**Fiesta**

Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea, I thought, contemplating the historic streets and beautiful evening sunshine from my table.

Sometimes, you think that there are certain things that you should have in your life. Friends. A weekend trip to somewhere abroad, something to show for your hard work, fruits for your labours. With a bit of luck, you can show it all off on Instagram. So you make it happen, but as soon as you get there, you realise it’s a mistake.

It doesn’t have to be that way, of course. A weekend away can be nice. But it depends where you go, why you are going there and who you are with. There are times in our lives when we are lonely, desperate. We make bad decisions about who we should be with to cure us of our isolation.

‘Fucking beautiful’, said Karl, staring at a passing girl over the top of his lager. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like that in Kettering.’

‘There isn’t anything like that in Kettering,’ Jeff replied.

We were sat at a table outside another bar in Malaga, slowly cooking in the sun, and reducing ourselves to a drunken and increasingly inactive and unimaginative gang of English tourists. We had spent the day slowly but surely exhausting our topics of conversation; which wasn’t that surprising, since the knowledge we possessed about each other had been gleaned from weekly five-a-side football and post-match visits to the pub, which hadn’t exceeded eight hours altogether – so this first day in Malaga was already a world record. We’d started early at the Wetherspoons at the airport, which had seemed almost compulsory at the time, but actually had only served to shorten the total amount of coherent conversation. Luckily, whenever it was my round, I had always bought myself a low alcohol variant of our drink of choice. Otherwise, I’d have probably been so drunk, I wouldn’t even have been aware of how bored I was becoming. Maybe that was why people drank. It wasn’t to have fun. It was to obscure the fact that life was passing by and none of it was bringing any opportunity beyond an expected additional drink. Life could be like that sometimes. It could be more about survival and marking time than it was about progress and achievement.

‘Let’s move on,’ I said.

Taking this as an immediate instruction, Karl quickly downed his pint and got to his feet. ‘Where next?’

I sighed and forced myself to sink the remnants of yet another continental lager. I thought quickly. ‘We should move down towards the beach.’ At least that was a good distance away. We’d barely left the street where our hotel was.

‘That’s miles,’ Jeff complained.

I had anticipated this. ‘Yeah, but where do you think that girl was heading? We’re in fucking Malaga, mate. We’ve got to find a place by the beach.’

Jeff struggled to his feet and we gathered our happy band together before moving off.

We were at the Place de la Victoria, so headed south west down Calle Victoria so as to go around the Castillo de Gibralfaro. I had managed to conduct some research before we came.

That’s how we got here.

The early Spring sunshine and heat begins to subside as we move through the evening haze. There is a predictable relaxed and Mediterranean feel about the place, but there also seems to be more loud salsa music than usual coming from the nearby bars. And a lot of people in the street.

‘Is there something going on here?’ Jeff asks, sounding interested.

As we walk on, we see a group dancing together, including two beautiful girls twirling together beneath their linked hands. Karl moves close and tried to join in exuberantly, but the girls scowl at him and he soon gives up.

‘Lesbians,’ he says.

I notice the rainbow flags that decorate the outside of the bars as we walk past and smile wryly.

Jeff and Karl begin to cotton on slowly as we move further down the street and see more and more same sex couples. To me, their theatrical exhibitionism and exuberance is infectious but my companions soon seem to react as if to some kind of threat.

‘Where’s the beach, mate?’ Karl grumbles.

‘A bit further on,’ I say. ‘Don’t you want to have a drink here somewhere?’

We are starting to grind to a halt as more and more people push onto the street in front of us. ‘Not here, mate. Too many fruits,’ Jeff scowls.

‘We might not have any choice,’ I say. ‘We can’t keep going much further.’

The crowds close in and we can feel the heat of the passing bodies as they push past. We can’t see where they are heading and it actually looks like they are all squeezing into the area that we are trying to cross, as if this part of the street and collection of nearby bars is the place they are making for. I’m quite tall, so I can see over the heads of the people, and the bars around do look like they are striving to be the focus of attention. Their doors and windows are open and their insides seem to be spilling out into the street. Some have barbecues, or have counters displaying tapas moved outdoors. There is the delicious charred, meaty smell of chorizo. We have made it as far as the cinema on the Calle Alcazabilla and there is clearly a festival of LGBTQ films there, which appears to be a cause for celebration for the participants, and the whole area is packed with people. Some are throwing coloured powder paints over passers by and clouds of pale blue pink and yellow explode into the air like puffballs. Some of it lands on Karl’s Luton Town shirt, and he doesn’t look happy.

Quickly, I grab him in a fraternal headlock and guide him to the side of the street where, miraculously, there’s a spare table. I don’t know how advisable this manoeuvre is with so much drink and anger inside him, but someone has to protect the English from the horrors of the foreigner and it’s safer that it’s me. Luckily, Karl doesn’t feel the need to take the matter further. ‘I’ll get the drinks in,’ I say. I leave him ruefully wiping pink powder of his shirt, looking somewhat crestfallen and outnumbered.

The bar owner seems to have decided to enter into the spirit of fiesta and is simply handing out bottles of Estrella for free to save time. Karl soon cheers up when his drink arrives much quicker than he anticipated.

‘Cheers, mate,’ I say encouragingly, and clink bottles.

He begins to down his drink as fast as he can, a vacant look on his face. Meanwhile, Jeff stares at his shoes, wondering where it all went wrong.

Conversely, I’m rather enjoying myself. It seems a shame that my companions feel so excluded by such diversity, and that they seem more content to display an odd contradiction of the clearly welcoming culture.

I see a chiller cabinet which is being used to display tapas, as is common in these parts. It looks old and appears to be habitually stored outside, and plugged in when needed. The back of the cabinet, plywood covering the refrigeration plant inside, is covered in graffiti. Someone has scrawled the words ‘You’re Next’ in a vaguely intimidating way, as if threatening the next terrorist atrocity against nearby persons. But the spirit of the fiesta has caused these words to be re-purposed and reclaimed. A huge pink heart has been painted to surround the words, and outlined in blue, yellow and green. Two small red hearts have been placed against the beginning and end of the words, like punctuation to again change the meaning, in the same way as two differently orientated question marks at either side of a sentence in Spanish make a phrase into a question. I wonder what the yellow and blue and pink paint has obscured, and assume that some hate-fuelled organisation had signed off the threat, but this had been painted over, in the same way as this fiesta itself has overcome the historical mistrust of a truly inclusive community.

Everywhere, there is music and Springtime and delicious-smelling food and happy people. I fail to see how anyone can have a problem with any of this.

I look at my football buddies and suddenly feel sorry for them. It must be difficult to only fit in to and feel comfortable in a narrow range of experiences and communities. Their response seems to be to try to shield their alienation in an alcoholic stupor.

I resolve to help them out as best I can. Once we move on from this bar, I‘ll find a taxi to pour them into, and ask it to take them to our hotel. Then I can explore this new city alone and see what I can find.