

Mark and His Drink

MARK MILROY HAD FORGOTTEN TO SET the alarm clock the night before when he'd rolled in half cut from his friend Joe's engagement party. Now he had slept in and, once again, he'd be late for work.

Oh, he shouldn't have overdone it with the drink, he thought as he rushed to the toilet to spew up. He should have learned his lesson by now. But it was always a case of 'never again until the next time' with Mark.

It was the third time this month he'd woken up with the most horrendous of hangovers, and he'd vowed never to touch the bottle again. He'd sworn to himself that he was going to give up drinking once and for all. It wasn't his fault, he told himself. It just was not his fault if other people invited him to parties and pubs and put temptation right in front of his face. He could have ordered some lemonade or a glass of fruit juice, but hey, there was no fun in drinking soft drinks. He liked the hard stuff, plus the boys would just laugh in his face and call him a sissy or a pansy if he were to be seen with a glass of lemonade or the like in his hand.

Mark had been known as the local hard man since the age of thirteen, and hard men do not drink lemonade. He'd also been the leader of the "LYT", Liverpool young team, all throughout his teens and early twenties. He'd always been a born leader, and people had always looked up to him. He had a reputation to live up to.

He had a look in the mirror and didn't like what he saw. His face was a purplish colour, and the tip of his nose was deep purple tinged with red thread veins – a tell-tale sign of a hardened drinker, he thought alarmingly to himself.

He'd always been such a handsome lad with those rough and ready good looks. All the girls had swooned over him at school, fighting for his attention.

The lifestyle he led was beginning to take its toll on him. He was on the verge of losing what Mother Nature had so generously bestowed him with. If he didn't pull up his socks pretty quickly, those good looks would soon be gone.

Of late he'd noticed that quite a few of his mates were beginning to thin on top. He should thank his lucky stars that he still had a decent head of hair on him – a thick mop of wavy blonde locks. His bright blue eyes were not so bright

this morning. They were puffy and blood shot. He didn't look like, or feel like, for that matter, the healthiest of human beings.

He headed for the kitchen and put the kettle on. A strong cup of good old British brew might do the trick and get him back on the mend.

As he sat sipping the tea with two teabags in it for good measure, his mind went back to June of the year before when his wife Katrina had walked out on him just nine months after they'd tied the knot. He'd pleaded with her not to go and had told her for the umpteenth time that he'd lay off the booze. But it had been to no avail. His pleading had fallen on deaf ears. She'd already made up her mind and nothing or no-one was going to stand in her way. She'd reached the end of her tether with her so-called husband.

With a suitcase in one hand and their pooch on his lead in the other, she walked out of the door, and out of his life, never to be seen again.

Rumour had it that her father had set her up in business in a recruitment agency in London. In fact, not long after her departure, Mark received notification from a solicitor in the capital informing him that she'd filed for divorce on the grounds of irretrievable break down due to his continual drunkenness. Had it been his own fault? He remembered only too well how many chances she'd given him to smarten up and get his act together. Only now, several months down the line was he beginning to get over the break up. He looked up at the kitchen clock. He was going to have to get a move on.

He was due at the factory at 9 o' clock and it was now going on 8.45 a.m. He risked getting sacked if he didn't get there on time. He'd already been given two oral warnings for his late time-keeping and the next one would be a written one and then after that he'd be out the door.

Anyway, did it really matter if he got the sack? Maybe they'd be doing him a favour. For quite some time now he'd been thinking of reinventing himself but he still hadn't thought about how.

For Gawd's sake! He was twenty nine going on thirty and he'd been in that margarine factory since the day after his sixteenth birthday. Where the heck was his life going? A written warning is something he did not need in his life right now. It would go against him if ever he needed a reference for another job – but what other job? He had no qualifications to his name. Not even an O' grade. He'd never been one for studying. Plus it had been the norm when he

was sixteen to get out of school as soon as possible and find a job to pay your way. He'd never been encouraged to stay on and get some kind of qualification. Ma and pa had had too many children to think about to focus their attention on any one of them. He was the fifth of eight children. They had all left school as soon as it had been legally possible.

Nowadays more and more people were going to university and getting degrees and doing masters' courses but that had not been the status quo back then. Here he was, on the threshold of thirty with no direction in his life. Maybe if he got away from it all he would also get away from his nights of boozing it up in pubs and clubs with what few mates he had left to go on the piss with.

