the old barrel that provided heat, became liquid, clashing against the sides of the barrel with a shattering noise.

“You were saying,” Baldy prompted.

“Hm?” I looked up, ordering my eyes to ignore the other two heads that had suddenly sprouted out from his shoulders and concentrate only on the one in the middle.

“Happily ever after?”

“Fortunately. Not.” My tongue struggled inside my mouth. “And honestly, I don’t know where people get these ideas of perfect love. It’s all a pile of crap!”

“It all depends on the lady,” the girl next to me said, speaking for the first time. She walked over to Baldy, wrapped her hands around his shoulders and kissed him hard on the mouth of his middle head.

Lady my arse! I shivered, as another gulp rushed down my throat. But as I looked at them through the curtain of the fire, I thought that maybe she was right, maybe it did depend on the lady. After all they have complemented one another – he and his three heads and she with her bird face and... awkwardly wiggling lizard tail?

“Don’t get me wrong. Things were great to start with,” I said, mostly to myself, as Baldy and his bird-faced girlfriend continued to make out right in front of me. Not that it mattered. In the past few months, I had lost that essential part of being a human – being noticed. I became transparent, invisible to those, who despite the rising rate of infections and another looming lockdown, still walked the streets, eyes

down, as if mud under the feet was much more appealing than the sight of a grubby beggar.

Baldy stirred. Suddenly on his feet, he knocked the barrel over and beat out the flames. He uttered something inaudible, grabbed his birdie girlfriend's hand and vanished around the corner.

Struggling to keep up, I hurried after them. It's one thing when you run on a treadmill or out in a park in a proper gear, not in layers of shapeless clothes and mismatching shoes, clutching all that's remaining of your old life tight against your chest.

I caught up with them, and the three of us moulded between the poles of a scaffolding raised around one of the unfinished buildings.

Two flashlights scanned through the dark and slowly waltzed away.

"You'll get used to it," Baldy shook my shoulder encouragingly. "Come. Let's get out of here."

I staggered after them to the end of a new-built construction site sprawled over the territory of the old military barracks and climbed under the wire fence Baldy had lifted for me. When I came out on the other side, he shoved my backpack, the remainder of the joint and a bottle into my hands.

Before I realised it, the blue lights flashed in front of me. And if I was still lost to what was going on, a police siren had made me painfully sober.

The car that carried me to a police station, was warm and dry – a first in many days – and I zoned out as it moved smoothly through the night town.

"What have we here?" asked the officer in charge, as I sat quietly by the wall, staring at my inked fingers.

“Trespassing. Possession of class-B drug. Resisting arrest,” he read from the printout, as I kept my eyes fixed on a grey carpet.

He laid out on a table the contents of my backpack, scanned through the second page of the report, and carefully looked me over.

“Aldershot is a long way from Hampstead Heath, Maximilian. Have you tried to get help?”

Tried to get help my arse!

“What shall we do with you, hm?” he asked and turned to the officer at the reception. “Get him into the second cell. Let him sleep it off. He can do with a dry and warm place for the night.”

In the morning, I signed for my treasured possessions and got kicked out of the police station.

At McDonald’s, I exchanged one of my remaining nine pounds for a cheeseburger, carefully pocketed one-pence change and headed to the train station.

Slowly eating my burger, I considered my options.

I could’ve attempted to travel to my sister’s in St Lawrence. With a channel to cross, the trip would have been a challenge, but doable. Still, it wasn’t the challenge of a trip itself that was putting me off the thought, nor the prospect of her rough husband or her two sets of twins, but the realisation that the further away from London, I went, the less there’d be a chance of me ever reclaiming my old life. What remained of it.

Late in the evening, I scavenged Tesco’s for discounted groceries. Filling a plastic bag with a pound’s worth of food that was meant to last me for a few days, I

walked into the night, and spent hours roaming through the town, searching for a safe place to spend the night.

