

## **The End of the Night**

Stefan's gone AWOL.

It was somewhere between the cloakroom and the bar that I lost sight of him.

To save money we'd draped our jackets together and not bothered to tip the cloakroom attendant.

We'd drifted along with the influx of people flowing towards the dance floor, and in the faces of others flowing towards us I'd spotted mascara runs.

It was in that mix of concurrences that Stefan managed to slip from my field of vision.

Stefan once said that the nicest thing about clubbing was waiting to be let in, that tingle of hopeful anticipation as you stand before the bouncer, like an examinee about to go before a tutor. Then the warm rubber stamp on your lower arm, the first booming bass sounds bouncing off the walls, the snatches of cryptic conversation: 'Keep an eye out!', 'Let it rip!'

By the time he got there, Stefan was well gone; he'd already been pranking the woman sitting next to him on the underground. The evening's drinking game hadn't gone his way, and no doubt he had jettisoned his dinner while barricaded inside the toilet back at the flat. Stefan never needed a big occasion to go on a bender. He didn't care about the DJs' names or give a toss about the discos they'd performed at in capital cities or on some Balearic Island.

I suspect Stefan is on the dance floor. He has a knack for blending in right away, and the enviable ability to live each day as it comes or, in this case, each night. I believe his flippancy could be down to ignorance; he believes my sense of superiority is down to me being uptight.

The club's dance floor is packed, and the music flows uninterrupted. Now and again, the strobe lights let me gaze into other gazes. Those yet unable to immerse themselves in the atmosphere of the night or unwilling to make fools of themselves with their dance moves are still standing around. Those still sober

cling to their smartphones or their beers, downed copiously.

As the bouncers manhandle a subject off the dance floor for reasons best known to themselves, I plunge into their wake and the swathe they have cleared. I step on a dancer's foot as another steps on mine, and my shirt soaks up an unsolicited beverage. I've always wished I had the power to switch off the music in a techno club, just for me – how ridiculous those shoe-sole mouse squeaks and intermittent 'whoos!' would sound ...

I realise that Stefan is not exactly profligate with his charms. His black T-shirt hardly makes him stand out from the crowd, and his hair simply refuses to surrender to any form of parting. Stefan cannot really be described as handsome, his wilful chin by far the most dominant feature from most angles. As I scour the crowd in search of his silhouette, I twice get stuck in cocktail puddles.

The closer I get to the stage, the more penetrating the heat. I feel my face flushing and sweat beading on my forehead; my breathing becomes laboured as I get ever closer to the sun. A guy, slim and slender of build, is whirling his shirt above our heads as if we're in a sauna. He vaporises acrid, lacquer-like male sweat, and beneath a fug of ammonia a dancing fury rages; he flails his limbs as if frantic to be rid of them.

Up close, his image sharpens into focus: his teeth are bared, his face transfigured in every direction. He looks puffed up and aggressive like a captive animal suddenly set free. If his opulent facial expressions were to allow for a third attribute, it would be 'undemanding'. Indeed, our bug-eyed jumping jack seems entirely preoccupied with his emotions, any interest in his surroundings clearly on the wane.

And Stefan is nowhere to be seen.

The corridors are more brightly lit than the dance floor and far more sociable than its immediate orbit. No doubt Stefan has been caught up in some haphazard conversation halfway to the Gents, engaging with more or less familiar acquaintances or perhaps with someone simply flattered by his smile. There has always been something about Stefan that makes people turn to him if, say, they lose an earring or their way. Perhaps he acquired his helper's aura at work, by osmosis. Stefan handles phone calls for the

council, fielding calls from people who complain that the lock on the door to their communal bin shed is broken, or that the grass never gets mowed or, if it does, then incorrectly.

Poseurs are parading up and down the corridors eagerly seeking out the attention of pretty women. A man with a tunnel piercing and a shaved head is smoking into his cupped hand, and as I study him more closely, he gives me the eye and barks: 'What are you staring at?' Up at the bar, the finals in the 'how-popular-am-I?' competition is in full swing: for some, all it takes to place an order is a casually raised eyebrow while, for others, no amount of elbow work secures the waitress's attention.

Stefan's not there either.

I wished for his sake he was the guy on the couch opposite with the passionate woman writhing all over him. There's something Stefan-like about the guy, but as she presses his face into hers and her kisses start to spin filaments, she's the one who jogs my memory. I'd seen her a few months ago when we were made to attend the same inter-departmental copier training course. Had someone somehow managed to possess this innocent girl's body, dress her in a petrol-coloured leather skirt and ankle boots, and take control of her limbs? The guy reaches under her top as she settles down on his belt: it's nice when the rules of decency are ditched overboard and club premises become a safe haven.

Stefan's shadow interrupts my train of thought. Moving fleetingly behind the bar, behind the barmaid and the drinks is a black shirt, a wilful chin, a head without a parting. That's him. That's Stefan. He seems to have managed to access the rooms backstage and is now heading down a passageway I've never been down before and have no idea where it ends. I follow him through open doors; the light gets dimmer; you can barely see your hand in front of your eyes; and then it gets brighter again. I resent the fact that the soles of my shoes are sticking, and I'm reminded of what Stefan is always telling me: that I walk too slowly.

