

A Tainted Love

“Did you hear about Nathan?” Jessica asked, almost eagerly with her eyes wide.

“Erm...” began Chris hesitantly and curiously. He wasn’t sure why her tone was so high and casual about it. Their classmate had fallen very ill recently and been taken out of school with no explanation.

“He’s got...” Jessica started, lowering her voice and looking around quickly, “AIDS!” She hissed the last word, her face now stricken with both worry and disdain.

Chris felt his body stiffen, the hairs on his neck and arms tingle and the colour in his face drain. He didn’t know what to say or think.

“To be fair, it’s not surprising really, is it?” Jessica went on in her normal, bristly voice and flicked her overly curled hair back. “Everyone knew he was a poof!” The word sent a shockwave through Chris. “Which means,” she continued without a care as if it was a normal everyday conversation, “he’s like four years underage!” Chris’ eyes had already pulled away from hers. *Like she hasn’t already had sex*, he thought.

“How do you know he’s got... that?” Chris finally managed to find his voice to inquire, not feeling he could bring himself to say the word.

“Through me mam, who is friends with a nurse at the hospital! I bet it won’t be long till everyone else finds out...” she trailed off, paused, then added without stopping, “I bet the school will have to be closed to be decontaminated before we can all go back! Ugh, imagine! People have still been going to school the past week! Anyone else could have caught it!” Her voice wavered and she shuddered.

Chris’ patience was beginning to wear thin with Jessica’s attitude. “I don’t think you can catch it that way...” he began warily. He felt a pang for Nathan, who he

wasn't exactly friends with but had got on with him in the past. Most people were aware he was gay but hadn't accused Chris of the same. Chris had always partly felt responsible for Nathan's ostracisation when he distanced himself more after Nathan became the target of homophobic bullying.

"How do you know? Nobody knows, do they?!" She retorted, raising an eyebrow at him. "Then again, they say it only affects poofs anyway so unless you're also a poof, maybe the rest of us don't have owt to worry 'bout," she said as if she was thinking more about it and knew what she was talking about.

Although her words weren't specifically implying Chris was a "poof", he still felt the sting of it.

Then, the door opened and a customer walked in to save the day. "Number eight, thirteen, seventy-seven and two cans o' coke, please mate," the man said gruffly even before Chris could greet him and without even saying hello himself.

"See ya at school!" Jessica called as she moved towards the door, "or not!" She cackled pointedly, opening it and walking out.

Chris stared after her for only a second or two, slightly dumbfounded at the news he'd just heard and by Jessica's feelings about it all as well, that although he'd heard the customer's order, his response was delayed.

"Oi!" The customer half-shouted, glaring at Chris and interrupting his thoughts. "Can you not understand English or summat?!" Chris looked at him, anger already beginning to bubble beneath his skin at that remark. A remark he was used to and was certainly not the worst he had been on the receiving end of. But he smiled and nodded, ignoring it and continued to serve the man as normal.

Several hours later, after standing on his feet all night and without barely a minute to stop and think, Chris finally managed to sit down in the back. He couldn't wait until he was able to leave for university. School during the day and then having to help out at his parent's takeaway - The Golden Peach - four evenings a week, was physically and mentally exhausting. The heat and smell of working in a Chinese takeaway as well as living above it, and the relentless stream of customers most nights - many of whom were just ignorant or racists who still loved a bit of Chinese food every now and then - did not help.

His younger sister Tammy, slumped down beside him. Their parents were still cleaning the front. Why there needed to be four of them working in such a small takeaway, even on a Saturday, was beyond both of the siblings.

"What's been up with you all night?" Tammy quizzed him. "Been quiet and grumpy ever since we opened!"

"Why do you think?" Chris shot back, looking around and throwing his arms up. He didn't mean to snap though.

"Yeah, but you usually put on a brave, fake happy face," she replied while eyeing him suspiciously, not addressing his sudden annoyed tone with her. Thankfully though, she was not one to pry too much.

