
RON DUDDERIE

Best

Sister

Ever



When Martin's life goes to pieces,
his sister reaches out.

Best Sister Ever

Best Sister Ever PREVIEW
by
Ron Dudderie

This is part one of a trilogy: Best Sister Ever - An Audience With Carstairs - And The Winner Is. For more information, visit <http://www.bestsisterever.co.uk>

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The author does not condone any sort of sex between people of any age for any reason in real life and urges you to practice abstinence until death takes you in its cold, yet merciful embrace. That being said, no person should ever be prosecuted or discriminated for who they love.

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This is version 1.0.2.

To my wife, without whom this book would not have existed.
May she never know it does.

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Who is this character again? There's a list at <http://bestsisterever.co.uk/whos-who.html>

Chapter 1 - Closing up shop

The lease ran out today, January 31st 2013. By now most of the furniture had been taken away. All of my employees were gone, too. Many of them would be starting new jobs next Monday, some had gone into early retirement and a few unfortunate souls were now at home, signing up for unemployment benefits and sending out resumés. Out of those, two had offered to work out the rest of the month but I could manage taking apart my own company perfectly well by myself. I wasn't taking down the logo on the rooftop, but that was about all that was left of my life's work. Some new company would be setting up shop here in months, maybe even weeks.

I still had my own desk but only one chair and no more filing cabinets. Most of my time was spent digitising documents, shredding the paper copies, terminating contracts and subscriptions and staring out of my office window. The only thing I couldn't get out of was my own phone contract.

I had taken to parking around the corner, even though we had 25 reserved spots out front. I just couldn't bear to look at my current car, a seven year old Volkswagen Golf. The Audi had gone two years ago, when the decline had started. I wasn't going to keep driving that thing when I had to ask my people to make economies, forego pay rises, see colleagues leave and to pick up some of their workload. My office had become as exuberant as a North Korean interrogation room. Actually, those at least had a framed picture of the current Kim Ass Hole on the wall. I had amassed a nice art collection by supporting local artists. That was when things were fine. Then I had bills to pay and now it was all gone.

We had given it our all, but our business ran on government contracts. Foreign governments. Good luck getting paid if you depend on a Mexican mayor to have your invoices authorised when he is sure to be voted out of office in a few months. Not that we weren't used to that, but it was like that iPhone game, 'Flight Control': you have to guide airplanes to a landing strip, usually several at a time. If all goes well, you can do that for hours. But then you lose focus for a second and two of them crash. Game over. Well, that had happened. Somewhere, somehow, there had been a hiccup in our cash flow from which we could not recover. The banks were not so keen to give out loans, one payment too many was just a bit too late and that set in motion a series of minor catastrophes. Our competitors and even our suppliers smelled blood and that was it.

Did I blame myself? Well, mostly. We usually had decent cash reserves and it wasn't as if we were all flying first class and having coke-fuelled parties, but in the end there are bills and wages to pay. Then all it takes is a bank pretending to need a notarised picture of your balls to process a payment, some civil servants in the Philippines stalling your money because their bribe was apparently too low and then... boom. Bye now, thanks for playing.

Four o'clock. Nothing to shred. Nothing to scan. No one to call. Time to leave. I took one last walk around the office, picturing the faces behind desks that were already gone, then headed for the lifts and the lobby. I decided to take the stairs, as fate would probably be unable to resist locking me in a lift for the weekend, in a deserted building.

There was a sign on the inside of the glass door: 'Would the last person to leave please turn off the lights?' And so I did.

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The drive home was fairly long these days. It used to be shorter, but about a year ago I had also lost my house. Actually, I knew exactly where it was, I just wasn't welcome there anymore. When the money had dried up, my marriage had collapsed like a porcelain rail bridge. I suppose that is what you get for marrying the first girl that takes a shine to you. I had been alone, way too alone, until I was twenty-five. Then Monique had decided to come after me, which was about as hard as going after milk in a supermarket. One evening of kissing in the back of my car was enough to make me hers forever. I was so in love and so inexperienced, I never saw that she was merely passing the time.

She eventually married me because I'm nice and dependable and I suppose because she liked being worshipped. But even though she was my first big love, I was never hers. And when I had to take away her credit card and gardener and housemaid and Land Rover, I guess what was left was not enough to hold her interest. Thank God there were no kids involved.

I would have had kids with her if she had insisted, but she never did. I wasn't keen on having kids either. Perhaps that's because I didn't enjoy being one. You know nothing, you have no control over your life, you're made to do all sorts of things you detest (swimming lessons, communal showers after gym) and you have no money. Nope, didn't care for it at all. Plus, I was mostly lonely as a kid. Why make someone else go through that hell?

