

Mandatory Equality

By Ina Disguise

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Roger ran a manicured nail over the spot of paint on the glass. It came off fairly easily, which he was thankful for. Nothing must sully his view of Hyde Park. Roger congratulated himself on what he had achieved with his modest 'just-down-the-road' almost-Oxford English degree. Now that he had managed to get on the second rung of his career in investment banking, largely due to his parent's investment in his expensive schooling, he was looking forward to moving out of his stylish yet expensive rented 'bedsit' and into something of his own. He was, after all, self-made. He stood, enjoying the view from his rented millionaire mansion flat at the window of the shared living room. So nice to be sharing with like-minded hedge fund hopefuls. And so peaceful, after a hard week with the brokers.

"Roger, just popping out to Wholefoods Market, can I get you anything?"

"Maybe some chai, and some calorie free noodles." Roger was aware that his appearance was important in his line of work. He liked to keep himself trim. Only this morning, the nameless woman he had enjoyed his weekend ritual of cocaine and dirty martini with, had commented on his trim physique. She was still in his bedroom now. If only he remembered something about her? Some detail that would remind him of her name, if indeed, he had ever known it.

As he prepared some artisan coffee in his Italian coffee maker, and warmed some croissants, he heard the distant waterfall shower in the marble bathroom. Ah, there she was, she would be out soon. He plumped up the designer pillows on the leather sofas and positioned himself on a stool at the kitchen island, coffee in hand, croissants on square black plate. A vision of a thoroughly modern guy, in his luxurious, 70% of his abundant wages, rented flat.

At length, she emerged. My word, she was magnificent. Tall, slim, muscular, presumably from Pilates as nobody really had calves that long, surely? Blonde. Did she say she was a lawyer? His memory was fuzzy on that, since he had not really been listening to her.

"Coffee, how nice." Her long, toffee coloured hair fell forward as she reached for the sugar substitute. "I'm so sorry, I don't quite remember your name?"

Thank God, thought Roger. "Roger, Roger Bolton. And you are?" he shot her his best version of a ditzy Hugh Grant smile.

"Ah well, Roger Bolton, it was nice to meet you, too. This is your flat?" The lady was not for talking about her name, evidently. Roger felt too embarrassed to press further.

"I live here, yes." Roger did not feel the need to admit that he was living like a very wealthy student, with another four young financial whizzkids. He prayed that none of them would return. He twiddled a designer cufflink.

She gathered the silk bathrobe she had found in the wetroom closer to her to protect her cleavage. "I suppose I had better get dressed. I have things to do before work on Monday." She did not look particularly attached, either to him or her surroundings.

Roger supposed that this was a good thing, since he usually had problems getting rid of them.

“Do you.....do you want my number? We could do breakfast or something?”
Roger was in the unusual position of feeling awkward.

“To talk over old times?” The honey-hair lady, as she was now to be known, laughed as she retreated to his bedroom to dress. “It’s been fun, sweetie, but this is a big city.”

This was true. London was a big city, and people did this all the time, without feeling the need for social niceties such as breakfast offers. Roger felt a peculiar mixture of relief and disappointment at the rejection. She was far more attractive as a result.

She emerged, fully made-up, hair in an elegant knot, toffee leather trousers and boots to match her hair and a fur of some sort. She smiled. “See you around, perhaps.” She headed for the door, and departed without further ado.

Roger was left somewhat nonplussed, and fiddled nervously with the cufflinks again as he opened his briefcase to see if there was anything he needed to catch up with before Monday. Ah yes, his forex experiment. He could take care of that, and perhaps enjoy some online poker later. He felt a little empty. Sex was a bit unfriendly, when you didn’t have to excuse yourself, he thought.

Some time later, after going through the international news and the financial papers, Roger settled down to his online poker and whiled away the rest of the night before returning to work on Monday. His flatmates returned, and after the inevitable guffaws and humorous chides he received due to his late night visitor from the night before, they settled into some financial gossip. Life was sweet when your earnings were unlimited. They all felt that they were doing pretty well, and nothing would stand in the way of their glittering future plans.

The following night they planned to meet at Aldo’s, the local chicken bar. Perhaps they could trash the place again, or loudly refuse to pay. They had done this in the past, with ‘hilarious’ results. They did not see anything wrong with this, since they would inevitably be able to produce a few thousand spare change to pay off Aldo if need be. They were untouchable bastions of Britain, shoring up the welfare budget with the results of their bonus-accruing gambling on the stock market.

“Oy, oy you dick’ead! Sell ‘em this way, yeah?” Roger was at his happiest in the computer room, where a selection of pale and sweaty boys made and broke their careers guessing what the money would do next. In recent years, the occasional woman would stop by for a few weeks, on her way to being sent somewhere better, or quieter depending on how much money she made. The computer room was where the high pressure stuff took place, and was not considered a long-term spot for girls. Some of the less talented boys were concerned about the impending loss of their career, but this was not something Roger had to worry about. He would actively avoid national news, in favour of market statistics and industry gossip. Yes, Roger was a celebrated, coke sniffing, womanising money-making machine. He had particularly enjoyed ‘Wolf of Wall Street’ and liked to model himself on the film’s anti-hero in more whimsical moments, flicking his hair and shooting his mouth off.

