

I grabbed her by the face – you know, hands either side of her cheeks, fingers stretching through her hair round the back of her ears, and thumbs planted firmly below her temples – and just looked at her. I didn't know what to say; or at least I think I didn't. She asked me what she was supposed to be looking at. I replied, 'I don't know. It's your mind, not mine'. At this point I was committed; there was no turning back, no looking away, not even a blink would go unnoticed. Strangely I could feel her thinking – like little ripples in a garden pond, flowing through my hands. She blinked first, it wasn't me – I'm sure of that. Then she said – and I'll never forget this for as long as I live – she said 'Hey man, wake up and get out of bed!' Of course this was my Bart Simpson alarm clock, intruding so rudely on my dream. I always seem to get to the same point: the dream isn't always the same – well not exactly – but just when I'm about to hear what she says, the moment of all moments, the truth of all truths, the one incy wincy sentence that would exonerate all male humanity from the heavy charge of 'romantic ignoramus', she gets cut-

Credits.

A wise man once said that life is just a performance. Well, that's not completely true, I've never heard the saying nor does the wise man exist, but I think there's some substance to it, so let's drop the formalities. My question is who is writing my lines? If you've ever seen some badly written 'tragicom', (sorry, that's a word I use to unite tragedy and comedy – it's just easier) or, worse, seen Hollyoaks, then you'll have some idea about the style of this mysterious writer of my script. Just last week I found myself the victim of the most gruesome date ever to have existed: I'd been attending photography night classes – I quite fancied myself the artistic type – and had been *conversing* on a regular basis with a fellow *arteeest*. About five-eight, dark hair, green eyes, chatty as Aunt Norris in the vicarage and er... female. Well anyway, tucking my self-consciousness tightly away and out of sight, I plucked up the courage to ask her out – on a date – just me and her – together – alone – or maybe not, I couldn't rent out a whole bar for her. Knocking back a few bottles of self esteem and a shot or two of confidence, I set off to my impending doom, dusty contraceptive in one pocket and taxi-fare-for-one in the other. And what did I find? Lots in common. Lots and lots and lots in common. I took a moment to listen to myself talking, and could swear there was a hint of 'suave' knocking around. I was in heaven! She was even interested in my 'how to get to Sheffield' speech – all those years of mockery, and finally I'd managed to engage someone with a story symptomatic of not-been-on-a-date-in-years-itis. When she acceded to my offer of showing her my private photo collection, alarm bells pierced my subconscious. Unfortunately the long island ice tea we'd just ordered sufficed to drown out the sound to a mere whimper. The success so far was bordering on ridiculous, but I didn't care because I was too wasted and excited to risk assess the situation. Stumbling through the front door of my shared-flat, both doubling over in stitches at the taxi driver's uncanny resemblance of Dame Edna Everage in drag (yes... I realise the irony), we were confronted by a half naked and totally astonished Pete, nibbling at a pot of dry cereal and clearly retiring to his room after a nightly instalment of *I'm Alan Partridge*. Pete is my housemate; a winging stump of a man, pessimistic to the core and a self-confessed Scotsman. Or is that the other way around? Needless to say he hadn't cropped up in any of the nights vibrant conversation, with even the verbal-autoroute to Sheffield taking precedence. So there I was, frantically attempting to untie my shoelaces, chuckling at Edna's deep cockney accent, when I became intimately aware that my date had ceased her likewise

chuckling. Instead, the half naked Scotsman and half sober Julia – that was her name – stood motionless, eyes deadlocked in astonishment. How long have I known Pete? Well it's not a matter of years really – it's been too long, and apparently not long enough, lets put it that way. Not only was she an old flame... no, that would be too easy, let me remind you; Hollyoaks, 'tragicom'; but she was the girl who had been with child – their child – before Pete had gotten 'hot feet' and skipped town. We were then brought up to date; weeks of crying, an abortion, anti-depressants, a few weeks of more crying, a lost job, a new job, another depressive spiral; all before a new city and a new slate – I'd just pressed the reset button. There was a slam and a hinge ruptured in the doorframe. Silence, followed by: 'Wh-?'

'-Ah, best not to ask, ey?'

The dry cereal crunch persisted and we both went to bed. Best not to ask... best not to think. Best to sleep. Best to dream. Well at least until Bart screws it up again.