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# Singleton Pattern

'I can't understand why you're single.'

I've lost count of the number of times I've heard that. Usually from women; who, as it happens, haven't made the connection between my being single and the undeniable fact that they are themselves unwilling to date me. Some might call this a catch-22 situation. I call it bloody typical.

Granted, I've had a number of relationships in my time. A few I've even enjoyed. But they always end after a couple of months, or 6 dates, whichever comes sooner.

Annoyingly enough, I'm usually the one who gets chucked. Usually with one of two stock phrases.

'I see us as more than friends'. Which is so cliched as to be a blatant lie. Or alternatively:

'I just don't see us going to the next level'. I have absolutely no idea what this next level is, nor of any particular power-ups required to reach it. As far as I'm concerned, there are a total of six stages to a relationship:

1. Awkward dating
2. Awkward shagging
3. Awkward cohabiting
4. Marriage
5. Kids
6. Death

I won't get into the details of my prior relationships, but by my reckoning, the "next level" would be living together, and six dates is certainly insufficient time to contemplate sharing a home. That level of commitment would probably require a pregnancy scare or two.

I can usually manage a total of about two car-crashes of relationships in a year, some of which last longer than others. If I were the sort of person who draws graphs, I might be able to predict my eventual marriage at the age at which most men have their last child. Or more specifically, the age of Charlie Chaplin when he had his last child. Which I believe was somewhere in his mid 80s. Being a realist, I imagine I'm unlikely to be virile at that age. Or alive.

A lot of this may come across as complaining. The few people I know who revel in the label of a 'whinger' tend to attract very particular looks at cocktail parties. The kind of look you might see in the eyes of a Rottweiler confronted with a yapping little Terrier intent upon making its acquaintance. The Rottweiler has all the killer instinct and big teeth to make short work of the irritating little bugger, but has been cursed with a muzzle to prevent it carrying out the deed. Social norms are a bit like that muzzle. How's that for a metaphor?

In short, getting a reputation as a moaning bastard is a perfect way of avoiding all those banal little conversations that seem unavoidable at any gathering where there isn't a film showing. Personally, I rather like small talk. As such I try to avoid complaining about my life in casual conversation, restricting any complaining to things that all parties dislike and have no power over whatsoever. For young professionals, such complaints typically revolve around the prices of one thing or another. Usually things we can't afford, such as houses, or putting a hit on Ted the Whinger.

However, alcohol has a tendency to turn me into something of a lumbering prat-a-saurus, lolloping through social gatherings leaving a trail of offended people and spilled drinks, or at the very least embarrassing myself. So I found myself one New Year's Eve at a friend's party, me having reached that wonderful point of inebriation when you know

you're going to regret something in the morning, but can't quite recall what it is. Here I was, three years out of university and at a party that could have been easily mistaken for a student party had you been unaware that there wasn't a single undergraduate in attendance. This was partly due to the five residents having lived in this house continuously since their second year, and hadn't got out of their old habits even after they were forced to get "real jobs". Tide marks from various hastily cleared spills marred the countertop, turning it from a near ebony to a dirty grey. I was rooting around the kitchen in search of some form of drink that might have previously escaped the notice of myself and the other 30-odd people in the house, opening the cupboards to find a curious lack of drinks, crockery and food that didn't promise to be instant.

The community supply of drink had long been exhausted, well before the stroke of midnight, several boxes once containing 24 cans each of bleached lager lay carelessly stacked in the corner of the kitchen-cum-conservatory. A pair of cooking pots, presumably originally purchased with the intention of holding large and numerous dinner parties, had been used as makeshift cocktail mixing vats. They remained on the hob, sticky with the residue of what we only assumed were unknown combinations of cranberry, orange, vodka and rum, their contents long since scooped haphazardly into cheap, plastic cups. Anything anyone had bought with them had also been exhausted, or craftily hidden in the toilet cistern, below which someone was no doubt now hunched over, expelling something that had been more easily obtained. It took me right back.

Handily, this frustrated booze search made my huntsman's costume seem all the more suitable for the occasion, rather than a bad pun to fit with the party's theme, neither of which I could entirely recall at this point. My attention would soon have to turn from alcohol to the even more trick problem of finding a space in which to sleep, camp beds and lilos already claimed by best friends and younger siblings, with everyone else who no longer lived locally left to fend for themselves.

I felt a tap on my shoulder. Looking over the wrong shoulder, I found a fellow reveler staring back in the hope of starting a conversation. It was a friend of a friend, whose name was either Matt or Mark. We had known each other just long enough that it would make asking his name embarrassing. A stronger person might bite their lip and just ask, or ask someone else. I choose the path of least resistance: never call him by name.

'Hi, mate.' I greeted him, my plan working perfectly yet again.

'How about this music, eh?'. Matt-or-Mark asked.

'Yeah, its rubbish.' I slurred back. Which was followed by a slightly hurt look in eyes that suggested he was responsible for this particular track being played. Figuring things were awkward enough, I tried to change the subject.

'Having fun?'. Not the most creative of questions. For all I knew he was the host, and was slightly more concerned with everyone else's enjoyment. Well, he would if he was a decent host.

'Yep, great, thanks.'. Then nothing, he didn't even ask the same question of me. I figured he was either a terrible host, or not the host at all, or incredibly drunk. Possibly all three. I decided to parry this attack by pretending he'd asked anyway.

'Me too.' Sadly that was the best I could come up with.

'You here with anyone?'

'Nah. Just got out of a relationship, not really in the mood at the moment.' I lied.

'Nobody here take your fancy?'. I was beginning to speculate that Matt-or-Mark was a pimp, or possibly coming on to me. His raised left eyebrow made it hard to tell.

'Not particularly. Besides, I'm rubbish chatting people up at parties. End up talking like a drunken tosser.' The first hint of a self-deprecating moan.

'I know what you mean, used to be much the same.' Matt-or-Mark gloated.

'Used to be?' I'll admit part of me was intrigued, either this man had some magical method for conversing with the fairer sex that he might instill upon me like an aged karate master might instill upon an Italian-American street punk in a cheesy 80s movie.

'Yeah, until I gave that internet dating thing a try.' So much for the karate master, it suddenly became a crazy old hermit ranting at an Italian-American street punk in a cheesy 80s movie.

'Internet dating?' I quipped, 'Aren't all the people on there either nuts or old men pretending to be women?'

'Well, was how I met Claire. Been with her 2 years now.'

I now had two choices. I could either admit my mistake and apologise or try to talk my way out of inadvertently calling this man's other half a crazy, aged female impersonator. I took the secret third path, which was to quickly change the subject and hope he didn't notice.

'Good for you, mate. Didn't know you were with someone.'

'Yeah, but afraid she's not here tonight. She always volunteers at the Shelter this time of year.'

I could see his game, he'd managed to find the only single guy in the room so he could brag. Lording it over me with his tales of not only being in a long term relationship, but with some big-hearted soul who will give up the biggest party night of the year to help her fellow man. And to top it all off, she didn't force him to come along! She sounds almost perfect. The git.

'And you two met online?' I inquired, expecting there to be a specialist site for these kind of people. "smugdate.com" or something.

'Yeah, its great. Really easy. None of the faffing around you get meeting people at parties.'

'Faffing?'

'You know, trying to figure out if she likes you or not. If she's single or not. That kinda thing.'

He'd got the wrong end of the stick. I was wondering aloud why anyone would still use the word 'faffing'.

Before I could decide whether to clarify what I meant or probe for more details, the conversation was cut short by excited screams from another room. We turned just in time to catch sight of a guy we both immediately pretended not to know, running naked through the crowded room. Somehow, despite the large number of people and the small amount of space, nobody managed to get in his way and the whole thing was over pretty quickly. The room was silent for a while, before people generally started realising it was probably time to go home.

On the way home, I began to wonder about what Matt-or-Mark had said. He had made online dating sound easy. But did I really want to go looking for love amongst the sort of people who use these sites? People who are so socially retarded that they can only bear to introduce themselves to someone if they're in a separate building? Who will only make a move on someone if they're 100% sure that they're not going to react with violence. So frightfully embarrassed about possibly flirting with someone who is already taken that they would insist on checking before even beginning a conversation with them.

Looking back on things, this was exactly the sort of person I am. So I signed up.

After a long, drawn out registration process - including intimate details of my income, turn ons and dog/cat preference - I was listed. Almost immediately, I was absolutely bombarded. By a need to check my messages every five minutes.

It wasn't long before I figured the drunken picture of me at Oktoberfest probably wasn't going to pique anyone's interest, so I picked a more sensible photo, and started being a bit more proactive in hunting for someone.

Judging on their photographs, I began wondering how some of these women could possibly be single. They were just too attractive to not have attracted a first move from someone else - social skills or not. I imagined three possible scenarios:

1. The photos were not of the women in question.
2. Their image manipulation skills were impressive
3. They were mentally unstable

None of these seemed to be ideal. Still, it was worth finding out, so I got in touch with the ones that had the most amusing lists of interests. The first few ladies I contacted - either by email or a pre-canned "wink" - appeared to ignore my attentions. It seemed my carefully prepared choice of "Hi" over "Hello" had failed to woo the women of cyberspace. But gradually, I began to get a trickle of responses and was soon organising dates.

# Lauren

The first date I arranged on this expedition d'amour was with a girl by the name of Lauren. We'd exchanged a few e-mails and agreed to meet based on a mutual appreciation of certain 1980s films about specter extermination.

Living on opposite ends of London, we met at the closest location that both of us knew. Which happened to be a Tapas restaurant in the centre. Granted, it wasn't the best restaurant on Earth. Its most defining features were the tacky plastic tablecloths, fake vines, and the odd waiter who didn't suffer from chronic eczema. The effect walking in was slightly jarring: going from an icy February evening into a room that seemed to be desperately trying to convey a mediterranean summer, and yet still wasn't much warmer than the street outside. But we tried to make the most of it, although initially, conversation wasn't the easiest thing to come by.

Lauren was a good three inches taller than me, and was slim in a way that seemed only to exaggerate her height. This served only to make me nervous, being of precisely average height and just overweight enough that I'm aware of it, but people always pretend it isn't the case to be polite, so I never really get around to doing anything about it. The height issue has always been one that confused me. For some reason, there was this strange cultural insistence that the male of a couple be taller than the female. This left me automatically unsuitable to 50% of the population, and online, the number of profiles I found demanding a partner taller than they are was significant. I resolved this problem in the only way I knew how: I exaggerated my height by a couple of inches. Lauren was already compromising, but more than she expected. The resulting slightly peeved expression was ever heightened by the shockingly professional manner in which she was dressed: dark brown hair in a bob, immaculately white blouse and matching skirt/jacket combo that suggested the person in the office everyone else is afraid of.

The net result of all this, was that I had absolutely no idea what to say beyond hello. After we sat down, I began rehearsing openers in my head, between glancing at the menu and avoiding looking at the waiter playing pocket snooker by the door.

*How about this weather?* Was the first opener I considered, sadly both dull and unlikely to spark stimulating conversation. Unless she happened to have a secret interest in meteorology, or spoke the Aleut language and knew all of the nouns relating to snow.

*What A-Levels did you do?* Was the next one that came to mind, which surprised me somewhat, as I hadn't asked anyone that question since I started university, and at this point in our lives, might be an insulting question akin to *When did you stop being educated?*

*If you were going to kill yourself, how would you do it?* God knows what made me think of that. Perhaps the stress of having realised just how long it had been since we had spoken was turning me suicidal. Aside from ordering a bottle of wine to share, we had barely said a word, nor looked up from our menus. Luckily Lauren eventually struck on something we somehow hadn't managed to discuss before, just as I was trying to think of a line that didn't make me seem boring or suicidal.

"So what do you do?" Lauren asked, leaving me surprised that we hadn't even mentioned our work before.

"Its not very interesting." I replied, full of the shame of my chosen profession. Going on past experience, describing oneself as a "computer programmer" tends to make people's eyes glaze over in the way your eyes glaze over when someone tells you they're suffering leprosy.

"Oh, I'm sure it is." She countered, unaware of her level of wrongness.

"I work with computers." My best attempt at being vague but still answering.

"Oh."

That was it, a single, solitary "oh". One syllable as response to learning the career I'd worked towards for five years - including a largely superfluous year of traveling yet going nowhere in particular. The best I could come back with was silence. A cooler person might have moved things on with by asking Lauren what she did, but I think we've already established that I'm not a cool person.

"What's wrong with that?" Finally stumbled out of my mouth. Desperate to downplay the social awkwardness stereotypical of my career.

"Nothing." Shattering my defenses.

"The 'oh' can't have meant there was nothing wrong."

"Umm, just a natural reaction."

"What's the different?"

"Inflection."

"What inflection?"

"I went up, not down, meaning I was interested." Were I to ask what she did now, I was expecting to hear she was a linguist. This was an argument I wasn't entirely prepared for.

"What would down mean?"

"That I was disappointed."

"Oh."

"Yes, like that."

At this stage I had to win at least one point. Somewhere in the back of my mind, a committee of neurons had come to the rather sensible conclusion that this was a bad idea. But stubbornness can be a pretty darn stubborn creature and I pressed on like a workaholic homemaker with a pile of ironing to do.

"Well, what exactly is your opinion?"

"I don't know, computers are all a bit foreign to me. They're so technical and dull." Her eyes immediately went wide as she realised what she'd said.

The joy at being right, combined with slight annoyance at having my profession lambasted left me only one all-purpose remark to utter.

"A-ha" I exclaimed like a cartoon villain, gesticulating forcefully as if the motion might add meaning to otherwise hollow non-words.

The only meaning this conveyed, however, was a demonstration of gravity, as my unguided hand struck a bottle of wine and knocked it on its side. Pointed straight at Lauren's blouse.

She screamed. I froze. The entire restaurant turned to see red wine glugging one swig at a time directly onto my horrified and now heavily stained date. The plastic tablecloth only served to direct the wine to a location it might be better absorbed, namely the remainder of Lauren's clothes that weren't already drenched in the third least-expensive red in the establishment.

I was so shocked and embarrassed that I went into a form of rigor mortis, as if somehow mimicking the after effects of death might make it come more swiftly, and ideally painlessly. My inaction was spotted by a passing waiter, who did what I should have done at the first glug: righted the bottle. This served both to save an almost insignificant amount of wine, prevent an even less significant amount of damage, and further highlight my failure in a most significant way.

In a few seconds, I had proved conclusively my shortcomings as a date, a person, and possibly as world wine juggling champion. A career that ironically might have proved more interesting to the woman sat opposite me. A woman no doubt now feeling mortified and murderous. Her heavy breathing implying a desire to either break the now almost empty bottle of wine over my head, or make mad, passionate love to me on the table in a whirl of alcohol-fueled public indecency usually reserved for Saturday nights in town centres. I assumed it was the former.

"Shall we call it a night?"

My first foray into internet dating didn't exactly fill me with confidence, having not even progressed as far as ordering any food. So I headed home shockingly early for the inevitable debriefing with my flatmates.

I was sharing a flat with two old uni friends, Nick and Dave. Nick was the eternal man child, the kind of guy who still delights in practical jokes, usually involving precariously balanced buckets or surprise rearrangement of furniture. Dave, on the other hand, was ever eager to progress to the next stage of his life, and his girlfriend Carla had become a de-facto fourth flatmate. They were a perfect example of a yuppy couple, from Dave's year round shirt-and-jumper combo, to Carla's obsession with organic produce.

I arrived home to find my flatmates in the living room watching TV. Dave and his other half Carla were curled up on the sofa, while Nick was sat on the floor leaning up against the base of the armchair.

"You're back early." Nick said.

"Yeah, didn't go so well."

"What happened?" Dave and Carla asked in unison.

I recounted the events of the evening, and suffice to say, all three were a little surprised.

"You threw a bottle of wine at her?"

"No! You make it sound like I was attacking her."

"So, what? You threw it at her in a nice way?"

"No, I knocked it over, it just happened to be pointing at her when it landed."

"She still ended up covered in wine though?"

"Well, yes."

"Did you offer to pay for dry-cleaning?"

"Was I supposed to?"

"Can't really speak from experience, but would probably have been polite."

"We didn't really say much afterwards."

"You legged it, didn't you?" Nick was astute as ever.

"Pretty much."

"So not the best first date ever." Dave chipped in, stating the obvious.

"Nah, not really."

"Are you seeing her again?" Carla enquired, seemingly having missed my whole story after that point.

"After that? Of course not."

"Why not? It could have been worse."

"True, I suppose we both got out more or less alive. But better first dates haven't resulted in a second."

"Oh, you're being too negative." Carla countered, "On our first date, Dave threw up on me."

We'd not heard this particular story before, but before either me or Nick could ask for some elaboration, Dave quickly changed the subject.

"So...what's on the other side?"

Thinking about it, Carla was probably right. The evening could have gone a whole lot worse, and I did manage to come out with a clean shirt. So technically I won. Even better, the odds were that any future dates could be called a success with less insane leaps of logic. I signed back into the site, and filled in the "Profession" box on my profile.



## Sarah

Surprisingly, it wasn't too long before I managed to arrange another date. This time with a teacher named Sarah - the occupation discussion having occurred over e-mail before arranging to meet. Despite this, I was still a little nervy about putting my foot in it, or worse. So I suggested we go to see a film, in the hope that this would give me less opportunities to say or do the wrong thing. Although this might have been wishful thinking - as upon arriving at the cinema we came to the sudden realisation that we hadn't actually given any thought to which film we might like to see.

"Anything you particularly fancy?" I offered, cranking up the chivalry after my appalling prior performance.

"Not really, you?" It seemed like Sarah was playing the same game. I considered pressing to get her to make a decision, but figured it would possibly be more polite to make a recommendation. This chivalry thing is tough.

I suggested a nondescript romantic comedy I'd heard about. Breaking the stereotype of your average "bloke" I actually rather enjoy romantic comedies, although I tend not to admit it as for some reason it tends to leave people wondering about my sexual preference. In this case, however, Sarah seemed to take it as an attempt to pander to stereotypical female taste. As it turned out, she was something of a nonconformist as well. She looked skywards while "umming" and "aaahing" a little, wanting to avoid my suggestion without flat out rejecting it. She glanced at the listings handily emblazoned on the front of the building and suggested an action movie.

A nice thought, but not entirely appealing. From my perspective, this was on a par with suggesting we go to a strip club. Despite not wanting to admit it, most men would enjoy it as a guilty pleasure. And I always find guilt outweighing pleasure. I'd say it was my Catholic upbringing, but I'm not Catholic.

"How about this one?" She said not entirely enthusiastically, pointing to a poster.

"If you like." Back in full chivalry mode here.

"Can see your one if you like."

"No, no, its ok. If you want to see this one that's fine." Unfortunately, modern culture has labelled the phrase, "its fine" as anything but. Given our previous ambiguity and bluffing, I was beginning to doubt even my own intentions.

"Its alright, if you want to see the other one, we can."

I decided to call her bluff, or possibly double-bluff. I'd lost count of the exact level of bluff by this point.

"How about we rock-paper-scissors for it? I win we see your film, you win we see my film."

"Sounds fair."

Fair it was indeed, if a little odd. Extreme politeness had left us competing to see who would have the honour of getting what the other one wanted.

"OK, rock, paper, scissors...throw."

We both threw rock.

"Try again? Rock, paper scissors...throw."

Once again, two rocks. Some might have seen this as an omen, a sign of a mystic psychic bond, or a shared personality that was a sign of a strong potential relationship ahead. Then again, everyone always picks rock.

We chuckled to each other and silently threw again. I absent-mindedly threw rock and Sarah had paper. So the rom-com it was, and I took on the air of the gracious loser.

As it turned out, the next showing started only a few minutes later. Of course, given the excessive amount of adverts they showed these days, we figured we had plenty of

time to join the concessions queue. Even though the queue stretched from one end of the lobby to the other.

I get the feeling that every time I go to the cinema, the popcorn sizes have got bigger. Which always struck me as odd, given that this exacerbated the effect of the price increases people are always moaning about.

These size increases pose a big problem for anyone trying to make a good impression, as it becomes impossible to order anything but the smallest option without seeming greedy. And if you do order the smallest, that makes look cheap. I settled on the medium size - which could theoretically have saved a small village from starvation - under the assumption that we could share.

These were all thoughts I was able to entertain standing in the queue, which was almost reaching the point of snaking when we joined it. We had nearly reached the front and were next in line, just behind a family who could be described as sizable in every sense of the word. It was at this point that I realised we hadn't said anything since buying our tickets.

"Do you prefer sweet or salty?" I asked, attempting to inject as neutral a tone as possible, to mask the possible double entendre.

"Whichever you like." Politeness can really screw up decision making.

"Ok, sweet then." I actually prefer salty popcorn, but I imagine most people enjoy sweet. There was no way in hell I was eating all of this to myself. I'd offer it to the people behind us if I had to.

I can't remember a whole lot of the film, and no, not for the reason you might think. Or even the second reason. As it happens, I was so worried about putting across the right impression that I was completely distracted from the film.

