

## Chasing the Dragon

My boyfriend Gavin spent a lot of time at Headquarters, London's grittier version of an Amsterdam coffee shop. His former hangout was the basement bar at the Double U, the university union, where you could buy, sell, and smoke dope openly because, it was said, it was Queen's property and thus exempt from certain regulations that normally would prohibit such a flagrant violation of the law. Since he'd dropped out of school to pursue his DJ career and was forced to surrender his ID, he couldn't get in there anymore, except when he was scratching at the Double U's weekly Friday night parties – which was where we had met – so he needed a new place to spend his time and earn some dosh.

Headquarters was an abandoned four-story warehouse tucked away in a narrow, cobblestone alley between Charing Cross Road and the Tin Pan Alley area of Covent Garden. You could buy a few different kinds of drugs there, all for increasing increments of money: £10 for dope, £20 for hash, £30 for cocaine, £40 for heroin. The clientele was decidedly mixed, especially depending on what time of day you went. I rarely was there before 5 PM, when most patrons were upper-level, uniformed school kids looking for a way to blow off steam. Around 19.30 the grown up and suit clad would arrive. Young, hip Londoners in combat pants and vests held court from 2100 on.

You had to know someone to get in, and once you entered, you had to apply for a membership card or you couldn't return. I never really thought the stoners in charge

were organized enough to keep track of the minions who'd flood in and out of that place each day, but somehow they managed to get everyone to purchase a fluorescent orange membership card and keep the crowd under control.

Jamaican mobsters who dressed a lot rougher than they probably actually were ran the place, guarding a door that was an almost-comedic steel, with a sliding, speakeasy-style grate at eye level. You'd knock, the grate would slide open, you'd hold up your card, they'd ask you to look to your left and smile at the video camera, and then they'd let you in after patting you down. They had a mandatory coat and bag check rule, like a museum, and the experience of depositing and retrieving your stuff always made me laugh: the invariably stoned-out-of-her gourd coat check girl would stare helplessly at the pile of coats and bags on the floor, look back and forth at your claim check and the things, and then fumble for about 40 minutes before she managed to produce something that looked like your possessions. Because you too were pretty baked, you were never too sure if what she gave you was actually the same stuff you came in with.

What I grew to like about Headquarters, in spite of my earlier reservations, was that it was so completely underground and random. I liked being able to say that I met my boyfriend at an underground drug bar in the middle of London almost every night after school. I liked that no one else I knew knew about Headquarters, or would ever consider going there. I liked that hanging out at Headquarters was so rebellious, so different than anything I would've done before I'd moved to London – along with not

taking my Master's coursework very seriously and generally caring less about things than the neurotic overachiever version of me used to. Then there was the fact that I was even with Gavin, and that somehow, by virtue of being his girlfriend and spending time with him here, it somehow made me edgy and cool, too.

At first I refused to meet Gavin there on my own. Although the part of me that's attracted to all things subversive liked the idea of the place, my paranoia of being busted (*Yankee Student Nabbed in Drug Palace Raid*, I imagined the tabloid headlines screaming) prevented me from showing up solo. Also, I was a bit put off by the imposing bouncers, even though Gavin had furnished me with the required membership card. While he was still in school he didn't even go there that often. But after a while, he was there almost every day and it ended up being just as easy for me to swing by and meet him there and then go out or over to his place.

So I got used to showing up after a long day of classes at the British Academy of Politics and Social Sciences and trudging up the steep, rickety stairs to the poolroom on the third floor to find Gavin, hanging around the pool table with his mates, taking turns smoking a spliff between corner-pocket shots and hatching a plot to swindle an unsuspecting stoner out of a few quid in a pool game challenge, often his primary source of income. The pool table was one of the more comfortable places to hang around the club. There were no proper chairs or booths, just industrial carpeting covered benches around the perimeter of each room. There was a bar in each room, too. The proprietors had done a much better job furnishing the bar than

the actual club. It was stocked with crisps, beer, Coke, chocolate bars, lighters, loose cigarettes and Rizzlas - everything a stoner would need to get high and enjoy it.

