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“Then lunch tomorrow, if your work allows? There’s an Italian that serves fast and they do a Malbec that kicks this into touch.”

Mags realised she was pulling some kind of face. She knew the place he meant and wouldn’t want to pay their prices, even for the breadsticks alone.

“The thing is I earn peanuts. I’ve never had Malbec whatever it is when it’s at home; the £3.99 offers do me at weekends.” She’d started so she might as well finish, better now than later. “I’m a cashier at a checkout eighteen hours a week. And my ex is a poet, so child maintenance cheques aren’t like bonanzas and I need a little top-up from the welfare state.”

“Good for the welfare state.” He reached for the wine bottle on the small, glass-topped table. “A bigger top-up. Your shift might fly by.”

“Or I might forget how to operate the till.” She didn’t stop him pouring.

“But you’re into the arts.”

“Oh yeah, I have a degree in the *Fine* kind.”

“And you paint?”

“Not a lot.”

“But you would if you could.”

“In a different life.”

Someone younger and more doll-like than Mags tottered over on heels and put a hand on his arm, telling him with scarlet lips that there was someone he must meet. A man in a suit with a ponytail raised a hand. Rudi looked past her to smile; Mags edged away before he did.

She could go around again; a second look always revealed so much more. Telling herself that this – with the wine in her hand, and the nibbles she’d already disposed of – was all a treat in itself, she tried to delete the girl who made her suspect that if Rudi Shaw liked her, it would only be as a diverting oddball, a bit of a break from the arses. She should focus on the work. Around her the paintings on white walls were far from decorative but stunning in their own bleak way.