*Am I sitting too close? I don't want to seem overeager. I'll move away a little just to be safe. Wait, maybe that's too far. What if she thinks I'm not enjoying her company? Maybe I should offer her some popcorn. But wait, I offered her some a couple of minutes ago and she didn't want any. I don't want to pressure her. Then again, maybe she's changed her mind. Its been a few minutes, I'm not being pushy. Am I? Never hurts to try.*

*Nope, she didn't want any that time either. She seemed a little annoyed as well. I think. I'll just concentrate on the film, she's probably enjoying it and doesn't want interrupting.*

*Ok, so I'm watching the film. Feeling empathy with the characters, pretending that I understand why he would employ someone who disagrees with him so often. Maintaining suspension of disbelief to expect that two people who hate each other will eventually end up in a relationship. Something funny just happened. Hope I'm not laughing too loud. I hate my laugh. I wonder if Sarah found it funny too, I'll take a quick glance. She's laughing, that's good. Seems pretty focused on the film too. She really is quite attractive when she laughs, her hair bobbing around like that. She's stopped laughing now, but still attractive. I hope I'm making a good impression. Hold on, how long have I been watching her? Oh God, please say she hasn't noticed, I know I'd find it creepy if I was sat next to someone in the cinema and they just kept staring at me. Christ, this dating thing is hard.*

*I realise this, and yet I'm still looking. Ok, looking away in 3, 2, 1. Great, back to enjoying the film. Wait, who's that guy? Why are they suddenly on a boat?*

Luckily, the film hadn't got great reviews. I guess I can't have missed much.

I managed to get through the film without committing any major faux pas - or at least without Sarah noticing any - so as we left the cinema the idea of actually having a conversation no longer seemed as disagreeable. The cinema itself was on the top floor of a generic inner-city shopping centre. You may not have been to the exact one, but I guarantee that if you've ever lived in a city you'll have been to one just like it. I knew of at least three in West London alone. The building's amenities were split over three levels:

various shops on the ground floor, bars and restaurants on the first floor and the top floor occupied by the cinema and a gym. All this was spread around the edges of an atrium that might have provided ample natural lighting, if the ceiling weren't made of solid concrete. Seemingly the general idea was that you'd come to see a film or have a session at the gym, and then be tempted into a meal, drink, or spending binge in one of the establishments you were forced to pass on the way out. We were caught in the honey trap of a chain pub.

It being a Tuesday, the pub was relatively empty. The weekly grind had not yet reached the point where a drinking binge was a viable escape, and the most dedicated partygoers were still recovering from the previous weekend. As it was we managed to occupy a pair of maroon, faux leather couches either side of what would be described as a coffee table, but was unlikely to have coffee placed on it. It being our first date, we each occupied a separate couch. We sat at one end of our respective couches, directly opposite one another. At this point, conversation was far more important than canoodling. That being the case, the couches were likely a mistake, as they were so deep, and the coffee table so large, that we had to hunch forward to have any hope of hearing one another without shouting. I took a drinks order and headed to the bar.

"So what did you think of the film?" Sarah asked as I sat back down.

"Yeah, it was good." I took a guess, having missed enough of the plot to fail entirely in forming an opinion.

"Really? I didn't think it was that great." I suppose I'd guessed wrong.

"What about the bit with...never mind." I spouted in a mild panic, "Anyway, how's teaching treating you?" I asked, deftly changing the subject.

"It's good, bit stressful sometimes, but I like it."

"Is important to have a job you like. Too many people hate their work."

"Exactly. Do you like your job?"

"I do, yeah. Might seem dull, but I enjoy it." Knowing about our career paths up front certainly made this conversation easier.

"That's good. Did you always want to work with computers?"

"I'm not sure, can't remember back that far." I chuckled, taking a sip of my lager as I realised that my quip wasn't really that funny.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course you can."

"Where do you see yourself in five years?" All of a sudden I was at a job interview.

"You mean in my career?"

"Yeah, well, no. I meant just in general."

I paused for a second before replying. "I really have no idea. Guess I'm kinda living year to year at the moment. See where life takes me." What I meant was I was pretty happy where I was and hadn't quite got around to thinking about the next step, but that wouldn't have sounded as free-spirited. "How about you?"

"No major plans. But I'd like to meet the right guy and settle down over the next year, probably be married in 2. We'd live with my mum for a while of course to save a little money. Then move out into somewhere nice and suburban, where we can buy a nice house. Two kids, one boy, one girl. Then when the kids are a little older, maybe we could adopt. Or foster. Give something back, you know?" Apparently this was nothing major. For someone who couldn't pick a film or popcorn variety she seemed surprisingly good at planning.

"Sounds like you've got your whole life planned out."

"Course not, only until I'm forty or so."

"That's pretty much your whole life."

"Don't be silly, it's only half of it."

"Not when you're in your twenties. Right now forty seems like an age away."

"What's wrong with being prepared?"

"Nothing, nothing. Works very well for the scouts in particular. I just don't think that far ahead. For me, being prepared doesn't get much beyond having fresh milk in the fridge."

"You shouldn't be so afraid of committing."

Now this took me somewhat aback. I may have a mild fear of commitment, like any red-blooded man, but a detailed timetable of a woman's intended future isn't something you'd like to hear on a first date. I would hope such revelations are saved for a point in the relationship when you've started exchanging spare keys, or the point at which they cease to be spare, and are just "keys". Meanwhile, as I'm mulling it over, Sarah has developed a look in her eyes that seems to demand a proposal then and there.

"I'm not, I just like to take things a step at a time."

"But how can you know where to go next when you don't know where you're headed?"

"I don't know. I guess I just let things go where they go. Its exciting that way. If I felt like it I could up sticks and move abroad. See the world, and figure out where I'd want to be."

"You really think you'll do that?"

"Probably not, no."

At this point, we both took an intense interest in our drinks as it became clear that we weren't entirely compatible. We chatted politely for a few minutes while we finished our drinks, and then mutually agreed to call it a night. So ok, it wasn't a particularly successful first date, but at least this one actually lasted longer than half an hour, and no clothes were ruined. I suppose this could be called an improvement, a few more like that and I might actually make it to a second date.

## Jane

"A few of us are heading for a drink, wanna come along?"

I looked up from my desk, where I was adding some finishing touches to a report that probably should have been finished the week before to find Stu, self-appointed social secretary to the office and occupant of the desk opposite, looking down at me, willing me to quit for the day.

"Love to, but I'm meeting a friend a little later." Technically it wasn't a lie, although I suppose it would be hard to call her a friend seeing as I hadn't met her yet. Not that I was embarrassed to admit I was going on a date, well, I was, but only because friendly office banter in our office tends to consist of ribbing and mild sarcasm. Guess that's what I get for working in an all male office.

"That's not what that e-mail says. Who's the lucky lady that's looking forward to meeting you?"

I hurriedly clicked around to hide the window containing the last e-mail exchange with Jane, who I was meeting about ten minutes later in a pub around the corner. I began to hope my workmates weren't heading to the same place. I tried to look as if I didn't know what he was talking about, before Stu gave up on his question, realising the others were waiting for him.

"Well, if you strike out, we'll be in the Cross Keys across the river." Thankfully, this wasn't where I was meeting Jane.

"Will do."

"See you in five minutes." Stu guffawed. "We'll have a pint waiting, mate. And try not to spill wine on this one."

How the hell did he know about that?

The pub was everything you'd expect from the traditional British boozer. In the sense that a number of the patrons were permanent items of furniture, notably the elderly men set up in each corner with a newspaper who might possibly not actually leave in the hours the place was closed. The garish design on the carpet was blunted by a combination of low light and age, decades of beer stains leaving the whole place with a hoppy aroma. The landlord regretted the move to replace the sawdust on the floor in the 70s, but that's progress for you. Nobody knew what the antique brass cooking utensils over the bar were used for. The walls were decorated in a combination of local artifacts and photographs of famous patrons few could recognise, giving a simultaneous sense of a tight-knit community, and dreams of higher things. In some circles, it might have been called a dive, and the upper classes might turn up their noses, but there was something strangely homely about the place. It might have been the dog next to the open fire.

I wormed my way to the bar through a two-deep crowd, only a third of whom were actually planning on ordering in the near future. I waited patiently to be served, giving deference to anyone who had arrived before me - and possibly one who arrived after - eventually ordering a diet coke, attracting odd looks from one or two of the regulars who couldn't fathom arriving at a pub alone and ordering a soft drink. I hoped my date wouldn't keep me waiting long, so they would see the method in my madness.

With my drink in hand, I edged away from the bar and began prowling the room for an empty table. Despite the heaving throng around the bar itself, the rest of the pub wasn't nearly as crowded, and I was able to move around without much in the way of pseudo-dancing or apology. After a while, I noticed a trio of people who'd finished their drinks and had started donning coats and scarves. I snuck up to one side, waiting for them to vacate, while trying not to look directly at them and revealing my intentions. This of course let to my seemingly attempting to read the front cover of the newspaper of the man at the bar

opposite me, which might have been a worse proposition. They say a watched pot never boils, similarly, an observed table never gets up and leaves. As they became evidently more and more prepared I was on the lookout for any possible rivals to taking the prize of a seat and somewhere to rest my drink. They finally had all their belongings together and started to stand up, I sidled slightly closer, picking the seat I was going to take. Perhaps a little too soon, as no sooner had they stood up, but their conversation reached a turning point and they suddenly became more interested in debating the finer points of a presentation given by someone called Edward, the volume reaching a greater level in line with their height off the ground. After what seemed like an age of attempting to subtly lay claim to the almost-but-not-quite vacated table, while not getting so close as to appear part of the group. As they finally headed towards the door, I swung into action and slipped in behind them, swooping down onto a seat and setting down my drink in a single motion. Mission accomplished, I quickly checked my watch and turned my attention to the door, watching for my date. I had arrived a few minutes early, and after my table-grabbing efforts, it was now just past 8pm. *Should be here any minute*, I thought.

About a quarter of an hour passed and I was still waiting. I'd alternated between sipping my drink, checking my phone for inexplicably missed messages or calls and keeping a watchful vigil on the door. During that time a number of people had blustered in, mainly office workers finishing shockingly late, and pre-inebriated gaggles of mates who were already on their second establishment of the evening. But no sign of my date for the evening.

A sizable chap strode into the bar. Sizable in all senses, although slightly more in the horizontal. He had a look on his face somewhere between excitement and murderous rage. Locking eyes on a group of about ten at a long table near the window, his expression rose into something close to a laugh, and rushed over. The volume of the group immediately rose with a series of greetings and superlatives, branding the new arrival as "the legend", "booze monster", and "John-o". This guy was apparently something of a party animal, a reputation borne out by his almost immediate suggestion of a round of shots. The party agreed on a single variety of spirit, despite a few members feigning reluctance due to "early starts" and still recovering from the night before. John-o waltzed over to the crush at the bar, and wove a cash-bearing arm through the throng to contact the edge of the bar itself, staking his place in the queue. He was only about five paces from his friends, so the conversation continued while shots were procured.

As tales of their weekend exploits unravelled, I became acutely aware that I probably shouldn't be listening in on the conversations of complete strangers and should find something else to occupy me. Still keeping one eye on the door, I took out my phone and went to the time-killing standby activity of deleting old messages. I'm always a bit slow at deleting messages when I've read them, so my phone is always packed with information whose usefulness has long since expired.

"im just round the corner. see u in 5." Weeks ago, deleted.

"r u busy 2nite?" Tonight meaning last month. Gone.

"Dial 7 for new offers from your mobile operator." Why did I keep this? Bye-bye.

Perhaps this habit is a sign of a deeper seated tendency to hoarding, and I'll eventually be found dead in my home, crushed under the weight of all the trinkets tchochkies and kipple I'd accumulated and stored over the years. That or I'll open a pub and keep it all on the walls.

After deleting a series of now useless messages, and even a few that might have been useful later, I realised my drink was empty. I'm not the sort of person who can sit in a pub without a drink, as it feels a little like freeloading and possibly not justify my use of the table I had acquired. However, I wasn't sure if I'd be able to get away from the table and back with a fresh drink without someone snapping up the space as I had not half an hour before. If I get up I might lose the table, if I stay I probably deserve to lose the table.

Bowing to the force of the market, I stood up and carefully draped my coat over my chair to mark my territory. Just to be safe, I tweaked the angle of the chair a little so it was visible to as much of the room as possible. I was coming back, and wanted everyone to know.

I struggled to the bar and waited to order, nervously eyeing my table in case I had to pounce on anyone that failed to notice the flag of ownership I had erected. Both the bar and the table deserved attention, and I juggled them twitchily whilst still occasionally remembering to check for anyone coming through the door. All the time wondering if I should check my phone for messages. Eventually I managed to catch the eye of a barmaid and bought my second drink with hardly a word. I swooped back down to the table and sat down again, drained by the whole experience. I'd say I was a social drinker, drinking alone is far too stressful.

The minutes dragged on, people came and went and it became increasingly clear that my date probably wasn't coming. *Should I send a message? I wondered. But I don't want to seem to eager, or too angry. What if I got the wrong time? Or the day? How stupid would I look then? There are all kinds of reasons she might not be here, right? Its not like she changed her mind. But if she was running late, or couldn't make it, she'd have let me know. I'll just send a quick text to check. But what if she send a message and it didn't get through? Then I go and ask where the heck she is, I'd look like an ass.*

After reaching the one hour mark, having sipped my second drink painfully slowly to avoid having to get up again, I figured she probably wasn't coming and I should go home. Slipping on my coat, I rose to my feet and walked towards the door, trying my best to look like I meant to sit alone drinking a soft drink and doing nothing in particular for the last hour. I wasn't two feet away from the table before it was occupied by a group I'd noticed hovering nearby for the last few minutes. They'd even managed to get an extra chair for their fourth member.

I stepped out of the door and onto the street, nearly colliding with a pedestrian passing unnecessarily close to the pub. I turned to face her, and without making eye contact we both half-raised a hand and almost mouthed the word "Sorry". True to the style in London - and to the stereotypes - we were eager to escape the situation before it became necessary to speak. Almost too predictably, we both chose the same escape route and found ourselves on a collision course. No sooner had we started moving than we stopped and planned another avenue of escape. After choosing to pass through the same space a further two times, we looked up, to hunt for clues as to the other's intentions. Then we stopped and finally broke the traditional London strangers' silence.

"Vanessa?"

"No way! Its been years! How are you?" I assumed she'd forgotten my name. Which wasn't surprising, we hadn't seen each other since we graduated from University. We hung around with the same crowds for most of our degrees, and shared many a drunken evening with friends. But for some reason, we'd spectacularly failed to keep in touch after we got proper jobs.

"I've probably been better." I replied, immediately realising I'd have to explain why.

"What's wrong?"

"Well, its a little embarrassing."

"Oh come on, tell me. Can't be that bad."

"I'd really rather not."

"Oh come on, try me. Promise I won't laugh."

"You're not going to let me leave without saying are you?"

"Not a chance." She said with a mischievous grin.

"Dammit, I should have remembered that about you. Fine, I've just been stood up."

"That's a bit crap." Her grin melted into a strangely sympathetic expression.

"I'll survive. Was only a first date anyway."

"Yeah, could've been worse. It could've been a fifth date and meant as a hint." She chuckled, leaving me to hope she wasn't speaking from experience. Suddenly I didn't feel quite so bad about my own evening, though.

"Anyway, its been ages. How've you been?"

"Not bad, working late a lot though, which is rubbish." She grumbled, indicating over her shoulder that she had only just left work.

"That is rubbish. Still, pays the bills, though right?" God, what a terrible cliché.

"Guess so. Look, its kinda cold out here. I'm assuming you have no other plans for tonight, want to get a drink and catch up?"

"Sure, one condition. We go somewhere else." I said, nodding at the pub sign behind me.

"Of course," Vanessa laughed, not entirely maliciously. "I know somewhere round the corner."

"Lead the way." I said, waving my arm to clear the way. Vanessa lead on, and "round the corner" turned out to be more than a figure of speech, the other pub was near enough next door. As we walked in I was surprised to discover it was also practically identical to its competition. Still, that wasn't all bad, I hadn't just been stood up in this place.

We went straight to the bar and caught the attention of a bored looking twenty-something barman.

"A diet co-", I began, before suddenly realising I could have a proper drink, "No, a lager, please mate. What can I get you?" I asked, turning to Vanessa.

"No, its ok, I'll sort myself out."

"Fair enough." I relented, remembering I wasn't actually on a date at this point, and chivalry was likely to be more insulting than flattering. As I paid for my drink, Vanessa ordered a glass of wine from the barman's colleague who had miraculously appeared beside him. Drinks in hand, we wandered off to find a table, uncovering one in a corner behind a group of office workers.

"So who's the girl that left you waiting?"

"Don't really know her, to be honest."

"Oh, a blind date, eh?"

"Not really, guess you could call it partially sighted. I met her online."

"You've been doing the online dating thing?"

"I've dabbled a bit." I said, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible.

"Really? I've been trying that myself."

"You're kidding. Small world."

"You could say that. What site are you on?"

"LiveDate, what about you?"

"MeetBox."

"Shame, might have been funny if we'd found each other in a search."

"Yeah, but would you have said hi?"

"Probably not, no."

"That was a dumb thing to say."

"No, not at all. Well, yes, but I won't hold it against you."

"Um, thanks? So, you met many guys so far?"

"A few, but only been on a couple of months."

"Didn't work out?"

"No, they weren't really what I was after. And one was downright creepy."

"Creepy? We talking stalker or axe murderer?"

"Stalker, definitely stalker. Although the severed heads did make me wonder."

"What?"



"Oh, didn't you know? Very romantic gift, a severed head. Chocolates and roses just don't cut it in comparison. Of course, some women will take a horse's head, but they're just easy."

I sat in silence for a moment, unsure of exactly how to take that. "I sincerely hope you're kidding."

"Of course I am. He did mention head, but not the severed kind."

"Ah, that kinda creepy."

"Yep, he was obsessed. Kept going on about which positions he thought were best, and trying to ask me which were mine."

"Lovely."

"When he got onto the one involving hooks I was pretty much running for the door."

"Hooks?" I very nearly shouted.

"Yeah, apparently some people like that, hanging from the ceiling by hooks in their back."

"Part of me was hoping it was some kind of Peter Pan thing."

"Are you sure that's not worse?"

I mulled over the implications for a second, before remembering a certain high profile court case. "Good point."

"I thought it was."

"So moving on." I stuttered, "What are you doing these days?"

"I'm working for a charity."

"Wow, that's great. Enjoying it?"

"Well, its mainly just admin, so bit boring sometimes. But its nice to be helping people."

"What kind of charity is it?"

"We work with the homeless."

"Good cause."

"Yeah, I like to think it is.", Vanessa said, breaking into a wistful smile. "What about you? What line of work are you in?"

The conversation seemed effortless, and once we'd caught up a little, it was like we'd never lost touch. Several hours passed, during which I recounted some of my recent disastrous dates, and Vanessa told me of some of the stranger responses her profile had attracted. All peppered with a few trips back to the bar. We snuck a glance at our watches and decided it was probably time to call it a night.

"I should get going, got work tomorrow." I said with a mildly tipsy air of responsibility, before emptying the glass in front of me.

"Same here, need my beauty sleep."

"Surely not." I countered, immediately wondering if that was too much of a compliment for a friendly chat.

"Don't try to be smooth with me." Vanessa jokingly threatened, lightly punching my shoulder.

"Just getting in practice."

"Sure you were. We should meet up again, compare notes on future dates."

"That'd be great. Your number still the same?"

"Yep, same as it ever was."

"Mine too, will be in touch."

We wished each other luck with the dating thing and went our separate ways. For saying it had started with me being stood up, I'd actually had quite a nice evening. Funny how it was so much easier to talk to women when I wasn't worrying about whether or not they'd want to meet again.

As I arrived home, I was barely through the door when my phone sprang to life and emitted a series of beeps and buzzes to tell me I had a message. Standing in the doorway, leaning on the handle, I removed my phone from my pocket and read the message. It was from Jane.

'Whoops, can we reschedule?'

Part of me was eager to suggest an alternative night. Part of me wanted to reply with a series of four letter words, possibly all in capital letters. But, somewhat predictably, I took the easy middle road out. I put my phone back in my pocket and ignored it.

## Nick the Guru

Sunday always comes around far too quickly. No sooner does the weekend start, than its practically over and Monday is looming like a dark cloud of having to get up early. At this particular point, I was engaged in my usual Sunday balancing act, trying to unlock and open the front door to the flat without setting down any of my three bags of shopping. I clumsily juggled the overweighted plastic bags to get to my keys, then did my best to select the correct key with my one free hand and unlock the door. All before my other hand went numb as the handles of the bags cut off the circulation to my fingertips. Of course, I could have put down the bags while I opened the door, which might even have been a little quicker. It would certainly be easier. But dammit, its the principle of the thing.