One day I was lingering at the bar, deliberating over snack choices, when I found myself approached by a stranger.

"Yeah, the bacon and cheddar crisps are just disgusting," he said, as if reading my mind. "But you can never go wrong with a Lion bar."

I was startled by his American accent – I was naïve enough to think that I was the only American cool enough to know about the place – but tried to answer him nonchalantly. "Yeah. Lion bars are good."

I turned around and saw a guy who was medium height and stacked, wearing a black polyester shirt with a red dragon embroidered on the shoulder. His face as attractive as I imagined his body to be, with a broad forehead, excellent bone structure and a jaw of steel. His hazel eyes twinkled as he sized me up.

"The candy bars are about the only thing I can stand to eat in this freaking epicurean wasteland," he said as the bartender approached us. He gestured to me to order, so I gave him a smile somewhere between grateful and coquettish and decided to go with the Lion bar.

"And for you?" the bartender asked him.

"A bottle of water and a pack of Rizzlas," he said, giving the bartender a £5 note. "So, how long have you been suffering in the purgatory known as London?" he asked me.

I was shocked that this exchange actually looked like it was going to develop into a full-blown conversation. No one at Headquarters had ever chatted me up because everyone was too wasted to be bothered. Plus, I was exclusively there as Gavin's companion, which precluded much interaction with strangers.

"I've been living here for about four months. You?"

"Just a few days, but I've been here before," he said. "They keep sending me back to this miserable city."

The stoned-slow bartender handed us our stuff. "And who might the 'they' be?" I asked the increasingly handsome guy.

"The IPA."

"The what?"

"The International Press Association," he replied, running a hand over his very thin hair. Thin hair was never an attractive thing, but his voice was sinister and gravely, which was very cool.

"I'm Damien Wiley," he said, extending a muscled, tattooed forearm towards me. "And what might your name be?"

"Sasha."

"Well, Sasha," he paused and smiled. "It's very nice to meet a fellow Yankee here in Queen Elizabeth's court."

"Yes, it is." I answered, feeling myself wanting to get flirty as I focused on his bulging muscles. I started nibbling on my candy bar and shifting awkwardly, thinking

I should probably get back to Gavin. But it was kind of nice to talk to another American, especially in such an interesting environment.

"Sasha, I think it's time to go roll a fat one," he said, interrupting my mental conversational strategizing. "Care to join me? It would be a nice change of pace to smoke out with someone who doesn't take, like, seven hits before they share."

At home, you'd take one hit and then pass it on to the others you were smoking with. Here, you'd take up to three hits off a joint before sharing. The first time I'd gotten stoned with Gavin and his friends, I'd taken one hit and then passed it around. Before long everyone else was ridiculously silly and I'd only had a little buzz. Gavin asked me why I wasn't smoking very much, and I asked him why people weren't sharing. I figured it out.

"Smoke out? You must be from California," I said, delaying him at the bar a bit longer. I wasn't so sure I should go off with Damien and smoke up. Surely at some point Gavin would finish playing pool and notice that I'd gone missing.

Damien had started taking long, desperate drags off a cigarette. "Aren't we perceptive, Miss Sasha?"

He was sounding a little flirty. "Oh, very. Smoke out sounds so stupid, I don't get why you left coasters say it."

"What do you say? Smoke up?"

"Yes, I do," I answered indignantly.

"Yeah, like that sounds less stupid. You people back East think you know everything. C'mon, I'm jonesing for this joint," he said, putting his arm around my back to prod me away from the bar. Normally I would have classified that as unnecessary contact, but, it felt... nice. "I try to be stoned as much as possible when I'm in England."

