

## THE GIACONDA SMILE

Tony Hibbert likes to work out. He goes to his local gym three, maybe four times a week. It's a Fitness First. Tony prefers the Fitness First to his old gym. Not only is it quite a bit more spacious it also has a wider array of machines. He likes the smart cleanliness of the place. He likes the towels with the embroidered logo, the solid-looking wooden lockers in the changing rooms. He likes the fact that, while he's resting between sets, he can stand with his arms crossed over his chest watching the hip-hop and R 'n B videos, which are played on continual loop, on the five flat plasma screen TVs mounted around the training area. Each of the gym's walls is an enormous mirror. Even as Tony stands there, each hand gently fondling its opposite bicep, feeling it tense and relax through the high-tech mesh of his cross-training top, he is aware without looking of his looming reflection. He has a bit of stature and this has stood him in good stead in the past, when he's been working the door.

Right now he's watching a video on MTV Base and he's thinking to himself that he would not look out of place up there, in that video. Tony can't sing and he never dances, he'd just be one of those guys maybe in the background, standing virtually still while some fine dancer jerked her perfect round glutei against him in time with the music. Tony has even bought for himself and is now wearing a square-cut glass stud of the kind worn by playboy rappers like Nelly or Ja Rule. In fact when Tony puts in this stud in the morning, after getting out of the shower, brushing and flossing his teeth, he thinks to himself that there can be no doubt, he is one of those guys, they are the same as him.

This next video that comes on is Nelly's latest promo "My Place." Before the music starts there is a short kind of scene that sets up the story for the rest of the video. There isn't any music or anything you've got Nelly and this light-skinned girl with beautiful green eyes. Tony isn't sure whether she's wearing contacts or they've done something with a computer or whatever. He's certainly never known a girl with that banana coloured skin and eyes anything but yellow-brown or brown too. In this scene Nelly and his girl are having a bust up kind of thing. She's saying to him "who's that girl?" and whatever and then she pulls off the necklace from round her neck (it's a necklace that he's given her right, like the one Karen has with her name on it only caked with diamonds) she takes it off and dashes on the ground, the grass. Tony's seen this video before. What it's saying is that Nelly can stick to just one girl if he really wants to, or likes her enough, if she's that special girl. He's just got a rep.

Tony is distracted from the next bit of the video (which shows Nelly, and the singer of the R n' B type chorus of the song, in the hot-tub of an enormous mansion in the Caribbean or Spain or somewhere where the sea is bright azure and all that's visible of the surrounding landscape is a far sandy yellow peninsula, miles away in the blue distance) by an ugly, grunting, hacking sound. He looks down to see that Oleg- who he's meant to be spotting for- is failing on his last rep on the bench press. Oleg is this Ukranian with a big, round, bald head and great triangular upper body, a lot of strength in his pecs. Oleg is now trapped under the bar, his face has gone bright red and his chin, with the effort of straining like this, has receded right into his neck producing a series of pleats like a triple or whatever quadruple chin. He's struggling to get the bar off his chest, grunting and blowing. Tony and Oleg bench about the same: today it's three proper plates with a little five stuck on the end there.

Tony shakes his head "Sorry bruv," and leans down with one hand to help Oleg with the bar. Oleg arches his back and with Tony saying "push, push, push." He gets his arms straight and rattles the bar back into the rest.

"It's a lot weight. Man."

Like Tony, Oleg is a door supervisor, a bouncer. But where Tony does the door for big the clubs up in the West End Oleg hasn't got his Westminster licence and that means he's stuck doing shitty jobs out in Staines and Southall. Oleg is the kind of bloke that Tony sees at the gym but would not necessarily hang out with, like, socially.

And Oleg shakes his enormous round head that is glowing with sweat, and blows through his nose and mouth at once, so the sound is modulated by the movement of his cheeks.

"Brrrrrrshrhshrhshrhsh. It's a lot weight," he says and rocks himself off the bench and upright, his abs tense, the way that short men who are almost all muscle do.

So it's Tony's turn and he first sits, then lies flat on the bench before shunting himself down under the bar like a mechanic under a car.

This is the last exercise that Tony is doing today and he enjoys the burn, straining hard, feeling the blood pumping in his forehead, eight reps, blowing three times "huh!huh!huh!" on the last rep. He doesn't really need Oleg's help to get the bar back on the rack and when he does it is neat, there is no rattle. It's not that the weight gets easier to lift, it's still just as hard as when you couldn't lift that weight, it's just that now you can do it.

He sits up and Oleg slaps him on the shoulder.

“Well done mate. Well done.”

Tony shrugs, catching sight of himself in the mirror on the far wall, the glass stud in his ear, his shoulder tight-sinewed, sheened with sweat.

Nelly is just making up with his girl now. He’s offering her the necklace that she’d taken off and dashed on the grass. She takes it from him and they hug and kiss like it’s going to be alright. It’s just one of those endings that they have in R n’B videos, it’s a bit cheesy, but it’s meant to make you feel like yeah, life is OK and sometimes things work out again, people get together, you know. Tony does notice that they look a bit uncomfortable though- since they’re up on the balcony of the big white house and they’re leaning against a glass balustrade that looks a bit too thin. Maybe it’s just that Nelly’s not a great actor that makes it look awkward like that.

In the shower Tony uses a special active shower gel made by Lynx. This is a new one, it smells different from the last one that Tony had. He takes the bottle and turns it over in his hand, brushing the suds from the logo, washed by the showers steaming jet and the droplets drumming on the full bottle change their sound for a higher one. Aztec this one’s called. Outside in the changing room Oleg is talking about some pub he works at in Staines.

