

**From the story ‘The Talk of the Festival’, which can be found in  
*Collections: One.***

‘Oh, yes.’ James wags his finger in the air a few times and then taps the side of his head.  
‘That reminds me. Listen to this. You won’t believe this.’

We’re in James and Fran’s tent, on Thursday night. Thursday night going into  
Friday morning.

‘This morning,’ he says, ‘lying in the tent. I overheard the best thing ever. The  
best thing I’ve heard at Glastonbury, I mean.’

‘Well,’ says Fran. ‘Best.’ She scrunches up her nose. ‘Debateable.’

James laughs. ‘True. Depends on your perspective. I was lying in the tent this  
morning, and this girl –’

‘Jim,’ says Fran, pointedly.

‘Right,’ he says. ‘Sorry.’ He pauses, glancing behind him, and then continues,  
lowering his voice. ‘I was lying in the tent, dozing – it wasn’t early, the sun was up,  
people all around were up – and I heard this girl say, in one of the tents round here –  
I won’t do the accent – she says, “Oh my God – Basil. You’ve slept on the brioche.”’

I clap, and laugh, and James laughs, and Harriet says, ‘Oh my God.’

‘Isn’t that brilliant?’ says James.

‘Talk about *Overheard in Waitrose*,’ I say.

‘Precisely,’ he says. ‘If anything sums up Glastonbury, in this day and age, then  
surely – surely – it’s that.’

He rubs his hands together. Then his attention turns back to the joint that he’s  
midway through constructing.

‘What do you want to drink?’ Fran stands and gathers up some discarded items  
of clothing and takes them into the sleeping area.

‘What do you feel like drinking?’ asks James. ‘How are you feeling, now?’

He looks up at me, and I puff out my cheeks and go, ‘Prrrrffff’, and he laughs.

James and Fran, who’d travelled down on Tuesday night and queued in readiness for the gates opening, had bought some legal highs from a stall near the Avalon Stage. Harriet and I had arrived earlier in the day, and within an hour of us hooking up with them we’d started on these pills. I’d had one and a half; Harriet had had two, maybe more, over the course of the evening. The festival hadn’t even started yet – not the actual entertainment, anyway – and already it was all a bit of a blur.

‘Not bad, are they?’ says James. ‘Pretty good, in fact?’

I close my eyes, suck in air through my teeth, and exhale, making a sound somewhere between blowing raspberries and the braying of a mule.

‘Do you have anything warming?’ says Harriet, in response to Fran. ‘I can’t feel my fingers.’

‘Do you want my jumper? Have my jumper,’ says James.

Harriet refuses.

‘I know what to have. Fran,’ he calls out. ‘Bring the liqueur.’ He turns back to me and Harriet. ‘We’ve been saving this. We got it on our travels last year.’

Fran reappears with a dark bottle and four plastic beakers. Under her arm she has the thick, ragged green jumper that she always puts on when we come back from a night out.

‘Here,’ she says, and drops it into Harriet’s lap.

Harriet looks up. ‘Are you sure? You don’t want to wear it? You always wear this.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ says Fran. ‘You need it.’

Harriet removes her coat, puts the jumper on over her dress and then drapes the coat over her shoulders like a cape. Then she leans across the tent, towards James, and places a finger on his Rizlas.

‘Can I?’ she says.

‘Of course,’ he replies. ‘The more the merrier.’

Harriet pulls out several papers, takes the pouch of tobacco, and begins to build a joint.

‘I’m not quick enough for you,’ says James, ‘am I?’

She tuts. ‘The more the merrier. Like you said.’

Fran pours the drink and hands out the beakers.

I take mine and put it to my nose. The drink is rich and fruity. I’m not sure I have the stomach for it. ‘What is this?’

‘Taste it,’ says James. ‘See if you can guess.’

I have a sip. It has bite, although it’s not unpleasant. It reminds me of fruits of the forest. ‘Is it a blend?’

James shakes his head.

‘I don’t know,’ I say. ‘Is it blackberry?’

‘Close,’ says Fran.

James puts up a hand. ‘Shush. I want them to guess.’

‘I don’t know,’ I say.

‘Harriet?’ says James.

‘Just tell us,’ she replies.

James sighs. ‘It’s blueberry. Blueberry liqueur. What do you think? It’s good, isn’t it?’

‘I’m not sure I’d want too much of it,’ I say. ‘It’s very rich. Where did you say you got it, again?’

‘I didn’t,’ says James. ‘It was from Slovenia.’

‘We’ve booked to go again in September,’ says Fran.

‘Another trip?’ says Harriet. ‘You’ve only just come back from the States.’

Fran pulls a guilty face.

Harriet sighs. ‘America. Slovenia. Russia. Croatia. Is there anywhere you haven’t been?’

Fran laughs.

‘There are many places we haven’t been,’ says James.

Fran sips her drink and then licks her lips. ‘In Europe, though? Probably not.’

‘What’s your favourite country?’ asks Harriet.

Fran throws her head back. ‘*Pffft*. That is too hard.’

‘Italy?’ says James.

‘Love Italy,’ says Fran. ‘I mean: Florence. Venice. Rome! That’s just for starters. But then there’s Greece. The islands.’ She holds her hands palm upwards, as though the argument is won.

‘You loved Iceland,’ says James.

‘God,’ says Fran. ‘Like another world.’

‘Top three?’ says Harriet.

Fran clutches her right shoulder, as though she’s in some discomfort, as she thinks about this.

‘I’d go –’ She closes her eyes and screws up her face. ‘Italy – no: France, Italy, Greece.’