I figured I could go hang out with him for a little longer. Maybe I should tell him that I'm here with someone, I thought, or go check in with Gavin and tell him where I'll be. Or maybe I should just have a beer and smoke something and chill out.

We started to walk over to one of the wooden benches that passed for furniture at Headquarters. "Why exactly are you here if you hate it so much?" I asked as I tried to make myself comfortable on the 2" thick plank of timber that served as a seat.

"Here? Headquarters one of my favorite places. I love it here," he said drolly, rolling several joints dexterously on the top of the paperback copy of *The Autobiography of Howard Marks* he'd pulled out of his back pocket.

"Oh, of course. Everyone loves Headquarters," I replied, trying to sound savvier than I was. I thought I'd one-up him. "Are you a member?"

"Abso-fucking-lutely," he said, sparking up the joint. "I carry my blinding orange membership card right next to my press pass at all times. You never know when you're going to need either one."

Damien was squatting instead of sitting by me, his solid thighs jutting out in a V from underneath his body, balanced precariously on a pair of black combat boots. He

was sweating, his face reddening, as he inhaled the joint heavily. He unbuttoned his dragon shirt, exposing half of a ripped, hairless chest, and another tattoo. I suddenly felt very uncool. Here I was with this super buff, tatted up journalist, in this totally underground drug bar smack in the middle of London, wearing a black cotton-ribbed turtleneck and khakis: it was a good outfit for class but it screamed lame loser at Headquarters.

I looked at him and started wondering how many hours a day he worked out for to get a body like that and what he was like in bed... Whoa. I'm actually imaging what this guy is like in bed.

“So, what do you do for the IPA?” I asked Damien, quickly getting out of my mind and keeping the conversation professional in hopes of realigning my focus.

Opening one eye and squinting the other, he began, “These days, I’m covering British-Irish politics. What a big fucking waste of time.” He blew out a load of smoke. “So what if they hate each other and blow shit up every now and then? It’s not real terrorism. It’s not even real international politics. It’s limey bullshit and it’s boring as fuck. There are so many other interesting things going on in Europe now, and I’m stuck here, in the most pedantic, punitive, passé country in the EU.”

“Why do you hate England so much?”

“Look around you,” he said, gesturing his hand around the room. “Ok, well, not here,” he said after a moment. “This is one of the only cool places in the city. But it’s

just so oppressed and so uninteresting and so self-referential and just so fucking awkward.”

“You’re giving me lots of adjectives, but no real reasons,” I snapped, gearing up for an argument. Although living in England was difficult and expensive, the food sucked and everything closed early, I didn’t think it was quite the abyss of negativity Damien was making it out to be. His animosity made me wonder if he wasn’t some antisocial pervert who preyed on fellow American expatriates in illegal bars. With that I started wondering if the pot was laced and if he’s going to drug me, take me home, and cut out a kidney or something? What if he’s not even really American and just pretending to win my confidence? He’s probably not even a journalist. His tattoos are probably from jail. That’s what I get when I wander off with some stranger at this place. I tried to send psychic messages to Gavin to come and rescue me. My eyes darted around the room, but there was no sign of him.

The dope seemed to have lulled Damien into a trance. Maybe he won’t even notice if I get up and walk away. I looked around and saw that Headquarters was filling up, which made me realize that it must be getting late. Fuck. I remembered I’d forgotten to return my book for class to the library. Ok, it has to be back by 10. Fuck! I have my international economics lecture at 9. Fuck!

I straightened myself up and turned my head towards the door. As I started to walk forward, Damien reached up and grabbed my arm.

“In a hurry Sasha?” he asked, grinning. His voice started to sound *really creepy*.

“Actually, I’ve got to go find my... um... friend. He’s probably wondering where I am,” I answered nervously. Why did I say my friend and not my boyfriend? Was I actually worried about scaring this guy off by telling him I was with someone else? “Thanks for the smoke, though. Maybe I’ll see you around sometime.”

