

## SPUNK

It was like that film Boogie Nights as me and Amir and Solly and Nadia swept along Shoreditch High Street, taking up the whole pavement, all talking at once, past the kebab shops and the bars and the money shacks, then into Rivington Street and up to the Honeyclub just as Matt was placing his meaty hand on some punter's chest and saying, "it's nothing personal mate but I don't like your face," and slowly pushing him down the steps one by one, and then he seemed almost to bow as he saw us and said, "good evening Mr Solly sir," and we sailed through the dim redlit hallway into the club, still mostly empty, just a couple of girls jigging in the lights swirling across the floor and a fat bloke at the bar, buttocks hanging off a red leather stool, slowly fingering peanuts one by one into his mouth, and after Solly nodded to Giorgio at the bar he was over taking our order almost as soon as we'd sat ourselves down in our favourite alcove, Solly and Nadia on the banquette and me and Amir in the gentleman's club type armchairs that always made me think of money. Solly ordered Krug, and a lemonade for Amir, and when our drinks came he insisted on a proper toast.

"To spunk" he said and we all drank to that.

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It was Nadia, Solly's girlfriend, who'd started it all off. She'd slipped into England on a tourist visa, looking for work.

"Anything better than working as doctor in godforgotten Siberia, sewing up vodka sodding coal miners," she'd told us. And

seeing as how she was stunning in a pale blonde way, she'd caught Solly's eye when she ended up behind the bar in the Honeyclub.

Solly was an odd looking guy. Even his mum wouldn't call him pretty. With his fat lips, round belly and short little legs, he looked like a toad and walked like a barrel on stilts. But I've never known anyone have so many girls falling over him as Solly. I would never have guessed it till the first night me and Amir went out with him. In the space of an hour he had three different women batting their eyelashes. And all he seemed to do was sit at the bar with his hooded eyes, soaking it up but also looking like he couldn't care less.

Though it wasn't exactly my territory, I was curious.

"I hope you don't mind me asking, Sol. No offence but you're not the best-looking guy in the world. How do you do it?"

Solly's face lit up.

"Just something I've got, Paul, a little je ne sais quoi. I don't what it is, to tell you the truth, but I've always had it. Maybe it's smell. Did you know that the smell of a man's armpit relaxes a woman; hormones or pheromones or something. Anyway, when a woman's talking to me she just feels good. She doesn't know why any more than me, but it makes her feel so good she forgets all her troubles and just keeps coming back for more."

Me and Amir hadn't known Solly long. We'd gone into the Honeyclub with this scheme we had. We'd got some girls working for us, dressed them up in short skirts and skimpy tops and made them strap-on trays, like the cigarette girls you see in old black and white movies. But these weren't for cigarettes, they were for

shorts, vodka or tequila, two pounds a pop. On busy nights, when the clubs were rammed, people often couldn't get to the bar, or even be bothered, but the blokes would fork out a couple of quid for a short and a look down some girl's top, and women nowadays just want to get caned. The club got fifty percent.

It was going pretty well, and we had three pairs of girls working different clubs. Anyway Solly was in the Honeyclub that night and when we'd asked at the bar could we talk to the boss, the barman had just pointed a thumb at this funny looking guy and said, "talk to him."

Solly was friendly enough, very easy-going, but sharp. He heard us out and said, "It's a nice idea, lads. But tell me why we'd want to give you a cut for selling drinks in our own bar? And anyway if we took you on and it worked, then we'd start doing it ourselves, wouldn't we?"

He was right of course. But he bought us a drink and we stayed for a chat. As soon as he heard Amir's name he clocked him as a Muslim. Well you couldn't not really, what with the name, his brown skin, and him asking for a lemonade.

"And what's a good Muslim boy like you doing in the alcohol trade," but so friendly that Amir laughed.

And Solly went on about how he was a Jew and how he could never get enough bacon. "Four thousand years of deprivation to make up for. It's in my genes Amir."

Amir and me had been mates since we were eight. We just hit it off as soon as we met. There was something about Amir's foxy face and sweet nature and the way he did everything so neat and fast that

got to me. We've been inseparable since. Amir's family ran a restaurant in Bethnal Green, the usual starched tablecloths and twangy music and polite waiters like undertakers. His dad used to feed us in the back and I'd make any excuse to eat at Amir's. I loved curry, I just couldn't get enough. Mind you, Amir's dad used to laugh at the customers who spent so long choosing their Dansaks and Jalfrezis and Pasandas. There was always one great big pot on the stove. "Curry Gravy Number One," Amir's dad called it, but there was never a Number Two. Anyway it was loads better than the frozen pizzas and tinned peas we got in our house.