Before Chris could answer, they heard a knocking on the glass door of the takeaway and glanced towards the noise despite not being able to see the door.

"Chris! *Lei'di gwai lo pang'yao!*" His mum shouted at the top of her voice, even though she was only a few metres away.

Tammy looked at him and he turned away from her gaze, going out to investigate. He wished first of all that Brad would not knock on the front door like that knowing his parents were in and secondly, that his mum would not use the term *gwai*

to describe him. He'd already told Brad it was basically slang for foreigner or White person, which to some White people seems a little offensive considering its original context but he found it funny.

When he saw Brad who was smiling a little sheepishly through the window - probably because he knew Chris had asked him not to come to the front entrance - Chris softened up a bit and returned the smile, though he was aware his parents were standing there watching.

"You'll have to meet him round the back, I'm not opening that door again," his dad said in Cantonese, not looking away from Brad. "And ask him how they did today!" That was all his dad really cared about. The competition. Although mainly a Chinese takeaway, The Golden Peach did serve some English food like fish, chips, sausages and pies. Brad's family ran the fish and chip shop a few roads down, Chippy Off The Block.

Chris rolled his eyes then gestured to Brad to meet him at the other door. Brad smiled and waved at Chris' parents before moving away - his mum just stared back blankly but his dad at least forced a smile and nod.

"So me mam wants to know where the name for your place came from," Brad asked.

"I told her it was named after you," he grinned, squeezing Chris' bum.

"You didn't!" Chris jokingly protested.

"Nah, 'course not! Can you imagine what she'd think!" Brad laughed.

"It's what my great grandma's name was."

"That's sweet! Like your peach..." Brad grinned cheekily, not removing his hand. They had stopped in the ginnel behind the takeaway that connected the other shops on that road and the houses on the street behind. They often rendezvoused

down there in the evenings when no one was about before heading to the nearby park.

Brad leant into Chris against the wall and moved his face closer. Chris' heart pumped with nerves and adrenaline. Adrenaline because of how he felt about Brad and nerves because of how risky what they were doing was. Not just this particular time but their secret meetings - dates or an affair if you will - that no-one else knew or could know about.

Chris' traditional Chinese parents always went on about him hopefully finding a nice Chinese girl at or after university - never as a teenager until he was older or after his studies. And Brad came from a very typical family who would probably hit the roof should they find out any of their children were homosexuals.

"Where do your parents think you are when you come and see me?" Chris asked, their faces still inches from each other. Chris would tell his parents he was tutoring Brad for exams, despite the fact Brad already left school at sixteen.

"Either fuckin' about with the lads or still seeing Amy," Brad chuckled. He had actually dated her before but she'd moved away with her family so he'd kept up the pretence. "I mean, I'm technically doing the first, aren't I?" He laughed aloud that the neighbours probably did hear. Chris looked around to see if anybody was stirring at the noise and at Brad, silently hoping he didn't genuinely mean "lads" as in plural. "I'll tell them we broke up when you piss off to uni and leave me..." Brad trailed off, his voice almost breaking and stepping away.

Chris' heart sank. "I don't even know for sure I'll get in yet!"

"Course you will! Always been top of the class!" Brad looked away, not wanting to get more upset.

“You could still always come with me to Oxford or London and get a job down there?” He’d suggested this before but Brad never seemed convinced by the idea. He’d always been under the impression he would eventually have to take over his parents’ chip shop since his older brother had already said he wasn’t going to when he started working as a plumber. Chris was glad his parents wanted him to go to university rather than carry on their business.

“Nah, you know I’d never fit in down there with all the posh knobs in Oxford! And London? Hmm...” Brad replied, unsure. The conversation about that stopped there as they continued walking down and out of the ginnel towards the park.

“Wahey, it’s Chris Cock!” A male voice hollered out from the darkness in the park. They stopped in their tracks and Brad quickly dropped his hand from Chris’. Chris froze and closed his eyes, hoping it wasn’t real.