And so now I lived in a rented vacation house, on one of those resorts where you're not really supposed to live year-round but which is inhabited by people like me: the poor, the recently divorced. The losers. Plus several dozen Polish and Croatian day labourers, sleeping four to a room. I'm sure they worked hard, but they didn't exactly raise the tone. These people worked 12 hours a day and many were away from their families so when they wanted to relax, they took to drinking. That led to fighting and all sorts of problems. When one of them was sent back to Poland for drinking too much (and that's by Polish standards, mind you), he usually made the rounds along the other houses to bring some souvenirs back to Bydgoszcz or wherever. And that is why I still had patio chairs last summer, but now I didn't.

The house was nice enough, if all you wanted was a place to visit for a few weeks in the summer. Everything was tiny and twice as narrow as back home, nothing was insulated so in winter you'd have to keep the heating on at full blast and, as these things go, the furniture was a mishmash of castaways, IKEA and second hand crap. It had two double beds, but one of those was actually a bunk bed for kids in an even narrower room than the 'master bedroom'. I'd been in hotel rooms with bigger walk-in closets than that. Still, you don't need much if you're alone.

So here I was, living in this tiny house with just a few thousand euros to my name, having just made myself unemployed by signing bankruptcy papers. There were quite a few messages on my phone, some a few days old, from friends, business relations and even former employees, offering me support and companionship. 'Come over for dinner, Martin!' 'Don't mope around, come have a drink.' 'It has been a pleasure to work for you, please let me know if there is anything you need.' 'You'll be back on your feet in no time at all!' All very nice words.

I had faltered, but I hadn't taken anyone with me. Even those who were now unemployed had been given a raise for the last month, so their benefit pay would be a little bit higher. And I never hired fools, so I could give anyone who asked fantastic letters of recommendation. But I was in no mood to inflict myself on anyone today.

I was just about to put my dinner in the microwave when there was a knock on the door. That couldn't possibly be good news. At best, it would be an Eastern-European neighbour, offering me a bottle of hooch for some reason or other. At worst, it would be an Eastern-European neighbour

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asking for an impossible favour, usually to do with money. Still, my car was parked in front so hiding was silly. With a sense of dread, I walked into the hallway and saw an ear pressed against the glass.

“KATE!” I shouted, as soon as I saw a familiar face peering in through the tiny window. I opened the door and was almost overrun by my little sister. She is sixteen years my junior, very much an afterthought of my parents. Mom was 21 when she had me, 37 when she had Kate.

Unexpected or not, she had definitely been a welcome addition to the family. Around age 16, I was seriously beginning to resent women for ignoring me, or even worse, taking advantage of me. But my kid sister had always been my biggest fan and I think it is because she used to unashamedly crawl on my lap and demand hugs and jokes from me until she was ten or so that I never turned into an axe murderer or something similarly creepy. Women couldn't all be bad. Some had to be like Kate. I'd never take someone's Kate away.

“You can let go now,” I muttered, after Kate had taken me in a vice-like grip and peppered me with kisses. Kate is tiny. Well, next to me, anyway. I'm 1.77 metres, she is all of 1.60 and that is in heels. Her hair is usually brown, but it varies. Today, she wore a leather jacket that had been carefully made to look old and worn but was probably made not less than a week ago. She had curled hair this time. You never knew with Kate. It looked good on her. Mischievous, which suited her character.

“I'll let go when I am good and done,” she giggled. “I missed you!”

“And I you. Are you here alone?”

“Yes, straight from Schiphol airport. Are you?”

She peered around me, as if Katja Schuurman might suddenly appear with a plate of snacks.

“Well yes, obviously.”

She pushed past me and saw what could technically be called a kitchen, with the microwave lasagna I was going to heat up waiting on the countertop.

“Jesus, Martin! Is there a manual for sad old bastards? Microwave lasagna in a sad little house... We're going out. Get your coat. And I'm buying.”

“It's not as if I am destitute, you know.”

“You must be, if you're living here and eating that.”

She grabbed my wrist and pulled me to the front door, but then she took a better look at me.

“Change,” she ordered. “You must have a suit somewhere. I'm not taking you out dressed like that.”

I was wearing a perfectly clean checkered shirt and jeans. The only thing you could say against me is that my shoes needed a shine.

Still, Kate gets what Kate wants, so I did change into a suit while she prowled around my house and unashamedly opened all the cabinets. Even my nightstand drawer!

“No condoms?” she asked, as I tried to do my tie.

“Fresh out,” I lied. “I was going to pick up a dozen tomorrow. I'll just use a bin liner if anything pops up tonight.”

