

Absinthe and the Friendship Absolute

by Ramona Depares

Men's toes are a gross and ugly thing, and M's were peeping through the cheap, flea market flip-flops. I shuddered, introduced myself and tried to forget about the toes. But they stayed there in some corner of my mind, forcing me to picture a parade of gnarled stubs, each one more disgusting than the other. He talked fast, as though he were on something, which he probably was. And he definitely needed a good bath.

No, the first time I met M, I was not impressed. He was not young. He had also done some 'living', and it showed. He was tall, awkward, and he rolled his Rs in that typical French manner that bothered me but not quite. His black hair was curly and unkempt, and there was one strand that was longer than the rest and kept falling across his eyes, while he explained what a *game-changer* his latest video was.

I met him at Ġugar, the preferred meeting spot for hacks and artist types. I was between jobs after the magazine I'd been working for folded, but still feeling pretty chill about it. There were enough freelance gigs coming in to keep me afloat for a few months. A fellow writer had passed on M's contact, knowing that hipster types were my thing. In return, I gave him personal contacts for a local politico who was notoriously difficult with the press.

My pre-interview prep was a quick look at M's Insta. His socials were a 'like' magnet, carefully curated in black and white to give off a James Dean angsty vibe. Nothing unusual there. I would enjoy getting him to drop that facade. Little games like these stopped me from getting bored of writing about over-reachers, those who thought they could leap over the ocean of TikTokers straight into the firmament of legit stars.

When I arrived at Ġugar he was already seated, sipping a beer. Understated cockiness, clearly very much the bartender's kinda cuppa. He had no problem with

men's toes. With his skinny jeans and Hawaiian print shirt, M looked very much out of place, but not in a bad way. I sat down, switched on my recorder, and let him ramble on for a while. The more he rolled his R's, the more I found myself getting annoyed. I'm not sure why. I should add that usually I found this kind of accent quite charming. But possibly I had decided to dislike M even before I met him, for no real reason at all. It happens sometimes, maybe I don't like their name, or the way they signed off a WhatsApp, whatever. He did think rather highly of himself, so maybe the feeling wasn't entirely undeserved. So many "you've never seen anything like this" sprinkled in an hour-long conversation.

Many visitors make that mistake when trying to impress me, thinking that because I live on a small island I won't notice they're being patronising. I matched every rolled R with a rolled eye hidden behind the big shades that I always keep on, even indoors. Not to try and look cool, but because they create the illusion of a boundary between myself and whoever I'm meeting.

To be fair, M did have a good story to share. His thing was parkour, taken to another level with the clever use of French electro and a rather impressive DIY light show, which he recorded and shared on his YouTube channel. Parkour artists tended to pick obvious landmarks, possibly thinking that they are more likely to go viral by falling off the Eiffel Tower rather than an unmapped cliff-edge. M had proven them wrong with a series of videos shot in abandoned buildings on obscure islands, each racking up millions of views in the space of days. Hence, Malta, a small rock hiding just under Sicily. We do a good line in abandoned buildings and obscurity.

Ugly toes apart, M had excellent click and share potential. The interview made the coveted featured story spot and was picked up by the social media sharing beast. I was rewarded with a thank you email, which I archived without opening.

A few months later – it was a Saturday morning, and I was wasting time on one of those stupid personality quizzes that tell me I'm special - M slides into my Insta.

Hey, you

I almost left him on seen. I didn't feel like wasting time on what would probably turn out to be a half-hearted attempt to pick me up. It had taken a while, but I was finally learning that guys don't slide into your DMs just to be friendly; well, not unless they were already friends to start off with. But there was also the small chance that this was an actual work opportunity. And I was curious. I typed a *hey* and hit return.

I'll be doing a secret show at White Rocks tonight. Will I see my favourite writer?

I wondered what had brought him back to Malta so soon. A second video in the same spot made zero sense.

Not much of a secret, if you're telling everyone about it! Will try drop by. No promises though, White Rocks is a bit of a pain after dark

Will be worth it, Ms Parker ;)

Ms Parker. I'm a sucker for compliments, even when I can see right through them. In spite of myself, I smiled. I could forgive cockiness if it was backed by talent. A secret show beat an evening of solo doom scrolling, but I didn't want to turn up alone. I scrolled through Insta and saw that Mandy was online. Bingo.

Hey hey lady

Remember that French parkour artist I interviewed a couple of months ago?