“Oh, and it’s bum boy Brad too!” Another man said.

“What are you two gay boys doin’ out here? Silly question!” A third laughed menacingly as the three guys walked closer towards them. It was hard for Chris and Brad to make out who it was as a distant streetlight in the park shone towards them, but the three men could unfortunately clearly see who they were.

“Brad, what are you doing hangin’ about wiv Chris Cock? Getting a free spring roll?” The first guy asked and they all laughed aloud. As the three of them stopped short of a few metres from Chris and Brad, they revealed themselves to be Kevin, Jason and Matt from their school, who had left at the same time as Brad. Kevin, had however, been expelled a year earlier for fighting and bullying, funnily enough.

“It’s Kwok! How lame is that joke now?” Chris plucked up the courage to say, though his voice was a little tight. He wondered how they already knew he was gay

before this. Is it because he used to sometimes hang around with Nathan? Was it the vibe he gave off?

“Not as lame as you two obviously,” Kevin bit back. “Never had you down as a poofter, Brad. Good job we pushed you out of our group a while ago, int it?”

Brad stepped forward, frowning. “No you didn’t. I was barely part of your group of tossers. I broke away from *you*, thank god.”

Kevin also stepped closer. They were pretty evenly matched in terms of height and build, but so were Matt and Jason. Chris was a little shorter and slimmer. “Not denying you’re a poofter though, are ya?” He snarled.

“Nothing worse than being a poofter, except if you’re shagging gay immigrants as well,” Matt chipped in, throwing Chris a dirty look.

Chris’ heart jumped, his nerves shaking and blood rising again. He glared at Matt and opened his mouth but Brad spoke first. “He was born here, ya dick!”

“Ooooooooooh!” The three of them cooed mockingly and cackled.

“So cute standing up for your little chinky boyfriend!” Kevin drawled sarcastically.

Chris barely took a half-step forward at this before Brad held his arm out in front of him, pressing him back slightly. He wasn’t even sure what he was about to do but saw the three of them flinch slightly, like they didn’t think he would make a move but were ready for him. He felt the warmth of Brad’s left hand just millimetres from his chest and could see his right fist was clenched in anger as if ready to throw a few punches, the veins in it bulging. And under the light from the streetlamp you could tell his face was reddening and the veins in his thick neck were also prominent. Kevin must have noticed this too as he half smirked like he was goading him for a fight, but also a little wary, knowing Brad - despite being gay - was a good boxer too.

“You know two things...” Brad started, staring into Kevin’s eyes, barely a metre between them, and glancing at Matt and Jason too.

“Oh yeah?” Kevin hissed back.

“One. You’d lose in a fight with me. And Chris...” They all scoffed at this. Chris also did some boxing but was by no means on Brad’s level of strength and fitness. “And two, one of you three cunts can’t touch me.” He grinned wickedly as he flicked his eyes between all three of them.

“What?” Matt barked in a raised tone, confused and annoyed.

“He’s chatting shit,” chimed in Jason, a little quieter and looking around in case anyone was eavesdropping behind the trees.

Kevin stared back, then looked at his two friends a little curiously. “Dunno what the fuck you’re talking about,” he growled, “could easily beat the shit out of both of you. But you’re right. We can’t touch you. Never know what disease we might get!”

“Let’s go, before we do then...” Jason suggested as if he’d come to his senses.

“Yeah, leave these two to their bummin’,” quipped Matt, shooting Chris another dirty look.

“Fine.” Kevin replied after a few seconds pause in a stand-off with Brad. “But you might not be lucky next time we bump into each other...” he warned, taking a few cautious steps backward but not taking his eyes off Brad and Chris. Matt and Jason followed, Matt walking forwards with his head turned back at them, still looking at Chris like he was a piece of shit, while Jason shoved his hands in his tracksuit bottoms and hung his head low.

As they sauntered off further into the distance, quiet at first then when they clearly thought they were out of earshot, Chris and Brad could hear some kind of disagreement bubbling between them.

