

From the story ‘The Journey Home’, which can be found in *Collections: One*.

Four months later, I attended a training course in the city centre with Tony. When the third and final day wound up an hour early, a handful of us retired to the nearest pub.

Most of the others were driving and ordered soft drinks. I hadn’t had a drink all week. On Monday, after another heavy weekend, I’d decided to give up alcohol for an indefinite period. But Tony didn’t need to work hard to persuade me to change my order to a beer.

We were on our third pints as the group dispersed. I began to drink faster so I could head home and carry on drinking there.

‘Let’s go and eat,’ said Tony.

He finished his drink and thumped the glass down on the table. ‘You don’t have plans, do you?’

We left the pub and walked, at a brisk pace, across Chinatown and through the back streets between the financial district and the Arndale and down towards the centre of Deansgate.

‘This place is new,’ he said as he pulled and then pushed open the front door.

The rush-hour traffic receded behind us. Classical music was playing quietly. The barman, wearing a white shirt and bow tie, was polishing glasses. Only two other people were in the restaurant – an older man in a suit, and his much younger female companion.

We waited by the entrance to be seated. The interior was modern and minimal: low lighting, exposed red-brick walls, dark grey chairs and booths, rectangular tables in neat rows. The maître d’, a thin man with a moustache and slicked-back hair,

hurried over.

He cocked his head and smiled. 'Do you have a reservation?'

'I have a few,' said Tony. 'Like which chefs are on tonight? Will the service be up to its usual standard? Is the hype for this place justified?'

The maître d' pressed his hands together.

'No,' said Tony. 'No reservation.'

We were taken to a table that was side on to the bar, between two circular metal pillars. The maître d' fetched menus and told us he'd be back in a few minutes to take our drink order.

'I've always wanted to say that,' said Tony, 'but I've never had the nerve.'

'It was good,' I assured him.

'He didn't think so.' Tony drummed his fingers on the wine list. 'What do you drink? White, right?'

I started to scan the menu. Neither of us spoke for several minutes.

'Is everything OK?' said Tony.

I was struggling to make a decision, as I was fixated on the prices: £36 for a main course of lobster.

'This place is expensive,' I said.

'Don't worry,' said Tony. 'I have the company credit card. It's taken care of.' He took a sip of water. 'No – I meant, in general. Everything OK with you?'

He let his menu rest against the table.

'You can tell me,' he said. 'If anything's up.' He played with his wedding ring, twisting it back and forth. 'I don't mean work. I mean anything. Anything at all.'

'Everything's fine,' I said. 'Everything's good.' I turned back to the menu. 'I don't know what to have. Any suggestions?'

Tony took control, ordering for both of us. The starter was breaded oysters,

which were served on slices of cucumber, surrounded by an oyster cream that was dotted with oil.

‘It’s all about the contrast of textures,’ said Tony, putting his cutlery down and then dabbing his mouth with a napkin. ‘The crispy coating with the silkiness of the oyster.’ He picked up and tilted his glass. ‘And this has just the right amount of bite. It’s the perfect complement.’

The maître d’ was walking past on his way to attend to a party of nine or ten that had just entered the restaurant. Tony stopped him and praised him on the combination, and the maître d’ said, ‘Very good, sir’, and moved on.

Tony had abandoned the idea of ordering a bottle and instead opted for the wine-matching service for each course. He was pushing the boat out.

Or, rather, the company was pushing the boat out. I’d fallen off the wagon and into the boat, and now the company, under Tony’s increasingly wayward orders, was pushing the boat out, and out, and out.

‘We deserve this,’ he said. ‘I should say – you deserve this. This current project: no one else wanted to have anything to do with it. It’s not gone unappreciated.’

I’d not done anything special other than volunteer. Motivation in the office was low: my colleagues wanted to do their jobs with the minimum amount of effort in the minimum number of hours specified and not have to think about the increasing scrutiny they were being subjected to by personal reviews and performance monitoring. So they gave short shrift to management’s request for a willing individual to participate in a new project, which would entail a shift in role, a significant spell of training and a slightly uncertain future in terms of how long the project would go on for and what would happen after that.

I could understand my colleagues’ attitude, as the company had been chipping away, for too long, at our self-worth. But I had nothing to lose. I didn’t particularly like

my work anyway, so I'd be learning new skills that might help me keep my job, or, if the worst came to the worst, find a better one at some point in the future.

Admittedly, there was also the issue of my punctuality. A couple of weeks after Glastonbury, I'd been given a verbal warning by Tony: if I persisted in being late on such a frequent basis, he would have no choice but to give me a written warning, and then I would have to change, as all the managers, and not just him, would be watching me.