‘France?’ says James.

Fran looks at him. ‘Are you kidding? Provence?’

James bites his lip. Provence was where they’d gone on their honeymoon.

‘Of course,’ he says. ‘France. Stunning. Like you, honey.’

She tilts her head and flashes him a sarcastic smile, which he returns. She takes another sip of her drink, and then puts the beaker down and runs her fingers through her hair. 'Britain first, though. Doesn't matter where you go. Still Britain first.'

Harriet, who is already licking the adhesive strip of the joint she's built, nods and goes, 'Mm.'

James nods, too, and then stops abruptly, and clears his throat. 'But not, I should add, Britain First. Just to be clear.'

I laugh.

'Britain first,' I say. 'But definitely not – *Britain First*.'

James sighs with pleasure. Fran shakes her head and sips her drink.

'Have you heard who's first on tomorrow?' I ask. 'The TBA slot? It's normally someone big, isn't it?'

'Oh, yes.' Fran slaps her thighs and exhales in frustration. 'Oh, God. Who is it? I did hear. But it's gone. My memory is terrible.'

'It's not that your memory is terrible,' says James. 'It's that those drugs were surprisingly good.'

'Talk about something else,' says Fran. 'It'll come to me.'

'I'll never be up in time, anyway,' says James. 'Daytime's the only time when I can get any sleep.'

'It's very noisy,' I say. 'It's not what I was expecting.'

'It's mad, isn't it?' says Fran. 'It's the stuff of nightmares, really.'

'You forgot to tell them about seeing whatserface, too,' says James.

'Oh, yes,' says Fran.

Harriet lights the joint. 'Seeing who?'

'Guess,' says James.

Harriet's shoulders drop.

'I'm joking,' he says. 'I'm joking.'

'Alexa Chung,' says Fran.

'Really?' says Harriet. 'Where? What was she wearing?'

'Very big shades,' says James.

'It was round the stalls near the Pyramid Stage,' says Fran. 'She was in knitwear – a stripy wool dress. Very short.'

Harriet takes a long drag on the joint and hands it to Fran. 'Any other celebrity spots?'

'Jim thought he saw Kerry Katona.'

'It was Kerry Katona,' he says. 'I swear.'

'Was it her?' says Harriet.

'It was someone who looked like her,' Fran explains. 'That's all.'

'I guess it would be a bit weird if she was here,' I say. 'I mean, she's not the first person you'd associate with Glastonbury.'

James twists the end of the joint that he's been rolling, focusing intently.

'Why not?' says Harriet. 'She's a celebrity.'

I rub my chin. 'Celebrity? You think?'

'Come on,' says Fran. 'She's never out of the gossip columns.'

'What?' I say. 'The singer? For what?'

'She's had a lot of problems with drugs,' says Fran.

As he's about to light the joint, James receives a tap on the leg from Fran, who hands him the one that's already going.

'Isn't she bipolar?' he says.

'She's had a torrid time with relationships,' says Harriet.

Fran picks up an empty can of tonic from the side of the tent and passes it to James to use as an ashtray. 'What's she on now? Marriage number four?'

‘Three, I think,’ says Harriet.

‘What was that story about her? A few years ago.’ James takes a deep lungful of the joint. ‘She was held up at gunpoint.’

‘It was knives,’ says Harriet. ‘Three men broke into her home.’

Fran clicks her tongue. ‘Horrible. Just thinking about it. Now that *is* the stuff of nightmares.’

‘I can’t believe what I’m hearing,’ I say. ‘Bipolar? Failed marriages? *Drugs?* Seriously?’

‘All true, sadly.’ James takes a second long drag and then hands the joint to me.

‘Thanks,’ I say. ‘But drugs, though? I mean, she’s a dame, for goodness sake.’

I drink some of the liqueur while tapping ash from the spliff into the can.

James looks at Harriet. Harriet returns the look, and then looks at Fran. Fran is frowning.

‘Pardon?’ says James.

‘Yes,’ says Harriet. ‘She’s what?’

‘Kerry Katona?’ says Fran. ‘A dame?’

‘Yes,’ I say.

‘Kerry Katona?’ says James. ‘The singer?’

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘Kerry Katona, the singer. The opera singer.’

James leans back.

Harriet and Fran look at one another.

‘Opera singer?’ says Harriet.

‘No,’ says Fran.

‘Wait,’ says James. ‘Hold on. Opera singer? Are you thinking of Kiri Te Kanawa?’

Harriet and Fran laugh.

‘What?’ I say.

‘We’re talking about the singer out of Atomic Kitten,’ says Fran.

‘Dame Kerry Katona,’ says Harriet, and laughs, and Fran and James both laugh.

‘Marvellous,’ says James. He takes a gulp of his liqueur.

‘I’m no good with celebrities,’ I say.

‘Ah, bless.’ Harriet reaches out and pats my leg. ‘Don’t worry, honey. It’s fine.’

I take another toke on the joint and then hand it to her. ‘I know it’s fine.’

She sighs. ‘He’s in a funny mood.’

I look at her, although her gaze is on the joint. ‘Am I?’

‘I can tell,’ she says. ‘You’re in a funny mood.’

‘I wasn’t aware I was.’

‘You’re fed up.’ She picks up the lighter and puts the joint in her mouth and relights it. ‘You’re fed up about something.’

‘I’m fine,’ I tell her. ‘Really.’

‘You’re not,’ she says. ‘I can tell. Cheer up, honey. We’re here now. Let’s just enjoy ourselves.’