“You should’ve wiped the ground wiv ‘em...” They could hear Matt grumble.

“He’s obviously got summat on one of you two sons of bitches!” Kevin snapped accusingly.

“He’s bluffing!” Retorted Jason.

“Or it’s you!” Matt shot back.

“Fuck you!” He hissed, and they heard Kevin shoving Matt away.

Brad let out a low sigh of relief and only now finally lowered his hand from Chris’ chest, looking at him as if to say it was okay.

Chris also felt he could start breathing out again as well. “Thanks,” he said, feeling a wash of contented safety overcome him.

Brad smiled reassuringly back. “But what did you mean they can’t touch you?” Chris asked, interested. He was obviously glad a fight didn’t break out and although he found it strange they retreated so quickly, he didn’t want to contest that too much.

“Nothin’,” he replied quickly. “As they said, I was chatting shit.” He chuckled smugly and winked. “Makes ‘em think one of them has got a secret only I know.”

“But...”

“It’s nothin’, don’t worry!” Brad insisted, taking Chris’ hand and squeezing it tight. Chris wasn’t so sure by Brad’s usual shutting off of the topic but he couldn’t argue with the outcome at least. Then Brad yanked Chris’ hand towards his crotch. He could feel him through his thick, relaxed fit jeans. *Did that close encounter just turn him on or something?* Chris thought to himself, puzzled but also aroused.

“Now, why don’t we do what they left us to do?” Brad smiled widely, giggling and letting out a non-aggressive growl.

“Where?”

“Here!” Brad quickly pulled him into the thickets next to the path which led to a small, dark wooded area of the park before Chris could say anything else.

Three days later, Chris hadn’t seen Brad since their cheeky tryst in the park. The next day was the start of Chinese New Year and Chris had been quite busy after school working in the takeaway and visiting family friends. He sat at the desk in his bedroom finishing his homework, Whitney Houston’s smooth, powerful vocals crooning out her latest single *Where Do Broken Hearts Go* through the radio, which Chris quietly half hummed and half sang along to at its climax.

As he neared the end of his work, Chris felt his temples beginning to pulse and a sharp pain washed over his forehead, taking him by surprise. He had felt a little tired and stressed from being rushed off his feet but rarely got headaches. Soft Cell’s version of *Tainted Love* was now blaring, which didn’t help.

Pushing back his chair and attempting to get up wasn’t easy as the room spun and tiny black spots flew across his eyes, blurring his vision. Breathing heavily, Chris hauled himself up with great effort, suddenly realising his joints were aching. Marc Almond’s voice boomed out as he sang “*this tainted love you’ve given, I give you all a boy could give you...*” but was intermittently muffled one second then barely audible except the hypnotic throbbing bass the next.

As soon as he had straightened up, Chris’ knees buckled. Tumbling to the side and knocking the chair over, he landed like a bag of rocks against the hard

carpet, his limbs limp and his head turning just in time so his cheek hit the floor instead of his nose. Everything went black.

“Please, can I not just see him?” Brad’s distressed voice floated up the stairs. Chris’ eyes twitched and half opened upon hearing him, tiny black spots still flickering around the room. He was lying in his bed, unsure of how he got there but the first thing he noticed was that he had a plaster in his forearm where he’d been given an injection. He felt sluggish, still ached all over which was accompanied by shivers and was hot and sweaty.

“No, he’s not well...” he could hear his dad say emphatically.

“I have to! Please!” Brad pleaded.

“*Ba, yeung ta!*” Tammy imploringly interjected.

The two of them exchanged some more heated words, before their dad grudgingly agreed and stepped aside. Chris heard pounding footsteps run up the hall, followed by more.

“You might want to wear these,” Tammy said to Brad, having followed him up.

A few moments later, the door creaked open and Brad stepped tentatively inside. He was wearing a surgical mask and rubber gloves. Tammy peaked through the open door, her face crestfallen when she saw her brother, then pulled it shut without another word. Chris squinted to see Brad and tried sitting up but could barely move, feeling numb and nauseous.