I staggered into the flat and hefted my shopping onto the kitchen table. I briefly pondered whether I really needed to buy the organic, free-range, additive free, five-a-day ready meal, before assuring myself that it was indeed necessary, but for a purpose I hadn't yet determined. I then began digging through the bags to find the milk and butter that needed to secure their place in the fridge.

As I closed the fridge door, I glanced across the hallway into the living room to see Nick sat on the sofa watching TV, still wearing his dressing gown and hopefully something underneath.

"Have you moved today?" I asked, half laughing as I wandered into the room and leaned against the door frame to adopt a mildly authoritative stance.

"Not really, " Nick replied, barely looking up. "but its Sunday. Why bother getting dressed? Who's going to see?"

"Well, the rest of us." I said, pointedly staring Nick in the eyes, hoping I wasn't going to "see" any more

"Its nothing you haven't seen before."

"Yes, I know. Rather keen not to see it again."

"Don't worry, I've got pants on."

"Thank god for that."

"Anyway, I can get dressed later, still plenty of the day left."

"Its seven in the evening."

"Exactly, five whole hours before I go to bed."

"Its been dark out for nearly an hour."

"So people are less likely to see me."

I had to admit, Nick's logic was infallible. To tell the truth, this particular occurrence was such a regular fixture of our sunday evenings that you'd think it wouldn't surprise me any more.

"Cup of tea?" I offered, again, predictable as the music selection at an Australian theme pub.

"Yeah, go on then."

I headed back into the kitchen and flicked the kettle on, expecting there would be plenty of water left inside. The loud hissing that almost immediately emanated from inside told me otherwise, and I rushed to unplug the kettle and make sure that it actually had water in it this time. I leant backwards to direct my voice into the living room and continued the conversation while waiting.

"Where are Dave and Carla tonight?"

"They went out to dinner."

"You see what you're missing by not getting dressed on Sundays, mate?" I sniggered, knowing full well the four of us hadn't gone to dinner together since an incident with the ice cubes and hummus six months previously.

"Nah, eating in tonight. Cooking up a feast." Nick said, exuding a laddish enthusiasm that might have involved rubbing his hands together, if he could be arsed.

"Oh really, what you having?"

"Well, I've got some cheese, bacon and half an onion from a week ago. So, I don't know, cereal?"

"Sounds like you're living the dream."

"Don't I know it, mate."

At this point, the kettle started bubbling and clicked to suggest I should get on with the task of actually preparing tea. I threw a couple of teabags into our already well-used mugs - you could count the rings to see how many cups we'd drunk today - and idly went about brewing two builders-grade teas.

When I'd finished, I wandered back into the living room and took a seat in the armchair across from the sofa that Nick was making a valiant effort to completely cover. No mean feat as he was neither particularly tall, nor notably portly.

"When did the lovebirds head out?" I asked, setting our drinks on the magazines that had long since been repurposed as coasters.

"About an hour ago, said something about an anniversary."

"How long has it been for them now?"

"Well," Nick said, checking a watch that he wasn't wearing, "think they're up to about three years now."

"Christ, already?"

"Well, they got together not long before we graduated."

"Good point, " I mulled over this for a second, "Has it really been three years since we graduated?"

"Yep, and they've still not put the rent up." Nick said, punching the air in victory.

"Don't you think we should've done more with our lives by now?"

"I don't know about you, but I've achieved everything I wanted to achieve at this point, and more."

"Like what?"

"I'm making rent and I'm better than you at video games. Speaking of which, rematch?" Nick indicated the joypads on the coffee table.

"Yeah, why not? Never know, I might actually beat you this time."

"Doubt it, mate, what do you think I've been doing all day?"

I leaned over to the TV, trying to reach as far as I could without actually losing contact with my chair, and hit the on switch on the console nestled between the DVD player and amplifier - all part of a "home entertainment" centre we'd built up over the past few years that had moderately increased our entertainment prospects of an evening, while vastly increasing the risk of an electrical fire from the rats nest of cables behind.

The game of choice was already waiting in the disk drive, and loaded immediately. It was a random racing title that Nick had picked up cheap a few weeks ago: discounted due to the combination of being a year and a half past its release, and the fact nobody had ever heard of it. Regardless, it had become the de facto game for the flat, as it didn't involve killing anyone, so we weren't chastised for playing it when Carla was around - although I suspected Dave was the one it really bothered, being the only one that ever actually complained.

We went through the obligatory huge list of game options, and with our cars, track, weather, music and preferred colour of furry dice selected, we began the race. I immediately realised that allowing Nick to choose the track was a bad idea, as he seemed to know it so well he could race it with his eyes closed. Whereas I was clumsily bashing the controls in the vain hope I'd pick the right combination, with my tongue poking out of the side of my mouth like a child focusing on colouring inside some particularly complicated lines.

The first few races happened in near-silence, punctuated by occasional expletives and grammatically poor encouragement for our cars to go faster. Finally, after completely thrashing me over these initial matches, Nick needed something else to keep his mind occupied whilst lapping me for the fifth time.

"So how's this dating thing going for you, man?" He asked.

"Well, I've had some dates, that's about all I can say for it."

"Not got laid?"

"Well, I've not actually got past a first date yet."

"Yes, but have you got laid?"

I gave Nick a look of mild incredulity, then a resounding clatter from the TV indicated I had crashed into a wall. Righting my vehicle, I formulated a response.

"These girls aren't really the sort that would go to bed on a first date."

"Are you sure? Maybe they're just the sort that won't go to bed with Ben Marsden on a first date."

"Maybe you're right, but I'm not that kind of guy, either."

"You would be if you could, mate, admit it."

I couldn't really argue with that one. I went silent for a moment whilst carefully negotiating a depressingly easy bend.

"What about you, Nick, you had any sordid affairs recently?"

"Nah, you know me, free and easy. I'm not gonna go chasing it, if the ladies are interested, I'll let them come to me."

"Is that why you haven't had a shag in four years?"

"I've been too busy for all that stuff anyway." Nick countered, deftly passing through a hairpin bend, illustrating exactly what he'd been busy with.

"Don't you worry you'll have no idea what to say when someone finally does make a pass at you?"

"Come on, I've still got it. What about that girl I was chatting up the other night?"

"She was 16, mate."

"So? Not like that's illegal or anything. If she hadn't had to leave, I'd have been right in."

"You mean if her dad hadn't come to pick her up? From her cousin's 13th birthday party. Where you'd been hired as the clown."

"What can I say? The ladies love an entertainer."

"They didn't seem particularly entertained."

"It was a tough crowd, teenagers don't want the kids' party stuff any more."

"So you thought the hen party stuff was more appropriate?"

"At least I had the material lined up."

"Yeah, but the parents really didn't appreciate phallic balloon animals. Practically chased us out with kitchen knives. That's the last time I help you out with your sound effects."

"We still got paid, didn't we?"

"Well, no, as a matter of fact."

"Anyway, that's beside the point. The point is, I'll be able to turn on the charm when I need to. And when the right girl comes along, bam, I'll be away."

"To a magistrate's court?"

"Very funny. What I mean is, you don't need to be hunting around for someone the whole time. What makes you want to meet with all these women most of which are going to reject you anyway?"

"Well, I figure eventually, it'll work out with someone. And this way, I know she's interested even before we've met."

"Doesn't seem as exciting though, does it?"

"Who wants exciting on a date? You're nervous enough already without wondering if its a date-date or a just-friends-date or an I-might-be-interested-but-I'm-not-entirely-sure-so-I'll-lead-you-on-a-bit-date."

"But why are you in such a hurry to find someone? Why not just enjoy being one of the lads!"

"There aren't a whole lot of us left, though. How many weddings have you been to in the past year?"

"I dunno, three. Four if you count the one I wasn't invited to."

"I think we can call that three. But still, at that rate, how long till everyone's coupled up except us?"

"Are you coming on to me?"

"Er...no."

"Not planning on making a pact are you? Because I'm one hundred percent straight, my friend. Emphasis on the friend."

"No, Nick, I'm not asking you to make a lifestyle choice. What I mean is, everyone we know is getting married, or moving in together. And I figure if I want to settle down with someone someday, I might as well get started on finding her now. After all, its getting harder and harder to get people together for a night out or whatever, they're all off with their other halves, partners and significant others. Soon enough, they'll be staying home every night watching their kids. One by one, everyone's going to disappear from our lives off at some kind of couples-only dinner at a restaurant we've never heard of. And if you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

At this moment, we heard the door unlock and Dave and Carla burst through the door, faces beaming.

"Guys, we've got some news!" Carla called, almost singing.

"Me and Carla have decided to get a flat together." Dave interrupted, practically bursting.

"We're moving out." They said in unison.

Me and Nick lost interest in our game and missed a spectacular display as both of our cars crashed simultaneously. Then I finally turned to Nick and said.

"You see? This is exactly what I'm talking about."

## Danielle

"Hi, Danielle, right?"

I was pretty much certain it was her, one of the good things about internet dating is that it doesn't require you to mess about with roses in books or wearing a particular colour of clothing. But I always asked anyway, just in case there happened to be someone who looked just like her who also happened to be standing in the exact place we'd planned to meet. Should that ever happen, "Nice to finally meet you.", "That dress really suits you." or "You look even better than your picture." are probably not the best things to say to a perfect stranger. Fearful of attack with a pepper spray or auditory assault with a rape alarm, I tended to play it safe.

"Yep, that's me." Thank god for that, no inconveniently placed doppelgangers tonight.

"Great, after you." I offered, hinting towards the door of the restaurant.

We headed into the restaurant and asked for a table for two with all the mannerisms of a tourist who doesn't speak english: all hand gestures and mumblings of the word "two". God knows why anyone ever does that, but for me it seems to be a reflex action whenever I'm faced with a maitre'd with anything approaching a foreign accent. Possibly due to childhood memories of the family struggling with the French for "Non Smoking". This guy didn't even have an accent.

As we were shown to our table, I catch Danielle looking me up and down, with something approaching disappointment on her face. I figured she was finding me somewhat less attractive in person than in my photo. She on the other hand was decidedly more attractive than in her photos. I began feeling a little out of my depth, that and immediately of the opinion that her friends were terrible photographers. I suddenly became very concerned about the quality of my conversation.

"Sorry I kept you waiting, I'm usually a bit early." I also usually explain being late in exactly this way.

"Its ok, I was only waiting a minute or two. You get here ok?"

"Well, was absolutely mental at Piccadilly Circus, full of tourists. I got stuck behind a group stopping every second taking photos on the narrowest side street in London. That ever happen to you?" I knew full well it had, but it was always a pretty good conversation point for Londoners.

"God, yes, I hate when that happens." Works every time. Of course, now the conversation was started, I wasn't entirely sure how to continue it. So I moved on to more practical matters.

"Wine?"

"Tempting, but I probably shouldn't."

"Oh, its Friday, not like you're working tomorrow."

"Well, I am."

"Really? You have to work on a Saturday?"

"Yep, they like it if some of us do. Its useful if the hospital's open all the time, and they'd have to close it if there were no doctors there."

"Yeah, that makes sense." I really should start remembering some of these facts before arriving on a date. "Well, surely a glass or two won't hurt. And I'll drink anything you don't want." Heavy drinker, great first impression to make there.

"Ok, why not? You're only young once."

"Red or white?"

"You ok with red?"

"Sure." I then ceremoniously ran my finger down the red side of the wine menu. Before remembering I knew absolutely nothing about wine.

"You know anything about wine?" I asked, offering the menu.

"Not a thing."

"Least we're in the same boat."

"Yep, that's true." She agreed, urging me to make a decision with a bored look in her eyes.

"Ok, how out the Merlot?" I couldn't tell a Merlot from Madeira, I'd just done the usual trick of choosing the third least-expensive wine on the menu. And hoping the proprietors hadn't cottoned on. The waiter left with our order, probably safe in the knowledge that he could pick out anything and we'd assume it was the one we ordered. I'd already forgotten the name.

"So, do you have a long day lined up tomorrow?" I asked, hoping to be able to offer some sympathy.

"Same as usual really, hopefully it'll get quiet at the end and I can go home on time."

"You have to work late a lot?"

"Depends on what happens. Occasionally something will come up just before your shift ends and you'll have to stick around."

"Know what you mean, I hate leaving something unfinished when I go home."

"Its something like that." I took this to mean that I really didn't know what Danielle meant, and it was nothing like my own situation.

"Although I guess what I do is never really as urgent. Nobody's going to die if I duck out early." If I had ever said exactly the wrong thing, this was it.

"Quite."

Danielle's eyes narrowed, while still maintaining a facade of pleasantness, and I fumbled for something slightly less morbid to say. Handily, the waiter arrived with the wine we'd ordered. Saved by the sommelier.

"Aha, wine." I said, somewhat redundantly.

The waiter leaned over as to give me the best view of the label, with a name that might have been French, might have been Spanish, written in a barely-legible script which made little distinction between As and Ms. I nodded unconvincingly in the direction of the waiter and he set down the two glasses and began uncorking the bottle.

"Would you like to taste?" He asked me, assuming that because I'd ordered it, I should probably know what it would taste like. I've always wondered what would happen if I said no, whether this would be some kind of vast insult to the sommelier. That it might paint me as some uncultured plebeian who only orders wine to appear marginally more sophisticated, but was unaware of the proper procedures involved in its procurement. That was probably true on the whole, but I hate appearing rude.

"Yes, please." I said, pretending I knew what I was doing.

I took one quick sip of the sample that was offered, and nodded again, completing the ritual as swiftly as I could. I couldn't tell if a wine was corked if my life depended on it. I'd been sucking on a breath mint on my way to the restaurant, so it tasted vile anyway.

Once we each had a full glass, we gave the waiter a moment to depart before resuming our conversation. Danielle doing so likely to protect our privacy. Myself so I would only risk embarrassment in front of one other person.

"Do you have to work weekends a lot, then?" I could've chosen a new line of conversation, but that would've almost been admitting it wasn't going well.

"Varies really. Sometimes I'll do a lot in a month, sometimes none."

"Do you ever do nights?"

"Yeah, similar sort of thing."

"Must be a pain if you're working different hours to everyone you know. I had to work over a weekend once, massive deadline, had to cancel pretty much everything I had planned."

"I tend not to plan things for those weeks."

"Smart move." I paused, thinking it over. "Actually, maybe its just the sensible move."



"You'd be pretty stupid to arrange a night out when you knew you were going to be working." Danielle laughed, seeming to warm a little.

"Very good point."

"What about you? Do you do often work longer hours than you planned?"

"Sometimes, occasionally get really into something and just have to finish. Annoyingly that tends to happen at the end of the day. Spend most of the morning drinking coffee."

"Coffee helps."

"And how. Guess they keep you pretty busy most of the time, need all the caffeine you can get."

"Its useful, I'll say that much."

We both shared a look of agreement at this. I guess we'd found something in common. I wasn't sure whether the fact that this common ground was a mild addiction to a legal stimulant should be cause for alarm.

"Do you get much time for breaks?"

"Not as much as I'd like, usually rushed off my feet."

"Can understand that." I said. "Although if I'm having a bad day, I can usually sit down in the break room for a while, try to relax."

"Not going to relax a lot if you're drinking coffee all the time."

"True, true." I said, sipping my wine, it still tasting revolting. "Although the break room's the most relaxing place, usually someone in there on the phone. And the TVs always tuned to the news channel, because everyone's too embarrassed to put anything else on."

"At least you aren't going to get called away at a moment's notice."

"That happen a lot?"

"Again, it varies, but more than I'd like."

The waiter reappeared, brandishing a notepad expectantly.

"We should probably look at the menus." Danielle said, flicking through the leather-bound tariff in front of her.

"Yeah," I turned to the waiter. "Can you give us a couple of minutes?"

We mulled over the menus for a while, pausing briefly to engage in a little politeness one-upmanship over whether or not we would have a starter. It seems that every time I go to a restaurant the starter discussion always involves trying to convince everyone else that they want to order one, but you will only order one if everyone else does. This usually ends in everyone giving up and going straight to the main course. So, as ever, we ended up only having to make one decision.

We quickly decided our order and looked around us briefly trying to catch someone's attention, our eyes scanning the room like gun-mounted lasers in a bad action movie. It was such a bad action movie that we managed to be looking in completely the other direction when a waiter came up behind us. We placed our order and returned to the small talk.

"So what do you do when you're not working?" Danielle asked, pouring us a second glass of wine each.

"Nothing particularly exciting, go out for drinks with friends, sometimes go to the theatre."

"You into the theatre? Musicals and things?"

"All kinds, I guess. One of those things you have to do if you live in London, kinda like the museums. You been to see many shows?"

"Not really, isn't exactly my thing."

"So what do you get up to of an evening?"

"Bars, clubs, usual thing."

"Any hobbies?"

"Not really, no. Try to go skiing every winter, though, guess you could call that a hobby."

"Skiing? Sounds fun. Keep meaning to learn, but can never seem to get round to organising it."

"You should, we always have a lot of fun."

This was going surprisingly well, despite a little bump or two at the start. Our food arrived soon after, and the chit chat continued in much the same way, finding out about one another and sharing the odd bad joke. Maybe I'd been able to charm my way around any bad first impressions, either that or we were both loosening up a little, nearly having finished a second bottle of wine between us.

As the waiter walked away with our empty plates, I felt sufficiently loosened up to offer a compliment, not in a facetious "I'm after bedroom antics tonight" way (although I wouldn't have said no), but in a cliched "this is how people behave on dates on TV" kind of way.

"Have to say you're looking really nice tonight." I said, taking a sip of wine. It was entirely true, aside from genuinely being an attractive person, Danielle's choice of outfit managed to tread the line between revealing and slutty that spoke of true class. And made it difficult enough to stare that it would suck the class out of a man within eyeshot. Of course, saying all that might have been a bit over the top at the time. If not creepy.

"What do you mean by that?" This couldn't end well. Should I elaborate?

"Erm, I mean you look nice tonight." I repeated maybe she hadn't heard me right.

"Are you saying I wouldn't look nice normally?" Her entire demeanor had changed, the kind of disapproving and shocked look a parent gets when their child utters a first expletive.

"I wouldn't know, we've only just met."

"So you weren't expecting me to look nice?"

"No, I mean yes." I suddenly became more interested in the dessert menu the waiter had left us with. "Do you want to order dessert, or...coffee maybe?"

"So now you're saying I'm fat?"

"What?"

"You think I shouldn't have a dessert. you think I could lose some weight, do you?"

"What? No! You look fine."

"So now its just fine? It was nice a moment ago."

"You're not really giving me much of a chance here."

"Why should I? You think I'm fat and ugly."

"You're putting words in my mouth!"

"And now I'm a liar as well."

I sat there dumbfounded for a moment, I hadn't had an argument like this since I was in school. At the time, I wished to god I would have the debating skills to turn everything someone said against them. But coming from a doctor in her mid-20s, it seemed rather silly. I was considering my next utterance, which was a choice between *Does this happen on all your dates?* and *Maybe you've had enough to drink*. When Danielle stood up and exclaimed.

"Men, you're all bastards." Before storming out.

I began to wonder what kind of psychiatric condition this woman might suffer from, or if she was just an angry drunk. She didn't seem to be slurring much, so I was weighing up the symptoms between bipolar disorder and manic depression. Then the bill arrived on the table. I realised she'd managed to storm out without us paying, leaving me to foot the bill without need for any discussion of whether or not to split it. Sneaky devil.

"Wow, she's either completely nuts or incredibly clever."

The following Sunday I went for coffee with Vanessa to compare our recent dating horrors. We sat in the window of a heavily franchised coffee chain near where we worked, Vanessa drinking a latte and myself sitting before a sickeningly sweet (and yet strangely addictive) mix of caramel, coffee and cocoa with a name containing more double-cs than I could comfortably pronounce.

"I'd vote for insane. She may have got out of splitting the bill, but I was probably going to offer to pay anyway."

"Yeah, but think about it. If she wasn't interested, but thought you were, what better way to make sure you'd never call her again?"

"Well, I suppose I did delete her number fairly sharpish. She's an evil genius!"

"I'll have to remember that one." Vanessa said, a feigned shifty look in her eyes.

"Oh come on, you'd never be that cruel."

"Only if I'd never see the guy again."

"Ok, so what about you? Dated any nutters recently?"

"Don't know if you'd call him a nutter..." She let the thought hang in the air for a moment, "Actually, you probably would."

"Tell all."

"Ok, well first off, he turned up with flowers."

"What's wrong with that? Surely that's kinda sweet."

"Yes, but I had to sit through the whole film with them in my lap. Felt like I was at a cheesy awards show."

"Yeah, that'd be annoying. But when is it ok for a guy to bring flowers?" A life skill I'd never managed to pick up.

"Flowers are always nice, just better when there's a vase or something handy."

"So perfect for a visit to Chelsea then?" I chuckled. Vanessa looked at me quizzically.

"What?"

"Chelsea, because of the flower show. Never mind." Witty bander was never my strong point. "This is why I never get past a first date, isn't it?"

"Probably, yeah. Anyway, so we're going for drinks after."

"Ah, it gets worse?"

