

Love is like government

David Jagger

We go back a long way. There's been a lot of dirty water under the bridge. But we both know there's still something behind the touch. We wanted to do it all the time in the early days—touch. We were in a kind of permanent state of foreplay. We wanted sex so bad in the city once she led me into the ladies toilets in David Jones. Someone heard us hard at it in there and went and got a security guard.

So when I came back this time she just let me go a little while. Warm, she was, because we're friends no matter what and because she knows how good it can be. Yet at the same time she was colder than I've ever felt her before. She kept looking at her watch. And when I made to hold her other hand she formed it into a fist and announced, *I'm going out with someone else. It's serious. You better not get your hopes up.*

Image Symphony Marie Arnold

I glanced towards the guy, one of three people she shares a house with. She shook her head.

Some stories span generations and continents. Well not this one. Still, we go back a bit. And for the last two years I'd been living in the centre, half a continent away. Somehow we managed to keep the relationship going. There were others. And I was straight with her. *But I've never loved anyone like I love you*, I'd tell her, honestly, over the phone. *Easy to say a thousand miles away*, was her response. Love's easy at that kind of distance.

At the end of my first year away I didn't buy anyone any Christmas presents so I could afford to fly down to see her. I brought back most of my gear. I left open the option of staying back with her. She told the poor bloke chasing her at the time she needed time to think. I used up that time then pissed off again.

This time she said she was sick of it, just sick of it. And the distance, the absence, wasn't what she meant.

We've been breaking up and getting back together for years. It's usually me that suggests both.

I got bored with that, she said.

I said nothing. What could I say?

She smiled and said, *We must've set some sort of record for bust-ups*.

We're the bust-up world champions, I said and moved a little closer to her, towards that smile.

She put out her hand to stop me and looked away. *It was crap*, she snapped. *What we had was total crap*.

But she let me sleep in her bed again this time because we're friends above all and there was nowhere else for me to sleep.

At first she said I had to keep my clothes on. It was hot but I did. I realised I had to be next to her no matter what the conditions, if there'd been a hundred beds to choose from, if it had been a hundred celsius.

I could easily have gone back to the centre for another stint if I hadn't heard those words: *I'm going out with someone else; I'm sick of it; it was total crap*.

All of a sudden I couldn't concentrate on anything but her. I'd watch her for any sign that she still loved me or if she didn't. I couldn't sit still. My right knee would start jumping uncontrollably, always the right one, my toe tapping faster and faster.

Put something heavy on it, her flatmates told me.

She works in a green-painted terrace house, helping people with mental disorders. I went round there midday one day. I felt quite at home. I wanted to see The Someone Else. She works with him. He wasn't there. I told her if I saw him I'd chase him down the road and tackle him and push his face into the bitumen. Bituminise the son of a bitch. She said he'd just run. Like she was saying she didn't care, she wasn't impressed by that and The Someone Else was beyond such behaviour.

I hinted at a couple of flings I'd had since I saw her last Christmas to try to get her jealous like she used to be. But she just asked, *What were they like?*

It was about then that I noticed my receding hairline. It's only slight. But it seemed to be noticeable so suddenly, to me anyway. I began to worry that I might lose all my hair and never stand a chance with her or anyone else again. I'd be bald and alone forever. That's what I was thinking. Sad, sorry shit like that, even though it was surely the worry itself causing the receding, worrying about her. It dawned on me that I'd never really worried before, about anything.

She asked, *Why all of a sudden do you want to give yourself up to me now?*

I said, *I always wanted to end up with you. There's no one else like you*.

She smiled at me, as if to say, *More crap*. But the next day I rung up my work and said I wouldn't be back to the centre, just like that, just to show her—and myself—that I meant it.

One night she took her clothes off slow right in front of me. She helped me take my clothes off. She poured water on me and rubbed it on my feet and we lay there on her bed, face down, straight, like a couple of jelly-babies. When I laid a hand on her, though, she held it for a moment then took it off and placed it on the acres of sheet between us.

I said a couple of times that I better go and stay with someone else and she just said, *Fine, you do what you have to do*. When I heard that, I couldn't even begin to think of staying somewhere else.

What about this other bloke? I said, *Doesn't he want to stay here with you?*

I see him every day at work, she said.

One day while she worked I went through her drawers, the drawers with pens and pins, papers and folders, bits and pieces. I found an envelope with her name on it that bulged at the bottom in a soft lump. It was sealed in the middle of

the flap with sticky tape. But she must have seen the contents already otherwise why would it be stuffed in her drawer? I opened this envelope. In it was a single page with these words handwritten on it:

I heard your ex was coming.

I had my hair cut short so he wouldn't recognise me. Ha Ha.

So I could better see you.

And you could see how much I cared.

Below these words was written, *See!* And next to this was proof of the haircut taped to the bottom of the page. It dangled wavy and dark, a sure six inches of it, as I read.

I went down to the pub and got drunk because I was losing my hair, losing my girl and losing my grip. And because the arsehole who'd moved on in had hair to spare and the kind of dumb charm I knew she found hard to resist.

When I got back to the house she'd been drinking too and watching TV. I slapped what I'd found in her drawer on the coffee table where she sat and said, *What is this, some kind of joke? You can see I'm going bald.*

She was watching the news, news of the election. *It's a fight for the battlers in the heartland*, said the newsreader, a man with hair like a plastic cap, thick and shiny and very, very tidy.

She glanced up at my forehead, poured herself another drink, pushed the page with the hair hanging from it back towards me and said simply, *Put it away when you're finished with it.*

I sat opposite her. I tried to stay calm. My leg was going like a jackhammer. And soon I was yelling at her. I couldn't help it. Tears flowed. Even a few of hers. *I love you, I want you to take me back, I'm sorry for everything.* These things I yelled over and over. It just kept coming out.

One of her flatmates banged on the floor above us.

She tried to leave the house and I grabbed a handful of her t-shirt. She swung her arm to knock mine away but I held on tight, following her into the hallway towards the front door.

Then she looked me straight in the eye and said, stronger than I've heard her say anything, *I might still love you too but I'm not taking you back and I think you better go tomorrow. Love is like government*, she said, *And I'm no expert. But one thing's for certain—I'm in power now.*

I let go of her t-shirt and dropped my head into my hands and closed my eyes. I heard her close the front door behind her. I ran my hands through my hair, and the first two fingers on each hand slowly along my hairline in two arcs from the middle of my forehead down to my temples, then leant my forehead against the hallway wall.

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