

We are Asleep Until we Fall in Love

by Francesca Ryan

He'd tried twice, back when they were all students together in 1983. He remembered the big Victorian library, the musty stacks of the history section. There she was, that tall girl with a bright pink pixie cut framing her fierce face. He'd edged past her, pulling out some big tome about the American Civil War.

"Excuse me."

He couldn't help himself.

"I hope you don't mind me saying, but you smell gorgeous. Your perfume, I mean."

The glare he received in return let him know how welcome that was. It was difficult to know how to approach a woman in those days. Especially one wearing white dungarees with a badge that said, "A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle."

The second time was at that party round at Dave's. Carlsberg Special Brew, bottles of Thunderbird wine, and the worst chilli con carne known to man. Several people had been quite sick the day after. Not Angela, though. The fragrant Angela. He'd tried to chat her up over a booming stereo whacking out "I Don't Want to Go to Chelsea." God, couldn't they have put on something a little more conducive to romance?

"Sorry, mate," said Dave the next day, when, over a pint, they'd deconstructed their attempts at pulling. "She thinks you're an arrogant tosser."

He had another go when she was on a demonstration in front of the students' union. The big banner: Support Greenham Common. "Angela! Solidarity!" he'd shouted, going up the steps. She scowled at him behind her placard.

And now here they were, in her little downsized flat, some forty years later. Her striking face, gaunt. The vivid pink crop now grey and sparse. He remembered Dave telling him how she'd coped with losing her hair to the chemo. Surprisingly painful for her, he'd said. Especially for a woman who'd always said she "didn't do all that looks shit."

David had been dead nearly three years now. He and Angela had seen Dave through the long stages of an illness that left him little dignity.

On the day of Dave's funeral, she'd sobbed in his arms. He'd kept his promise to Dave: that he would always look out for his beloved Angela; fierce, indomitable Angela. An activist even now, a grandma among the young eco-warriors. She'd been there for him, too. The painful divorce in his thirties. Without Dave and Angela, he'd never have got through it. Especially during the battle over Jen taking the kids to Australia. He'd been heartbroken to lose that one.

Angela bent over him to pour him another glass of wine. Her perfume still stirred something in him. After all these years. Bloody hell.

"I know you like the Aussie stuff, but this Italian from Aldi is good, don't you think?"

He nodded and took another appreciative sip. She sighed.

"Do you remember the time you left a poem at my place in the library?"

He blinked. He didn't, actually.

"Did I?"

"Yes. It was something about love and sleeping in a den. I asked Dave about it. He couldn't stop laughing when I read it out. What the fuck was it about?"

"It was John Donne. I used that line on several girls. Quite successfully. It was something like, we are asleep until we fall in love. But Dave knew how to impress a girl, and it wasn't with poetry."

"You were a bit in love with me then, weren't you?"

She smiled at him. Her face was so close to his he could smell the alcohol on her breath now. And something underneath, a little stale. Her teeth were a bit stained with the wine. She started to cry. Her glass tipped over, the last of her wine running in pink puddles onto the tablecloth.

"Oh bugger, bugger, bugger!"

She pulled a tissue from her sleeve and dabbed at the mess.

"I still miss him so much." She hiccupped. "It just gets so lonely sometimes, you know?"

He lifted his hand and gently wiped her wet cheek.

"Of course it does. And to answer your question, yes, of course I was. As you bloody well knew. I loved you then, I always will. Come on now. It's alright. It's alright."

"Help me make it through the night, then."

Angela lurched to her feet and pulled him towards the bedroom.

"I've only got one tit now, but you already know that, of course."

They collapsed onto her bed. He held her through the night. Both drunk, both fully clothed.

Over breakfast, she giggled.

"Bloody undignified, wasn't I?"

"Yes, you were. So what? I would always rather be happy than dignified."

She smiled.

"Got a poem about that?"