"Well, imagine how you'd feel if your date started questioning the practice of changing your underwear every day."

"How on earth did you get on to that topic?"

"God knows, he just came out with it. Said people try too hard. And trying too hard was gay."

"Nice. Sounds like a real catch."

"Ugh, he was vile. Was saying goodbye at the tube and he went in for a kiss. I nearly ran a mile."

"How'd you get out of it?"

"I managed to dodge it, got away with a peck on the cheek. Which still felt like too much." Vanessa said, shuddering.

"So, bad dates all round, then."

"Seems it. So other than that, how've you been?"

"Not bad, not bad. Although one of my flatmates is moving out, moving in with his girlfriend."

"Got to find someone else to take the room, then?"

"Yeah, don't suppose you know anyone that's looking, do you?"

"Afraid not."

"Ah well, worth a try. We've put out a few adverts, just a little nervy about having a stranger move in."

"Finding dates and flatmates online, now, are we?"

"Yep, and based on my recent dates I'll probably end up living with an axe murderer."

"I'm sure it won't be that bad."

"Hopefully not, just not never had someone move in I didn't already know."

"Was a lot easier at uni, people were always looking."

"And usually because their existing flatmates were mental."

"Or their neighbours."

"Or their landlord."

"Seems like life is just a series of tactics to avoid nutters."

"Very profound."

"You had anyone interested in the room?"

"Had a couple of replies, showing some of them round next week."

"Well, hope you find someone normal."

"Nah, normal is boring. Anyone I'm not terrified by would suit me fine."

"Let me know how it goes."

## Rent Boys

Sometimes I wonder if society would collapse if the Internet suddenly went away. Nick and myself had spent little more than a couple of hours carefully constructing a room to let advert before sending it out into the ether. A process that might have taken days if we had to arrange it over the phone - partly because photos would have had to be posted out, but mainly because we would have fought over who had to actually make all these calls to total strangers, our social skills stunted by years of sending all our business requests out in the written word, with all the editing and thinking time this allows.

But thankfully, the power of modern communications allowed us to quickly post an enticing sounding description of the room cobbled together from similar listings turned up in a Google search. As it turns out, writing room to let ads are far easier than writing dating profiles. You're practically expected to lie. Or at least you feel less guilty about it.

We took a series of carefully cropped photos on a camera recently purchases on Amazon, showcasing the wealth of furniture ordered from IKEA's UK site, and the odd bargain sniped out on eBay. Screw jetpacks, we've got the information age! We were careful to avoid photographing the hole in the plasterboard left by what we can only assume was an uncharacteristically wild and debauched evening by Dave and Carla (the exact circumstances we tried not to picture), and hadn't been able to fix because we didn't know of a website that did price comparisons for plasterers.

Responses came in a little quicker than we had expected, surprising how many people are willing to share with complete strangers in order to live that bit closer to work. We weeded out a few of the less realistic requests: everyone who asked if bills were included (given the rent had been fixed for three years it was already pretty darn cheap), occasional queries about pets ("No pets" seeming to mean "Just double check" to some people), or any emails that opened with "I'm not racist, but was wondering...". After a while, we'd whittled it down to a couple of viewings, which we arranged for two evenings that week.

There's something about looking for a new flatmate that makes you assume the worst about people. The thought of having to live in the same space for a minimum of six months makes you fear all the myriad eccentricities and odd habits a person may have. They seem laid back, you worry they may never clean up after themselves. They seem organised and together, you worry they'll throw a fit if you fail to clean up after themselves. They seem pleasant, friendly and courteous, you worry that they'll secretly be running an S&M dungeon from their bedroom - but only as a hobby.

I rushed home for the first viewing that week, barely getting through the door before the bell rang. As I happened to be close to the door, I answered the entry phone and was buzzing our visitor in as Nick appeared from his room wearing a suit. I hadn't seen Nick wearing a suit in years, and was somewhat surprised he still owned one. Especially seeing as most of the times I'd known him to get dressed up he usually managed to get sufficiently drunk to end up falling into bed still fully dressed. Somehow his jacket was no longer as creased as I remembered it.

"Er...why are you wearing a suit?"

"This is important stuff, mate, need to take it seriously."

I glanced down at Nick's slippers, and decided he was dressing smartly in an entirely ironic way. Hopefully this would be taken as quirky and fun by our prospective flatmate.

There was a knock at the door, and we crowded round the door to welcome our appointment. He wasn't wearing a suit.

"Hi, I'm Ian", he said, offering his hand to Nick in greeting. It seems formal wear conveys a sense of authority.

"Nick." Came the reply, both parties shaking hands and grinning maniacally in that enthusiastic but strangely insincere way that men do during formal greetings.

"Ben." I offered, extending my hand to keep the greetings moving.

"Nice to meet you." Ian said, the truth of the statement to be determined later.

"Well, first thing's first." I said, after a potentially embarrassing pause. "The room's this way."

I ushered Ian to the soon to be spare room, herding Nick out of the way as he continued his maniacal semi-formal grinning. Neither me nor Nick were trained estate agents, so the viewing consisted primarily of statements like "this is a room" while waving a hand around as if trying to clear smoke. Ian, in turn, remarked on the features of the flat in similarly uninformed ways, with statements like "Nice." "Good." and "Plug sockets, excellent."

Once the viewing part of the viewing was out of the way, we sat down in the living room and offered Ian a cup of tea under the pretense of him asking any questions he might have. In reality it was so we could all get to know each other hopefully well enough to decide if we could bear to live under one roof together or would be in danger of killing one another in the first week.

"Do you know a lot of people in the area?" I asked, hoping we might get a decent welcome party going.

"A few, yeah, a lot of people ended up settling round here. Guess its handy for where most people work."

"Most of your friends work in the centre?"

"Yep, doesn't everyone?" Ian laughed. I was tempted to offer Nick as a counterexample, but it wasn't strictly true. He did work in the centre, just not entirely regularly, or recently. At this point, Nick decided my line of questioning was complete and began his own.

"If you could be any kind of squirrel, what kind would you be?"

Both me and Ian stared at Nick briefly, wondering what kind of answer he might be expecting.

"How many kinds are there?" Ian asked, expressing what we were both thinking.

"Well, red and grey, I guess."

"Red, then."

"Interesting."

Nick had a serious look on his face. If he had a notepad, I imagined he might be scribbling in it ferociously. As it was, he looked like a psychologist who's just discovered the root of a person's unhappiness. But doesn't really care to tell them how to fix it.

"Are you an early riser?" I asked, trying to get the conversation on a more sane path.

"Sometimes, guess it depends on whether or not I'm working. I always like a bit of a lie in at the weekend."

"Don't we all?" Nick chuckled, before returning to an excessively serious tone. "Do you feel more guilty having eggs or bacon at breakfast?"

This was quickly turning into less of a chat and more of an interview. A police interview. I only hoped I was the good cop.

"Ummm, I guess bacon's worse for me than eggs." Ian said, squirming a little.

"Worse for you? Yeah, that works too." Nick said, leaving me wondering what on earth he could have meant originally.

"So what kind of work do you do?" I cut in, trying to get the conversation onto a more sane path.

"I work for the government."

"You mean like a spy?" Nick asked, beginning to get excited.

"Well, I could tell you, but I'd have to kill you." Ian replied, so predictably I could have said it in unison with him.

"So you're a civil servant then?" Nick asked, in the same manner you'd ask a prostitute if she were really a police officer.

"Yeah, work for the Competition Commission."

"Like running the lottery and stuff?"

"Not quite. What do you guys do?"

"Well, I work in IT." Just as generic a term as civil servant. "And Nick is, freelance." A nice way of saying he was a children's entertainer who hadn't worked in weeks.

"Great." Ian said. A dead end in the conversation.

"Well, anything else you want to know about the flat?" I asked, putting my hands on my knees as if to get up.

"Think that's about everything. Oh, what's the landlord like? Not a psycho is he?"

"Nah, hardly ever see him really. No unannounced visits or anything." Nick said, managing to seem entirely normal.

"Well, great then. Guess I'll be off." Ian said, beginning to stand up, the rest of us following him as if we were joined at the hip by rods.

"Be sure to give us a call if you're interested in the room." I said, as we were shaking hands on the way to the door.

"I will." Ian replied somewhat unconvincingly as the door closed, leaving me looking at Nick quizzically, not entirely sure what had just happened.

The second viewing we'd arranged was the following Sunday afternoon. I was sat on the sofa eating my lunch when I suddenly remembered that the clocks had gone forward the night before, and today's potential, Pete, was due to arrive at any minute. I dashed to the window to see if I could see anyone coming, and noticed a figure standing below at the entrance to the building. He was holding a hastily printed map - heavy on the magenta - and staring intently at his watch.

I went off to hastily clear my plate and hide it in the sink, and, turning as the doorbell rang, I noticed the clock had just hit the hour. This guy must have been waiting outside for god knows how long just so he could be exactly on time. This was either very good, or very bad. My bet was for the latter. I called to Nick and answered the door.

Pete knocked on the door at about the same time Nick emerged from his room. Thankfully, Nick wasn't wearing a suit this time, and we both greeted our visitor in the same manner as before, with the awkward handshakes and forced grinning. Pete was tall, verging on gangly. He wore a large pair of glasses that were sufficiently unfashionable as to deny him a description as affectionate as nerd, and a gore-tex jacket that hung off him like a bell. I found it impressive that a taller gentleman would actually be able to find clothes that were noticeably too big.

"Want to hang your coat up?" I suggested, pointing at the hangers by the door.

"No. I'm ok." Pete said, not actually making eye contact. Neither me nor Nick had expected this and stood there feeling lost for about the time it would have taken to hang Pete's coat up.

"Um, ok, so the room's this way." I said, moving towards the vacant room.

After last time, I'd learned a little about flat letting etiquette, and made an effort to point out some of the major features of the room. Although this didn't extend much further than a bed, wardrobe, desk and a radiator. I could have mentioned the window as well, but that might have been overdoing it. Pete glanced from corner to corner, never really settling on anything. I began to wonder if he drank too much coffee. It continued like this in the other parts of the flat. Until we reached the bathroom. Once I'd pointed out the major fixtures, Pete wandered over to the toilet and flushed it unceremoniously, watching the water draining. During which time, myself and Nick were exchanging a variety of confused glances. And Nick isn't easily confused. This was the first time Pete had actually gone into

any of the rooms in the flat, previously having merely hovered in the doorway of the bedroom, living room and kitchen.

"Do you want to see the room again?" I asked, wondering if Pete might get more out of a second look.

"Ok." He replied, still watching the lavatory water.

We led Nick back to Dave's bedroom, and ushered him in. He got a bit more into the process, and started opening windows and running his finger across surfaces. Finally, he picked up a picture of Dave and Carla up off the desk and stared at it intently. After what seemed like an eternity of gazing, he then put the picture back, carefully lined it up with the corner of the table, and then moved over to the wardrobe, opened the door and started scanning the inside, as if trying to guess how much would fit inside. I hoped he was the kind of guy who had a lot of clothes to store, rather than a guy who had a lot of dismembered corpses. The former probably would have surprised me more.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" Nick finally asked, I still not sure what to make of the whole situation.

"Ok." Pete said.

We went back into the living room, pausing briefly to turn on the kettle, and Pete stood smack bang in the middle of the room while myself and Nick occupied the sofa. He rocked on his heels for a few moments, looking anywhere but at us, until finally I decided to make our implied offer of a seat explicit.

"Do you want to sit down?" I asked, nodding at the armchair behind Pete.

"Ok."

"Right, well. We were wondering if we might get to know you a little better." I said, myself and Nick having previously come to a gentlemen's agreement that I'd be the one asking the questions this time.

"Ok."

"Great. Well, do you tend to get up early in the morning?"

"Yes." There was a brief pause.

"Right, moving on." I said, getting the impression this might be a one-sided conversation. "Why are you looking for a flat?"

"Don't really get on with the people I'm living with now."

"I see." Nick said, playing psychologist again. "Got fed up with them and had to get out?"

"Kinda, yeah." Pete replied. I began to wonder if "kinda" meant there was some form of restraining order.

"What kind of work do you do?"

"Office work." Pete replied, his gaze intensifying. By this point, I was afraid to ask him to elaborate, in case I discovered something horrifying.

"Is there anything else you want to know about the flat?" Nick cut in, seemingly as eager as me to bring the conversation to a close.

"Yes, do you share many things? Like to save money."

"Well, yeah." I said. "Milk, butter, cleaning stuff. Usual kinda things."

"What about toothbrushes?"

"Not really. Well, we've got someone else coming soon." I lied. "Best finish up there." Myself and Nick began to stand up, and motioned for Pete to do the same.

As we were subtly shooing him out of the flat, Pete turned back and, in a flash of recollection, said "Oh, by the way, I've got my own toolkit. Well, an axe at least."

We were suddenly hastened in our efforts to get him out. I got a sneaking suspicion that we'd see him again though. In a mugshot on the news, before the little old lady who lived next door comments, "He seemed like such a nice man. You'd never have thought he'd have done that."



# Anne

Waterloo station in rush hour. You could fit hundreds of thousands of people in the space, although most of the space was between the floor and the rarely-cleaned glass roof, so these people would need to be piled on top of each other like a vast and hopelessly complicated game of pick-up-sticks. With the smallest people at the top, so to more easily fit them between the metal supports. As it was, people didn't really appreciate that manner of stacking, and so fought for the choicest pieces of floor space - namely those around the departure boards and on the way to the bottleneckiest of exits. Physics dictates that fluids get faster when pushed through a small gap. People don't do that. As a result, its a bad place for three kinds of people: agoraphobics, antisocials and anyone who doesn't like walking. Although if you are the sort who enjoys crowds, being jostled by hurried commuters and coming into the main station concourse to discover your platform is right at the other end of the building, you'd be right at home. I fell somewhere in between, and just about tolerated the place, with the added bonus that I didn't mind a little walking, so I had no qualms about taking the less-conveniently placed yet slightly earlier train just to minimise the time I had to spend in the place.

On this particular occasion I wasn't actually planning on setting foot on a train. Anne, my date for the evening, had been working out of town for the past couple of days, and this was the most convenient place to meet at any reasonable sort of hour. We'd arranged to meet under the large clock hanging prominently in the centre of the station. Which just happened to be where everybody arranged to meet. I had arrived slightly early, and had managed to occupy the final piece of under-clock real estate, which happened to back onto a major thoroughfare. Were I to move an inch to my left or right, I would either have to apologise for bumping into the person next to me, or get swept up into an ant-like file of office workers and find myself on the 18.15 to Guildford with neither a ticket, nor, slightly more annoyingly, a seat.

I wasn't entirely sure which train Anne was likely to be on, so I hunted through the processions of the recently-arrived, pausing briefly on any person who looked anything like the picture I'd seen.

*That's not her.*

*That's not her.*

*Dear god, I hope that's not her.*

Thinking she may have already escaped the platforms and snuck up behind me, I wheeled around, taking in the landscape of faces, carefully scanning the throng of commuters, greeters and unsubtle pickpockets. I immediately caught sight of a large, burly, angry-looking gentleman rushing towards me. At least, I thought it was a gentleman at first. As he drew closer, and his features came into sharp focus, I become less and less sure. I began to worry that this may be the individual I came to meet, the picture posted online having been a clever subterfuge. I was meeting a person who would be considered frightening regardless of whatever gender they turned out to be, and whose meaty arms and legs we, were currently pumping towards me like a freight train constructed from a combination of excessive weight training and overeating. I'm almost on the verge of flinching, when the orc-like creature made a surprisingly swift and graceful dart to the left - creating a slipstream that nearly knocked me over just as deftly as an actual collision. This course correction led to an encounter with a tiny gentleman who seemed entirely prepared for the impact. Maybe I was being too superficial. I'm sure she had a really great personality.

I'd barely regained my composure when I felt a tap on my shoulder, and simultaneously, I both jumped three feet in the air, and span to face the person on the other end of the finger.

I was faced with a mischievous grin surrounded by dimpled, slightly freckled cheeks. I was standing much too close. I stepped back so to see the rest of the person.

"Scare ya?" Anne asked, her grin not letting up.

"Yes...No...Maybe." I replied, unsure of the answer she was looking for.

"Oh, I saw you jump, Ben." She said, a knowing and playful look in her eyes. I half expected her to offer a friendly punch in the shoulder. Which, as it happens, she did not long after.

"You seem remarkably upbeat for someone who's just come from work."

"Well, weekend starts here, can't wait." Anne said, rubbing her hands together in anticipation, somehow managing not to make it look like a pantomime.

"It does indeed. So, where shall we get the weekend off to a start?"

"There's a nice bar near here, not the trendiest of places, but they do good cocktails."

"Sounds great, lead the way."

Anne grabbed my hand and led me through the crowds to the exit, with all the speed and grace of a figure skater...provided that skater was required to slalom other people and jump the occasional suitcase. I had some small talk all lined up and ready to go, but held my tongue until we had traversed the escalator down for fear of breaking her concentration.

Our pace slowed as we broke into the fresh air - fresh meaning outside as opposed to pleasant, let's not get delusional, it is a city after all.

"So how was work?" I asked, once I had caught up and was walking alongside.

"Oh, same ol', same ol'. Desks, paper, all that sort of thing."

"Guess you're firmly in the work-to-live camp?"

"Oh god, yes. What's the point of doing something you hate just so you can get some extra cash you've never got the time to spend?"

"Not much, I'll admit."

"What about you? You spending every waking hour chained to your desk?"

"Far from it, although I don't sleep much."

"Too busy partying, eh?" Anne said, nudging me with her elbow.

"Too right." I lied, unless you counted a cup of Earl Grey in the bath as partying it up. Most nights, I wasn't so much a party animal as a partly granny man. I couldn't even come up with a decent pun for it.

"Even on a school night? I'd much rather have a cup of tea and a long soak."

*Holy crap!* I thought. *She's a telepath!*

"Now that sounds like a good night in." I agreed.

"I hope you mean separate baths." She said, the mischievous grin returning to her face.

"Of course, I'm a gentleman."

"Suuure you are."

"Don't question me, woman." I joked. Immediately, Anne adopted a slightly irked look.

*Was that going too far?* I wondered. *Christ, it was, wasn't it? She's going to walk off, isn't she? She folded her arms and everything, that's a sure sign she's mad.*

As my face no doubt began to display my worries, Anne began to chuckle and rapped me lightly on the shoulder.

"Had you going there."

"I'm going to have to watch out for you." I said, suddenly feeling surprisingly relaxed. This was going to be an interesting night.

We arrived at the almost-humorously named "Bar Ry" and worked our way to the back of the room through the post-work crowd to grab a table at the end of a long, heavily padded bench. The majority of surfaces in the room were black, from the faux-leather of

the seating, to the faux-marble of the table tops, right down to the suits worn by the businessmen entertaining their clients - faux friends.

"Interesting place."

"Its somewhere to go, maybe they try too hard, but they make a good mojito."

"Gotta get those priorities right."

"Totally, and it can be quite cozy if you get a table by the fire." Anne said, pointing to a flatscreen TV mounted on the wall, playing an endless loop of a roaring fire. As the image registered in my mind, we both burst out laughing.

"I wondered why it was so warm in here. So what can I get you?" I said, my laughter subsiding as Anne deposited her coat and bag on the back of a chair, and I took a seat on the bench opposite.

"I'll give you three guesses."

"Does it involve mint?"

"You got it."

After watching a drink-mixing spectacle involving a lot of crushing, shaking, straining and two sprigs of mint, I returned to the table with a pair of mojitos, heavy on the crushed ice and heavier on the wallet.

"Brilliant, been waiting all week for this." Anne said, as I set the drinks down.

We each took an exploratory drag on the dual straws sticking out of our drinks, and Anne opened the next round of talk.

"You doing much this weekend?"

"Not a whole lot. Got someone to come look at the flat on Saturday, other than that, nothing much planned."

"You're moving?"

"Nah, one of my flatmates is moving out, so we need to find a replacement."

"I see. Many people been round?"

"A couple, although it didn't go too well."

"Really? How come?"

"One didn't seem to like the flat." By which I meant, we scared him off. "And the other was, a bit unusual."

"Unusual?" Anne asked, clearly excited about the prospect of some juicy gossip on someone she didn't know.

"He was pretty quiet, never took his coat off, and we think he might possibly have been an axe murderer."

"Might have been?"

"Well, he had an axe."

"He brought it with him?"

"No, said he had one in his toolkit."

"My cousin has an axe, doesn't make him a murderer."

"Well, what does it make him?"

"A fireman."

"Oh. That makes a lot more sense."

"That said, I wouldn't want to live with my cousin, so you're probably better off."

"So what are your living arrangements like?"

"Usual thing." Anne said with an air of nonchalance, "Eating, sleeping, occasional courses of antibiotics."

"Heh." I half-laughed, trying to strike a balance between showing approval at the joke, and not sounding particularly forced. "I meant are you sharing, renting, stuff like that?"

"I know what you meant." Anne said, giving me a light slap on the knee. "I'm sharing with a friend."

"Nice place?"