She sat down on my bed. Her leather boots were black and shiny. Kate always dressed well.

“That is just sad. You are a sad old man. It's today right, that you signed the papers?”

“Few days ago. But I did close the office today. I just came in.”

“Have you spoken to...”

Kate had never been Monique's biggest fan, but after the divorce I don't think she has

ever said her name.

“Not recently. Not much to discuss. So how is this? Considering I'm a miserable, old, overweight, balding, unemployed and single sad sack of shit, of course.”

She got up from my bed and straightened my already perfect tie.

“See, was that so hard? Now you look like a human being. We'll take my car and you can drive.”

It was months since I last saw Kate in person and that was at our parents house in Hastings, in the South of England. We called each other at least once a week, but she can be hard to reach so she usually found me. Kate is in the vaguest of businesses: star management. She works for an agency that assigns her to do PR for singers and bands, so she travels a lot and is usually in a different time zone to me. Kate gets shit done. Need five big black guys to carry you into a theatre on one of those litter chairs a Pharaoh would use? Kate will whip out her phone and get them for you, plus that chair. Want a limo? Black, blue or pink? Are you suddenly a vegan who is into raw food? She'll find you a personal chef with the exact same mental affliction and fire her for you when you've come to your senses. Are you booked to do a concert but you prefer to stay in your hotel room doing coke? Kate will come and get you and you will do that show even if she has to personally animate your corpse with piano wire. Kate has a billion weird stories and hardly any spare time, so it is a treat when I see her.

She took me to a really nice place near Amersfoort I'd never even heard of, where I did not look out of place in my suit and tie. The waiter fell instantly and deeply in love with her (they always do) and we were treated like royalty. Of course, my current predicament came up.

“So... what are your plans?” she asked, when our starter plates were taken away.

“Well... get a job, I suppose. One or two people have hinted there may be some mid-level positions opening up. Sales, mostly. Not quite a dream job, but...”

“Really? You wouldn't do that, would you?” she said, indignantly. “You are a CEO.”

“I was. I am currently unemployed and not entitled to any kind of benefits. So I am in no position to be picky and I won't be. Jack from Devon-Willis has said to come see him Monday, so I suppose I am going to have to write a resumé. It's been a while since I needed one, I think my last copy is still in WordPerfect format.”

She just shook her head.

“Don't take a bloody office job. This is your chance. You're brilliant, go do something nice. Do radio. Write. Go do standup, you'd be amazing. Act!”

I just smiled.

“I'm a fat forty year old and I have absolutely no network in the media. No casting agency is going to want me unless they need an extra to sneak out of a warehouse in the background or something like that. And as to stand-up... I don't really feel very funny and I don't think you can actually make a living wage doing that. Not until you're actually famous. And last time I checked, there were waiting lists to even do free open mic spots. Meanwhile, I have bills to pay.”

“So how much do you have left?”

Kate and I were always open and honest about money, but I actually felt embarrassed now.

“I'll manage for a few months.”

“Ah yes and how much is that in actual money exactly?” she insisted.

“About 3700 euros.”

Her eyes, brown with light flecks in them, absolutely amazing eyes that can get out of traffic tickets on all continents and probably out of assault charges if she really tried, went wide.

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“And debts?”

“Yeah. I'm square with Monique, but I owe quite a bit. Richard Maarsen has taken over that debt, so it's not at a bank rate. But he and I agreed I'll pay him four percent and try to pay off at least ten thousand a year.”

“On how much?”

“One thirty. It's what I...”

“WHAT?” she shouted, not giving a toss about people looking at us. “How are you in the hole for one hundred and thirty THOUSAND?”

“Shhhh... Be quiet, Katey. I wanted to buy out Monique.”

“Buy out? Then why are YOU living in the Shrieking Shack? She should be paying YOU. You left that house.”

“It's not that simple. Alimony. She was a shareholder. We had...”

“You are an idiot,” she declared. “That vulture took you to the cleaners. Alimony. You don't even have kids. Shareholder. For what, sucking your dick twice a oh thank you, that looks fantastic. Can I have some more fizzy water? And my brother would like a beer.”

“I'm fine,” I protested, as my main course was presented.

“No, seriously, he wants a beer,” smiled Kate at the waiter. “Large one. And a shotgun, if you can manage. Make sure it fits in his mouth.”

Kate was fuming. She wanted to know the exact details of my financial arrangements. My accountant had actually said I had been too generous to just about everybody and had informally recommended a different course of action that would have required me to leave The Netherlands for five years. That would have left an awful lot of people in trouble, though, and I couldn't bring myself to do that.

“It's actually very nice food, you might want to taste some of it” I said, as Kate was chomping her way through a salmon mousse and berating me at the same time.