A month later – after an especially bad week – I'd been handed that written warning. So I was in need of all the credits I could get. I'd hoped that starting afresh on a new company initiative might take the pressure off me and deflect attention from my attendance record.

Our main courses arrived: venison, with roasted winter vegetables, kale and elderberries.

After five minutes, the maître d' stopped and asked if everything was alright.

Tony swallowed. 'It's beautifully presented. The venison is a little bit dry, maybe.'

'Oh.' The maître d' turned towards me. 'For you, sir?'

I was halfway through a mouthful. I finished chewing, bobbing my head at the same time, indicating my intention to speak. There was a clatter from the kitchen, which sounded like a pan hitting the floor. The maître d' didn't flinch.

'It's good,' I said. 'Thank you.'

'Our chef is very exacting,' said the maître d'.

'Of course,' said Tony. 'I was only saying – for my taste, it's just a touch overdone.'

The maître d' adjusted the cuffs of his shirt. 'Are you saying that you want to

send it back?’

‘No. I’m not saying that. If I wanted –’ Tony fidgeted, and in doing so he nudged the table. His wine glass wobbled, but his hand was next to it, and with lightning reflexes he grabbed and held the glass and prevented it from toppling.

The maître d’ moved his arms as if to steady Tony and then, realising a crisis had been averted, broke into a smile.

‘Impressive, sir,’ he said. ‘You have your priorities straight.’

Not looking at the maître d’, Tony stood up. He took a breath, and then drank the contents of his glass, which had been half-full. Then he threw the glass past the maître d’ at a forty-five-degree angle, where it shattered against the floor and the bar.

The restaurant fell silent.

‘You can bring us the bill now,’ he said, tapping the maître d’ on the chest. Then he pointed in the direction of the shards of glass. ‘And I’ll pay for that, obviously.’

The maître d’ averted his eyes. ‘Very good, sir.’

Tony sat back down, shook out the napkin that was folded next to his plate, and then wiped his mouth.

Outside the restaurant, the wind had got up. Cars honked their horns at one another at the intersection with Peter Street.

Tony walked quickly.

‘I need a drink,’ he said. ‘Are you hungry still?’

We had a pint in a basement bar in a back street off Albert Square. Tony promised me they had the best jukebox of any pub he’d ever been into, and while I couldn’t argue with the selection of albums, the volume made conversation extremely difficult, unless you were willing to get intimately acquainted with your companion. Tony became withdrawn, and I couldn’t tell if that was due to the oppressive volume,

or because he was reflecting on his behaviour. But midway through his second song choice, his eyes lit up.

‘Let’s see who’s playing tonight,’ he said. He studied his phone. ‘Let’s go and see some music.’

We were late and the choice was limited. The university, where there were three venues, was on the other side of town, and there was no one interesting enough to tempt us into making the journey. I suggested we head to the Northern Quarter, which wasn’t too far a walk, and where there was a bar that had live music on most nights.

‘At Glastonbury,’ said Tony, as we made our way there, ‘did you take anything?’

Although Tony was someone I trusted, his probing questions were making me uncomfortable. He was still my line manager, at the end of the day. I didn’t care to risk blurring the boundaries of our relationship. We were getting to a point where, if I had any more to drink, I might easily open up, and if the conversation became too personal and I started to tell him too much about my drinking and how that was affecting my work and everything else, the night would linger horribly in every subsequent interaction I had with him at work. I didn’t want to make myself vulnerable to that.

‘Drugs, you mean? No, nothing like that,’ I said.

‘Everyone was on coke this year. Coked-up kids. All the kids in their twenties, in the dance area. All on coke.’

‘Can’t say I noticed.’ I thought that, depending on where you looked, people appeared to be on a whole range of different drugs, although I wasn’t going to get into a debate about it. The truth was that if I was in a certain frame of mind, I’d take anything that was offered to me, by anyone who offered it. ‘But then I was pissed out of my head the whole weekend in any case.’

He laughed. ‘Drugs have never agreed with me. Whereas alcohol. Alcohol is

like –’

We were halfway up the wide pedestrianised part of Market Street. Tony ran ahead of me, waving his long arms up in the air and from side to side and hopping from foot to foot, while making a sound like, ‘Waaahhyeeeeeaaahh!’

He slowed and walked backwards, waiting for me to catch up with him.

‘Am I right?’ he said.

He was slightly out of breath, but he turned and carried on walking and I had to accelerate to keep pace with him as he crossed the tramlines and headed towards Oldham Street.