The reply was instant.

swoon

Damn right I do

He just invited me to a gig tonight at White Rocks. You game?

Fuck, yeah

And dibs

All yours ;)

Pick you up at 9.30

Let's not show up sober

K

Come up to mine. I have tons of booze leftover from Christmas

Amazes

Later :D :D

Dress warm, it'll be freezing tonight!!!!

Mandy, my newish BFF that was almost a girl crush. I am not big on female accessories. The last real girl friend I'd had before Mandy was Marianna. All the Ms, maybe there's something there. Anyway. I first met Marianna in primary school, aged ten, and we were pretty much joined at the hip from day one. We even chose

the same course at uni. We both adored doughnuts, dancing, and Chris Hemsworth, not necessarily in that order. We could spend hours laughing at nothing in particular. I still loved her to bits, but she was adulating a lot more successfully than I was, and we had grown apart over the past years. Since Marianna, no other girl had measured up.

Women are boring. Or at least, the ones I meet are. They talk about men. Clothes. Kids. Periods. They are Normal, and I have nothing to say to Normal. Which possibly explains a lot about my non-adult life.

But I didn't think of this when I first met Mandy. All I saw was a pretty woman with short, curly hair, wearing a tiny miniskirt with frills. We were the same age, give or take, and she ran her own second-hand bookstore – an unassailable indication of success, naturally. She was quirky, and she liked to hang out at the same places I did. Our tastes in music crossed, like a hipster-meet-rock chick Venn diagram. We were both obsessed at first sight.

Our first meeting happened by chance, soon after I was dumped by an eleven-month long relationship and I was staging a return on the social circuit. That night, a new girl band was playing at Coach, one of the few hipster hangouts on the island. Bit too hipster for my tastes, in fact, but then again the gigs were fun. Plus, you got to meet some real characters.

Best thing about Coach was that I could just show up alone and no one would bother me. I didn't need to fit in because everyone was somewhat lost in their own private world. The place came with its own cast of regular characters, which was also part of the fun. The nerdy pharmacist who moonlighted as DJ in her spare time. The Hipster Queen all the boys wanted to shag, in her very early 20s, dressed like an eight-year-old in shapeless, flowered dresses, Chucks and beanies with teddy bear ears. The groupie, who had dated most of the guys from the indie bands. And the wankellestuals, hiding behind their specs and their absinthe and discussing the long-awaited new Herzog. They managed to make watching movies sound like homework.

It was a good cast and I did like most of them, despite everything. But I'm getting sidetracked. Mandy. Before we first bumped into each other, I already knew who she was, thanks to, well, the island being the size it is. She was a Coach regular way before I had ever heard of the place – my late relationship had necessitated a degree of hibernation – and the first time I walked inside I recognised her immediately by the yellow flower in her curls. A trademark of hers, she never left the house without it. People teased her occasionally, but she always replied that yellow was her colour.

In reality, she didn't need gimmicks to stand out. Mandy was tall, super-skinny. She had black hair and blue eyes that were unexpected. She needed no yellow flowers in her hair.

Anyway, that first night we were the only two dancing to the pre-gig DJ set at Coach. I still remember what was playing when we finally spoke. Blue Monday, New Order. We danced, we laughed. We switched to vodka shots that we had to down from normal glasses, the shot glasses at the bar having run out. We danced some more. It felt like I had found my second Marianna.

We met again the next day. And the next. Mandy was fun. We filled each other's inboxes with crap, uploaded a dozen stories every time we went out partying, chatted non-stop... If it sounds like a teenage romance, it's because it kind of was.

Being with Mandy meant there was always something to look forward to. Pretending to be shy, she was one of the biggest extroverts I had ever met. I've seen her walk up to random guys to tell them that she liked their hair/skinny jeans/butts. She would then giggle, look at them from behind lowered lids, and and go, "awkward". I've seen her flirt her way into gigs for free, give the finger to strangers she decided were looking at her funny and down a quart of neat vodka, straight from the bottle, in a few (tearful) gulps. I was hooked on her.

If the Mandy highs were high, the lows were something else. But that is a different story for a different day. The night we met M, we got to White Rocks pretty buzzed. The place was just about the only isolated spot on the island where you could pull off a semi-spontaneous performance in a relatively controlled space. We got there right as the action was about to start, and walked up to the improvised DJ stand. Being with Mandy gave me that kind of confidence. If I were with anyone else, I would probably have huddled at the back.