“I eat nonsense like this every damned day,” she huffed. “And I would like for my brother to be able to do the same. You'll be homeless in three months unless something comes up!”

“I won't be homeless. I'll be fine. And I'll get a job where I get to go home at 5 PM and not worry if we'll make payroll this month. That will be nice for a change. This Irish beef is fantastic, by the way. Who is paying for it? Shakira? Lady Gaga? Elton John?”

That was one of our family jokes for Kate. She always carried credit cards of the people she was handling, or at least a card from her agency that she could use to ply clients and solve problems. That's why I let her pay for dinner: it wouldn't come out of her own pocket, or so she said. I never really knew her clients. I'm not exactly up to date with modern music. And so when I was teasing Kate, I generally named the most obvious showbiz people I could think of, which in my case usually included a fair few that hadn't come out with a proper song in ten years or so.

She mellowed, but only a bit.

“Come live with me,” she said. “It will be fun and you'll save money.”

“Fun? You're never home.”

“Sometimes I am. And anyway, that's better for you. You can finally go on the prowl for a bit, find some girls to fuck. You'll have the flat to yourself when I'm gone. Martin, please come with me! I don't want to think of you living in The Cabin in the Woods. Join me in London.”

“Very hard to do job interviews in Holland if you live in London.”

“Then don't do job interviews here. Do them there.”

“Katey, I need to come up with 15000 euros a year just for clearing my debt. London isn't the place for me to make that kind of money, it's expensive. And I'm just... not as British as you are. I'm a foreigner in the UK. Nobody needs me there.”

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When Kate was nine, my parents moved to England. My father got posted there and they rented a house in Pinner, near his new job. I was 25 at the time and because the house in Holland was large and I had no social life to speak of, I still lived at home. Dad was often away on business trips anyway and my mom liked having someone around to open jars and change light bulbs. It also meant there was always someone home for Kate, because mother often worked evenings and nights as supervisor in a retirement home.

Living at home gave me the opportunity to try lots of different jobs without worrying too much about paying the rent, and so I like to tell myself it helped make me into quite a rounded individual. I've tried my hand at a lot of things: journalism, making music, being a tour guide and setting up my own web development business amongst them. I had a future in most things, but there was always something new to explore.

I got my diplomas of course; I tried mathematics for a while but it wasn't for me; even a shy guy like me was more of a people person than my typical classmate; I nearly went nuts dealing with these people. And so I ended up with a humble BA in business studies and some certificates that only make sense if you know the Dutch higher education system of the nineties. My CV doesn't exactly translate well unless I add a brief history of education reforms in the Netherlands, going back to just before the Dutch Republic of 1581. My BA, for instance, was awarded a year after I had graduated from an institution called 'HBO'. No, not the movie channel. You can see how this got confusing, so they tried to align the system with international standards and that's how I and a few hundred thousand others found a BA in the mail one day. I just found it amusing and said: 'I pity the fool!' a lot. To myself, mostly.

Not that it mattered much; I was always employed in the Netherlands, hired by people with similarly incomprehensible resumé's. When I went abroad to apply for internships and the like, being Dutch was generally enough to get hired. But that was when I was young and cheap and would be gone three to six months later anyway. I didn't fancy my chances much nowadays, when my main achievement had been to build my own company and then lose it again because of financing problems.

I can't say it was nice to see my family go off to England, but at that point I was already an adult. They kept the house in Leiden on, so I had somewhere to live. I didn't join them because by then I was already running my own business and it was also around that time Monique showed up. She liked the shy boy with the well-to-do parents in the conveniently located big empty house, as she went to Leiden University and didn't feel like sleeping in a dorm or an attic. She moved in after a few months, so I never followed my family to England.

Kate had no trouble at all adapting to the UK. Her English is flawless and she can go for weeks without speaking Dutch, except when she has me on the phone. And even then she often forgets to switch over. My parents like it there, too, and so they never left, even though dad retired last year. I can never work out what keeps them there, the food or the climate... (Taxes. It's taxes. The UK is bad, but Holland is worse. Plus, it's a good place to live if you've got money.)

Now I don't want to brag, but my English is actually fairly good, though I am prone to amusing 'Dutchisms'. I'll occasionally say things like: 'he sat on a chair' rather than 'he sat in a chair', simply because in Dutch you say 'on'. But I have an ear for accents, so mostly I sound like a native. It defaults to a rather posh Oxford accent, though I wouldn't be able to find either Oxford or indeed Cambridge on a map, but I can do regional ones as well. Katey loves that, she's always testing me and teaching me new expressions. And then, while managing to sound as if I am born and raised in Liverpool or East London, I'll come out and say 'musea' rather than museums. Because

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that is the Dutch plural. Or I'll say elevator rather than lift, or write 'waste' instead of 'waist'. I'm a visitor there at best, an impostor at worst. I don't belong there.