And Amir and I had been like two peas in a pod when it came to our ideas about life's little pleasures. We always had a scheme going from the start. Dealing Pokemon cards, flogging the trainers and Walkmans my dad got cheap, selling homeworks to the kids who were too lazy or thick to write their own. We didn't write them ourselves of course, we just connected the brainy types to the customers and took a cut.

Amir's and my friendship got a bit strained for a while when we hit puberty. We got tense and tongue-tied for months but when we finally realised we fancied the pants off each other and did the deed, everything went back to how it was before, better in fact.

So as I was saying, Nadia started us off. She had this idea, and I must say there was nothing blonde about the way her brain worked. She reckoned there was cartloads of money to be made in private fertility clinics.

Apparently lots of women can't get pregnant nowadays. They reckon it's something in the water or women having careers and

leaving it too late, but Nadia said it's really common. These clinics put them through loads of tests at several hundred quid a time, then the fertilisation itself costs thousands and they often need three or four goes before they get pregnant or give up. Nadia had worked a second job in a fertility clinic in Russia and she'd figured out that if she could get a license here and Solly would back her, she could make serious money.

"Women who cannot get pregnant get desperate," she'd keep saying. "Doesn't matter how much it cost, keep spending, sell house if need to."

Solly spent some time looking into it. He was fond of Nadia and wanted to help, and of course the prospect of all that money didn't cause him any pain. But it wasn't to be. He tried all his contacts but there was no way he could get Nadia licensed. They wouldn't even accept her ordinary medical qualifications here, however much he offered to pay, and it turned out that fertility clinics were pretty tightly regulated. And even if he got past that hurdle, it would have cost more than Solly could lay his mitts on to set up a clinic, what with premises and receptionists and nurses, and labs to do the testing and so on.

We were all in the Honeyclub when Solly broke the news to Nadia. She started crying like a drain and even Solly, who had a soft heart, looked a bit blubbery.

"Rubbish life, being Russian," sobbed Nadia. "Crap there and crap here. Sweat fingers to bone to study medicine and get paid peanuts to work in arse of Russia or come here and work in bar."

Solly had kept telling Nadia she didn't need to work in the bar, or anywhere else for that matter, but she was made like Amir and me, we had to be working.

"Such a nice clinic I wanted, clean pretty clinic, help people have babies, everybody happy, lots of money," said Nadia, whose English hadn't developed much since we'd known her. "And so good medicine now for fertility, not just test-tube but icksey, good even when man has too few sperms."

"What's icksey?" asked Amir.

"Get sperm from man, inject into egg. Make baby!" said Nadia. "Even if he has no sperm can take from balls with needle."

"You mean you stick a needle in his balls and suck out the sperm?" said Amir. As for me, you couldn't have swiped a credit card through my buttocks.

"Yes," said Nadia, oblivious. "Man don't have to make love to woman. Even if he can't, or is in another country or is in coma. Even if he's a poofter." Nadia had never quite got the hang of Amir's and my relationship. "Just take the sperm, put on ice, then make baby with woman's egg."

That got the rest of us talking about the wonders of modern science but Amir was unusually quiet. Then, when there was a lull in the conversation, he went back to what Nadia had been saying.

"You mean a man could be out like a light, and you could take his sperm and put it in a woman's egg and she would get pregnant?"

"Yes, I keep telling you. Can stimulate penis with electric thing. Or if no good then take with needle," said Nadia.

But I was watching Amir. I've got the highest respect for his thinking abilities and I don't mind admitting that it's Amir who's come up with the best of our little ideas. I could see he was onto something.

"And of course the bloke wouldn't have to be the woman's partner," he said. "In fact she needn't even know him." Amir was talking softly, almost to himself.

And that's how we came to start the most beautiful baby of a business any of us had ever been involved with. What Amir had seen, with that cunning little brain of his, was that there were thousands of women who were mad for a kid, but didn't have a boyfriend, or else he was shooting blanks. And then there were all the gay women who wanted babies. Amir had read that they'd brought in a law allowing kids to track down sperm donor fathers, and ever since then the supply of sperm had just about dried up. It made us laugh. One thing you could never say was in short supply was spunk, what with blokes from Vauxhall to Vladivostok shagging or doing the five knuckle shuffle from morning to night. But it seemed all these sperm just weren't in the right place at the right time, which I suppose is the secret of life.