He let go of my arm, stood up, and extended his hand. “I certainly hope so. We barely got a chance to talk.”

I stared at his hand like it had a hook on the end of it. Then I timidly shook it, half-smiled, and started to walk away.

I ran into the hallway and bolted up the staircase to the poolroom, climbing the rickety stairs so fast that I barely noticed Gavin barreling down the stairs in search of me.

“Where’d you go off to?” he asked, holding out his arms to me. I practically jumped into them. Try to be cool, I told myself. Don’t tell him you were getting stoned with an American sociopath.

“Oh, I was just listening to the music down by the bar,” I said, taking his hands. Expressing an interest in music would always win points with Gavin. He started to kiss me amidst a growing crowd of people clambering up and down the staircase. “You’re done with your game?”

“Yeah, but I fucking lost 10 quid,” Gavin said, annoyed. “I thought for sure I could win but they brought some guy in I didn’t know and he was cracking good.”

Suddenly Gavin looked extra yummy; no doubt the result of the pot I'd just smoked way too much of. I reached up and touched his stubbly, hollow cheek with my thumb. "I'm sorry honey. That sucks. Why don't we leave then?" I peeked over my shoulder to make sure Damien wasn't lurking behind me.

"Yea," he said, putting his arms around my shoulders. "Let's go home. I'll cook us some tea."

"Great," I gushed, trying to appear unfazed. "I've got early class tomorrow." We walked down towards the coat check holding hands.

Damien was in fact lurking behind us, and saw us heading out.

"Typical," he said to himself. "The only halfway decent American chick I meet in months abandons me to go off with some long haired limey fuck."

I know this because at 9 AM on Thursday, Damien was sitting in the front row of the Jewel of India lecture hall at the British Academy of Politics and Social Sciences, poised to pummel our surprise guest (who probably would not have been a surprise if I'd ever bothered to look at the syllabus before class actually began), Senator George Mitchell (D-ME), guardian of the Irish peace talks, with questions for the IAP.

I'm certain I would not have noticed him. As per usual, I had arrived late to class, having gotten even more high with Gavin after dinner and stayed up until all hours having sex. Now that Gavin wasn't in school, he had little regard for my world of scheduled classes, office hours and papers, and I was adapting to the lack of boundaries around his lazy days and late nights.

I practically tripped over Sen. Mitchell as I scrambled through jam-packed rows of eager beavers who already had their notebooks open, pens at the ready to record our esteemed professor's every word, who probably had been there since well before 9AM in order to get a good seat, because they, of course, knew that we were having an important guest lecturer today. I tried to simultaneously tear off my coat, put my hair up in a bun and take my stuff out of my bag without spilling any of my disapproving classmates morning beverages so I could sit down to open my mind to the education I was supposedly there to absorb.

As Sen. Mitchell rose to the podium after a suitably ass-kissing introduction, I noted a vaguely familiar face perched atop a craned neck bulging with veins staring several rows back at me in disbelief. While I knew few of my fellow classmates by name, I was pretty sure he was not one of them.

It was when he began interrogating Sen. Mitchell with caustic and wholly unprofessional questions about the futility of trying to make peace among a bunch of whiny Jesus freaks duking it out for some Godforsaken rainy land on the tip of an otherwise pleasant island that I recognized Damien's voice, and his bitterness. That he was summarily ejected from the lecture hall after being asked, in horror, to identify himself by one of the teaching assistants amidst the repulsed groans of the students, prevented me from shouting, "Hey! I know you!" with the perverse pleasure of recognition.

My classmates actually cheered when Damien thrust himself up from his seat and left the room. My professor resumed the podium, apologized profusely for the unwelcome presence of a rascalion journalist in our academic bubble, and let Sen. Mitchell go on with whatever it was he was there to talk about.