Kate wasn't letting go of her idea that easily, though. She never does.

"I can cover your debt, Martin. I've easily got enough and I don't want interest."

"Kate, grow up. If you have that kind of money, first of all you should be investing it in property. Second, you shouldn't be giving it away. Four percent is very reasonable, especially because there are no other strings attached. He is doing me a solid."

"At four percent? My bank only gives me one! I'd LOVE to make 1.1 percent!"

"Can we not talk about this anymore? I'd like to enjoy my food."

"Okay," she grumbled. And she did indeed manage to let it go for a little while, launching into one of her lurid stories about showbiz people I had never heard of doing sordid things in hotel corridors.

"No dessert for me, thanks. Just coffee," I said when the waiter came around with the menu.

"Is this because you're on the market again? I'll have the eclairs. And two spoons."

"Not really. It's because this is not the time to invest in a new wardrobe. I eat when I am bored."

"Were you very bored of late?" she teased.

"I know... Look, I've been under a lot of stress, okay? It's what I do. At least Monique used to keep me in check with balanced meals."

Kate grunted.

"That was about all she could do, starve people. Who marries a dietician, really?"

"Chubby blokes. Now, how long are you in Holland for?"

"As briefly as possible, really."

"Why, what brought you here?"

"My brother! Alone and unemployed! I came here to get you, you idiot. Why else am I here?"

"Really? You didn't even call ahead."

"Like you were going anywhere. I know my brother. Last day at the office, all alone, moping around. I couldn't get an earlier flight or I'd have picked you up there. Look, at least come and stay for a week or so. It looks like I'll have some time on my hands. We'll go see mom and dad. You shouldn't be alone. Please?"

I can't say no to Kate. Not for long.

"What if I say yes?"

"Then this:"

She pulled out her phone and started typing in an app. After a minute or so she looked up at me.

"Did you renew your passport recently?"

"No. I'm good till 2019."

"That's the one I have here. Okay, here we go... And now I've booked us on the 12:10 from Schiphol, tomorrow. Open ended for you."

"Well, thank you. It's very sweet of you to be so concerned. How much is my ticket?"

"Why don't you ask bleedin' Shakira?" she snarled.

We had taken our time, so after dessert I asked her where she was staying. A bus ran to my 'resort' from this town, I just assumed she would be in a hotel near the airport. Driving to and from my house would take her 40 minutes at least. When I asked, she huffed.

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"I haven't got a hotel. I'm staying at yours."

"Oh. I'm not really um... equipped for visitors."

"You have a double bed, I have my trolley. It will be fine. We'll pack up your sad-ass collection of rags and clown suits tomorrow and drive my rental back to Schiphol. You can park that pussy magnet near a railway station on the way, okay?"

That sounded like a plan. Kate always had a plan, plus a backup for that plan. That was her job. We drove back to my house and she took a small, black flight case from the trunk.

"I'll change the bed," I offered. "Can you make us some tea?"

"At least you're not in danger of becoming an alcoholic," she said, seeming to know exactly where to find everything. Well, she had opened all the cabinets earlier today. I got out of my suit and changed the bed. It's a double bed, which came with the house. I would not have been so optimistic if I had furnished the place myself.

I owned very little these days. A laughably old phone, a laptop that originally shipped with Windows XP, some clothes, a few CDs and photo albums. Monique had all the nice stuff back at the house and I knew I could get it back if I asked her, but I just didn't have the space for it.

"How long have you been here?" Kate asked, looking in on me wrestling with the sheets.

"About a year. It's a rental from the parents of my accountant. There's a lot of money to be made in emergency housing for the suddenly divorced, I gather. There's a waiting list for this."

She walked in and helped me tuck in the corners.

"Then why not get the hell out, give some other poor bugger a roof over his head. I mean, quite apart from anything else, we're miles from anywhere. What job are you going to get in this area? They have milking machines now, you know."

"I'm sure I'll do better here than in London. Look, if I am suddenly hired by Cygnosis or Grant Laudon, all I need to do is make a phone call and they'll come get my stuff and chuck it in a few boxes for me. And they can then torch those, for all I care. But I am not quite ready to commit to homelessness, okay?" I said, fighting the last corner.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm pushing too hard."

I looked up. She seemed really sad all of a sudden.

"Hey, cheer up. I know you mean well. Now, let's have tea."