We started small. There was a little businessmen's hotel, the Clovis, not far from the Honeyclub, owned by a guy called Viv. The Clovis used to send lonely punters down to the club when they asked where to go for a good time and Viv, who was a decent enough bloke, never had to pay for a drink as a result. Natalia, the receptionist at the hotel, was another Russian girl and a friend of Nadia's. We got Natalia to look over the men who checked in, and when she saw a

likely specimen she'd send them down to the club with a wink that hinted at unfeasible delights. Then she'd text Nadia who to look out for.

Amir and I supplied the girl. It was easy for her. All she had to do was cosy up to the guy when he came in, and look into his eyes and listen to whatever rubbish he was coming out with, and after a few drinks start rubbing up to him and arching like a cat on heat. It's not hard to fool the average man like that. Then she'd slip some Rohypnol in his drink when he was off in the bog, and when he started to go whirly she'd drape herself around him and drag him down the road to his room. Usually he'd barely make it and would be out like a light on the bed when Nadia knocked on the door a few minutes later.

I was never too sure what Nadia did in there but I know she had some kind of a machine that Solly had bought her, a vibrostimulator he called it. Amir tried to borrow it once, saying something about giving it a road test, but Solly wouldn't hear of it.

"Pull your own, or get someone else to pull it, this thing cost me two grand."

Anyway Nadia would be out in about ten minutes with a mugshot of the victim and enough of his precious sperm in a dry ice canister to impregnate a convent. Our lucky donor would wake in the morning with a sore head and only the haziest memory of the night before. A pair of knickers we'd popped in the bed kept him shtum.

Solly's job had been to organise the sale of the goods.

I've learnt in life how, when you scratch under the surface, the most surprising people turn out to be as straight as a three card trick, and the fertility trade was no exception. A certain amount of persuasion was required of course, but having an in to the Russians made everything easy. The Russians can get anything done in London nowadays. They've got the money and the muscle, and like the Italians they're very family minded. Natalia had a sister who was married to a chancer called Igor, and Igor worked his way up the food chain till he got to speak to a big fish called Sasha. Solly and Sasha had cut a deal and within a week we'd got our first clinic ready and willing to co-operate, though it cost us a cut of everything we made of course.

The thing to understand about women who've reached a certain age and haven't had a baby is how desperate they get. Their biological clock is ticking away like a time bomb and it gets so they can't think about anything else.

So when the doctor says, "I'm afraid my hands are tied, we've just got no sperm donors," she might turn to him and say through her tears, "Doctor, isn't there any way? I'd do anything."

And that's when he might say, ever so quietly, "Well there is one possibility, but due to our short-sighted laws it's not strictly legal," and he opens his drawer and pulls out this book that Amir got made up, really professional looking, which is basically our shopping list with photos and prices and everything. I don't know what they made of all these blokes with their eyes closed, but it didn't stop them writing the cheque. And what was so great was that

everyone was happy. The doctor got paid, we got paid and with a bit of luck she got her baby.

Sasha continued to deliver and within a few weeks we had one clinic in London and one each in Leeds and Birmingham and we were clearing twenty grand a month.

So there we were in the Honeyclub, me and Amir and Solly and Nadia, champagne glasses raised, bubbles soaring in tune with our spirits, toasting spunk and the money it was making us. Nadia was trying to do that linking arms thing with Solly and was looking happier than we'd ever seen her. And then, ever so quietly, Amir started talking, and after a bit we all began to see where he was going and went silent, our jaws dropping in wonder at his genius.

"So far we've been working just with regular blokes, but there's women, some of them with husbands or boyfriends even, who'd pay through the nose to have kids from men they fancied like mad but would never stand a chance of getting close to. Footballers, film stars, musicians, even politicians. How much would that be worth to a woman, to have David Beckham's baby?"

I couldn't help it, I just had to, and I kissed Amir smack on the lips in front of everyone. He gave me a quick pleased smile.

Solly couldn't care less about football, but me and Amir had been Arsenal fans since the days they were famous for being boring, and it seemed disloyal not to stick with the team. Arsenal were finally going through one of those patches that makes being a fan worthwhile. They were winning all the time and had a team stuffed with great players, two of whom were not only young, good-looking and incredibly rich, but were on the gossip pages nearly every day

of the week. Andy Baptiste was one of the best full backs in the business, and Frankie Saville, big-shouldered local boy, was currently top striker in the premiership.