“Last week I fuck one Irish in my car.”

“Yeah?” Says Tony, turning off the shower and coming out into the changing room, his feet slapping wet on the tiles.

“You come down sometime. Monday huh.”

“I tell you I’d love to Oleg but Monday’s my day of rest. I work Saturday Sunday don’t I? Anyway I got a girl on the go just now.”

“Oh yeah? What kind girl? Nice girl? Sexy?”

“Yeah.” Says Tony. “Buff.” And he thinks of Karen, her round belly in her dressing gown. He thinks of the bad skin round her nose stud and the bags under her eyes.

“I know you. You very bad huh.”

“That’s me,” Tony smiles. He dries off and puts on his clothes while Oleg showers. He’s putting on his jacket when Oleg comes out and he says: “I gotta go now. Later on then.”

Tony holds up his fist to touch, only Oleg, confused, puts out his palm to shake hands. Tony puts his fist onto Oleg's palm where it is shaken. They both laugh, embarrassed.

"Later man."

"Yeah later."

Going out through the gym, past the machines, the free weights, the punching bag Tony nods at the two or three people he knows. The TV is playing another video, it looks pretty similar though, some girl in a big house, they all kind of look that way really.

The evening has dulled Acton High Street. There is slight drizzle that hangs in the air. Miserable London weather. Tony's parked in the Safeway's car park and he has to pass the bus stop where three tramps sit croaking at one another, fighting over a green bottle of cider with a dent in one side. Their white beards are streaked yellow with something.

He reaches into the pocket of his jeans for the key to his VW Polo and, aiming the fob, taps the button making a little firing noise with his mouth "pkhioo." His car flashes its indicators and honks in response. His car.

Tony throws his gym bag on to the back seat along with his shopping, gets in and starts the engine. The lights flash on with the radio and the wipers as he backs out of his space. It's one of those things, the radio is playing that song too, "My Place." He thinks about his place as he drives, about the corduroy sofa with Karen sitting on it glowering at the TV with her eyes all red and puffy. Tony doesn't even know why he's letting her keep the thing. This was not how he'd imagined it, it was not how it was meant to be. And Nelly singing about how they'll be together, whatever the stormiest weather and Tony starts to feel angry with this song. With this fucking song following him around like his fucking theme tune or something, like someone's taking the piss out of him. In the rain a woman steps out from kerb so that he has to swerve suddenly, punch his horn and he shouts (even though he knows the shout will not be heard)

“Stupid fucking bitch.”

He settles his large frame back into the seat and wipes the fog from the cold window with the back of his hand.

Is that not for him then? It's Karen is it? Karen? He will have his other girls, he thinks. What she doesn't know, he thinks.

He stops outside their block with just the rain pattering on the car roof the only sound, and he reverses with a neat whirr into the waiting space.

When he opens the door there is that stale damp smell that he does not like, damp and the hash that Karen smokes. “Smoking weed.” He says, and sucks his teeth. He can hear the burbling of the TV down the hall and see its bright shifting white and blue smudge on the frosted glass pane in the living room door.

On the sofa she sits still. The elasticated waist of her tracksuit bottoms curves to offer out the round white bulge of her belly, her navel all forced out like that. And Tony says:

“I thought I told you about smoking that shit. It's my fucking kid as well you know. I don't want a cabbage for a son just 'cause you can't discipline yourself to stop smoking for five minutes.”

“Vanessa came round. I didn't smoke any.”

She doesn't look up from the TV. It looks like she has washed her hair which is pulled back tight into a scrunchy, past her small ears with their wide gold hoops.

Tony goes straight through to the kitchen where he puts the bags down on the table. In the ashtray he notices two cigarette butts and the last yellowed inch of a joint. He sucks his teeth again, tips it out into the kitchen bin then begins to unpack the shopping briskly: cereal and ravioli in the cupboard, orange juice in the fridge, the bag of lettuce in the fridge drawer. He takes out from the fridge door a branded Fitness First flask which contains his protein drink, flips up the nozzle and takes a long draught of the cool fluid. Chocolate flavour with a weird clinging sweetness and the thickness of egg white. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and leans back against the door frame looking at Karen. Karen is looking at the TV, her small feet on the table, blackened soles toward him and the lamp light picks out the sharp-looking stubble on her legs.

Looking up she says: “What? What's wrong with you?” and reaches for the remote control.

“Nothing,” says Tony. He takes another drink of his shake before putting it back in the fridge. When he comes back Karen is flicking through the cable channels. She stops on Kiss Hits. It’s an advert for a competition where you have to text in the lowest amount for the prize, a laptop or an iPod or whatever.

He recognises the next promo before the title flashes up. The green clipped lawn in front of the mansion. The light skinned girl with her bleached blonde hair. Nelly’s trying to apologise and he hasn’t even taken his sunglasses off. And the girl with her weird green eyes, acting angry, but he knows already that she’ll get back with him. However many times she dashes the necklace on the ground she’ll always end up getting back with him.

“Turn it over will you. I’ve heard this song about three times in the last half hour.” He reaches forward for the remote.

“Leave it. I like it.” She says, with anger in her voice already.

“I told you I’ve seen it. I don’t want to see it again.” The great big white house, the hot-tub, the blue sea laid out till the horizon.

“I like it. Put it back on,” She shouts, “Give me the remote back! Give it back Tony, I need it!”