“*Gung hei faat choy!*” Brad said quietly after a slight pause of looking at Chris, his eyes sad and concerned. He drew up the desk chair and sat down beside the bed.

“Cheers, you too...” Chris replied weakly. He was quite proud Brad had remembered how to say it. “What... is going on? What... happened... to me?” he stuttered.

“I don’t know...” Brad choked a little. “I tried ringing you yesterday and earlier today but ya dad said you weren’t well both times so I rushed over. Wasn’t best pleased with me just showing up!”

“And my sister made you wear those?” Chris eyed him, his mind filled with dread.

Brad slowly pulled down the mask, showing he wasn’t afraid. He sucked in a little bit of air and his already defined cheekbones became more prominent as he took in Chris’ appearance. He looked like he could cry, which Chris had not seen him do before.

“What?” Chris asked him worryingly, now conscious of how he looked. He tried to swallow but his neck felt swollen and lumpy.

“Your face looks so pale...” Brad began dejectedly. “You’re bloody Whiter than me now!” He added with a faint chuckle and half smile.

“I’ve got it, haven’t I?” Chris asked urgently, breathing heavily again even though it hurt to do so and he finally managed to sit up.

Brad averted his gaze quickly. “Have they not had a doctor in to test you?” His eyes roved around everywhere but didn’t look into Chris’ again.

“I think so... must’ve been out of it though,” he replied, pointing at the plaster. Brad was looking at the side of Chris’ abdomen which was visible now that he’d sat up and pushed the covers down a little. Chris followed where he was staring, a rash of red, sore-looking little bumps about the size of his palm was about halfway down his body. He hadn’t felt the rash appear and it wasn’t itchy but it was warm to the

touch as he reached down, his fingers gingerly tracing it. "I have, haven't I?" Chris pressed again, his voice rising as high and loud as he could muster, trying to meet Brad's eyes to get answers. Brad was the only person he'd had sex with but he knew he wasn't Brad's first.

"I'm so sorry..." Brad started. His hand flew to his trembling mouth, his eyes beginning to brim with tears.

"Brad?"

Before Brad could respond, footsteps thundered up the stairs again and more urgent voices could be heard. It was Chris' dad and Doctor Lim, the family's physician. The door swung open with some force and Doctor Lim, dressed like he was ready for surgery in a mask, gloves and a gown, purposefully swanned in. Chris' dad stood at the doorway, looking in at his son, his face full of fear and sorrow. Chris could sense his dad's fury and disappointment as well though.

"*Aiya*, put your mask on boy!" his dad turned to scold Brad, who quickly pulled it back over his mouth and nose. He beckoned Brad to come out and demanded, "you must go now".

"I suggest he gets checked," Doctor Lim said grimly to Mr Kwok in Cantonese, his emotionless eyes flickering over Brad as he said it. Brad might not have understood him but he sensed the tone of Doctor Lim's voice and knew something of a serious nature had been said regarding him.

"What'd he say? Will Chris be okay?" He quickfired, glancing at Chris who was looking both scared and confused at Brad, desperate to know how he had come to contract it and what was going to happen next.

"Please leave," Mr Kwok repeated nonchalantly, gesturing Brad out but pressing his back as close to the door frame as possible to let him pass.

Chris tried to say something as Brad reluctantly turned to leave but he was too in shock, his mind racing with a million and one thoughts.

“Please take care of him,” Brad said to Doctor Lim, who just looked stiffly at him. “I’m sorry, Chris... *I love you*,” he mouthed the second part with a cracked whisper and then added slightly louder, “goodbye.”

Chris’ mouth gaped open, still unable to say anything as his heart sank. All that came out was a “g” sound and an elongated exhale. One last look between them was cut short by Doctor Lim abruptly closing the door, ushering Brad out. Chris’ dad had already turned away, without giving his son a second look.