At the top of Gun Hill, among the density of the trees, I saw a grand, dilapidated manor surrounded by a dozen or so smaller buildings, all fenced off for either refurbishment or demolition. I had seen this building before, from the other side of the town. The setting sun always tangled in the stained glass of the clock-tower windows.

Even then, as I looked up, I saw a faint light shining in the round window beneath the clock. Has another lost soul found a refuge in these abandoned halls?

Making sure that there were no guards, and the fence was not armed, I climbed over.

The manor's pale walls seemed to glow in the white moonlight. Broken windows set within the cracked frames looked like empty eye-sockets. The crumbling brick reminded me of dry old skin ready to dissolve into dust from the lightest touch. Once grand and imposing, now it was just a crumbling façade. Just like me.

Weighing my chances on running into Baldy and his bird-faced girlfriend, I pulled at the door handle.

The hallway was damp and smelled of decay. Paint peeled from the walls, spiders infested the dark corners, waiting for their prey.

Overbearing, tall windows strode up the staircase which led up to the clock-tower. I followed it to the very top and entered another dark corridor with only one door at the end. A streak of light was shining beneath the door.

The flapping of wings high above my head startled me. When I looked back, the light was gone. Somewhere in the distance, a door opened and closed, and

hasty steps echoed through the house. A moment later, the light shone at the bottom of the staircase and moved swiftly to another side of the hallway.

“Wait!” I shouted, descending two steps at the time, but by the time I reached the bottom of the stairs, the person, whoever it was, was gone, leaving behind a gentle scent of lavender.

It started raining. I found the driest room, scavenged what I could for a makeshift bed and rolled out my sleeping bag.

For the weeks that followed, this sombre place became my home.

The other occupant was keeping out of sight, and if it wasn't for a dim light shining here and there, and a passing scent of lavender wafting through the halls, I would've been sure I was there all by myself.

The new lockdown came and went, and with Christmas fast approaching, I felt the world weighing harder upon my shoulders. But my new life had taught me a few lifesaving skills, and luckily, the corner store always had cheap booze. So, I begged on the streets by day, shoplifted in the large supermarket by evening and drank myself into oblivion by night.

Christmas Eve crushed me. My mind flooded with the memories of my trip to the Maldives with Jess last Christmas. How much has changed in just one year.

I pulled the photo from my backpack – Jess's beautiful barbie-face with the long blond extensions cascading on to her large boobs, my hand resting comfortably on her curvy side, our happy, fake, smiles on a backdrop of a blue ocean and white sands.

Looking back, I wondered what Jess and I had had that held us together for as long as it did.

Our passion was violent, while it lasted. But as the first lockdown progressed, it grew colder in proportion to the density of empty wine and beer bottles that festered in the kitchen.

As the furlough replaced my comfortable forty thousand, plus bonuses, per year we started to argue more. Even more so when the credit card company cancelled my card. As quick as she was to declare her eternal love at the beginning of our relationship, Jess was even quicker to pack up and leave when a redundancy notice and a final cheque for just over a thousand pounds came in the mail.

Even my so-called “best mates” turned away and offered no support, when in reply to my request to extend my mortgage-repayment holiday, my bank had served me with the repossession order.

And that was the end of me – Maximilian Marcus Thompson – a financial broker and an investment advisor, a party animal, and an unfaithful boyfriend.

Tears rolled down my face. I wiped them away with my dirty sleeves and I took another swig from the bottle. Catching the sight of my reflection in a broken window, I recoiled. What have I become? A mere shadow of a person I once was. A filthy shadow.

“You’ll get used to it,” Baldy’s words echoed in my head.

Me? Getting used to *this*?

Stale air of the building spun my head. Gasping for breath, I climbed up on to the roof.

The wind howled, tearing at my clothes. As I stood on the edge, the pile of broken glass and construction rubble on the ground, right beneath me, seemed so welcoming.

