

Four Queens

by Mark Staniforth

Pearl

She rolls up at school with the word MAYHEM marker-penned across her stomach, wrote so big the first and last letters graze each inner thigh bone. She says it's in honour of some rock star I never knew.

Next day she's revving an old ice cream van up on the pavement. The sun's washing down and she's shouting me to lamp in the back if I've got the balls.

She's fourteen years old. She's been living in a fantasy world since the night we got spliffed up and ended up watching Natural Born Killers on the couch, feeling each other up while her fat-arse sister snored in the arm-rest close by.

She rams the van off down a side-track and just about totals it in a tree. She twists out the driving seat and tugs her belt so her combats snake down to her ankles and her candy pink g-string shows. She tears off her tee-shirt with a single yank and falls right on top of me. She says, 'how sexy am I now, huh, flirty boy?' She says it in a fake American accent that sounds more like Paki to me. It's her favourite line from the film. She has me call her Mallory the whole way through.

Nicole

Nicole says she speaks to the dead. She takes us up the haunted house at the end of our street. Says she sees something good on its way. She's small enough to be an almost-midget, though her tits float out front like life-buoys. There's a joke goes round that if you laid her on her back she'd stand taller. There's plenty who've practised. Something good sounds something good, all right.

She whips out a Ouija board and whisky glass but even when the glass gets moving it's the tit-jiggle that gets to me and Clint the most.

Nicole call, 'are you with us?'

Clint says, 'bullshit'.

A kind of chill comes over. I goose-bump up. Clint reaches over and paws a whole hand down her blouse-front like a bear scooping honey.

Next thing I know, Clint and Nicole are going at it on the foamy old couch. She's underneath, her skirt's rode right round her waist and her dough-white thighs are rippling up. She's got her eyes clamped shut and a part-smile that says she's still tranced up with the dead folk.

Heading out, Nicole tugs me back and whispers next time it's my turn, and I figure she already knows it.

S__

She swings on a swing and kicks her legs up and tells me girls who wear mini-skirts and over-the-knee socks are sluts. Her mum's left her home alone, headed off to Vegas on a two-for-one deal with her brand new man. She calls from the steakhouse at Four Queens, asks what salad dressing she should choose. She doesn't name them, just asks for a number one to six. S__ says six. Her mum hoots 'honey-walnut!' and a man's voice chokes with laughter. S__ hangs up. She fingers out her gum and swings over and clamps her mouth to mine. I taste Juicy Fruit. That night I head round hers and we smoke her mum's dope stash and watch Ghostbusters three times over. We play a game where we say what we'd never do for money. I say screw a guy. She says screw a dog.

She asks me, 'do you love me?'

I say, 'uh-huh'.

Next day she wears a mini-skirt and over-the-knee-socks. We go to the Odeon and watch some film I don't remember. Her mum rings

while the credits roll. S____ picks two, creamy pepper. Her mum says, 'shit, S____. You know I don't like creamy pepper.'

The next day's school.

Tamasina

We go to church and her old man's in the pulpit. We sing 'Onward Christian Soldiers'. She tugs me out before the end.

We head round the graveyard and she tugs off her dress, strips to all but her Amber Flash. The sun makes her skin shine golden. She skips round the slabs, darts her eyes like an elf.

She pants back up, breathes life. I drop my jeans, haul my tee-shirt, do the same. The breeze flits my skin. I brush stones then bundle back for my clothes. We kiss, blaze life. We're back in the pews for the prayers. We beg for daily bread, hide our giggles behind hymn books. Later I head round her folks' place for cake.

