

THE GAP

A short story by A.A. Abbott

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It was ten o'clock on a Friday evening. Jeb had dragged himself away reluctantly from the White Horse, but business was business. He parked his BMW round the corner from Green Park tube station, fishing in his pocket for coins. Fifteen minutes, that should do it. He tutted at the extortionate cost. Still, he was getting a premium for his wares, as he well knew.

Barry, the doorman at the casino, looked him up and down with disapproval. "It's jacket and tie only, mate," he muttered, standing solid and immovable in front of the entrance. Like Jeb, he was tall and broad-chested. In stature, they might have been twins. There couldn't have been more of a contrast, however, between Jeb's dark good looks and Barry's pale, rough-hewn visage.

Jeb bristled. He always wore a leather jacket, jeans and box-fresh trainers; Barry knew that. "I'm just delivering," he said frostily. "Let me inside the door. It's too public to hand it over in the street. And," he grimaced, "you need to find a spot without cameras, obviously."

Barry shook his head. "The customer wants to see you personally."

Was Barry scared of a sting? Jeb considered walking away. Greed overcame him. He had a grand's worth of gear with him, and he'd been offered half as much again for it. "Okay," he said. "I'll meet him in the gents. But I'm not going home to get changed."

"I suppose I can lend you clothes," Barry grumbled. "The management keep a set just in case one of the high rollers turns up in Hawaiian shorts. It's not for the likes of you, but..."

"That would be 'not for the likes of us', Barry," Jeb pointed out. "You're pond life to the high spenders, the same as me."

Barry scowled. "I was about to say, you'll have to take off that jewellery too."

"All right," Jeb acquiesced. He removed the gold pins from his nose and left ear.

The spare suit Barry retrieved from a cubbyhole next to the door wasn't a bad fit. Jeb still detested it, swearing as he changed his clothes in the spartan staff toilets to which Barry directed him. He roughly knotted the cheap, boring grey tie he'd been given.

Barry looked relieved. "I'll take you up to Mr Al-Shakah."

"Is he a rap star?" Jeb asked, tongue in cheek.

Barry ignored him. "You can manage on your own for five minutes, can't you?" he asked the monosyllabic Romanian who shared door security duties with him. The man grunted his assent.

They took a lift to the second floor, where the gaming tables were located: a dozen of them, variously shaped like lozenges or horseshoes. The huge room, red-painted and low-lit, was buzzing with conversation, concentration, sighs as punters lost and cheers as they won. "Impressed?" Barry asked.

"Not bad for a betting shop," Jeb admitted. His eyes flicked between the young, sexy casino staff and the punters clustered at each table, confidently throwing down gaily coloured chips. He felt himself drawn into the excitement, the chance to win a fortune.

Barry nodded to the nearest table. "That's him."

Al-Shakah was playing roulette with hundred pound chips, bright red circles with the denomination written on them. His skin, like Jeb's, was light brown, and he too was probably in his early thirties, but the similarity ended there. He clearly wasn't a Londoner of mixed race. The gambler had a slight frame and an Arabic appearance. His gaze was fixed on the young blonde croupier, who was smiling and congratulating him as she handed him a pile of chips. Jeb's eyes widened. With one bet, Al-Shakah had won two thousand pounds.

Barry coughed discreetly, caught the gambler's eye and nodded to Jeb. Al-Shakah spoke briefly to the croupier before heading to the toilets.

Jeb followed. Entering a cubicle adjacent to the Arab's, he hissed, "Give me the money."

A bundle of notes appeared from the gap below the partition between the two cubicles. Jeb counted them carefully: exactly fifteen hundred pounds. He passed back a couple of sealed clear plastic bags containing white powder. Listening for the other man to leave, he heard nothing apart from a few sniffs and some heavy breathing. Finally, a strongly accented voice said, "Barry says you can get me a girl."

"That could be arranged," Jeb said, adding, "And Viagra." He knew they were alone. On entering the room, he'd scanned it. It was second nature to him. Sensing another sale, he slipped a packet with a couple of blue pills under the partition.

"I want that one. Kat."

"Sorry?"

"I'll show you."

Jeb unlocked his cubicle, hearing a click as the gambler did the same. Nervously, Jeb followed Al-Shakar to the gaming tables. A couple of metres away from the roulette, Al-Shakar jerked a thumb at the blonde croupier. "Her."

Jeb couldn't fault his taste. She was pretty, her face a perfect oval with creamy skin, green eyes and a wide smile. He guessed she would be in her early twenties, perhaps ten years younger than him. It was too risky though. He'd never met her before. He couldn't simply waltz up to her and ask her if she did foreigners. "I'll get you another girl," he said. "A stunner, even better. It'll cost a grand."