A few weeks later, Roger arrived at work to find the formerly sweaty computer room half empty. There was a sombre atmosphere. No-one was yelling, and nobody looked up as he strutted to his desk. A note was pinned to it. Roger was confused. He looked along his row to the next chap at his desk. Timothy looked up, and swiftly looked back down again. What could have happened? Roger's performance was exemplary, so the call to the floor supervisor could not be bad news, surely? Where was everyone? Usually they were at their desks for as many hours as they could blag, given the money that even the underperformers were taking home. He thought about asking Timothy what he knew, and rejected the idea. Timmy-boy might think he was worried. He wasn't having that. He snatched up the note and prowled confidently to the floor supervisor's office.

"Orright Roger?" The gruff floor supervisor looked surprisingly cheerful. "Grab a seat, mate." The plump little man waved his hand in the direction of a chair. "Nuffink to worry about, we can't lose you." The supervisor laughed.

"What's up, mate?" Roger did his best to sound nonchalant. "Wot's 'appened to the office?"

"Mandatory Equality Bill, innit. The slowcoaches have been filtered out to make way for the women."

"Mandatory Equality?" Roger had never heard of it. It did not sound good.

"Yeah, mate. In the news and that. Mandatory Equality. The 'less-gifted' amongst us have been moved to the customer service department, and the best performing ladies will be getting a promotion up 'ere. All the departments have to show equality, and the ladies have the same promotion prospects as the lads now." The supervisor continued to grin. "It'll improve the view, wunnit."

"Won't work, mate." Roger liked to adopt the same accent as the supervisor. He imagined that this would endear him. "They can't stand the risk."

"Don't matter, does it? It's legal, mate. And that brings me to why you're in 'ere."

"Yes?"

"I have some good news for you, my son. You're pregnant." The supervisor continued to grin.

"Pregnant?" Now Roger was really confused.

"Yeah, pregnant. Under mandatory equality, you have to decide when to take your paternity leave, innit?"

"This is a joke, right? I'm a bloke." Roger was beginning to feel a bit uncomfortable. What was going on? He looked up at the ship's clock on the office wall. How long was this gag going to take? He had money to make.

“If you want to ask about the birds and the bees, there are places to learn that. You’ve been reported as fathering a baby by a Miss....Miss Hartliss. Two months gone, she is. You can go to the Mandatory Equality Unit and find out about the logistics, the where, the when an’ that. All I want to know is – when do you want to take your twelve months off on half pay?”

“Twelve months...on half pay?” Roger felt his dreams of living alone were slipping away from him. He would barely be able to afford a one bedroom ex Local Authority flat on half basic pay and no bonuses. “What about my promotion?”

“You can forget that now, son. You can pick up when you get back. The way I see it, the sooner you take your year off the better.” The supervisor raised his eyebrows.

“How does anyone know that I’m the father?” Roger was already starting to think of ways he could escape this horrible fate. “I don’t know any....Miss Hartliss.”

“They can explain more at the Mandatory Equality Unit. I can tell you that they sent out a picture of Miss Hartliss to jog your memory. They were quite clear on paternity. Times, places, word of a talented young female barrister, that sort of thing.” The supervisor pushed the form, complete with photograph, across the desk.

Roger’s heart sank. Honey-hair. He had knocked up Miss Honey Hair. Bitch. Her name was Hartliss, how appropriate. That was his life fucked then. “Can they force me to accept this? Surely they need DNA?” He was really frightened now.

“Innocent till proven guilty, mate. She’s telling the truth until you can prove otherwise. Plenty of CCTV and GPS monitoring now, mate. If you didn’t want this to ‘appen, should have used a condom or stayed at ‘ome with yer zip up.” The supervisor looked serious. “Seriously, mate, I’ll be sorry to lose ya, but you’re job will be ‘ere when you get back. Best get yourself down to the Mandatory Equality Unit, there’s a good lad.”

Roger left the supervisor’s office in a daze. Just like that. Life screwed. He packed up his desk and took the box back to the flat. He wouldn’t be able to live here anymore on half pay. He reckoned he was down to average London wages now. All because of a lousy shag. Well, probably a good one actually, but not that good. A lawyer, eh? Better have some evidence then, he thought as he took his passport and ID and headed down to the local Mandatory Equality Office.

The office was surprisingly civilised, having been designed on similar principles to a posher-than-usual jobcentre. A security guard challenged him on the way in.

“Sorry mate, we get a lot of aggressive men ‘ere. Wot’s yer business?”

“I’m accused of knocking up some woman I don’t know. Well, it was only one night.” Roger looked up at the older man.

“Aren’t you all, mate, aren’t you all.” The guard sighed. “This is going to ruin things for us men, you know. No more chasing the titties, no more shagging at random and

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