

# A Grand Night Out.

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Thank God they didn't let me in.

The bouncer outside was a short, thick-looking guy with an earpiece and a black leather jacket, and behind him, a wide set of double doors opened into an entryway with a mirror behind.

Picture me standing in front of 'Zoo Bar,' a chic-ish club in Leicester Square that caters mostly to tourists and well-off, twenty-something west-enders. I'd made plans to meet friends here, or, rather, I'd been invited. What follows is my first experience with clubbing in 9 weeks and counting in the U.K.

Inside, imagine that I can see the blue silhouettes of people dancing. It looks busy.

Out here, it is just me and the guy with the jacket standing on the sidewalk on a curious strip of red carpet.

And I have no idea what I'm supposed to be doing.

I take a step forward on the carpet, and put on my best, 'charmingly clueless but lovable' face.

"So," the face comes with slight, disarming stutter, "how does this, ah, work exactly? Do I just, ah, you know, walk in, or do I wait for you to tell me to walk in or..." at this point I realize both that this bouncer does not care for the clueless but lovable, and that I don't have anything more to add to my question, "or, you know, ah, what?"

"Sir, we have a mixed couples policy."

"What, ah, well, what does that, ah, mean, exactly?"

He looked past me across the street, and said, as if he were reciting a tired pledge of allegiance.

"It means boys must be accompanied by girls. Every boy needs a partner."

I brightened a little. I had an answer for this.

"Ah, see that's great, because I'm meeting four girls here; they're inside," and I pointed over his shoulder to indicate to him where my friends were.

The guy looked past me into the street again, and shook his head. I got the impression that I'd said something wrong.

"So," I looked around, "should I, um, you know, go find a girl, just any girl, in Leicester Square, and then bring her back here or something?"

He told me to wait on the carpet.

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I stood there for about 30 seconds, and then took first one step towards the guy, then another, then, after I'd got his attention,

"So, should I just wait here until, you know, a random girl just comes by herself? And then I go in? Or should I..."

He turned his big, meaty head around so slowly that I felt like I should stop talking. And then he spoke so quickly that I felt like I should leave.

"Look, mate," he said, "you're not getting in."

And this is how I met Daniel.

I left, called my friends inside, and told them what happened, and said I wasn't coming. They said they could probably get me in, but I told them not to bother. I walked around Leicester Square, towards the tube stop, thinking I might go home.

But I turned around, I'm not sure exactly why, but I wasn't ready to go, and, on a split second impulse, I squeezed back into the crowd of tourists, teenagers, couples, and lonely old men that make up the pedestrian zone between Leicester Square and Piccadilly Circus.

Just past the main square, there's a fountain on the corner with six dashing, wet horses, and this is where I remembered the Comedy Store.

The Comedy Store is underground, and I'd been there once. It smells like the mothballs they keep in the club's steel trough urinals, and hosts some of the best touring stand up comedy acts in the world. And they've got a student discount.

I took a left at the fountain and got in the queue for the late show behind two couples, and the familiar black-clad bouncers at the front door.

That is, I was fifth in line. The doors wouldn't open for twenty-five minutes.

Waiting by yourself is a lonely business, especially when there's no one behind you. I spent a few minutes studying the scaffolding of the construction project across the street, following its pipes from the ground over and up the building's facade.

"Are you in the queue?"

A tall, youngish looking man in a sweat-shirt was standing behind me. Behind him, beaming, were a short, smiling girl, and a medium sized, solid looking guy with stubble on his head. They seemed like they were having a good night.

I told them I was, and they fell into line behind me. We got to talking, about lots of things, about what I was doing here in the U.K., about what they were doing that night, the club they never made it to because were too busy playing 'snap' and drank vodka at Daniel's apartment, about the comedy club we were queuing for, and about politics, and the stock market, and pubs, and about football. We

## WHERE THE HELL IS WAYNE, MAINE?



talked until the bouncers stood aside and let us in.

These three adopted me that evening. Daniel, sort of the group leader, his girlfriend Ali, and friend Matt, quite literally took me in, into an adjacent seat, into their company, and, later, after four acts and three pitchers of XXXX, into their home.

The club closed at 2:30, and Ali, though I'd forgotten her name at that point, said:

"Would you like to come round for a drink?"

Daniel and Ali's apartment, which isn't far from Piccadilly Circus, near the Comedy Store, and surrounded by various embassies, is spacious and bright, and they have the most amazing soap in their bathroom, some sort of honey and lavender. For the next two hours, I had friends in England, and we talked over drinks about music and sports, and in the end, I tried to teach them to play canasta, but it was useless.

We threw down our cards at half past four, and as I walked to the bus stop after waving goodbye and exchanging email addresses, I was struck by how quickly a night in this town can turn, from one you might rather forget to one you will always remember.

Things turn around fast. I had, probably, the best night I've had in my time here in the U.K., the kind of night away from reaches of tourists with fanny packs and tipsy-clubbing abroad-ers. And whatever its cause, the evening couldn't have possibly gone better.

So. Thanks, Mr. Meathead bouncer, with your red-carpeted sidewalk and your perfect gender balance. Thanks. For a grand night out.