The house had a sofa that had seen better days somewhere before Yeltsin had stood down, but that's why they sell plaids. There was one other chair, but it was so terrible I mainly used it as a small desk for my laptop. And so we sat next to each other, legs pulled up, hugging mugs of tea.

"So, Casanova... When did you last have sex?" Kate asked. It's one of her favourite questions. She asks everybody, except our parents. She didn't ask me when I was married though.

"You haven't asked me that in fifteen years."

"I'm asking now," she laughed. "I figured the ice princess wasn't overly keen on it. Was I right?"

"Yeah. She was okay at the beginning. But that went downhill amazingly fast."

"Thought so. But you've been a bachelor for a year now so... When did you last have a girl over?"

I just stirred my tea. It's not something I care to discuss with my kid sister, even if she's not a kid anymore. Plus, if I thought about the real answer too long, I might very well decide to headbutt a train.

"Does anybody ever give you an honest answer?" I deflected.

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“Most people do. You are stalling. My guess is... six months. At least.”

“Oh really? And with whom did I have sex then?”

“I don't know, do I? You still had staff at the time. Annabelle worked for you until November.”

“Yes... I know you don't believe me, but I never actually had sex with or even tried to seduce Annabelle. She was my secretary, that means I have a duty of care as an employer.”

“But you kissed!”

“We kissed once, five years ago, when she got way too drunk at a conference and cornered me in a lift. I was so surprised, I forgot to push her away. Or at least, that is my story. Apologies were made, we had a laugh about it and once a year, on my birthday, she gave me a proper kiss when nobody was looking. As we had broken the ice anyway. That is the be all and end all of it.”

Kate looked at me, bemused.

“That's the most you have ever said about it. Any more?”

“No. I was the boss and I was married. And all my customers are men. Were men. Are men, were my customers.”

“Martin, you were married for twelve years to a woman who treated you like a cash machine. Apart from kissing your secretary on the lips once a year, are you telling me you never strayed?”

I was tired. I'd had two beers, which for me is my limit. I had just terminated my own company and apparently I was so pathetic, my own sister had come to rescue me. And now she made me think back to my marriage. Sorry folks, but I lost it. Somewhere a valve opened and before I knew it, I was going to pieces.

“Hey! Oh God, I'm sorry!” said Kate, leaning over to hug me. I pushed her away.

“I'll... be fine... Just don't... go on about it... okay? Jesus...”

I hadn't cried for about as long as I didn't have sex: 19 months, 14 days. Monique had deigned to have sex with me when it seemed as if Samsung was going to buy us. Turns out that was just another tactic to drive an extra nail into our coffin, to let us bleed out just a bit more. Samsung didn't want our tech. They wanted us out of the way, then scoop up our patents.

Kate watched me for a few seconds, then stood up and got some paper towel from the kitchen.

“Thanks,” I said, weakly. It was taking all my concentration to stop this and I wasn't doing well.

“Come here, you sad old git,” she said, standing in front of me and pushing my arms away. Then she just sat on my lap, or rather she straddled me. She used to do that when she was a kid, it was her favourite way to talk. Today, she was about three times the size of that four year old girl, so the experience was rather different.

At the time, it could get uncomfortable when she moved around too much, because penises on 20 year olds really don't know or care what is going on: if you touch them, they get hard. Little Kate went through that phase where she wanted to see 'pee-pees' and for a while, she really tried to get to see mine. We had to have a talk about it in the end, or mom did to be precise. I didn't want to be present for that one.

“Hey, you're not a kid anymore, get off me!” I protested.

“Shut up. Be human for a few minutes, see how the rest of us manage,” she said, wrapping her arms around me and resting her chin gently on my left shoulder. I didn't have it in me to fight. I don't think another human being had touched me, save from handshakes and a few parting kisses from female employees, since Monique had stopped showing affection. It felt good to be hugged, to feel the warmth of another human. And I remembered her smell. Katey had always loved

almond soap. It was her thing; everything was almonds with her. And so, occasionally, I'd be in a hotel or someone's toilet and there'd be almond soap. In those instances, it was almost as if a hologram of Kate appeared on my lap in a millisecond, hugging me as she did now. Smells are an incredibly powerful way to trigger memories.

My janitor had once bought a tray of almond soap dispensers for our restrooms, a perfectly normal thing to do. I had to tell him I wanted them replaced, which he found odd. But I just didn't want to be reminded of Kate, or rather Kate's absence in my life, two to three times a day. And more importantly: I was afraid the effect would wear off. If I'm honest, I needed to feel as if Kate was around sometimes. Apart from mom, she was, for ages, the only woman on this planet who gave a shit whether I lived or died; who was actually glad to see me, came looking for me when she missed me.