"Yeah, bit of a way from the tube, though. Tend to take a bus late at night."

"Scary area?"

"Not really, but you know, young woman, alone, at night."

"Can't say I'm familiar with the situation. You'll be happy to know I've never been in the position of being a woman, nor a rapist." My second attempt at humour of the evening seemed to go down slightly better, although I immediately conceded to myself that "rapist" was probably not a word to use on a date.

"That is good to know." Anne said, before taking a long pull on her drink, draining the remaining liquid from amongst the crushed ice. "Another drink?"

"I won't say no." I said, and with that, she departed to the bar.

I whiled away some time taking in the surroundings while hoovering up the remainder of my drink. The "straight from work" crowd of business suits had been peppered with more colourful individuals who'd taken the time to go home and change into their "play clothes" - as well as some who hadn't actually been to work at all, whether through lack of employment, or feigned illness. Gradually, flashes of blue, pink and a curious example of what I believed could be called plaid would appear amongst the black and white figures huddled around the bar. I began to wonder who might be considered the truer party animals: those who had prepared a look specifically for the occasion, or those who were so eager to get a drink in their hand they wasted no time in preparation after the working day. I pondered this briefly, then realised I could be making more effective use of my time and deleted some old messages on my phone.

Anne returned with two brightly coloured drinks (each a different shade of mauve) and placing them on the table, slipped into the seat next to me, ignoring her previous perch on the opposite side of the table.

"Was looking over the menu, thought we should see how many different ones we can try."

"Didn't your mother tell you not to mix your drinks?" I asked, trying and completely failing to raise one eyebrow. Although this was preferable to actually putting my tongue in my cheek, which makes speaking difficult.

"Of course, but these are already mixed."

"Touché."

"I like it when I win." Anne said, twirling a lock of her hair around her finger in a manner that I wasn't entirely sure whether or not to describe as flirtatious.

The conversation continued in much the same way, although with an increasing air of inebriation. We discussed our jobs, our social lives, hobbies - more specifically Anne's hobbies, which were far more interesting than my occasional forays into online poker - and were just about to reach our primary school educations when we suddenly became aware that we were one of only two couples left in the bar. We looked around at the staff circulating, up-ending chairs onto the now vacant tables, then we turned back to each other and burst out laughing.

"When the heck did everyone leave?" I asked, glancing around in case they were about to jump out as some kind of obscure prank.

"I have no idea. Guess we were having too much fun chatting." Anne replied, nudging me with her shoulder.

"Guess so, think they want us to leave." The staff had now finished with the rest of the room and were standing over us, the only obstacle to them closing up for the night.

"Ok, think I've about used up about a month's worth of calories with all those cocktails anyway."

"Yeah, my teeth are stinging a little. Worth it though."

"Definitely." Anne said as we gathered up our coats and other effects and began to head towards the door.

"How you getting home?" I asked as we got outside, wondering which direction to go.

"Tube." Anne replied, leading us to the right.

"Great, me too."

We started down the main road towards the station, and I got a crazy notion that I wanted to stretch the night out a little.

"Hey, here's an idea, want to take a little long-cut?"

"Long-cut?"

"Take the long way round, up by the river, shouldn't take much longer."

"Ummm, sure." Anne said, sounding intrigued.

I led us down a side street advertising a "Thames Walk", which took us to a pavement running alongside the river. Surprisingly enough, as we came onto the path, I had to dodge out of the way of an approaching jogger.

"Wow, bit late to be exercising." I said, bemused.

"Well, maybe its because the view's better at night."

"It is." I said, taking in the lights of the buildings across the water.

"Nice way to end the evening."

"Glad you think so."

We walked on towards the station, trying to guess the names of the buildings and realising our knowledge of London's geography was sorely lacking. We quickly started making up fake names before we had to turn off for the station. I was slightly relieved that we'd already passed the Gherkin by this point, lest I devolved into sophomoric humour relating to certain male parts.

We entered the station and suddenly became aware we were traveling in opposite directions. There was a corridor running between the two platforms, so we paused there briefly and I was just about to say goodnight, when Anne beat me to speaking first.

"Its going to take me ages to get home now, gonna need to change three times."

"That sucks, does that include the bus from the station?"

"No, but you could always ask me back to yours." Anne suggested, sidling up a little closer. Her inebriated state turning it into a weird parody of an amorous crab.

"I don't know, don't you think its a little soon for that?"

"A little soon for what?" She asked, drawing sufficiently close that I could suddenly see two of her.

"Soon for going back to the same flat, maybe." I said, less and less sure of myself with every word.

"Come on, I know you don't really mean that."

"Well maybe not, but its the decent thing to say."

"What makes you think its the decent thing?"

"Well, I don't want you to think I'm, pushing for anything?"

"If I did think that, there's a little word we girls use, called 'no'."

"Yeah, but then I'd get all awkward and embarrassed."

"More or less awkward than right now?"

"Maybe a little more."

Anne stepped back a little and looked at me quizzically. "Let me give you a little tip. Girls aren't too fussed about 'decent', girls don't want 'polite', girls definitely don't want you to play it safe. Take a risk, make a move."

"So, um, do you want to come back to my flat?"

"Not when I suggested it first. I'm not a slut." At which point, she walked off to a waiting train, stopping only to throw me a cheeky, flirtatious wave as the doors closed. I stood there for a moment, completely nonplussed. Did she actually want to come back home with me? Was this for coffee or something that I was until recently positive was not on the cards for a first date. Women are complicated, no wonder dating is so hard.

## Boy Girl Boy Boy

"More wine, anyone?" Carla offered, waving the bottle indiscriminately at the others around the table.

Dave and Carla had not long since moved into their new flat, and had invited their collection of ex-housemates for a flat-warming dinner party. So, around the table were currently seated Dave, Carla, Nick, myself and two couples at least 50% of which used to live with Carla: Matt and Lucy, and Leo and Sophie. Exactly which 50% was unclear, despite having known all four of them for years. I was amazed that Dave and Carla could fit an eight-person dining table into a London flat, but Dave assured me this was the advantage of one bedroom and two incomes. Granted, the chairs didn't all match, and everyone's elbows were close enough that we had to cut our food in unison, but still, eight people.

From what I'd gathered over the evening's conversation, all three couples had recently progressed to the "cohabitation" stage of their relationships, giving Carla and her flatmates the advantage of all leaving at the same time, so nobody was left attempting to fill spare rooms. Nick and myself were putting in a poor show for the modern trend of living with a partner before marriage. I began to wonder if everyone else thought we were secretly gay.

Given that most parties had moved onto a more "adult" stage of life, wherein living with friends was no longer the norm, the conversation had been very much within this adult vein. The topics included such riveting concepts as council tax rates in different boroughs (apparently Wandsworth wasn't the cheapest if you had a lot of large items to be removed) and the paradoxical assertion that using a dishwasher was actually better for the environment than washing up by hand.

Carla aimed the wine at each person at the table individually, in a weird variant of spin the bottle which allowed you to choose where it stopped, and the resulting forfeit was not a random pseudo-sexual encounter, but an almost imperceptibly increased feeling of inebriation. One by one, everyone at the table politely shook their head, waved their hand or mumbled, "No, thanks.". Leo very nearly accepted, but a quick nudge to the ribs and a cough from Sophie corrected his behaviour. Eventually the bottle arrived in front of me and I felt obliged to refuse as well lest I appear to have a drinking problem.

"So have you guys had any luck finding a new flatmate?" Dave asked.

"Not really." I replied. "We've had a few people look round, most recently a woman with a painfully posh accent, who heavily implied she was related to royalty, but seemed a little dejected when we told her the rent didn't cover utilities, and a bloke in his mid forties who was so drunk he made Oliver Reed seem clean cut."

"Not going too well, then." Matt said, with an air of redundancy.

"We'll need to find someone soon, or we'll be out on our arses." Nick exaggerated.

"You folks know anyone who's looking."

"Not really, its a shame you're not from a corrupt country or something."

"Why?"

"Well, then you could make up some kind of issue to protest, make some banners, buy a tent and a megaphone and camp out on parliament square for free."

"Now there's an idea. If they lay on some free coffee or sandwiches I'm in!" Nick said, with an excited grin.

"Something of a lack of washing facilities there though."

"Unless you're a member of parliament."

"Think its a bit late to stand this time round."

"I bet I could slip in a late entry."

"The election's next week, Nick."

"Really? I'm sure I would've noticed."

"There're billboards up all over London!"

"Was that about the election? I thought some guy was getting divorced."

"What?"

"The picture of the guy with the caption 'We can't carry on this way'. I thought he was telling his wife it was over."

"That was the leader of the opposition."

"Didn't you think it was a bit of an expensive way to end a marriage?"

"And a little cowardly."

"Still, point is." I interjected, hoping to bring us back from the brink. "I think the parliament square idea should really only be a last resort."

"Can't you guys just find a two bed flat?"

"We could, but might have to move a bit further from the centre."

"I'm beginning to feel a little guilty." Dave said.

"Ah, don't worry about it, if we waited until everyone had something sorted we'd never leave."

"Would've saved on removals, though." Nick said.

"Don't mention removals, half of my stuff is still at my parents' house." Carla said, with a resigned sigh usually reserved for use by exhausted mothers.

"Well, you managed without it for the last few years."

"But now I've got space for it."

"And you absolutely have to fill that space right now do you?"

"Its so you can't put a pool table in there." Lucy chipped in.

"I can assure you I have no such intentions." Dave protested. "But a dartboard, on the other hand."

Carla got out her phone and started tapping out a message. I half expected her to start sticking her tongue out in concentration.

"What're you doing?" Leo asked.

"Texting my Mum." Carla said, still tapping away. "I need to get that space filled first thing tomorrow!"

We emitted a series of polite chuckles and giggles, assuming this was a joke. At least we hoped for Dave's sake that it was, otherwise he might be in for a prolonged period of not being allowed to make any decisions.

"So, Ben, how's all this internet dating been doing." Dave asked, eager to move on the topic of conversation. A few eyebrows around the table were immediately raised in interest. This wasn't something I was ecstatic about becoming common knowledge. I shot Dave my best withering state, although seemed to have something wrong, as it came out more withered than withering.

"Not great, I'll admit. Haven't really met anyone who's worth a second date." I half-lied, trying to appear more choosy than I really was.

"Total dogs, eh?" Leo had chosen to join in on the faux machismo, while also removing all subtlety entirely. But this was him all over, a bit of a lad's lad. Sophie didn't approve, although this was probably something of a cornerstone of their relationship. The numerous kicks under the table Leo was earning for his transgressions, and his resulting well-rehearsed yelps of pain were always delivered with a sense of affection. The kick he earned for this particular statement was delivered with an extra helping of tough love.

"I think he means he struck out." Nick laughed, as honest as ever.

"What? This stud-muffin? Never!" Dave countered, with a level of sarcasm so severe it very nearly came full circle to become abject sincerity again. The table erupted in atypical dinner-table laughter, boisterous but without much in the way of thigh-slapping or pointing, which would have been difficult even if our chairs had any space between them. I joined in, even though the joke was at my expense, partly because I didn't want to seem

humourless or easily-offended, and partly because Dave's sentiment was entirely correct. I am neither a stud-muffin, nor would I want to be. I'd much rather be a chocolate digestive. You feel far less guilty after having a chocolate digestive.

"Nick, that's the last time I tell you about a date I've had."

"Ah, so there is something to tell?" Lucy's eyes went wide, hoping to catch some exciting gossip. The others leaned in ever so slightly. I knew I was stuck here. The second a group of friends realise you don't want to tell them something, they will do whatever it takes to make you spill the beans. I figured I might as well get it over with. I began to take a breath to quickly think of the best way to recount my recent experience with Anne, when Nick thought he might save me the effort and tell the tale in his own, inimitable way.

"He was offered sex on the first date and turned it down."

There were brief gasps of surprise around the table. The male gasps for completely different reasons than the female gasps. I was glad I'd turned down the extra glass of wine, as I might have ended up doing a comedic spit-take directly into Matt's face.

"That wasn't what happened at all. We went out for drinks, she hinted that she might have gone back to my place if I'd offered." I thrust a shushing finger in Nick's direction to prevent any possible interjection. "Not necessarily for that, Nick, probably just for coffee. I wasn't entirely sure, she went home. Simple as that."

"You wish you'd offered the coffee though, don't you?" Matt asked.

"Is it that obvious?"

"You're a man, of course it is."

Partly as a function of the number of glasses of wine I'd already consumed, I placed my hands on my temples and got mildly philosophical. "Dear god, does that make me a complete git?"

"Well, you didn't actually offer the coffee, so you've still got a shred of decency." This seemed kind of obvious in retrospect, but made me feel comfortable enough with myself to return my hands to the edge of the table.

"True, but maybe I'm being too decent. I never actually offer the coffee until I'm absolutely sure she wants the coffee. Then by the time I think she wants the coffee, she thinks I'm never going to offer the coffee and gives up."

Nick had taken on a more puzzled look than usual. "Are we talking about coffee or sex now?"

"I hope sex, otherwise Ben's worrying way too much."

"Yes." I sighed, slightly more wearily than troubled. "We've now reached the point in the discussion where coffee actually means sex."

"So basically, your problem is that you're never sure what your dates really want out of an evening?" Dave asked, waving his spoon about to collect the disparate elements of the conversation from the air.

"I think that about sums it up."

"Might be able to help you there."

"You discovered the secret to mind reading?" Nick asked, excited at the prospect of real telepathy.

"You know, surprising as it seems, I've missed your conversations since we moved out, Nick. No, I can't read minds, yet." Nick said, effecting an air of mystery by waggling his eyebrows like a hypnotist villain in a particularly bad detective serial. "I've got a book that might make things a little clearer."

"A book?"

"Yeah, some psychology self-help thing. Just a minute, I'll go get it."

With that, Dave stood up and wandered out of the room. The rest of us looked at Carla, as if she could cast some light on exactly what Dave was talking about. Her response was a shrug that could be immediately interpreted as *don't look at me*. She then proceeded to offer around the wine again. This time, we were all eager for another glass,



so the remnants had to be carefully divided between us. Once the wine was all rationed out, Dave returned and handed me a book. The aptly named:

**When Coffee Means Coffee**  
Dating Psychology for the Modern Man

"What's it about?" I asked, as I turned it over to find a picture of the author, a stern academic woman who gave the impression of not having actually been on a date in modern times. Although her glasses were pretty trendy.

"It's mainly about what women typically expect from a relationship, and the sort of things that would put them off immediately. It's basically a bunch of dating tips for blokes."

"How long have you had this?" Carla asked, slightly suspicious of her long term partner possessing such a book.

"Oh ages, someone got it me as a gag gift on my eighteenth or nineteenth birthday, I think." Dave replied, struggling to remember the exact circumstances. "They thought I needed advice on how to handle women."

Carla threw him a look that demanded elaboration.

"Not that I needed any advice with you." He said, pouring on as much charm as he could muster, before panicking and adding. "I was too spellbound to think of putting on the moves with you."

That was pretty smooth. I almost found myself wishing he'd stopped at the first sentence. Not because I'd wish the guy ill, but it would have been kinda funny. Or at least the resulting fight would have. Carla adopted her best unimpressed face, before losing her composure and laughing along with him.

"Anyway, you can borrow it if you want." Dave said, turning to me. "It might come in useful, get you past the awkward bit."

"Then if she's not the one for you, you get to be the one doing the chucking." Leo laughed.

The couples in the room then all simultaneously gazed at one another as if to cement the fact that they had no intention of doing any chucking of their own. I suddenly felt invisible. Part of me was relieved, my dating ineptitude was no longer the focus of everyone's attention. Another part of me felt like a voyeur. A third part was surprised to discover that Lucy had her tongue pierced. She didn't seem like the type.

The evening began winding down after this, we'd exhausted the supply of wine and the three couples were eager to either get home - or get the guests out of their home - so they could engage in their own form of "dessert". Myself and Nick had no such intentions, but silently agreed it would be rude to outstay our welcome, through the medium of slowly standing up. I thanked Dave for loan of the book on the way out. I was still a little dubious as to how helpful it would be, but I wouldn't want to dismiss it out of hand, especially when he'd had to hunt for it amongst stuff he hadn't read in a good six or seven years. When we arrived back at the flat, I put the kettle on for a mildly unnecessary cup of tea, and idly flipped open the book to a random page.

*It may come as a surprise to most men that women aren't all thinking the same thing. It is almost impossible to know with certainty what a woman wants, even more difficult to know how to give it to her. Part of the reason for this is that most people are totally unsure of what they want. They worry about whether their desires are social acceptable, if the other person thinks the same way, or if they might regret it in the morning. If you can get past these fears, and know for sure what it is that you want, you're already a long way towards getting it.*

I closed the book. I knew exactly what I wanted. I wanted to get some sleep.

## Amy

I spent the next few days idly flicking through the book during my daily commute. It seemed remarkably formulaic, every morsel of advice it offered up being labelled as the "most important thing". Quite how such increasing importance could be placed on every subsequent nugget of wisdom escaped me, leaving me wondering if the author was a complete genius, or just had an excessively bombastic writing style. Cynicism aside, the advice within the book seemed worth taking, and, typical of self-help books, often invoked the exclamation: "oh, of course, why wasn't I doing that before", seeming both profound and incredibly obvious at the same time.

The following week, I found myself sat at a bus stop with Amy, a quiet girl who worked in some branch or other of the civil service, although she never actually specified which one. From her timid, almost jumpy demeanor, I assumed she wasn't a spy, or if she was, she was a very good one, maintaining a perfectly unassuming cover. I almost felt guilty when I greeted her at the start of the evening, as my side-on approach made her jump to the extent that it was no longer a metaphor. Either her feet genuinely did leave the ground, or the extra height she gained at that moment was evidence of extremely bad posture. She was quiet in a way that made her a good listener, so good in fact that I kept wondering if I was talking about myself too much, and made various attempts to pepper the conversation with questions about her. Questions that were so divorced from the original topic as to be non-sequiturs.

"And that was pretty much all I remember about my final year in primary school. But enough about me, how was work today?"

So it had come to the end of the evening, and, having selected a location that was mutually convenient in terms of distance, but universally inconvenient in terms of the lack of a tube connection, we were waiting for buses going in opposite directions. With all semblance of chivalry, I'd offered to wait at Amy's stop until her bus arrived, confident that after seeing her on her way, I'd be able to dart across the four lanes separating the two pavements, and reach my stop before I either missed my bus or was run down by another one. Quite why we'd agreed on this particular location, I was unsure, as our date had consisted of a trip to the cinema followed by a few drinks, and I was fairly sure that there were cinemas and pubs all over London, and many of them actually had a decent transport link. I would probably have been willing to travel a little bit out of my way for the benefits of waiting for a train indoors, as the weather was currently at the point where a jacket seems unnecessary during the day, but is vital during the evening, and despite knowing I was coming out straight from work, I had neglected to plan that far ahead. So now I was attempting to be confident, sure of what I want, and all the other stuff the book had recommended, whilst simultaneously being on the verge of freezing off various unmentionables.

While I was concentrating on placing my arms in a pose that would serve both to provide maximum heat retention, while seeming entirely nonchalant and laid back, Amy broke her characteristic silence.

"I had a really nice time tonight."

"Glad to hear it, me too."

"Been a long day though, I'm drained." Amy said, the words blurring into a yawn.

*One of the most vital things to remember about being on a date is that you're there to enjoy yourself. You need to keep that sense of fun about you all the time, and make sure that your date knows you're enjoying yourself. Loosen up a little, be playful.*

At this point in the evening, I figured it was my last shot at trying the "playful" approach. Just before Amy had the chance to cover her yawning mouth, I extended my index finger and placed it between her gaping jaws, and struggling to stifle a laugh, I yelled.

"Yawn Rape!"

Evidently, this wasn't a meme of which Amy was aware, and either the surprise of my shout, or the uninvited invasion of her face, or likely a combination of both, caused her to clamp her jaws shut.

She may have been slight of frame, and quiet as a mouse, but this girl had one hell of a bite on her. Somewhere, squirreled away at the back of my brain, was a vague memory of having my fingers slammed in a car door at the age of ten, and suddenly my current predicament seemed extremely familiar. Although worse, because this was happening now. My immediate reaction - besides a wince that quickly transformed into a rather unmanly scream - was to try and yank my hand away, which probably made the damage somewhat worse. Once free, I began shaking my hand in the air as if this might actually numb the pain slightly. Quickly realising this wasn't really doing much to help, I stopped and took a look at my mangled finger, while Amy stood wide eyed.

"Oh christ, are you ok?"

"Not really." I replied through clenched teeth, not quite being sarcastic enough.

"Is it bad?" She asked, peering over.

"Well, it hurts enough, how the hell did you manage to bite that deep? Nearly took the nail off."

"I don't know, regular visits to the dentist?" Amy said, looking sheepish.

"Tell him he's doing a great job." I said, returning to most ineffective hand waving.

"You should probably get that looked at, don't want an infection or anything. Do you have a first aid kit at home?"