He'd chosen a ridiculous figure. His girls usually charged a hundred, tops. They were young, fresh-faced and biddable, though. He thought Al-Shakah would like that.

The Arab didn't bat an eyelid. "In thirty minutes," he said, and turned to play again.

Jeb shuffled back to the gents to make a phone call. He knew at least one young woman had a shift in a massage parlour at the Elephant. It was close enough for a taxi to bring her to Mayfair in twenty minutes. Arrangements made, he took the lift back to Barry.

The doorman held out his hand. "Two hundred, Jeb."

"What? That's double what we agreed."

Barry raised a bushy eyebrow. "He told me he'd want a girl as well."

Jeb couldn't argue. Trixie would be there at any moment, long-haired, short-skirted, made-up like a princess, out of her mind on her own particular brand of addiction. Jeb had learned everybody had an addiction, a gap in their lives they struggled to fill. It was his job to discover it and satisfy it. He sold Trixie what she desired most; she in turn sold herself to the men who craved what she offered. He handed the cash to Barry and went outside for a cigarette. Trixie's taxi arrived as he flicked the last hot ashes away.

"Tell Mr Al, will you?" Jeb asked Barry.

Barry simply shrugged, indicating that Jeb could tell the Arab himself. There was the small matter of payment too, of course. Bolder now, Jeb ascended in the lift once more.

Al-Shakar noticed his arrival at once. He motioned to Jeb to join him at the table. "Here," the Arab pointed to the chips in front of him. "There's your payment."

Jeb would admit that arithmetic, or any task that involved more than low cunning or brute force, was not his strong point. However, even he could see there were more than ten of the hundred pound counters laid out in front of him. "Thanks," he said.

Once the Arab had left, Jeb could have cashed in the chips, he knew. The blonde croupier turned a dazzling smile on him, however. "Want to play?" she asked. "Black or red?"

In his youth, merely a decade or so before, Jeb had bet heavily on the horses. It was a habit that, while he wouldn't call it an addiction, had led him to take risks with his friends and finances. He'd sought counselling during the resulting spell in prison. Since then, he'd never been near a racetrack or

betting shop. Now, he teetered on the brink, torn between common-sense and the lure of the gaming tables.

Hard work had never appealed to Jeb and the temptation of gaining something for nothing was enough to overcome his scruples. “How can I win big?” he asked.

She laughed. “Well, playing black or red, you simply double your money,” she said. “But you can bet on just one number, or two, four, five or six, or a line of them. Then you can win more.”

Jeb tried to digest her instructions while hiding his surprise at her voice. It was husky and well-modulated, a hint at a monied background far removed from the poverty of his childhood in Canning Town. Why was someone like her working here? He smiled, charm oozing from every pore. “How old are you, Kat?” he asked, reading her name from the badge on her prim uniform. “That’s the number I’ll choose, if you come out for a drink with me.”

Kat’s eyes flashed. She grinned. “You don’t ask a lady her age,” she said, “but you could try twenty three.”

He placed a tower of chips on it. She took bets from other punters and spun the wheel. Jeb watched it, a whirling dervish, the numbers and colours blurring together. His heart stopped as the wheel slowed, finally settling on twenty five.

“Bad luck,” Kat sympathised.

“Not at all,” Jeb replied smoothly, “Because you’ll let me take you for a drink now, won’t you? How about Tuesday?”

He left with her telephone number. Even the penalty notice he found on his car didn’t dent his good humour. Despite the gambling loss, he’d made money on the evening. Better still, he’d met Kat. Al-Shakar, and many more like him, would pay well over the odds for a night with a girl like her. All Jeb need do was learn all about her, understand her vices and fulfil them.

Kat watched him go. She knew he was Barry’s friend, and she had a shrewd idea, too, of what he bought and sold. The other croupiers occasionally indulged in drugs to help them through long and boring shifts. She chose to spend her hard-earned cash, and easy credit, elsewhere. Jeb’s cheek made her laugh, though. She looked forward to a night of cocktails in the West End at his expense.

Her shift was nearly over. Kat returned to the staff locker room to remove the pristine, heavy cardboard bags from designer boutiques she’d patronised that morning. There was indeed a deep, aching need within her, a black hole she filled with the thrill of buying dresses, shoes and handbags. She shivered with delight, recalling the silky, sequined garments inside those bags. Nothing Jeb could give her would ever come close.

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Kat and Jeb also feature in full-length crime thriller [The Bride’s Trail](#) – out now!