I was too freaked out (residual pot paranoia?) by the fact that Damien had been right there, IN MY CLASS, to pay attention to anything Mitchell said, although afterwards, I felt appropriately guilty, for failing to learn anything from yet another class required to earn a graduate degree in foreign affairs.

When the lecture concluded at half past 10, I was still shell-shocked, but not removed enough from my present surroundings to avoid severe annoyance at my classmates' cooing over how lucky they were to have heard the perspective of such an important and brilliant man, blah blah, blah. I put my stuff back in my knapsack and planned on heading to the computer lab to catch up on some emails before my 1 PM class and walked out the door.

Damien was waiting outside the building, leaning up against a bike rack that was stationed dangerously close to several bus routes. I didn't see him then either, but he called out, "Too much ganja last night, huh Sasha? Couldn't wake up on time?"

I stopped at the entrance to the building, frozen with humiliation and shock, praying no one had heard him.

He walked towards me, still brandishing his reporters' pad and pen like weapons, and kept going. "You're paying all this fucking money to learn at this famed institution,

and you can't even get your ass out of bed for a 9 AM class? Jesus, you're worse than I am," he continued.

I reached into my bag for my mobile phone – maybe I could pretend it had rung and could excuse myself from this incredibly embarrassing person by pretending to take an important trans-Atlantic call. But my ruse failed.

“Well, don't feel so bad. I'm going to get my ass kicked by my editor for fucking this up, but hopefully that will help him see how wrong I am for this assignment. Wanna get some coffee?”

I absolutely should not have gone with Damien to get coffee. There was too much about Damien that was offensive, and troubling. He had no shame in embarrassing himself in front of a room of 100-plus strangers when he was supposed to be on the job, and had sought me out in a stalker-ish kind of way. But I remembered his body being so fit and there was something cool about talking global politics (that's what I'm here for, right?) with a real, live journalist...

Before I knew it – *Was he actually wearing the same thing as last night? No, wait. I'M WEARING THE SAME CLOTHES AS LAST NIGHT. God. How embarrassing* – I heard the words “Um, ok,” emerge from my mouth.

“Cool,” Damien said, moving towards me and putting his notepad away. “Why don't we go into the bar?”

“The bar? It's 10.30 in the morning.”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, looking at his diver’s watch. “I guess it’s not open for another half hour. We can go to a café until 11 and then move to the bar.”

For fuck’s sake. I had agreed to some coffee, in one location, not a multi-loci beverage tour of campus. “Actually, I don’t have a lot of time between classes. Let’s just go to the café across the street,” I said, starting to walk in that direction.

“Come on, Sasha. I thought you were a fun-loving all-American girl. What’s wrong with a little tippler before class?”

I felt the heavy cloud of regret settling over me as I realized that he was actually going to try to justify drinking at this hour on a THURSDAY. Worse, his physical appeal was diminished with each word that came out of his mouth.

“Don’t you have to go back to work?” I asked, hoping he’d say yes and just disappear before anyone I knew came by and I had to explain who he was.

“Yeah, eventually,” he replied, and then a wash came over him and his demeanor changed. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I know I can be a bit full on. I’m just glad to see you again and I wanted to talk to you some more. I don’t know a lot of people here and I had fun with you last night...”

This landed somewhere between charming and pathetic. “It’s ok,” I said, meeting him on the corner. “Let’s just get a coffee over there.” I pointed to the Italian café across the street.

Damien started talking as soon as we sat down, and didn’t stop. He had just gotten back to London a few weeks ago, after having been in the States for some

undeterminable reason. He was 27 – which felt ancient to my 23 – and had been living in the Middle East, writing for various pro-Palestinian publications before somehow getting a stringer position with the IAP. Now he was desperately trying to get transferred from London to the Balkans

“Now that’s a real story!” he’d said, slamming down his third cup of coffee on the chipped Formica table.

He was living in a crappy bedsit in Bayswater and trying to spend all his discretionary income on things that would dull his senses of senseless England, like the low-dose, over the counter codeine that came packaged with paracetamol at the pharmacy.