"Nope, never really expected to get bitten on a first date."

"Ok, well the hospital's round the corner, sure they can sort you out in A&E."

"Is that really necessary?" I said, attempting to sound macho.

"Well, you're going green, so, probably." We have machismo failure.

Despite being an annoying distance from a proper transport link, the local hospital was indeed just a couple of minutes' walk away. We wandered into Accident and Emergency and presented ourselves at the reception desk.

"Can I help you?" The receptionist asked, sufficiently bored to not actually look either of us in the eyes.

"Ummm, I've hurt my finger, could I get it looked at?"

The receptionist sighed and made a note.

"What happened?"

"She bit me." I said, pointing the thumb of my good hand at Amy, who smiled winningly.

The receptionist's eyes grew wide, and she stifled a display of amusement. After taking a few particulars, we were directed to a waiting area, with the assurance we would be seen as soon as possible. Which I took to mean when all the genuinely ill people had been seen.

"You don't have to wait with me, you know. Its getting pretty late."

"Wouldn't want you to get bored. And I was the one who bit you, after all."

"Well, I did kind of ask for it."

"What on earth made you think that was a good idea anyway?"

"Well, I was trying to be fun and playful." I said, shrugging and putting on the sort of expectant expression you get after telling a joke that nobody's quite started laughing at yet.

"This is fun for you?" Amy said, looking around the room at the assortment of Friday night slapstick injuries resulting from alcohol abuse: a man with his arm in a sling and his head in an emesis basin, a girl with a broken left stiletto and a suspected broken right leg, and a student with his head caught in railings that had been removed from a wall with heavy-duty cutting equipment.

"I didn't expect this part."

"What were you expecting would happen?"

*They say "Honesty is the best policy", and in this case, folk-wisdom has it exactly right. Even if you ignore all the other advice in this book, at least be honest with people.*

"If I'm honest, I've been reading this book, a kinda dating psychology thing. I'm not great with this whole first date thing, and a friend lent it to me to see if it could help me out. One of the tips was to be playful, and that was the first thing that popped into my head."

"A book? I see. So how much of what you've said and done tonight was because of the book?"

"Not everything." I said, defensively.

"But the whole thing with yelling about rape?"

"Yeah, that was all the book."

"Right." Amy said, taking it all in. We sat in silence for a moment, and a name was called from a back room, causing everyone in the waiting area to look up simultaneously. It wasn't my name.

"Guess the book doesn't really work, then."

"Probably not."

"I'm sure you'd be fine without the book, you're a nice guy."

"I've managed to cock up a lot of dates with and without the book, so I think its about even."

"Well, I'm not sure I'm comfortable being in a relationship with someone who isn't happy with who they are." Amy said, slightly disappointed. "Happy to be friends though."

"I can understand that." I replied, actually quite relieved not to have been slapped at any point.

"Maybe not the best time to say it, as we could be waiting a while."

"Well, I'm flattered you said it rather than just not calling me back."

"Has that happened before?"

"One or twice, although it was kinda clear why they didn't."

"Why's that?"

I recounted the tales of the spilled wine and Danielle's bipolar outburst, which seemed to break the slight awkwardness that was apparently typical after someone is told they're not second date material. Amy responded with a tale of a clumsy attempt to kiss her that nearly ended up with the guy falling off the platform and onto the third rail, stopped only by grabbing onto her jacket and ripping her sleeve. Suffice to say, she didn't call him back. Following this quick bout of bad date one upmanship, I was called into a back room for my injury to be assessed, far quicker than I expected. Surprisingly enough, I was deemed to need stitches, and a tetanus shot. We agreed that we'd both get plenty of mileage from this story, although Amy did seem mildly offended at the prospect that she could be capable of transmitting the extensive list of diseases that were noted in the pamphlet I was given, entitled *She Bit Me! Hidden Dangers of Human Bites*.

Although we were in the hospital for slightly less time than I expected, we were still there long enough to be extremely glad that our buses ran round-the-clock, and that it was a Friday night. I got home without being entirely aware of what time it was, beyond the description "wee small hours". As I was hanging my coat up on the back of my door, I looked over at my desk, where Dave's book was sitting half-read. I began to wonder how I

might have fared without having taken its advice. The trip to the hospital would probably have been unnecessary, and we might even have ended up meeting again. I picked it up and flicked to a random page, chuckling to myself at how little it had actually helped. As I began to consider when I might next see Dave to return it, my eyes came to rest on the sentence:

*The tips in this book are a guide, use them as you will. But the most important thing is. Never tell a date you're using this book.*

Vanessa had been laughing into her latte for a full three minutes.

"I can't believe you actually thought that anything involving the word 'rape' would be a good idea."

As was now becoming a semi-regular occurrence, we were exchanging bad date stories over coffee. I'd opened by recounting my experience with Amy and the book. I had barely reached the conversation in A&E when Vanessa had burst out laughing, trying her best not to point at me mockingly.

"Well, it seemed funny and spontaneous at the time."

"It probably would be, if you weren't on a first date."

"Good point."

"I'm pretty sure if a guy stuck his finger in my mouth and yelled rape on a first date, I'd probably fight back too."

"To be fair, I don't think she was fighting back, she was surprised, it was a reflex."

"I'm not sure that makes much of a difference. You still got put in hospital by a girl."

"Thanks, that makes me feel infinitely less embarrassed." I said, mustering what sarcasm I could get past the aforementioned embarrassment.

"It's probably more embarrassing that a book told you to do it."

"Well, at least it proved to me that the book was a bad idea."

"Why would you ever think it was a good one?"

"I had a bit of a weird date the other week, made me wonder if I was doing something wrong."

"What do you mean weird?"

"She said she'd be up for coming back to my flat, but only if I suggested it."

"Right..."

"Made me wonder if I wasn't being forceful enough."

"Are you sure she wasn't just being slutty?"

"I've had this conversation with other friends, and I still don't know what she was being. Was strange, she was a lot of fun up until that point."

"So this made you think you needed advice from a self-help book?"

"It's a leap, I know."

"Did you like her?"

"Well, until the cryptic bit at the end, she was great. A lot of fun."

"Fun as in fun, or fun as in sticking a finger in your gob?"

"Fun as in fun." I said, with the weary tone of someone who should have seen that particular reference coming a mile off.

"And it seemed that she liked you, at least enough to suggest extending the evening. You must have been doing something right. So what if you didn't 'move' quick enough?" Vanessa said, emphasising the absurdity of the term 'move' with finger quotes. "And if that didn't work for her, then who cares? As far as I'm concerned, is much better if you meet someone and things just work. No tricks, no tips, none of that stuff. If you're being yourself, the right person will like that. I want to meet a guy I can just click with, who I know right from the first moment is the right one, and who I can't bear to be without for even a minute."

"So have you met anyone like that lately?" I asked expectantly, not having heard the tales of her most recent dating exploits.

"God no, they've all been total pricks. The last guy I went out with was the most obnoxious guy I've ever met. Totally up his own arse."

"Are you sure he wasn't just really confident?" I laughed, wondering if he might have tried the self-help approach as well.

"Nope, just a prick."

At this point, my phone emitted a short buzz, indicating either that I had a text message, or the battery was running low. I excused myself from the conversation to check, and discovered that it was the former. I had a message, that happened to be from Anne.

"Speak of the devil." I said, as I opened the message.

*Really sorry about the other week, was a bit drunk. Wanna try again?*

"Ah."

"What is it?" Vanessa said, resisting the urge to look over at my phone.

"Its from Anne." I replied, showing her the message.

"I see. Well, why don't you?"

"You think I should?"

"Well, you liked her, she kinda liked you, I think. You never know, sparks might fly this time."

"I suppose it can't hurt to give it another go."

"Exactly."

I began putting my phone back in my pocket.

"Aren't you going to reply?"

"I'll do it later, give me a bit of time to think about what to say."

"Is it that hard to say yes?"

"Well, I thought..." I began, entirely unsure of exactly what aspects of my reply I would need to consider in detail.

"Want me to do it for you?" Vanessa said, in a mock threatening manner.

"I'm not totally incapable." I lied, bringing my phone back up to eye level, and writing out my reply.

## Anne, Date 2

*Really sorry about the other week, was a bit drunk. Wanna try again?*

*No need to apologise. I was just a bit surprised. When works for you?*

*How about next Saturday?*

*Sure, know anywhere good?*

*I know a couple, meet at Liverpool Street about 7?*

*No problem, see you then.*

You might say I'd been a little bit quick to agree to see Anne again, but I figured it was almost guaranteed to be better than my experiences with Amy. That, and I'm the kind of sap who can never really stay mad at anyone, if I ever manage to get mad with them in the first place. Besides, a date's a date.

We met a little bit after seven, having neglected to specify exactly where in Liverpool Street station we were going to meet up. I was waiting in the Underground ticket hall, and Anne was waiting outside a chemists in the main station. After waiting for a few minutes, we both had the same thought, and practically swapped places. I was halfway from the north end of the station to the south before my phone rang. Realising our mistake, I turned on my heels and went to meet Anne back where I'd started. There's something about abruptly changing direction in a crowded place that makes me feel like a bit of an idiot, but when you're on the phone, it feels almost like you have permission.

Once we'd finally managed to be in roughly the same place, we headed off to the restaurant Anne had selected for the evening. It was a little Greek place off a side street a few minutes walk from the station. We ended up taking the exit from the station that I'd earlier been heading towards before doubling back. I chose not to mention it, and told myself it was probably good exercise. Its a big station.

We walked into the restaurant and waited by the door while a waitress - who I can only assume spotted us while we were still on the street - weaved her way through a sea of diners that somehow made the room seem far larger than it actually was. Half expecting a significant wait, we asked as to the availability of a table for two. We had barely confirmed the number of people when the waitress grabbed a pair of menus and began to cut a winding route back to the depths of the establishment, holding an arm in the air like a teacher leading a group of students on a visit to a big, scary city. The room was buzzing with conversation, and the atmosphere enhanced by music coming from an archway in the middle of the room, where an old, bearded man was finger-picking some mediterranean sounding tune on a battered acoustic guitar. The tune as a whole may have sounded strange and unfamiliar, but I could have sworn I'd heard the notes before. As we were seated, I suddenly realised where I'd heard it before. It was the Cantina Band tune from Star Wars. I cast a knowing smile at the aged guitarist, in appreciation of his little in-joke. Of course, in a crowded restaurant this was like trying to order more wine using nothing but your eyebrows, and the man just happily plucked away, enjoying having fooled everyone.

"So how've you been?" Anne asked, once we'd sat down and opened out menus, barely glancing at them before starting to chat.

"Not bad, how about you?" Normally, I might have given a little more detail, but my pride was still smarting a little from ending up in A&E.



"So-so. Work's been pretty crazy."

"Better than being bored."

"I guess."

We paused awkwardly for a moment, and both took the time to have a look at our menus. Not being particularly hungry, I didn't read through the list of starters and almost immediately turned the page. Anne looked up as I did this, catching something out of the corner of her eye.

"What happened to your finger?"

Immediately, I hid my hand back under the table, before spluttering an answer.

"Ummm, I got bitten."

"Bitten? Like by a dog?"

"Errr, yeah." I lied. As soon as the words left my lips I winced a little at the somewhat unfair comparison with Amy.

"How'd it happen?"

"It's a long story, not really very interesting." I said, hiding my embarrassed eyes with my free hand. Only one of my statements was true.

"Ha! OK, I won't pry too much." Anne said with a wink. "How's the flatmate hunt going?"

"Still a bit of a nightmare, had a guy come by the other day, asked if he could keep a tank of snakes in the living room."

"Snakes?"

"Yep, plural."

"Were they big snakes?"

"You know? I didn't think to ask."

"You're afraid of them, aren't you?" Anne said, in a mock mocking tone. Pointing at me accusingly with a wagging finger.

"Might be." I shrugged. "Can't say I've ever been close enough to one to find out."

"Nothing wrong with being afraid of snakes, some of the bravest men in history were afraid of snakes."

"Like who?"

"Indiana Jones."

"He was fictional."

"So? There's some truth in every fiction."

"It's all academic anyway, our contract doesn't allow pets."

"What your landlord doesn't know can't hurt him. I had a friend who hid a rabbit in her flat for two years. Had to send it to a friend's house when the landlord came round."

"Ah, the real reason behind 24-hours notice. But there's no way in hell I'd help lug a tank full of snakes out of the flat whenever the boiler needed servicing."

"Aha! So you are afraid of snakes!"

"You got me!" I said, putting my hands up in surrender. "Anything that eats mice whole has to be at least a little evil."

"Speaking of which, are we going to order a starter?"

"I think all the talk of eating mice might have put me off. You ok to go straight to mains?"

"Sure, should really be watching my figure anyway."

"You? Surely not. You look great as you are." This exchange was well rehearsed, a subtle, yet completely transparent request for, and granting of, a compliment.

"Stop trying to be smooth, you." Anne said, winking.

"We'd better hurry up and choose, looks like the waitress is on her way."

We buried our heads in our menus, and hurriedly made our choices barely in time for the waitress to arrive. Once we'd placed our food orders, we suddenly became aware that we hadn't made any decisions regarding drink. To save time we reduced the decision to

one of colour, settling on red. Thus we discovered that the inclusion of house wine on a list serves a dual purpose: offering a low cost alternative, and simplifying decision making for the hurried. With our somewhat rushed requests transcribed onto a miniature notepad, the waitress disappeared into the back room and I dived in to pick up the conversation again.

"So whereabouts are you from? I never got round to asking before."

"Well, this is only the second date, you can be forgiven for not delving into my past quite yet. I grew up not too far away, in a little village in Kent."

"How long have you lived in London?"

"Well, I studied here, so about six years now."

"Just close enough to send washing home, eh?"

"Hah! No way. Practically had to hide it so my parents wouldn't try to do it when they came to visit."

"The helpful sort, then?"

"Yeah, they're great." Anne laughed. "Try to go back and see them whenever I can, but it's a nightmare finding the time."

"Work keeping you busy?"

"Well, that and seeing friends. Everyone I know from uni are slowly drifting apart, seems like there's twenty groups of people I need to keep seeing."

"Sounds like hard work."

"Nightmare. Guess I'm just too nice to lose touch with anyone."

"A martyr to social circles." I laughed.

"I'll have to remember that phrase."

"Be sure to give me credit."

"What about you? How long have you been here?"

"I came down after uni. Me and four or five people I knew came down to get the good jobs."

"Just in time for a recession."

"Think we snuck in just in time."

"Lucky you."

"Don't I know it?"

"What about your family. You get to see them much?"

"A few times a year, is a bit of a way to go, try to call them whenever I can, though."

Anne opened her mouth to respond, but all of a sudden, a bottle of wine was presented between us. We went through the standard wine-acceptance procedure, then returned to our conversation. As the evening progressed, we went through more of our respective backstories, realising this was probably the conversation we should have had on our first date. Although perhaps the slightly awkward finish to that evening made us a little more cautious and slightly less flirtatious this time. Strange that being more guarded and reserved actually let us open up more.

Upon leaving the restaurant, we headed back to the station and stopped in the foyer of the underground where we had started the evening. We paused for a moment, trying to think of a suitable way of parting company, until Anne began twirling her finger around her hair and said. "I've had a great time tonight, thanks, you're a really nice guy."

I stood waiting for the "but" that this sentence seemed to be leading towards. Realising it wasn't coming, I responded.

"Thanks." I said, slightly abashed. "I had fun too, it'd be great if we could meet up again."

"It would, will have to sort something out soon."

"Great, well, are you headed north or south?" I said, beginning to make my way to the ticket barriers. Anne grabbed my hand and pulled me back.

"Before we go, I just want to say I'm sorry for what happened last time."

"You don't need to apologise, we can forget all about it."

"I probably should have told you, though, I've just got out of a really long relationship, so I'm not entirely sure how these things go any more. I probably shouldn't have been so forward, I just missed waking up with someone."

"It's ok, I'm not entirely sure about what I should be doing either. I want to make one thing clear though, I really think its too soon to be going back to anyone's flat this early on."

The next morning, I woke up in bed with her.

As my eyes focused, the clock on the bedside table became legible and I was surprised to see that it was 6.03am. I experienced a brief moment of panic while my brain was still trying to impart on me the knowledge that this was Anne's room. I was in Anne's bed. And Anne herself was currently asleep behind me, radiating an almost uncomfortable amount of body heat directly into my back. The events of the previous evening were replayed in a strange stop-start fashion in my head, as if a tiny projectionist with arthritis was hand-cranking an ancient projector in my mind's eye, loaded with a reel of dusty memories in sepia. Thankfully, the music was lighthearted and whimsical, and nobody was tied to a railroad line by a dastardly villain with a gravity-defying mustache. I was also pleased to recall that despite failing in my assertion that I wouldn't end up here this morning, I had at least kept a few of my scruples intact. We hadn't had sex.

Typical for a male of the species, I began entertaining thoughts of leaving before Anne woke up. I dismissed them almost as quickly, as this would have been heartless, cowardly and downright rude. But also my right leg was currently trapped beneath hers, and while extracting it wouldn't have been particularly difficult, I'd probably end up dragging her halfway to the door with me. Add the difficulties in making a surreptitious exit to my desire to be a near-decent human being and it was enough to tip the balance in favour of at least waiting until Anne was awake before I scarpered. But then the question was how long I should stay after she wakes up. Would she think less of me if I went right away? Should I stay for breakfast? Only if she suggests it, of course, I wouldn't want her to think I was a scrounger. But if I stay for breakfast, do I have to offer to take her out for lunch to make it even? Would she want a dinner date to turn into three square meals? Oh and coffee, we had coffee when we came back. What do you know? Coffee actually did mean coffee.

Anne was barely stirring at this point, so I decided I should probably try to get back to sleep before I started planning a week long getaway just to avoid the awkwardness of telling her I was ready to go home. I closed my eyes and waited. I shuffled around a bit trying to get into a comfortable position, which was made ever more difficult whilst trying not to move my leg. Eventually, I found myself lying with one arm under the pillow and my free leg outside of the duvet. Once I had nestled in properly, I did my best to stay perfectly still, in the hopes it would help me fall asleep more quickly. I lay there for a while, not moving a muscle, trying to ignore any itches and the overall warmth in the room. Eventually, my arm began to tingle, and gradually went numb. At least part of me had succeeded in getting to sleep. I opened my eyes and gradually dragged my arm from under the pillow, wincing at that familiar sensation, that isn't quite pain, but isn't particularly pleasurable either, and shook my arm in the air to try and bring it back to the land of the living. I might have been a little overzealous with this attempted revival, as I ended up losing track of where my hand was and slapped Anne in the face. I stopped dead, and watched as she swatted around her forehead as if shooing an errant fly, and turned over, still sound asleep. I breathed a sigh of relief and gave my now mostly conscious arm one quick shake for good measure, well away from Anne's side of the bed.

I returned to the challenge of getting back to sleep, this time opting for a prone pose not unlike that which is popular for funerals and vampires. Albeit with my legs splayed, one under a sleeping woman, one radiating excess heat in the open air. Again I closed my

eyes and tried to detach myself from the world. I soon began to feel unaware of what was happening around me, and was sure I must be finally losing consciousness. *I bet I'm asleep now*, I thought, opening my eyes. *Dammit! Right, I'll try again*. Once more, I closed my eyes. *How about now?* Eyes open. *Nuts*. Eyes closed. *OK, I bet I'll be asleep....now!* Again, I opened my eyes, and the ceiling stared back, just as blank and expressionless as ever, yet somehow still seeming to mock me.

It seemed as if getting some extra sleep was a no-go, which surprised me as I was pretty sure we hadn't got to bed until about 1am, and yet I wasn't in the least bit tired. By now it was only 6.10am, and for all I knew, Anne could be asleep for hours yet. It was just my luck, the one time when getting up isn't an option, and I can't get back to sleep. I surveyed the room, passing the time by memorising objects on the dresser opposite the foot of the bed. A tub of moisturiser, an empty glass, a jewellery box, a bottle of sun cream and a book with no cover. I looked out of the window and did my best to recall them. *A box of moisturiser, an empty book, a glass with no cover...on to hell with it*. I hoped this might have passed some time. Looking at the clock, I realised it had indeed passed some time, probably even as much as a minute. I thought that doing this a hundred times or so more, then Anne might be awake, of course, this would have been incredibly boring.

Looking at the clock, willing the seconds to go by faster, I noticed a magazine under it. I thought this might help alleviate some of my boredom. Fishing it out from under the clock, I turned it the right way up, and read the headline for the main story, running across a candid picture of someone I'd never heard of shopping in sunglasses and a tracksuit.

*Candice's divorce: has she lost her sense of style?*

A gossip magazine. Not my normal reading material, but I was desperate to pass some time. Looking at the picture for a moment, I realised that I had seen this woman's face before; on the cover of other gossip magazines on the newsagent's shelves. I flicked to the promised article in the hope of finding out what she actually did to make her worthy of this kind of media attention. Upon reading the story, I was none the wiser about her career, but was far more knowledgeable about just how far money can go in getting you immunity from prosecution. I resolved that when I eventually became rich, and purchased fame with said riches, I'd arrange a really good legal team and go around systematically punching all the bullies at my old school...along with half the teaching staff. Then I'd pay the gossip magazines not to cover the story.