Most of them had recently got married and hardly ever had time for the boys' nights out. He didn't even enjoy going out anymore. Maybe he'd had too much of it. Too much of anything and boredom sets in.

He remembered a time when he'd lived for those kinds of nights out. He definitely needed a turning point in his life – a new direction. After all, he told himself, they do say that 'a change is as good as a rest'.

He looked up at the kitchen clock once again. It was nearly 9 o' clock and he still felt sick. His headache was getting worse and his head was spinning. Maybe he should phone in sick. No, he couldn't do that. They all knew he'd been to Joe's engagement party the night before. They'd know he had a hangover and hangovers were not classified as valid reasons not to go to work. They were of your own making.

He got up and went to the bathroom where he splashed his face with cold water for several minutes before throwing on some clothes and heading on out. He'd go to the factory, late or not, and face the music. If they pulled him in, he'd hand in his notice. Now was the time to start thinking about the future. He couldn't see himself still working in that factory at the age of 65. Gawd! What a damn waste of a life that would be.

Once outside he got on his motorbike and revved it up. He shot off down the street and after about twenty minutes he was at the factory gates. He clocked in at 9.38 a.m. hoping the supervisor wasn't around to notice his tardiness although he knew it would show up on the computer system. At least the process of being pulled in to HR for a lecture and the dreaded written warning would be delayed. He just could not be arsed with it. Not today. His head was still spinning and he felt sick again.

He greeted his colleagues before going to his locker to get the white coat and hat – a mandatory uniform to wear in the factory. His colleague Tom, who'd worked alongside him for the past ten years, gestured to him that Mrs O' Sullivan the floor supervisor hadn't yet arrived. Good, good, he thought. He was not in the mood to listen to her ranting.

Mark's job was to mix the oils for the margarine mixture. Today just the mere smell of those oils was enough to make him feel sick. And sick he was. Luckily he managed to get to the nearest toilet before throwing up.

He was taken to the factory infirmary where the doctor signed him off for three days.

'Go home and get plenty of rest,' said Doctor Finlay. 'Make sure you drink plenty of water with lemon in it and try to eat fresh fruit and vegetables. Don't touch alcohol and do not eat fried food. You need to go easy on that stomach of yours – you know, detoxify your system.'

Doctor Finlay advised Mark not to ride home on his motorbike.

'You could have a terrible accident in the state you're in. Leave it parked in the factory car park.'

A taxi was called to take him home. He spent the rest of the day in bed thinking about the drastic changes needed to his life.

That night he felt a bit better. Ma popped round with a few lemons and some oranges and apples and a pot of homemade vegetable soup.

'It time you got a grip,' she said. 'I know ma, I know.'

'You're not a baby anymore,' she proceeded to tell him.

Ma lived two streets away. She was now nearly seventy years old. She looked tired and worn out after having brought up eight children on a tight budget but now they'd all left home and were living their own lives.

Ma had a particular fondness for Mark whom she'd always dubbed her blue-eyed golden boy. She knew deep down that Mark was a real softie and not the hard man he made out to be in and around Liverpool. Her golden boy had a heart of gold.

Mark suddenly felt he was a letdown to ma and once again vowed to himself that he would change his ways.

Next day a thought struck him. He could go to live in Spain or Greece or maybe Italy. He liked the idea of living in the sun. Here it was always raining. He had £5000 savings he'd stashed away for a rainy day. Well this was a rainy day. His health, and the good looks he was beginning to lose, depended on how he conducted his life from now on. It was now or never; he was still twenty nine years old. This kind of move he could not make at forty. What about his flat? It was a small pad that he'd bought seven years earlier at a knock-down price. It had once been the property of the council. He'd paid rent to them for three years prior to the moment they'd decided to sell off all the flats in his street. He'd put down a five grand deposit and taken out a ten-year mortgage so he still owed the building society three years' mortgage repayments on it which were pretty low at £300 a month.

An idea struck him. He could rent it out. Maybe he could get £450 a month for it. The rent would pay the mortgage and he'd have some money left over to go towards renting a new pad abroad. That way he'd always have a home to come back to should the need arise. Ma and pa could collect the rent for him or it could be sent to his bank via direct debit.

He suddenly felt better. He found himself dancing around the house singing, 'I'm leaving on a jet plane, don't know when I'll be back again.'