The terrace is shockingly cold, and quiet. Stepping out of the club into the garden is like re-surfacing from a surging current. Out here, those who only moments ago were dancing orgasmically are now calmly chatting away. The girl with glitter in her face is so cold her bare legs are trembling yet she listens earnestly to the torrent of words from a mind-numbing conversation about how all forklift trucks in Taiwan

and Singapore are already hydrogen-powered. Her voluble counterpart is talking the way someone talks who has only recently been gifted these very lines and is now tasked with passing them on. He concludes by mentioning that the two of them should see one another again. She wishes she was in Berlin – and thinks ‘see each other again’ would actually be the correct phrase.

Beneath the moonlight, the party animals are agleam with good bad taste. The shirts are too tight by the same measure that the trousers are too wide; the ravers sport non-conformist hairstyles and original looks. A person of indeterminate gender is wearing chains and, indeed, chain-smoking; he stares down at crossed legs, his elbow cupped in one hand. He says he is planning his biggest project yet: he has taken photographs of acquaintances after they had woken up and wants to paste the photos with artefacts from their everyday working lives, like name tags and hair nets and coffee-machine keys. He believes it’s an emancipating work about the absurdity of capitalism and might soon be part of a group exhibition. The circle of listeners around him declares its enthusiasm, and the narrator modestly rolls his shoulders.

But no matter how much I crane my neck, how far I scan the pavement or scrutinise faces until they start to feel uncomfortable, Stefan is not there. Neither among the smokers freezing to death, nor on the metallic furniture proportioned to prohibit any lingering. Nor among the palm trees sullied by men, nor in the corner furthest away where a woman is showering her smartphone in tears.

I must have been following an illusion – or a dead ringer. I consider the fact that Stefan is perhaps looking for me, as it were, and that fatefully we keep missing each other. Perhaps he is pleasantly preoccupied and does not wish to be found. Morning is looming in the sky, and I’m at risk of wasting a night. I decide to take a leaf out of Stefan’s book and see the world with his eyes, abandon myself to pleasure and whatever catches my eye. Meanwhile, even those previously orbiting the dance floor have surrendered to the euphoria, and the bar staff are now taking orders direct from mouth to ear. The dancers grin in concert.

A delicate-looking girl with a bit of a bounce in her step is disporting herself in every direction. Her sunglasses are meant to disguise what her nose has clapped eyes on today. Bet you any money she’s just back from the women’s toilets where she squeezed into a cubicle with many others and hoovered up a trail of chemical experience off someone’s phone screen. And all the while the toilet attendant was staring at his phone and sending messages back home.

The door to one of the squeeze cubicles opens, and the ejected occupant immediately gets to work on restoring his respectability. He twice blows his nose, wipes his mouth compulsively, and acknowledges his mirror reflection with a sweeping gesture that takes in the whole city. 'Like being wrapped in cotton wool' is how Ms Bouncy is describing her rapturous ecstasy. Stefan, too, has a similarly laid-back relationship with drugs, preferring not to overthink them. Essentially, he'll take whatever is on offer.

And then, just as I was coming to terms with my solitude, out of nowhere or, rather, out of the fourth of the four toilet cubicles comes a widely audible gurgling. It's human speech, but not words as we know them, and it's only after the third pause that all doubt is cast aside: it's Stefan's voice. That's his confused babbling. I've found him. The toilet attendant still doesn't look up, so I venture forward, knock on the cubicle door, and call out his name. The door is closed, but not locked; I take a step back, knock again, wait for a moment, then open it a crack.

But Stefan is not there.

The cubicle is empty and oddly clean. The toilet seat is up, and the bowl pristine. Not a scrap of rubbish litters the floor, no dirty shoe prints. Inconceivable that revellers would have done a night's worth of business in here.

I turn around and now the Gents looks transformed. The room is all neat and tidy – and deserted; I am alone; Wipey Mouth has gone; the toilet attendant's chair is empty, as is his tipping bowl.

Without a word I walk out into the corridors; they are unmanned and unheated; the poseurs gone. I find myself standing on a clean-swept soundless dance floor. The stage is deserted: no dancing frenzy, no bouncers, no cotton wool. The bar area has been emptied, the beverage bottles sold off. The barmaid sits at home; the DJ has retrained. The club is as silent as a photograph. And the nights, merely remembered matter.

No doubt Stefan has just dealt himself yet another hand of solitaire on his tiled table, now more interested in club sodas than in techno clubs. The country's ravers now spend their time tending to their depressions

and their succulents; gone the excesses, the euphoria, and the dire straits. This city's nightclubs stand like WWII flak towers or excavation sites, remnants of a time now long forgotten.

There was a time when night-time meant opposition. We behaved unreasonably, immorally, unhealthily, and recklessly. We sloughed the skins of our everyday identities so we could be whatever we wanted. We forgot the week's turmoil and got nosebleeds for good reasons. We wrote messages to secret lovers and told them what we'd been thinking all day.

The morning-after hangover has lasted more than a year. The pain sends sparks to the back of our heads; we are going to seed, with our eyes wide shut, and sluggishly we drag ourselves along. We buff up our now soulless shoes and apply soothing salves to our dance sores. We are bestially exhausted, for we had lent our spirits to the night.

One year with no nights, and our interest in all that surrounds us is waning.