I glanced for the one last time at the photo of Jess and me together, shredded it to pieces and released them into the wind; and just as I took the final step into the dark abyss, in a window of the clock-tower, I saw her.

In the faltering light of a candle that she held in her hand, painfully pale, with her mouth curved into a silent “NO!”, she was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

The ambulance arrived shortly after the police.

While paramedics were treating me for minor cuts and marvelled at how I managed to survive the fall, I was keeping my eyes on the clock-tower, but the mysterious figure had vanished.

Seventy-two hours later, after full physiological assessment, I left the police station with a promise to get a grip on my life and headed straight to the local Samaritan’s centre.

I showered, shaved, and got a hot meal, first time in months. Through the local charity, I signed up for some manual labour and even managed to earn a few quid. Finally, I felt like a human again.

In my centre I learned that the place that had housed me all this time was the old military hospital. Originally built in the nineteenth century, it was now sold to a large developer to be refurbished into luxury apartments.

Luxury apartments my arse! Who would want a luxury flat in this shabby town? But who was I to judge?

Every day that followed, I visited the old hospital, but the person I saw in the tower window did not return.

With some of the money I earned, I purchased a little notepad, a pen, and a few envelopes. I wrote a note and left it by the entrance to the clock-tower.

Eagerly, I waited for a reply, until one evening, I entered the room that lead to the tower and there she was, waiting for me.

Jess, with her fake tan, Botox lips, and clothes that left nothing to the imagination, would never have compared to this simple beauty. The woman's skin was pale, in contrast to her dark hair that was pinned high at the back of her head. She wore a long grey dress with a stiff collar and a little red cape. Perhaps, a little old-fashioned, perhaps a mixture of goth and steampunk, but perfection, none the less!

"Hello, Max," she smiled. "My name is Alice."

Alice! The most beautiful name in the world!

We talked all night. I might have fallen asleep in the early hours of the morning. When I woke up, she was already gone, and the construction site was coming to life. I sneaked out from the hospital, determined to turn my life around.

In the weeks that followed, Alice and I got to know each other better. She told me she was a nurse, and that her fiancé had killed himself by jumping off the clock-tower, that is why she came here so often. I told her I was sorry and offered my shoulder to lean on should she wished to. I told her about my old life and my new existence, and how grateful I was to her for saving me and showing me that there were still things in this life worth living for.

Late in January our friendship was blossoming, slowly turning into something more. Or so I hoped.

A day commemorating one month since our first meeting was falling on my birthday, and I suggested we celebrate.

On the set day, with a little bouquet of flowers and a bottle of wine, I ran up the steep hill toward the hospital. I waited for the construction workers to leave the site, then climbed over the fence and entered the building.

The house was dead silent, except for the intermittent creaks of the floor as I moved from the door towards the staircase. The air was thick with anticipation. Hardly able to breathe, I rushed up the stairs to the very top of the clock-tower and pushed into the room where the candlelight shone under the door.

The smell of a decaying flesh hit my nose.

Alice wasn't in the room. Instead, there was a dark shapeless mass. It screeched and yowled.

In deep animal fear, I froze on the threshold.

A figure in grey separated from the dark mass. Its scarlet cape fluttered behind it.

Heart pounding in my ears, I backed away, as the figure glided towards me.

Blood-soaked maggots fell out from the empty eye-sockets. Pieces of rotten flesh covered the floor. The bony fingers reached for my throat.

I shut my eyes and forced myself to scream but produced no sound.

When I opened my eyes again, Alice was standing in front of me. Her pale, almost translucent face was smiling. The room around us was filled with an overwhelming scent of lavender.

A few days later, police and ambulance came to remove a body found by the construction workers on the grounds of the old hospital. Hand in hand, Alice and I

watched from the clock tower as the body was loaded into a black bag. It had mismatching shoes. Just like mine.

“So, you see, it all began, as it usually does – once upon a time I met a girl and my life, as I knew it, had ended.”