

CHEAT

SHORT SHORT STORY NO.43

Henry stands at the bar, turning his back to the room, and orders a drink. It's been a pleasant evening, one of those gallery events that he has to attend in order to show his face, but he'll be pleased when it's over. Too many people talking to him, asking the same questions. He thinks of Kate, home in bed with the 'flu, and wishes she was here or he was there.

'It's Henry, isn't it?' says a voice to his right and a girl is standing there, very pretty, long dark hair, carefully messed up. 'I'm Jessica. I work with Alex.'

'Oh yes,' he says, smiling at her.

'I just wanted to tell you,' she begins, then laughs a little and looks away. It's a carefully designed manoeuvre; he's seen it a thousand times. 'I'm sorry, I don't normally feel the need to say this to people.' *I love your work*, he thinks, anticipating the next comment.

'I love your work,' she says. 'That show you had at the Serpentine last October? I went every day.'

'Didn't you get bored?'

'No. Not once.'

He nods. Ah, he thinks. So that's how it is.

Kate's the best girlfriend he's ever had, and he's had a few. Here are some of the things she's not: she's not obsessed with her weight. She's not a reader of *Heat*. She's not a person who's afraid to eat finger food at openings in case she spills any on her dress.

'I hate these things,' says Jessica, turning around so the two of them are leaning against the bar, side by side. 'Everyone talking about art all the time like any of them even care about it.'

I'm supposed to say I hate them too, thinks Henry. That I only come because it's important to support other artists, when the truth is all we do is look at each other's work and point out how the idea is good, the whole concept is a really clever one, but the execution... we would have done it differently. Better.

Henry can feel the little finger on his left hand almost touching Jessica's right. If there's any air separating them at all, it must be just a sliver. He thinks that he can feel the warmth of her skin. It would take nothing, he knows, to move his finger just a fraction and touch her. She wouldn't move at all, he knows that too. She'd leave it there, which would tell him everything he needed to know.

And then they'd go somewhere together.

Here are some of the things Kate is: she's thoughtful. She's someone who tells him when a piece is no good. She's not here.

He holds his breath, allows his finger to rest exactly where it is and neither of them say a word. In a moment he'll either have to touch her or turn around entirely and keep talking about art and other nonsense.

He waits a moment longer, then decides.