Solly always says you can't make money without spending money, and in this case most of it was Sasha's. Frankie Saville was patron of the Sunshine Fund, a charity that took sick kids to Disneyland, which personally I thought would be more likely to finish them off, but there's no accounting for taste. Solly got in touch with Frankie's agent and told him he'd like to make a hefty donation. All he asked in return was that Frankie join him for a private dinner in his suite at the Dorchester and bring Andy along. The formal invite was hand-delivered along with a cheque for fifty thousand pounds.

Me and Amir wore Oswald Boateng suits, embroidered Paul Smith shirts, white for him and black for me, and black Church's shoes for the night. We looked the real bollocks. There's not much you can do to scrub up Solly, though, but like a lot of squat Danny de Vito types, after a few minutes it's his energy you notice more than his looks. But the real stunner of the night was Nadia. She'd had her hair cut short, and bleached so blonde it was virtually white. And she must have had lenses in because her eyes had a red cast that made her look almost albino. She wore a kind of catsuit, skintight and made from matt black silky stuff. It had long zips down the insides of the arms, and more across the neck and chest. She looked like something out of Blade Runner, and Frankie and Andy couldn't keep their eyes off her. Nadia had also brought along two Russian sisters, Lydia and Anya, from the seemingly endless supply of beautiful girls that Sasha, our sponsor, kept handy. The overall

effect of the crisp white tablecloth and napkins, the gleaming glasses, the uniformed flunkeys, the beautiful women and four fit young men was sexy as hell and we all got intoxicated with it.

Solly, who liked his food, had planned the meal. We started with oysters and champagne, then asparagus and hollandaise. Mains were duck or venison and then there was a whole stack of tiny cakes and creamy things on big white plates, dribbled with red juice and dusted with icing sugar. And of course there were the different wines with every course, and the brandies and liqueurs, and by the end of the meal Andy and Frank had drunk more than they probably intended. As the Rohypnol started to kick in neither of them protested when they were led away to have a little lie down.

In less than twenty minutes it was all over and Nadia had her two precious canisters. We all scarpered straight away. I can't imagine what Andy and Frankie made of it when they woke up, but the fact that the beds looked like a hurricane had been through and they didn't have any clothes on gave them a clue, misplaced as it happened to be.

Amir and I were to deliver the goods to Sasha. He said he had women willing to pay serious money for Frankie's and Andy's sperm, and being fit young lads there was plenty to go round.

We'd not been to Sasha's place before. He had a house over in Kensington where Solly said all the Russian millionaires lived. The door was answered by a shaved headed bruiser in a suit and I don't think he was the butler. He led us along a hall lit with chandeliers to a pair of double doors which opened onto a living room. I reckon just this room was bigger than the whole of my and Amir's houses

when we were kids. Sasha was sitting on a black leather sofa watching a screen that took up the most of one wall. Chelsea were one down to Barcelona at the Nou Camp and he waved us silently to sit till the first half was done, though his muscle man did bring us a whisky each. I had Amir's.

At half time Sasha turned down the volume. He was a small guy, dressed rather poncily in a Pringle sweater and jeans, very neat and contained. He had really tiny hands for a man with fingers in so many pies. He wasn't much of a smiler, or given to small talk. We gave him the cold box and that was pretty much it. We'd agreed a one-off payment and Sasha handed over a bag stuffed with a hundred grand in pictures of the Queen there and then. Me and Amir couldn't stop laughing, and whenever we calmed down, just looking at each other set us off again. We met up with Solly and Nadia and divided the cash after Solly took out what he'd spent at the Dorchester. Equal shares in everything was our way.

That was it for the next few months and we went back to our regular routine with the suckers from the Clovis. I spent some of my share on equipping a mini-gym in the spare room of the flat me and Amir shared, and I was working out pretty seriously most mornings. I'd decided to try my hand at a bit of boxing.

One Saturday, as I was sweating on the rowing machine, Amir, who'd been out for some munch, came bursting in. He was always a bit hyper but I'd never seen him like this.

"Hold it down Amir," I said, but he couldn't.

"The fucking cunt," he was shouting, over and over, and jabbing at a copy of the Sun.