Our tea was cold by the time I was done crying. Not that I was actually done, there just comes a point where your body says: 'Okay, we need to shut this down or we will dehydrate.' Kate had hugged me all that time, occasionally moving her head to my other shoulder. Sometimes I'd try to say something, an apology for being so weak, and she would tut in my ear and say that it was fine, that there was nothing to be ashamed about.

Eventually she got off my lap. She tried her tea and pulled a face.

"Stone cold. My God, Martin. She really did a number on you, didn't she?"

"Well, you know... Seeing a multimillion euro company go down in flames may have had something to do with it," I said, defending my ex-wife as ever.

"Keep telling yourself that," said Kate. "Let's turn in. Turns out I am not in the mood for tea."

I nodded and got up. Then I took the cushions and the plaid off the couch and moved the coffee table towards the wall.

"What the hell are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm afraid I'll bang my knee against it if I get up in the night," I explained, stacking the pillows on that terrible chair.

"We sleep in the bed, Martin. It's a double bed. That means TWO people. I'm not getting on that couch and neither are you."

She was right, I suppose. We had shared a bed often enough, on vacation. My parents liked luxury and could afford it, so Kate and I would have a hotel room to ourselves rather than us all getting a room with two doubles but still only one bathroom. That worked fine; we simply made sure the bathroom door was locked when occupied.

We brushed our teeth and I undressed to my underwear after having turned off the lights in the rest of the house. As I wear shorts and an undershirt, that's not a very shocking look. Kate showed up from the bathroom in slightly racy knickers, silky and black, but she wore a very long shirt with Lisa Simpson on it which covered most of her bottom. I was already in bed and she jumped in like we were having a slumber party.

"Finally, a woman between your sheets!" she laughed, crawling around on all fours.

"Don't remind me. This bed has seen less action than Pavarotti's home trainer. The light is on your side, you can feel the switch in the cord just behind the radiator."

She got under the sheets and turned off the light.

"It's been a while since I was in bed with a man," she mused.

"I don't want to know," I answered, turning to my side and settling in.

"No, really. How long was it for you, did you say?"

"I've never been in a bed with a man."

"Funny. With a woman. How long ago did you say it was?"

"I didn't."

It had been on Friday, June 17th 2011. Twelve minutes of very mediocre sucking and fucking, for which Monique tried to get rewarded with a new car. I didn't even think her performance was worth a new inner tube for that bike she never used, to be honest.

Kate kept on talking, in that darkened room. It's very quiet in a forest at night, which made the room feel much more intimate.

"Probably a year. Yeah, must be a year. Some drummer, in a hotel. Man, was I bored."

"How interesting. I'd like to sleep now."

"Nothing after that. That's pathetic, isn't it? I mean, not your level of pathetic, but still. I'm hot. You'd think there'd be a queue. I'd love that, actually. Take 'em three at a time. Have 'em plug me up like a leaky rubber boat."

Now I sat up, leaning on my elbow.

"Kate, shut the hell up. Could you make this even weirder? Do you have a pierced nipple you'd like to show me or something? Bloody hell, I don't need to know all that!"

Well, she finally got me. It was all meant to get me to fly off the handle and now she had managed. She howled like a wolf and because her laughter is as contagious as an aerosol spray with Ebola in a leukaemia unit, soon I was laughing too.

"Ooooooh, I've missed that. I was beginning to think I'd forgotten how to get you angry," she giggled, shaking the bed.

"You still got it. Now, can we get some sleep? I've had a bit of a day, you know."

"Okay. Good night, brother dearest."

I pretended to snore.

"Funny you should say that, though. I do have a piercing somewhere. You'll never guess. 'Ere, if you can find it while I sleep, I'll make breakfast tomorrow. Have a rummage."

"Shut. Up."

I still chuckled though. The things that girl would say...

I probably wouldn't have slept a wink that night. The past few months I had generally slept only five to six hours, more from exhaustion than anything else. But this night, I slept just fine. There was a warm, friendly body nearby and whenever I woke up, there was an arm or a leg against me, which was just nice. I've been told I snore, but there were no complaints. Whenever I was briefly awake, she was just breathing quietly.

I did have to disturb her when I woke up because my bum was getting cold, though. Technically it was a double bed, but this size is called a 'twijfelaar' in Dutch, literally a 'doubter': wide for a single, bit small for a double. She was curled up against me, being the little spoon, and her ass pressed into me so hard that my own behind was now pushed out over the edge of the bed.

"Kate... You awake?"

"Hmmm?" It didn't sound as if she was actually awake.

"You're pushing me out of bed," I whispered.