I read through the various articles, and was part way through discovering the twenty reasons why money doesn't buy you happiness, when Anne stirred. I turned just as she opened her eyes, still not quite refreshed, and sat up groggily.

"What time is it?"

I looked at the clock on my side. "About half seven."

"Really? Damn, I'm supposed to be meeting my parents in an hour. Sorry, we're really going to have to rush out. Do you know where your bus stop is?" I guess I wouldn't have to worry about making my excuses after all.

"Think so, I can get one from the high street, right?"

"Yep, same one we came in on. Are you free next Tuesday?"

"I think I am, don't have my diary to hand."

"Great, I'll call you before then." Anne said as she clambered over me, kissing me on the cheek before she swung her feet onto the floor and dashed into the bathroom.

## Anne, Date 3

Having returned Dave's book of relationship advice, I had moved onto fiction. At this particular moment, I was currently engrossed in the tale of a detective tracking a serial killer, whilst ignoring somewhat heavy handed clues that he himself was the killer and suffering from multiple personality disorder. The erstwhile hero was studying a particularly gruesome crime scene, and had just uncovered a note in curiously familiar handwriting, when I looked up to find that I had arrived at my stop, and the doors of the train had been open for an unknown amount of time. I cursed under my breath and practically leapt onto the platform, passing through the doors just as they began to slide closed. I didn't quite manage to stick the landing, and stumbled as my feet hit the platform, attracting some amused stares from a couple walking past who had been paying attention when the train stopped. Pretending I had hopped off the train in a far more dignified manner, I walked to the exit, and found myself utterly lost.

Anne had invited me to a pub that was holding a variety night, for which I had to travel almost an hour out of town, which left me with a mild sense of paranoia about leaving in time for my last train. Much of the hours before I left the flat that evening were spent checking and re-checking the timetables, planning to leave the pub no later than twenty to eleven. Just to be safe, I would probably make my excuses about fifteen minutes before this. Handily, the pub looked to be directly opposite the station, so I hadn't bothered to print a map. Looking around outside, though, this didn't seem to be the case. I wandered up and down the street looking for any building that might be a badly signposted public house, before finally realising that it was probably opposite the other side of the station. I walked down the surrounding streets, probing for a route around the station. As it happened, there were no ticket barriers out this far from London, so I could have just walked straight through the station, but this thought didn't occur to me until I was cutting across a green to the pub. Despite this little detour, I was still about twenty minutes early.

I walked through the door and headed straight for the bar. Once I'd ordered a drink from an excessively friendly barman, I took a seat facing the door at the nearest empty table, and returned to my book.

I looked up as new people arrived, and went to greet their friends. It seemed that everyone knew everyone else, greeting friends on almost every table as they came in. Having been the only one who didn't greet anyone, I felt like something of an outsider.

The time I'd arranged to meet Anne came and went, and I began to wonder if I had the right place. I hadn't seen any posters or signs advertising the evening's entertainment, and I hadn't seen a stage or a door to a function room or anything when I arrived. I began to consider the possibilities of having come to the wrong pub, the night being cancelled, or Anne having played some kind of cruel prank on me. Still, I had a drink now, so I decided to wait it out.

There was a screech of feedback behind me. In almost perfect unison with everyone else in the room, I turned my head to find the source of the noise. At the back of the bar, a couple of speakers had been set up since I arrived. This was extremely impressive on two counts, firstly, I'd only been sat down for three minutes, and second, the speakers and their associated amplifier looked somewhat heavy and unwieldily, and the man currently setting them up (and who I could only assume had lugged them into place) was both smaller than any of the three items, and considerably older than anyone else in the bar. There were a few wincing at the feedback, and a couple of calls of "Nice one, Harry." and "Too loud, Harry", but nobody offered to help. He knew what he was doing, Old Harry.

All off a sudden, I was aware of someone looming over me. As I closed my book, I developed a sinking feeling that I might be sitting in a regular's favourite seat and was about to be either instructed to move, or invited to some form of fisticuffs. It seemed a nice,

friendly area, so was hopeful for the former. Regardless, this would still do nothing to improve my standing as the only stranger in the room, and quite possibly in the entire village. I felt a hand resting on my shoulder and leant my head back as far as it would go, to see Anne grinning at me in a strange upside-down kind of way.

"Sorry I'm a bit late, have you been waiting long?"

"I was a little early, but not too long." I said, glancing at my watch almost unconsciously.

"You should have given me a call, I was only round the corner." Anne replied with a note of sympathy, indicating an end of the bar where I was totally unaware there was an entrance.

"Surely you know me well enough to know I'd never be so pushy." I've always felt slightly embarrassed calling someone when they were running late. I start to worry that I'd actually got the time wrong and was excessively early. Then if I called them, demanding to know why they were late, I'd look the fool. Assertiveness was never my strong point.

"Pushy, practical, its a fine line." Anne shrugged.

"Got caught up in my book anyway."

"Well, at least you weren't sitting staring at the door, wondering if I'd ever arrive."

"Perish the thought. Drink?"

"I'll get them, its the least I can do." Anne said with a wink. "What you drinking?"

"Should be ok for now." I said, raising my still mostly-full glass in a toast to cheap rounds.

Anne disappeared off to the bar, saying hello to nearly everyone she passed on the way. She greeted the nearest barman as an old friend, and offered hellos to the other passing staff while her drink was prepared. Gradually, I came to the realisation that this was probably the village where Anne had grown up, and she'd brought me to her family's local. Quite why it had taken me so long to figure this out was beyond me. With deductive skills like that, I should have been a detective.

I was just about to pick up my book again, expecting Anne to be catching up with the locals for a while, but I had barely cracked the spine when Anne had swooped back to the table with a glass of wine, and was carefully arranging her seat to get a good view of the makeshift stage.

"So how've you been?" Anne asked, once she was in the optimum position.

"Pretty good, thanks. Finally found a new flatmate for one."

"That's great. You didn't settle with the axe murderer, I hope."

"Thankfully not. And this guy doesn't have snakes, either."

"A bonus."

"Definitely. Turned out one of Dave's work friends needed somewhere fairly quick, so he put us in touch."

"Much better if its someone you know."

"Or someone who someone we know knows."

"Yeah, or that. So when's he moving in?"

"Next Wednesday. We're having a welcome party next weekend, you'd be more than welcome to come along."

"Sounds good. Will be fun to meet your friends. I hope you've not told them lots of horrid stories about me."

"Of course not, no horrid stories. Perhaps some awful ones, but definitely not horrid."

"I should hope not." Anne warned, shooting me a playful look.

We chatted for a while, catching up on what we'd been doing over the previous week, about work and the other usual topics. I was mid-way through a partial review of the book I was reading, when another burst of feedback drew everyone's attention to the makeshift stage area, where a short gentleman with a regulation real ale drinker's beard was fumbling with the microphone. His bumbling turned into a feigned confident swagger as he

brought the mic up to his mouth, and cleared his throat with an unnecessary level of ceremony. I turned to Anne, having been cut off mid-sentence, and gave a look that promised I'd finish my admittedly bland synopsis later, before turning back just in time to catch the compere's opening spiel.

"Welcome, everyone. Hope you're all well. Its that time of the month again, no not that one." There was a sudden burst of raucous and somewhat forced laughter from a large bloke sat at the back of the room, and an awkward silence from everyone else. The laughing man quickly stopped as the woman seated next to him hit him on the shoulder with her handbag. "No, I mean its time for our regular variety night!" Safe in the knowledge that the evening's entertainment was going ahead as planned, the room erupted into applause, peppered with occasional cheers from the more enthusiastic, and likely drunk, members of the crowd. I joined in the clapping, but stopped short of cheers or wolf-whistles. I haven't really been able to do much more than applaud on such occasions for years, ever since secondary school, where the Deputy Head would keep a stern watch over assemblies, berating any and all who let out whistles, cheers and whoops during mandated applause. I was fairly sure the school's latin motto translated to "we show our appreciation by clapping and nothing more". There were also rumours put about by the older kids that this particular staff member indulged in the occasional illegal caning on the sly, so I've been left with something of a mental block. Besides, I've never really been able to whistle.

"As always, we've got a great selection of top local acts for your enjoyment, and all free of charge." The compere continued. "Although I would like to remind you there is a three drink minimum." Again, the loudest, and indeed, only laugh, came from the back of the room. "So, without further adieu, let's get started with your very own, Rowena!"

There was a moderate amount of applause that rose to a crescendo as a blonde woman in a surprisingly revealing red dress appeared from the door by the stage, the presence of female skin in an entertainment context provoking a series of whistles and cat-calls from the card-carrying males in the room. I might have joined them but for my own awkwardness, and my date sat beside me. As Rowena retrieved the microphone from the stand, and delivered a well-rehearsed greeting, Anne leaned over and whispered, "She's good, I've seen her here before." I began to wonder if this was Anne's preferred location for a third date.

As Rowena went through her introduction speech, which alluded to a well known pop song without mentioning the name, a lanky chap ducked behind her and crouched by the speakers, hastily connecting a CD player to the one available, and least accessible, jack in the amplifier. Once everything was hooked up, about ten seconds after Rowena had finished her speech, she launched into a series of carbon-copy renditions of three well-known songs from the last fifteen years, backed by instrumental versions of her chosen hits that might have been more at home in a shopping centre lift. The opening lines of each song were met with applause of approval from the audience, like a one woman Stars in their Eyes, with only a marginally smaller budget. She was actually pretty good, and the ballad on which she finished moved one woman in the audience to tears. There was even a standing ovation, although it consisted solely of the crying woman. Rowena thanked her mother for this show of support and left the stage, leaving the compere to dash over from the bar, his pint still in hand, almost knocking the mic stand over as he rushed to speak before the applause died down. He almost made it too.

"We're going to keep things going with a very special guest. Some know him as the King, some might call him hip." He said with a wink, indicating a pun most of us had missed. "Here for you tonight, alive and well, its Elvis!" He yelled with great enthusiasm, extending his arm towards the door at his side, as a bald man in a red Elvis costume burst through the other door at the front of the pub. Elvis quickly realised his mistake, and dashed across the room, breaking from a run into a pseudo-cool swagger as he neared

the stage, getting into character. The compere had long since gone. Elvis accepted the remaining applause with a curled lip and winks fired at two elderly women either side of the room, then he brought the microphone to his lips, struck a pose and said "Thank you very much" in a thick East London accent. The crowd went nuts, particularly Anne, who I never had pegged for an Elvis fan.

Elvis turned his back to the crowd, and the room fell hushed. He signaled the CD operator, who had kept himself folded up in what looked to be a very uncomfortable position for nearly half an hour now, and after a brief pause, the track started with an immediately recognisable guitar sting, and Elvis began jiggling his leg, either to imitate his hero, or as a side effect of stage fright. No sooner had the leg jiggling moved to hip gyration, than Elvis turned on his heels, and informed us with gusto that "Two" was for the "show". Having failed entirely to let us know what "One" was for. He quickly picked up, though, quickly getting into a passable imitation of the King of Rock and Roll, provided you ignored his accent, which was still unmistakably that of a man who wasn't born to the sound of Bow Bells, but told everyone he was. Elvis also had a three-song set, separating each song with the same, single sentence: "Thank you very much". He finished with a rendition of "The Wanderer", which I was fairly sure wasn't an Elvis song. The crowd loved him, and evidently he was well known in the area, receiving similar shouts of encouragement as Harry had received earlier.

The compere returned to the stage with a painfully predictable shout of "Elvis has left the building". Which was not only predictable, but also entirely untrue, as the King had taken up a position at the back of the room, receiving further encouragement from a gathering of his friends, who had earlier given him by far the loudest cheers. The compere announced an interval, and his closing joke was drowned out as everyone in the room went to the bar at once.

"Can I get you another drink?" I asked Anne, whose glass had been empty for a while.

"Yes, please. Can I have a small glass of red?"

"Cutting down?" I teased.

"No, just want to enjoy the rest of the show." She fired back, poking me in the ribs.

I headed over to the bar and wormed my way to the front of the queue, at about the same speed as everyone beside me who were waiting patiently. Upon reaching the front, most of the scrum had dispersed, and I ordered our drinks casually without fear of someone jumping in ahead.

"Having a good night?" The barman asked, glancing up as he poured Anne's wine.

"Yeah, good so far."

"What do you think of the entertainment." He laughed over the final word, I was pretty sure he would have surrounded it with air quotes if his hands weren't otherwise full.

"Err...well." I began, torn between a desire not to speak ill of the acts, and not to disagree with a man who could turn and spit in my drink.

"Bit rubbish, wasn't it?"

"Well, at least its free."

"How about that Elvis, eh? He definitely doesn't want to give up his day job."

"Oh god, no. Do you think someone told him he could do a good Elvis as a joke, and he took it too seriously?"

"Well, whoever it was, I want to throttle them. That'll be seven fifty." The barman said, and I handed over a note.

"Ben, I'd like you to meet my Dad." Anne said, behind me.

As I'm about to turn to face Anne, I took my change from the barman and wrapped up the conversation. "At least I'll have had a drink before the second half, hope Elvis doesn't make a comeback." I joshed as I turned and came face to face with Anne's Dad, Elvis.

"Hi Ben, I'm Sid, nice to meet you." Elvis said, extending his hand to shake mine.



I was immediately filled with the terror of meeting a prospective partner's parents mixed with having just insulted a guy who is a clear foot taller than me. I was fairly sure the colour had drained from my face. I swallowed deeply, and forced out the most polite sentence that came to my mind. "Can...can I buy you a drink?"

"Nah, I'm good thanks." Sid replied, lifting the near-full glass of cola that had been clearly visible from his arrival.

We headed back to our table and took a seat. I glanced back at the barman, who had me fixed with a mocking grin. The bastard had set me up.

"So how did you two meet?" Sid asked casually. I considered the possibility that he hadn't heard what I'd said, or that he did hear and is keeping it quiet for now just to lull me into a false sense of security. The crafty bugger. I sat there for a moment, concerned that I might wind up injured for my remarks, but luckily Anne jumped in to answer.

"Through mutual friends." Which I suppose was true, assuming a very loose definition of friend that included internet-based companies.

"So what do you do, Ben?"

"I work in IT, not really very interesting to talk about."

"I see. Anne's last boyfriend worked in IT." Sid said, with all the seriousness of a Nostradamus prophecy.

"No he didn't, Dad, he's an estate agent."

"Shush, Anne, can't you see I'm trying to mess with the guy?" That settled it, I was sure he'd heard what I'd said.

"I'd say I'd been warned, but Anne didn't tell me I'd be meeting you tonight."

"Well, I thought you'd be spending all your time with your mates afterwards." Anne said to Sid with a shrug.

"And leave my little girl with this weirdo, never." Sid laughed, playfully punching me on the shoulder.

"Well, I had to have someone to watch the show with." Anne countered.

"Do you perform often?" I asked Sid, hoping to move the conversation away from my own weirdness, although I regretted my choice of topics even before I got a response.

"Nah, I was really only doing this for Harry, he's always short of acts. I had the costume from last halloween, so why not?"

"Thank god for that." I said before I realised what I was saying, my mouth failing to close as the words trailed off.

"What do you mean by that?" Sid asked, in what I hoped was mock indignation.

"Well, I mean there can't be much work for you in Elvis impersonation...I mean because there's lots of competition. They say there are more Elvis impersonators every day. Everyone will be an impersonator by 2012, which will make the Olympics interesting." I stammered, trying to come to a salient point. I was just about to launch into an impression of the obese, Vegas-era King attempting to run the 100m, when Sid interrupted my fevered rantings.

"Its alright, Ben, I know I was crap." Sid laughed. "Its just a bit of fun. At least you didn't lie and tell me I did great. I hate when people do that."

"Well, you weren't the best, I'll admit."

"That's the spirit. To be honest I've never even sung an Elvis song before."

"Really? I could totally tell." I said, playing along.

"Not surprised. If they had an Elvis contest tomorrow, I'd lose hands down."

"You'd probably lose to Rowena."

"Ha! You're probably right."

"At least you didn't try to do the voice, sometimes you hear people who think they can do voices and it just makes you cringe."

"I was doing the voice." Sid said, his brow furrowing into a deep frown.

I went back into my stammering act. "I mean, you weren't going over the...or you captured more of the...or..."

Sid's frown melted as he started laughing again. "Got ya! I like you, son. You may be spineless, but at least you're not fake."

I managed a slight smile of thanks, and was hunting for something to say when Anne arrived back with the drinks.

"So how're you guys getting along?"

"Just great." Sid grinned, giving me a hearty slap on the back that might have better been saved for someone who was choking.

The second half started soon after, featuring a girl with a hula hoop that she had to keep catching when it banged into the speakers either side of her, and a teenage magician who caught his fingers in a gimmicked box and had to be rushed to the hospital. This spectacle and subsequent commotion took a while to die down, mainly because, in true community spirit, everyone had offered the injured boy a lift, their cars being parked at home only a few minutes' walk away. Many people had forgotten that the reason their cars were at home was so they could have a drink, and a level of one-upmanship about who was the most sober began. In the end, it turned out that Sid was the only driver who hadn't actually had a drink that evening, and he said his goodbyes and left me and Anne alone as he ushered the magician to his car, the boy's hands held in a prayer position, bandaged together in a tea towel to avoid getting blood everywhere. Once he'd gone, I checked my watch and saw that it was nearly time for me to leave.

"I'm going to have to run. Thanks for tonight, it was fun, a bit different."

"Glad you enjoyed yourself."

"You could have given me some warning I was going to meet your Dad, though."

"It was far more fun this way." Anne winked, clearly knowing full well what I'd said to the barman. "And it seemed like he really liked you."

"Thank heavens for that, I wasn't entirely sure. I can see where you get it from now."

"Ha! I sincerely hope not. Well, guess you'd better go before you miss your train. See you Saturday!"

"Yep, see you then. I'll text you my address during the week. And I can promise that none of my family members will be there."

"Ben, you get worse." Vanessa said, tinged with a mixture of despair and mockery. After hearing about my previous date with Anne, she had been keen to keep up on the latest gossip and had arranged to meet for lunch the next day.

"At least he didn't actually take offense."

"Yep, but he sounds like the kind of guy who might bring it up to embarrass you later on."

"That's assuming this whole thing works out."

"You don't think it'll work out?"

"Well, I'd prefer not to make any assumptions right now."

"Ah, but you want it to work, I can see it in your eyes." She said knowingly, before adding in a sing-song voice, "You love her."

"Bit early to say that. I like being with her."

"But are you in like being with her?"

"What does that even mean?"

"No idea, sounded better in my head."

"You're spending too much time with me, you'll start offending your dates' parents next."

"I sincerely hope not. So how's the new flatmate working out?"

"He doesn't move in until next week. We're having a welcome party for him next weekend if you want to come."

"Love to, but I've got a date."

"Don't want to bring him along?"

"Not for a second date."

it?" "A second date? You've been holding out on me. This isn't with the obnoxious guy is

"No, this guy's actually quite nice. Its why we're having a second date."

"So, what's his name? What's he do?"

"His name's Mark and he's a teacher."

"So he'll know how to handle a big kid like you." I grinned.

"Hey!" Vanessa said, feigning offense.

"So where are you going?"

"To his place, he's going to cook."

"Oh really?" I said, doing my best to raise one eyebrow.

"You're one to talk."

"Touché." Another thing I probably wasn't going to live down.

## Welcoming Dave

"OK. One, two..."

"Hang on, are we counting to three or four?"

"Three. Why on earth would we count to four?"

It was the night of Andy's welcome party, and we were moving all our furniture about to make room for the dancing we knew was probably not going to happen. Nick and I had volunteered ourselves to move the dining table, and had cleverly opted to load it with snacks and plastic cups beforehand.

"Well, we always counted to four when I was a kid."

"What?"

"My Dad always said we should count to four, because everyone counted to three and that would mean we were more prepared than all the other people."

"So wait, you counted to four to be different from everyone else?"

"Yeah."

"That being the case, why would I count to four?"

"I thought you were smart."

"I never really believed you could get any stranger, Nick."

"So we're going on three then?"

"Yes. Three." At which point, Nick jerked his side of the table to the left, somehow managing not to disturb the arrangement of party snacks atop it.

"You have to let me count up to three first." I said, incredulously.

"Ah, " Nick said, wagging a finger beside his right temple as if he'd just learned a vast, conspiratorial secret, "Gotcha, up to three."

"Right. One, two..."

"Isn't my side pretty much there now?"

I looked to the corner of the table opposite me, to see it was practically touching the wall. My carefully laid plans of a careful lift maneuver dashed, I jerked my side of the table in line with Nick's. A bowl of crisps took offense at my interference, and leaped to the floor, face down on the carpet.