“I’ll show you how to separate the white part from the pink part and with, well, I’d say about 25 white tabs, you can get a kicking buzz going,” he advised.

This went on for almost two hours. After several ignored attempts at excusing myself, I flagged down the waitress with a shout of “BILL PLEASE!” and stood up. “It was really great to meet you Damien, but I have to get going now.”

His face, which had seemed red and inflated for most of his diatribe, sunk. “Oh, yeah. I guess I should try to get back to the office and explain why, after three and a half hours, I don’t have an interview with Mitchell.”

“Well, good luck with that,” I said, eyeing the door and thinking of all the better ways I could’ve spent my morning than having my ear talked off by this strange guy.

“Listen, Sasha,” Damien continued, again ignoring all my signs of desire for escape. “Can we have a drink some time and talk a bit more?”

TALK? You call this TALKING? I wanted to shout, but instead, while he didn’t deserve it, I opted for the more polite, “Actually Damien, I have a boyfriend.”

“Hey, that’s cool,” he said, throwing some coins down on the table for the bill. “I have lots of girlfriends in lots of places. I don’t think they’d really mind if I spent a little time with a compatriot.”

“Well, I think my boyfriend might.”

“Yeah? And what would he do about it? I saw you with him last night at Headquarters. I could kick his ass in two seconds.”

Oh God, I thought. This is too much. “Damien, I know Americans have a reputation for being rude and I hate to perpetuate a stereotype, but, NO. I will not grab a drink with you sometime.” I raised my chin as I said this to increase the haughtiness of my pallor. “I have to get to class now. Goodbye.”

I started past him towards the door, but was slowed by the incoming throngs of hungry lunchtime students, which gave him enough time to say, “Come on Sasha Brunner. You know you want to.”

That stung. He knew my last name. *I am officially being stalked by a tattoo-laden filibustering psychopath.*

I spun around and hissed, “How do you know my last name?”

“While you were listening to Mitchell drone on about ‘the troubles,’ I went into the computer lab and logged on to the online syllabus for your lecture. I clicked through to the list of discussion sections, and, lo and behold, there was only one Sasha.”

Well, now I was fucked. I had let on that he had gotten my name right and that I was shaken and, somehow, despite the fact that I didn’t say more than three words while we’d been drinking coffee, he had picked up on the fact that I was (strangely, repulsively) attracted to him.

I’m not sure what it was, because no one had ever gotten to me before with just a nice set of abs and a chiseled face. It may have been the passion with which he seemed to disdain everything except intricate, bloody international conflicts. Or maybe it was the hint of loneliness and desperation with which he’d just talked and talked at me. There was something about this anti-social creature that got me, and made me forget, for a moment, that I was practically living with a perfectly lovely, if not a bit grungy, tall Englishman who was madly in love with me, who I might be falling in love with, despite the fact that he had dropped out of a PhD program to become a DJ, was dealing drugs and hustling pool to pay his rent, and who didn’t understand most of my cultural references, which I attributed to the fact that he, astonishingly, had never seen “The Brady Bunch.”

But somewhere in Damien I sensed the alluring potential for adventure and education via exploration. That he was gainfully employed (although after that afternoon, perhaps not for much longer) American (no pesky visa problems) and

attractive certainly helped. The red flags that popped up each time he spewed forth a complaint or a derision, or when he'd insulted a renowned political figure or revealed that he'd looked me up in my class directory suddenly disappeared and I imagined myself traveling around the world with a war correspondent for the IAP.

I wasn't entirely convinced that I should acquiesce to Damien's interest. He found me once, I reasoned with myself. He'll be able to find me again if he really wants to.

And I'll make it easy for him.

"Maybe I'll let you buy me a Lion bar at Headquarters some time," I said, half-smiling.

I noted how his expression changed from hangdog to piqued, and I walked out the door.