

JACK
PROBYN
COFFEE

A JAKE TANNER SHORT STORY



COFFEE

'Excuse me?'

Jake felt a light tapping on his shoulder. He removed his headphones. Turned to face the girl next to him.

'Yeah?' he said.

'Would you stop tapping? It's distracting.' She spoke harshly and to the point. He sensed an air of aggression in her voice. The girl was blonde, skinny, and had defined facial features. Her face didn't appear caked with too much makeup, unlike some of the girls he had seen around campus. He presumed her beauty to be natural.

'Was I?' he asked, struggling for words. The general hubbub of the coffee shop buzzed around them.

'Yeah. It was annoying me.'

'Sorry.'

Sheepishly, Jake plugged his headphones back in his ears, and returned his focus to his laptop. He was studying for his mid-semester exams, getting in the flow of things. And now, as he flicked between tabs on his internet browser, he had lost focus. His mind was elsewhere. Distracted. Imagining the girl next to him moving closer, brushing up against his arm, acting coy, shy, and kissing him. It was an immediate, visceral reaction he didn't know he was capable of. This girl was stunning, and he wanted to speak to her. But what would he say? Had he ruined his chances before he'd begun with his rude and arrogant attitude?

He left it.

Five minutes went by, and for the first time in his life he consciously made an effort not to tap his finger or pen on the table, nor bounce his leg up and down in what was frequently referred to as a sign of sexual frustration. He was, but he didn't need everyone else to know it.

His eyes kept wandering away from his screen, and they floated around the room. Every now and then he would pretend to look to his left, as if something had caught his eye, and then when he returned to his laptop, he'd chance through his peripherals if the girl was watching him. In all the

instances, she wasn't.

This is ridiculous, he told himself. Pull yourself together. Don't be an idiot. She's just another human being. The moment you start treating her as some A-list celeb is the moment you'll start to choke. Besides, if she says no, then she says no.

Struggling to find the courage to talk to her, he went analogue, and pushed the laptop to the back of the table and replaced it with a book, a pen, and a set of four highlighters, one for each category of note he made: Important, Useful, Quote, and Other.

As he sat there, striking away at the words on the page, his focus gradually returned. It wasn't until he felt another touch on his shoulder, that it grounded to a halt. This time the touch was more gentle.

'Yeah?' he asked, removing his headphones.

The girl looked shy. 'Sorry, but do you mind if I borrow one of your highlighters? Mine's just run out.'

Jake looked down at his beloved Stabilos, and then back to the girl.

'Sure. I charge two pound each time you want to use it, though.' Jake smirked, hoping she would pick up on his poor attempt at flirting.

'Two? That's generous. The last coffee shop guy I asked to borrow a highlighter from told me no.'

'You do this often then?'

'Not after last time.'

'Must have affected you deeply?'

'It was. Instead of letting me use his highlighters like I wanted, he offered to buy me a drink.'

'How horrible.'

'And then he asked me out on a date.'

'Did you take him up on it?'

The girl shook her head.

'Poor guy. Just trying to pick up a girl in a coffee shop. Can you blame him?'

'I can when he was about double my age.'

Jake didn't know what to say, and he couldn't tell from her expression whether she was telling the truth.

'Right, because you've evidently been through a lot, I'll knock fifty per cent

off,' he said.

'Make it eighty pence and you've got yourself a deal.' The girl extended her hand.

'Done,' Jake said, shaking it. As he passed over the highlighter, he said, 'I'm Jake by the way. Nice to meet you.'

'Hi, Jake By The Way, nice to meet you, too. I'm Elizabeth.'

Leaving her with a smile, he stared back at the notebook, leaving his earphones placed on the table. He sat there contemplating. Did he really flirt with a girl over a highlighter? And did it really work? And now he had a name. Elizabeth. He repeated it several times in his head. Elizabeth, Elizabeth, Elizabeth, Elizabeth. That way he wouldn't forget it.

As the minutes wandered by, Jake made more and more notes. He was feeling good about himself. He hadn't ruined his only chance to speak with her and make a good impression. Now all he had to do was build on it. Throwing the lids off the highlighters, Jake devoured three pages in his textbook. Every thirty seconds or so, he extended his hand, asked for his highlighter, underline something, and then give it back to Elizabeth.

'How many times are you going to do that?' she asked.

'As many as is necessary. There's a lot to learn.'

'You sure it's all important, and you're not just highlighting the entire text for the sake of highlighting it?'

Jake looked at her, perplexed. 'Wait, isn't that what you're supposed to do? I thought that's how students learn?'

'Hate to break it to you... Let me see.'

Jake passed her his textbook, and Elizabeth inspected it.

'What you've done there is colour in the entire page with different colours.' Elizabeth returned the book. 'You're not doing geography, are you?'

'No, I'm not. And if you think that's bad, you should see some of books at home.'

Elizabeth's eyebrows rose, creating a thin wrinkle on her forehead. 'Are you inviting me back to your place when we've only known each other five minutes? You're more forward than the other guy.'

'Not at all, I was just... hoping you'd see my textbook collection and think I was really cool.' Jake put his pen down, peered over Elizabeth's arm, and asked, 'What are you studying?'

'Photography.'

'At uni?'

Elizabeth nodded.

'And that's an actual degree, is it?'

She looked offended, taken aback. 'You know, offending me isn't going to get me anywhere near your bedroom any time soon.'

'But that doesn't mean to say it won't happen at all?' Jake let the comment hang in the air, and to his surprise, Elizabeth didn't say anything. Instead, she just smirked and shifted in her seat to face him more directly.

'What are you studying, then?' she asked, reaching for his textbook.

'Psychology.'

Elizabeth eyed the pages. 'Great career prospects there, then. You could always be a teacher.'

'Says the person who takes fancy photos.'

Elizabeth ignored the comment, and asked, 'Where are you studying?'

'UCL. You?'

'Same.'

Intelligent. Beautiful. And in close proximity of him. What more could he ask for?

'Really? I've never seen you around.'

'That's because I'm too busy taking fancy photos.' Elizabeth's eyebrow raised in a sort of smug, how do you like that?, kind of way.

'Makes sense. Are you a part of any societies?'

'Snow and Ski.'

Jake's mouth opened a fraction of an inch, and the sides of his lips raised into a smile, although he fought hard to hide it.

'So am I. When was the last time you went — I've never seen you there before.' Just as Elizabeth was about to open her mouth, Jake interrupted her, and said, 'Let me guess, too busy taking photos of the mountains and snow?'

'Actually, no. I've not been able to go to a meeting yet because dog's been ill.'

'What breed?'

'German Shepherd.'

'Nice.' Jake didn't want to tell her they were his favourite breed of dog — he didn't want to come across as too keen. 'Are you going on the snow trip

next Feb?’

‘Should be. Are you?’

‘Yeah. Can't wait. Do you board or ski?’

‘Board.’

Marry me. Jake fought a great battle in his mind not to say those words out loud. He looked down at his desk, Elizabeth, the outside world, and said, ‘Hey, do you want to go grab some coffee in a different place? The vibe here isn't that good.’

Elizabeth looked down to the ground, a tell he had learned meant he was on to a winning path.

‘Yeah, you seem all right. How about I buy you a coffee and you call it quits on the highlighter?’

‘Deal.’

Jake packed away his things in his bag, waited patiently for Elizabeth to do the same, and as they headed out of the cafe, he decided to let her keep the highlighter that started it all. It would be a pertinent reminder of him.

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