M was in good form, rolling his Rs stronger than ever, as he gave the small crowd the usual spiel about the show. It was incredible really. Place the man in the middle of a crowd, and his sex appeal sky-rocketed. A flock of what I was sure were regulars, who hopped along with him on plane trips wherever, gave us the side eye as we pushed our way ahead of them. Shit, the guy even had honest-to-goodness groupies. You could see them in his videos, lone females crowding the front, looking warily around them, sporting a half-nervous, half-hopeful look. To M's credit, he stopped to exchange a couple of words with each one of them once the performance was over. I used to think it was sweet of him to care, until once, before it all ended, it came up in conversation.

Don't fall in love with me, I'm heartless

No I won't and no you're not, you're even nice to all the weirdos who follow you around

Well yeah that's 'cos I want them to keep coming to my shows

Are you always like this, wanting something out of people?

Eh bien, isn't that the essence of most human relationships?

Mhmmm

Mhmmm?

So you're saying... you and I, we're only friends 'cos I'm a journalist. Disssapointing

Don't be silly. Our friendship is absolute

And we both laughed and downed our absinthe shots and talked and drank our thoughts away.

That night at White Rocks I saw that M's strategy was well-founded. I turned to Mandy, a snarky comment on the tip of my tongue, but she was sporting the same puppy eyes as the rest of them. I shook my head. Sucker. After the gig, I made a beeline towards the guy selling beer from a picnic cooler. M headed straight over, as I knew he would.

Ms Parker

I smiled. Sometimes, I liked smooth.

That was great fun, M. Have you met Mandy?

Kiss, kiss, awkward smile and Mandy was ready with her usual routine.

You should get us shots. We need to drink to this new friendship

I think there's only beer, though

So, we go elsewhere, no?

But that would be very disappointing to my fans, n'est ce pas? I'll see what I can find

And that is how we first ended up drinking absinthe straight from a small bottle, courtesy of one of said fans. A habit that I would only lose four months later, when M boarded a plane out of our lives to Detroit.

But back then I was not used to it, which is why half a shot into the game I spotted someone who posed less of a danger to my liver, and absconded. That night was the night my friendship with Mandy started to unravel, only we didn't know it yet. My focus lay elsewhere, mostly on the way M's chin rested on the top of Mandy's head whenever he laughed. And he was laughing a real lot. This was going to be an easy win.

I would love to say that I was right, and that I helped my friend snatch the artist of her dreams. But I didn't. Two months floated past, a whirlwind of weekday binges of absinthe and cigarettes that would inevitably finish off at M's rented apartment in St Paul's Bay, watching the sun rise from his living-room balcony, scrounging for the last dregs of coffee in his empty kitchen. The next day, we'd start all over again, spending entire nights talking about that which fucked us up but didn't kill us. And those two still hadn't progressed beyond the chin-resting-on-head stage.

Why didn't I disappear, give them space? Truth is, I did try, but they wouldn't let me. The two or three times I backed out of these evenings, one of them would cancel on the other. I still wonder what it was, the barrier that stopped it from becoming real for them. Whatever it was, I soon gave up trying to make the hook-up happen, mostly because I wasn't sure what to do with myself once these meetings fizzled out and things went back to normal.

And then, one night we walked into our usual hangout to find M chatting to some random woman, and everything changed.

The fuck does he think, that he can drop us just like that?

Mandy's words, not mine. By then it had become a bit of an obsession for her, the idea of promoting M from friend to lover. We should've left, I suppose. Instead, we got a tray of absinthe shots. Finally, about an hour too late, M joined us. He smiled, and it annoyed me.

So? When's this drink coming?

As soon as the words left my mouth I heard just how rude that was. He raised an eyebrow, but obliged, returning with a fresh tray of shooters that I ignored. Mandy matched him glass for glass.

Not gonna tell us who that weird chick was?

She's an old girlfriend. Not really weird at all.

But you've never mentioned her.

So? I haven't mentioned a lot of things. Another shot?

Well at the very least you could've introduced us, no?

Why should I? You're in a strange mood tonight, huh? Shots? Oui? Non?

And that smile again. Mandy walked out, and now it was her I was annoyed at for leaving me there hanging by the bar, not quite sure what to do.

I'll get us something decent to drink, not this cheap shit your friend likes.

The last I remember of that evening, before waking up ten hours later to a haze of guilt and cigarettes, is M asking me if he was the oldest man I had slept with.

I never saw Mandy again.