And there it was, front page, "Two Arsenal players in paternity suit." I read on. "In an amazing coincidence, solicitors yesterday filed simultaneous paternity suits against Andy Baptiste and Frank Saville for three million pounds each. Even more extraordinarily, the two women who say they are carrying the footballers' babies are Russian sisters, Lydia a swimwear model and Anya, a bar hostess. Lydia, who claims she had a long-running affair with Saville, said, 'I love him but now I'm pregnant he doesn't want to know. I just want justice for myself and my child'."

The story covered the next four pages, with photos of Andy and Frankie, a couple of Lydia in a bikini, and one of both blonde sisters standing with their hands over their swelling bellies. A statement from Arsenal's solicitors said both men denied even knowing the women. There was an editorial which, without ever quite saying the lads were guilty, went on about testosterone-fuelled footballers, drunk on fame and wealth, and an accompanying article on famous paternity suits including Boris Becker's payout of around three million to another Russian woman after a shag in a broom cupboard at Nobu's. 'The most expensive five seconds of my life,' he'd called it.

We rang Solly and met later that evening at the Honeyclub. I thought Solly would be flaming, but he was pretty philosophical.

"We just got screwed, there's fuck all we can do. I can't see us negotiating with Sasha and his bandits for a cut of the paternity money."

The story rumbled on in the papers. Frankie and Andy had their own solicitors now and they'd obviously told the boys to keep shtum.

They put out a joint statement saying that there would be no further comment until the births had taken place, in around three months time, and DNA testing could be carried out.

The weeks passed fairly quietly. I was training for my first bout and was spending most afternoons at Finchley Boxing Club. Amir was ducking and diving as usual. I knew he was helping his dad set up another restaurant but I think he had some other ideas on the go as well; I knew he'd tell me when he was ready. The baby business was bringing in regular money and everything seemed sweet.

I was working the heavy bag at the gym when Gus the trainer called me to the phone. It was Amir.

"Leave the gym right now, Paul. Just get your stuff and scarper. Don't go home. Come to the Rajah as soon as you can," and he wouldn't say any more.

There was so much urgency in his voice that I didn't even shower and caught a cab straight to Amir's dad's new place which was due to open the following week. When I got there, Amir was sitting at a table opposite Solly. I slid in next to Amir. Solly looked at us for a long time. Then really quietly he started on us.

"You stupid cunts. You total bell-ends. You knobs. You spanners." Solly knew a lot of insults and I figured he could keep this up for quite a while.

"What's up Sol?" I managed to get in when he paused for a moment.

"Well might you ask, you fucking doughnut," said Solly. "It wasn't exactly hard was it, not rocket science or anything. All you had to do was deliver the canisters to Sasha."

"And we did, Sol, you know that."

"Yes Paul, you did. Two canisters. The one with the red label was Frank's, the blue one was Andy's ..."

"Hang on," I said, "I think you'll find it was the other way round Sol, and we made sure Sasha knew exactly which was which."

"Yes, you fuckwit, I know what you think. It just happens you were wrong. Sasha rang this morning. He is very seriously upset. Lydia's baby was born in the night. And guess what, the baby's only fucking black."

Everyone seems to think it was my and Amir's fault. Solly managed to make some kind of peace by raising the hundred grand and paying back Sasha. He had the Honeyclub and Nadia to think about and we didn't really blame him for putting all the weight on us. He ended up out of pocket big time because Amir and I had spent a fair whack of our share, and we needed what was left to get away for a bit.

Sasha's forgiveness didn't extend to me and Amir, and the word was that his goons were looking all over London for us. We hid out in an empty flat over the Rajah but we knew we had to chip quick. Amir already had a passport from when he'd been to Pakistan as a teenager, and I managed to fast-track one with a story about a dying granny in America. We were on a flight to Ibiza within a week.

I'd never been out of the country before. I'd always wanted to travel and Solly knew a bloke who ran a club in San Antonio who owed him a favour and would give us work if we needed it.

So here we are. It seems a million miles away from London. The season hasn't started yet so there's not much to do, but we've still

got a bit of cash to tide us over. The sun shines all the time and the sky is just this perfect blue like I've never ever seen in London. Amir seems to be learning Spanish dead quick, though 'buenas dias' and 'cerveza' is about my limit. This is the first real holiday either of us have ever had. There's a whole long summer stretching ahead and Amir's already started coming up with a few ideas.