She pressed her buttocks deeper into my groin and just sighed. My dick had woken up because of this long ago, but other mechanisms had kicked in to make me move out of the way. You don't want your penis rubbing up against your kid sister's ass, really. What if she woke up and thought I had manoeuvred myself in that position?

"Hey, stop that. Lie on your back or something. I'm not your drummer."

Without a word she moved away again and I managed to get back on board. Oh great, now I had an erection. My dick hadn't been anywhere near a woman for ages, so it was happy just where it was. And now, to make the point it wasn't happy with being moved from rubbing against those silky knickers, it got as hard and as large as it could and began to almost throb.

Ordinarily I'd have found some relief and gone back to sleep, but that wasn't going to

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happen with her in the room, obviously. And so, very carefully, I climbed out of bed. Just as I found myself near the door, Kate's hand shot out from underneath the blankets and turned on the light. I still had my boxers on, but they looked like a navy signal flag now. I'll admit it would have been funny if a black triangle was the one for 'I require a tug', but it isn't.

Kate was looking straight at my pitched tent.

“Jesus Christ, where are you two going?”

“Just getting a drink,” I said, turning away. I meant to say 'get a drink of water', obviously.

“Buy him one too,” she giggled. I snuck out of the room, not sure where to go. Jack off on that couch? Bit nasty, what if she got up?

The bathroom was just next door, one of many design flaws of this vacation house. Who builds a bathroom next to a bedroom? Put it next to the kitchen or a closet. Still, I didn't have many other options, so I got in there and turned on the tap. That made a lot of noise, as water rushed through the pipes and created as much ruckus in the middle of the night as starting a vacuum cleaner. I leaned against the far wall, got out my dick and began to wank off furiously. I needed to slay this monster and do it quickly, too: you can't very well run a tap for ten minutes. I gripped my cock like I wanted to strangle it and began jacking away so fast my hand was a blur. Well, it remained rock hard but that was about it. This just hurt me, but didn't do much to let it subside.

Perhaps emptying my bladder would help. It's very hard to piss with an erection, but I'd been a boy for forty years so it wasn't the first time I had to deal with that problem. I managed, without making a mess. It helped a little, but not much. I washed my hands and by now the house had been noisy for several minutes and this was getting silly so I turned off the tap.

Now there was a knock at the door.

“I need to go too.”

Oh great.

“Just a minute.”

“NOW. You've been running a tap for ages. Open up!” she insisted. I tucked myself in, but ended up with the exact same black equilateral triangle as before. Still, I opened the door and let her push past me, sneaking out as soon as I could. I closed the door, but she didn't lock it and was already on the toilet.

We had never been one of those families that did things in front of each other. I had seen her go potty when she was a toddler, but that was about it. Bathroom doors were closed in our house. But now I was in the hallway and I could hear everything that was going on. She really had needed to pee urgently, I could hear a concentrated stream hitting the bowl. Moving into the bedroom didn't help much either, as the walls were about as thin as the doors. Finally, she flushed. But she did not come back. Instead, I began to hear a new sound, like... I wasn't sure. She wasn't washing her hands. There was no running water. Was she fluffing her cheeks? That was an odd thing to do and it sounded differently too. At last I realised what was happening: that was the unmistakable sound of a woman masturbating. I say unmistakable, when I actually mean: 'as heard in countless porn videos'. She was rubbing her pussy, alternating with slapping it. Every now and then I heard an 'oh yeah' or a 'mmmmm', clear as day. Should I say something? Should I pretend I was asleep? Should I open the window and disappear into the woods, never to be seen again?

I'm not proud of it, but if anything was going to help me get rid of the father of all boners, this was it: I took out my dick and, listening to my sister moaning and slapping her pussy, I jacked off.

I did step back into the hallway, halfway towards the kitchen so I could hide in the dark and ejaculate into a paper towel, but that house was so small it didn't put any serious distance

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between us. There was nowhere else to go, the house was just that small.

I, myself, am quiet as a mouse when I masturbate. Nobody had ever been even remotely interested in witnessing it and in fact, I mostly had to hide that I was doing it for Monique, so in that regard, I was like a ninja. With one hand I grabbed a piece of paper, with the other I did the obvious. Kate was stepping it up and that helped me a lot. I wouldn't need much time to finish now. The thing is, she had to be aware I could hear her. She had been in the bedroom, awake, when I stepped in. But she seemed to have forgotten, moaning fairly loudly now. I finally came, cleaned myself up and was in bed before her. My erection had disappeared like a banker in a courthouse. I could hear her wash her hands and then she stepped back into the room and slid next to me in bed. I had turned to my side, facing the wall nearest me. This was not a moment for eye contact.

“Can I turn off the light?” was all she asked.

“Yup.”

“Good night.”

“G'nite.”

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