He'd go back to the factory for two weeks. Do the decent thing and hand in two weeks' notice. That was one of the clauses written in the company contract. He'd get some extra cash as well. How much was it? One week for every year of labour. He'd been there for thirteen years so that would be thirteen weekly wages added at the end. Yes, he'd have enough money to tide him over until he found a job abroad.

He'd been to Spain – Majorca, Tenerife and Ibiza. He'd also been to Greece to the Island of Crete. He quite fancied the idea of Italy.

In and around Liverpool there were plenty of fish and chip shops – all owned by Italians. He often wondered what the heck they were doing in Liverpool when they came from the land of "o sole mio". He'd once posed the question to Mario from the fish and chip shop down the road.

Mario spoke broken English with a thick marked Italian accent. Mario had replied. 'Italy good for one month in beautiful hotel. We go there in luxury hotel. Live in Italy – difficult life. We work here we make lots money and have good life. Better for us one month of luxury in the Bella Italia than twelve months of struggle to pay bills. We happy eleven months here and one month in our land.'

There was always a magic in the air in Mario's fish and chip shop. People queued right out onto the street and often Mario would be heard shouting at the top of his voice in Italian to his two sisters who worked there with him. Mark and his friends would try to guess what they were saying.

Mark's mind came back to the now. He remembered that one of his sister's friends had gone out to Italy about five years before as an au pair. She'd come back after a year and said she'd loved it, especially the weather and the food, but was back home as she'd missed her friends and family. She'd been in Milan and her only task had been to take a couple of children to school, tidy their rooms and speak to them in English. She'd had a room and board and a small monthly allowance in return.

He wondered if he would miss ma and pa and his brothers and sisters and his mates. He could always come back if he did. Hey, there was internet. He could connect to them via Skype.

Well his mind was made up. It was definitely Italy he was going to go to; first things first. He'd book the flight and that way there would be no turning back. He would search the net for accommodation and then see what jobs were available. Maybe he could be a tourist guide in Florence, Milan or Rome or even Naples. He'd get to meet all sorts of people. It would be a far cry from seeing the same faces he'd been looking at in the factory for the past thirteen years.

First he looked on internet to see what the going rate was for flats rented in his area. Some were going for £700 but had three bedrooms. Yes, £450 would be the right price. He placed his advert on an internet website.

Delightful one bedroom flat. Double glazing/ gas central heating throughout and a modern kitchen and bathroom. £450 pcm (per calendar month)

For further details please contact Mark on 0777 3737337

Next he booked a cheap flight for the end of the month. It was a one-way ticket to Rome. News spread around Liverpool about the hard man Mark going abroad. Some of his mates tried to talk him out of going. He was having none of that. Their only fear really was to lose their drinking partner.

Ma said it would be good for him to see a bit of the world before he got too old. Pa said nothing. He was a man of few words and rarely stated his opinion. His sister Jane, who he was closest to, was crying.

‘I’m not exactly going to the moon,’ he said. ‘I’ll only be two hours away by plane. You can come out to visit me once I get myself sorted out.’

His other sister Maggie thought it was a brilliant idea. She had seen her brother going right downhill since the breakup of his marriage or rather, since he got married or worst still, since he had laid eyes on that Katrina he’d ended up marrying. Maggie had had no time for that Katrina. A snooty nosed, spoilt, arrogant good for nothing bitch who she blamed for the depression her brother had gone through. Anyway, Maggie thought it was the best thing for Mark to get out of Liverpool and have a change of scenery for a while. His brother Peter said they’d all be out to visit him the next time Liverpool was playing at the Olympic Stadium in Rome.

‘Yes that would be nice,’ joked his eldest brother Johnny. ‘At least we won’t have to pay a fortune to stay in a hotel. Mark can put us all up in his penthouse suite.’

His other brother Kevin, who ran a boarding house in Bournemouth with his wife Lindsay, rang him and said that perhaps he should come down to Bournemouth for a break before taking such drastic measures.

His nieces and nephews loved telling their friends that they had an Italian uncle. He hadn’t even set foot on Italian soil yet and they were referring to him as their Italian uncle. Gawd! Kids did let their imaginations run away with them.

His colleagues in the factory were saddened that Mark was leaving. Even HR were sad and Mrs Hopkins, the head of personnel, joked that she’d cancel those late-time keeping warnings and give him a clean slate were he to decide he wanted to stay.

He'd miss them all. They were like a second family. But he had to keep on reminding himself that it was a dead end job. It was the road to nowhere and he'd been on that road for a third of his life.