"Well, at least it wasn't the dip." Nick said as he bent down to retrieve the wayward bowl, and knocked a tub of hummus to the floor beside the crisps. Andy looked up sharply from his own furniture task: lining up an assortment of chairs scavenged from all over the flat. I surveyed the splatter of hummus and accidentally dipped crisps on the carpet, then turned my gaze to Nick, who simply shrugged.

"Anyone know how to get hummus out of a carpet?" I called to nobody in particular.

"You pour white wine on it, don't you? I'll get the blue nun." Nick suggested, with all the authority of a brain surgeon in the NASA control room.

"That's for getting out red wine, Nick."

"We have to put red wine on it first?"

Eventually we reached an agreement to deploy a strategy of scraping up as much of the dip as possible, before attacking the remainder with a bucket of soapy water. This approach was marred only by our differing opinions (bought on by collective lack of knowledge) about whether you dab such stains or scrub them. But after a while, we had a dip free, yet sodden patch of carpet, and a hand vac full of crisp shards.

"Right, crisis over. What time is it?" I asked, heaving the sigh of relief that follows any near ruining of a carpet in a rented flat.

"About seven." Andy replied.

"Seven? When did it get to seven?"

"About a minute after six fifty nine." Nick said without an ounce of sarcasm.

"But people will be arriving any minute, I haven't had time for a shower."

"Worried you won't get any if you're not clean?" Andy joked.

"From what I hear of Anne, I'd bet she likes it dirty." Nick said, nudging me in the ribs.

"Very funny, guys. Its just been a hot day, its only going to get hotter when people get here and I feel gross enough as it is."

"So go shower, you've got plenty of time. Its a party, nobody's going to be here on time. Being fashionably late's still in style, and even your work mates aren't dull enough to be here bang on time. You've got a good half hour at least."

"Fair enough. If anyone does show up before I'm out, just try to keep them out of the corridor."

"Sure, sure, never going to happen though." Nick's level of confidence bordering on hubris.

I hurried myself into the bathroom, aiming to be in and out in a quarter of an hour. I climbed into the bath and grabbed the curtain, before walking straight out of the bathroom again to retrieve a towel from my bedroom.

I figured that as long as everyone was at least fifteen minutes late my own tardiness might go unnoticed. I attempted a new showering strategy to speed things up, rapidly soaping each of the major areas as quickly as I could, before rinsing and starting again because I didn't feel quite clean enough. Not the best of strategies, it may actually have taken longer than I usually do when I'm not pressed for time.

I stepped out of the shower, hurriedly did some preliminary drying and wrapped my towel around my waist to make the dash for my room. I opened the door and burst out of the bathroom, nearly colliding with three strangers Andy was leading into the living room.

We stood there in shock for a moment, none of us quite reaching the conclusion that we should probably continue on our way and say nothing more about it. Instead, I was the first to speak, and all I could think to say was.

"Hi, I'm Ben, you must be friends of Andy." I said chirpily, extending my hand to the closest of the three. He was a tall guy wearing a rugby top, who I hoped wouldn't see a handshake from a man dressed only in a towel to be an affront to his sexuality. Had he been wearing a football shirt, I probably wouldn't have had this expectation. I was just glad I hadn't greeted the woman in the group first, it might have seemed like some form of harassment.

All three stood there stunned for a moment. Finally they shook my hand and introduced themselves one by one. I promptly forgot their names and disappeared into my room to put on some real clothes.

I emerged a few minutes later, to find that more guests had arrived, a group of halflings, dwarves and other mythical creatures possibly trademarked by the Tolkien estate. Introductions weren't necessary, they were all friends of Nick through various channels I hadn't dared to investigate. I'd met them all plenty of times, usually in a pub setting engaged in some form of competitive drinking. I retrieved a beer from the fridge and joined the huddle they'd formed, doing my best to avoid Andy's friends until we were all sufficiently inebriated to forget about my semi-naked episode.

The conversation was typical for people our age: "How's life?", "Work going ok?", "Did the manager of the hotel press charges?" The usual kind of thing. We'd nearly completed the first round of competing for who's working week had been the least enjoyable, the doorbell rang. I figured it was my turn, so I excused myself and went to the door.

The new arrivals were Dave, Carla and a few other mutual friends. This spared me any awkwardness in answering the door to people I didn't know, which was usually followed by a brief moment of confusion on both sides, host wondering if they're gatecrashers or friends of someone else in the flat, and guests wondering if they got the right address. I'd been on both sides of the equation many times, so the relief I felt in knowing the people I was letting in was palpable.

"Hi, great to see you all."

"Hi Ben." They chanted in unison.

"Looks like we're starting to fill up a bit."

"Sorry if we're a little late." Carla said, "We all went out for dinner before we came."

"And you didn't invite me?" I said, faking a hurt expression in a depressingly middle class way.

"Well, we thought you'd be too busy getting things ready here." Dave said, not knowing how right he was.

"Well, come in. You can leave jackets and such in Nick's room. We assumed he'd be the last to go to bed, if at all." They'd all heard that joke before, half of them had told it. It was also fairly warm, so nobody even had a jacket. Yet they all still laughed, they're nothing if not polite.

I led everyone past Nick's room where a few bags were deposited in random locations on the floor and bed, and then through to the living room. Middle-Earth and Twickenham had joined forces in a single semicircle around the table. Nobody was seated as the number of chairs was already insufficient. As we entered the room, my phone began buzzing in my pocket, so I left the new arrivals to mingle into the group, and escaped to the corridor to answer the call.

"Hi Ben, its Anne. I'm just at the station, but I've managed to forget my map. Can you give me directions?"

I'm terrible at directions. My usual tactic being to forget the words for left and right, and just point in the general direction of the place in question, my hand snaking to signify turns along the way. I once got a pound out of that one, they thought I was a mime. I'd still sent them in the wrong direction.

"Tell you what, its only round the corner, I'll come meet you."

"Ok. I'll see you in a bit."

"See you then." I hung up and headed to my room to put some shoes on, then left for the station.

"That was quick." Anne remarked as I arrived outside the tube station.

"Well, I did tell you it was around the corner. Come on, its this way. Really glad you could come."

"Me too, bit worried I'll be stuck on my own most of the night though. Won't know anyone, and don't want to steal you from your friends all night."

"Well, I wouldn't mind." I said, in the cheesiest impression of a great lover I could muster, "Everyone's great, I'll introduce you to everyone, you'll all get talking. It'll be fine. So how's your week been?"

"Not bad thanks, work's been a bit mental."

"Ha, tell me about it. Totally snowed under. Everyone trying to get stuff done before their holidays."

"All trying to meet their numbers before the end of the quarter."

"And covering for everyone who's taking the afternoon off to watch the football, or the tennis, or the racing, or something."

"They let you do that?"

"Well, they put a TV in the break room, don't mind if people watch the odd match. Keeps them in the office."

"And you end up having to do extra work?"

"Well, I'm the one sat at his desk when the boss comes along needing something doing."

"Have you thought of, stop me if this is crazy, watching a game?"

"I could, but I made the mistake of telling everyone I didn't like any sport back in April."

"Ooh, schoolboy error."

"If a schoolboy worked in an office where they let you watch major sporting events provided you stayed on the premises and didn't take the mickey, maybe."

"It's a figure of speech, and you know it. Maybe it isn't fair on the schoolboys, but my point still stands. You're a fool, Ben Marsden."

"You win this round." I winked. "And here we are." I said, as I turned sharply through the gate to the front door of our building.

We traipsed upstairs and arrived at the flat, not particularly out of breath. There's something about living in London that means you have to walk up a lot of stairs, be it at home, at work, or to find an empty table in your favourite bar. "Want to leave your bag somewhere? Nick's kindly donated his room as cloakroom for the evening." I said as we got through the door.

"Nah, I've only got this little bag. I'll be ok."

"Righto, guess I'll go introduce you to everyone."

We were just starting towards the living room when Andy came out, pointed in the direction of the kitchen. He saw us and stopped in his tracks.

"Well, might as well get started on the introductions..."

"Andy! What are you doing here?" Anne exclaimed.

"Annie! Wow, it's been ages."

"You guys know each other?"

"Yeah, we went to school together."

"Small world."

"Isn't it just." Andy said. "So how long have you been in London?"

"About six years, came here for uni." Anne said, as they started towards the living room, which was now somewhat more bustling as a number of people having arrived after I went to meet Anne. I followed, but was distinctly out of the conversation, I didn't begrudge them this, they hadn't seen each other in years. It looked like Anne wasn't going to be left without anyone to talk to.

"How could I have not heard you were here? I've been here a few years myself."

"Hold that thought." Anne said, "I've just seen someone I have to say hi to." And with that, she waltzed over to Andy's group of friends in the corner.

"Who would've thought she'd be turning up. How do you guys know each other?" Andy asked me.

"We're dating."

"Wait, that's the girl you've been seeing? Brilliant! You want to watch out for her mate, she's a crazy girl. Or has she got boring over the years?"

"I'd like to think she's still a bit crazy."

"You're looking a little dry, mate. Can I get you a drink?"

"Sure, I think I've got a few bottles in the fridge, bottom of the door. Grab yourself one too if you've not got one lying around."

"Don't mind if I do."

Andy went to fetch us fresh drinks and then we set about mingling with the assembled crowd. We traded drunken war stories with Nick and his friends, I introduced Andy around the few of my friends he didn't know already, and Andy returned the favour amongst his friends. They were a great bunch of people, with the possible exception of a girl who clearly couldn't hold her drink, stumbling over words and not quite looking directly at anything in particular. Not that she wasn't particularly pleasant, but she was seemingly at a level of drunkenness when one's real personality goes out the window like the head of a smoker in a flat with no garden. Which I might add, I'd seen her doing earlier.

Eventually, I went over to catch up with Anne, not wanting to seem neglectful. She was talking to the the rugby-topped guy who I'd bumped into straight out of the shower earlier. I think he was the only one of Andy's friends I hadn't spoken to since I'd got

dressed. I hovered around their conversation for a moment, before gaining a combination of nerve and rudeness.

"How're we doing over here?" I asked Anne, pretending to address both of them.

"Oh. Hi, Ben. Max, this is Ben."

"Fully dressed this time, I see."

"What you mean by that, Max?" Anne asked.

"We met earlier." I coughed.

"Ben treated us to a little strip tease."

"Hey, I kept my towel on and you know it." I stopped at that, realising the picture I was probably painting for everyone else. Anne almost raised an eyebrow, and then resumed her conversation with our now mutual rugger-bugger friend. Slightly snubbed, I moved on and found the nearest person who wasn't obviously deep in conversation, in hopes of avoiding looking like a loser. I'll have to admit I did begin to get a little bit jealous. Not that I'm the jealous type, or at least not the type who says so out loud. Although on this particular occasion, my suspicions were aroused when I caught Anne and Max out of the corner of my eye, sat on the sofa, engaged in what the eponymous schoolboy might describe as snogging.

I tried to justify it to myself, which led me to some incredible leaps of logic, enhanced by my slightly inebriated state.

*Perhaps its her brother. I thought. Although that's a pretty unconventional way for a family to behave. Maybe they've not seen each other in a while.*

His hand went for her breast.

*A really long while.*

Her hand started to creep into his trousers.

*Right, that settles it, they're not related. Unless she grew up in a very small community.*

Andy appeared behind me and caught a look of the pair.

"Ouch, that ain't good, mate."

"Who is this Max?"

"He's her ex."

"You think they're getting back together?"

"I think there's about a fifty percent chance."

At this point, the two got up and hurried in the direction of the bedrooms.

"Ok, seventy percent."

At this point, the MP3 player we had set up for the evening's music - in a glorious display of timing and poor management of the shuffle mode - started playing Edith Piaf's "Non, Je ne regret rien". I took this as a cue to go retrieve the bottle of tequila I had stashed in the cupboard above the extractor hood.

I opened my eyes, and closed them again. My face was pointed directly at the window and the sun was streaming in. I must have gone to bed in a hurry and forgotten to close the curtains. I turned over to face away from the light, and was about to open my eyes, when I suddenly realised I was spooning someone.

I didn't remember going to bed with anyone, much less anything we might have done. What I did know, however, was that we were both naked. I reached my hand over and felt vaguely familiar curves. At least it was a woman.

I opened my eyes as she turned over to face me, still mostly asleep. It was Andy's incredibly drunk friend. And I couldn't remember her name.

I wasn't entirely sure if I'd ever actually been told her name, I've always been terrible with names. I guess now it had caught up with me. Not only could I not remember her name, I couldn't remember whether or not we'd engaged in anything more intimate than just sharing a bed. Our bare skin seemed to suggest we had. Slowly I tried to piece



together the events of the evening. I reached the point at which Anne and Max had rekindled their relationship and came to the conclusion that this was what led me to jump into bed with someone who amounted to a stranger. Whether out of spite, heartache or just plain drunkenness, it was definitely a bad idea.

*What's wrong with me?* I thought. *I may well have just had sexual intercourse for the first time in years and I can't remember the girl's name. Nor the act itself What a waste.*

Slowly she awoke, her eyes opening slowly, then exploding wide as soon as she saw she was not alone. It was more a look of terror than one of being pleasantly surprised. I watched as the cogs started turning in her head, and she went through much the same thought process as I.

As it turned out, she didn't remember my name either.

We mutually agreed not to mention this to anyone, quickly dressed in the previous evening's clothes and headed downstairs in search of breakfast. She left first, and I waited a while, so nobody would cotton on to our having come from the same room.

I went down the hall, nearly tripping over someone in a sleeping bag by a radiator. Evidently they had run out of floor space in the living room.

The door to Nick's room was open, and I noticed two pairs of feet hanging off the edge of the bed. Wishing to protect Nick's modesty, I leaned in to close the door and caught a glimpse of the rest of the couple. It was Anne and Max, lying on top of the covers, amongst a pile of still unclaimed bags and light jackets. Nick must have crashed out on the couch for the night. Their modesty was covered only by some of the smaller items that had been left unattended in the room. I allowed myself a slight chuckle. Max's manhood only required a miniature novelty sombrero to cover it. They didn't say goodbye before they left.

## Susan

A couple of weeks passed, and I hadn't heard anything from Anne since the party. Nor did I try to get in touch. Although we probably didn't really need to talk about it, it was fairly clear that another date was definitely off the table. At least there was no need for the "its not you, its me" type platitudes. Flaunting intimacy with someone else is actually a pretty good way to send a message. Although, as I discovered, it doesn't do much for the other person's confidence. And despite my best efforts to be pragmatic, it took me a good while to get over it. After all, its no fun to be cheated on. And I wasn't even sure if it was actually cheating. This wasn't even behind my back. Assuming we'd been dating long enough for there to be any kind of obligation not to sleep with anyone else.

I kept telling myself that it really wasn't anything to do with me: her ex was there, they got back together, it would've happened no matter what guy she was with at the time. They'd been together for three years, which somewhat trumped our four dates. I repeated this in my head over and over to try and cushion my ego. I repeated it so often that I forgot to do anything else, spending much of the next two weeks padding around the flat in my dressing gown, watching TV and sampling as many different snack foods as the local supermarket would provide in lieu of a proper meal. Andy had tried to get me to come along on many outings with his friends, but I'd politely declined, my desire to be sociable outweighed by the thought that a mutual friend might bring up the subject of Anne and Max. I'd even stopped playing video games with Nick.

After a few weekends had passed without incident, and the last few hidden caches of party drinks had been discovered in various obscure places, I resolved not to let this get me down. If I sat about lamenting for my whole life I'd never get anywhere. I needed to get back on the horse, take control of my own destiny, be the change I wanted to see, and use cliches like a man.

This occurred to me at about 3pm on a Sunday afternoon, as I finished a second bowl of cereal, pulling double duty as breakfast and lunch. I put down the bowl and leapt purposefully to my feet. I imagined a cool training montage set to some classic inspirational track from the 1980s: running laps, lifting weights and punching meat hanging in a giant freezer. All while a coach figure shouted silently at me through a megaphone a mere three inches from my face. This manifested in reality as a fresh cup of coffee and turning on my computer to check for new e-mail. Zero messages. Not exactly inspiring. I signed into the dating site and started a new search, thinking it a shame that there wasn't an option to order profiles by their sense of decency.

I engaged in a brief, but pleasant email exchange with a girl named Susan, who worked in advertising. We discussed our work, what we did in our spare time and where we grew up. The typical sort of introduction. She was fairly new to London, having moved down from the North in the past year. I offered to show her around, re-writing the sentence a good three or four times to avoid it seeming too sleazy. Susan suggested meeting for dinner first. I guess I was jumping the gun a little with a guided tour.

We arranged to one evening after work, and, as was becoming typical, slightly too early to pop home to freshen up first. I left slightly later than I'd hoped, and had just enough time to look over myself in the mirrored walls of the lift on the brief trip down. My hair seemed to be keeping roughly in place, but my shaving left a little to be desired. I'd missed a small tuft of hair on my upper lip, just below my nose. I'd managed not to notice it all day, but now I'd made a close inspection it seemed clear as day. This tiny homage to Hitler would not be at the forefront of my mind, burning brightly when I

went to greet Susan. No better way to start a date than a minute advertisement for National Socialism, or possibly for a better razor.

I'd played the local knowledge card and recommended a restaurant a few minutes' walk from work. I arrived outside to find Susan waiting for me, and greeted her with my head slightly turned to keep the unshaven patch on my left in shadow.

"Susan?" I asked, as always accounting for the possibility I had the wrong person. I almost held my hand out to shake hers, but I'd never really worked out if this was appropriate date etiquette. I decided against it, adopting an informal approach, although one that currently involved absolutely no physical contact.

"Ben. Hi, nice to meet you."

"And you. Shall we?" I said, leading us inside.

We were shown to a table near the window, a short enough walk as to preclude the possibility of any conversation until we sat down. I paused briefly as Susan was placing her bag under the table, and wondered if I should have held her chair out for her. Some might have appreciated the gesture, some might have taken offense. Equal rights are all well and good, but when it comes to confusing men with questions of proper behaviour, feminism has a lot to answer for.

"Did you find the place ok?"

"Yeah, no problem, wasn't far from the tube."

"Well, score one for convenience."

"Is the food as good as the location?"

"It's pretty good, come here with work a lot." I wasn't 100% sure of this claim, as most of the time I came here with work, it was after a rather heavy drinking session.

"You work near here?"

"About ten minutes away."

"So slightly more convenient for you then?" Susan said with a raised eyebrow.

"Ok, guilty." I held up my hands in surrender. "I chose the place purely for my own convenience."

"I'll forgive you just this once." Susan winked.

"So how was your day?"

"Not bad, things are kinda quiet at work right now, so had plenty of time to worry about tonight."

"Why should you have been worried?"

"Well, you know, meeting someone new. Anything could happen. Worried I might say something stupid or offend him or something. Gotta make a good impression."

"You shouldn't let that bother you. If you're right for each other, it'll work, seems pointless making a huge effort to force it." I was slightly shocked as the words left my mouth. I guess I'd actually learned something over the past few months.

"Maybe. But don't you ever get nervous before a date?"

There were many things I could have said here: "I'm too excited to be nervous.", "Yes, but a good kind of nervous.", "No, I've been undergoing hypnotherapy.", but I didn't really give my reply much thought. "Terrified." I responded.

"At least I'm not the only one."

Being close to the entrance, it was hard not to notice when someone walked in. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a familiar face and I couldn't help but look up over Susan's head and locked into eye contact.

"Vanessa, hi!" I waved, raising my voice to some point between loud enough to carry and not loud so loud as to be obnoxious.

"Ben!" Vanessa replied, walking the short distance to our table, dragging two men behind her on an invisible rope of which she herself was unaware.

"How are you? I haven't seen you in ages." Vanessa asked as she arrived at the side of our table.

"I've not been out in a while. This is Susan, by the way." I said, indicating my date, who seemed slightly uneasy at the interruption.

"Nice to meet you."

"Likewise."

"Oh, and this is Steve." Vanessa said, almost as an afterthought, bringing her own date forward into the circle. More handshakes and greetings followed.

"Would you like me to put you all together?" A waiter offered, breaking into the group.

We all looked at each other, then back at the waiter. Susan looked even more uneasy. Steve looked almost smug, I guessed he saw himself as the better catch. I mulled over it, unsure about the idea of an impromptu double date. Eventually, several of us, and I can't quite remember exactly who, nodded at the waiter simultaneously. We were quickly re-seated at a table for four, that was handily vacant immediately next to the table Susan and myself were originally occupying.

"Sorry to barge in like this." Steve said, profoundly embarrassed.

"Oh, don't be silly, its fine." Susan replied, temporarily relieving me of the lingering doubt.

"Have you folks ordered anything yet?" Vanessa cut in, taking charge of the situation. Susan and I shook our heads. "Right, anyone for wine?"

We picked a red and ordered a bottle between the four of us, Steve grabbing the attention of a passing waiter with little more than a raising of the eyebrows. I had trouble getting a waiter's attention with a megaphone. He was definitely staking his position as the alpha male.

"So how do you two know each other?" Steve asked, indicating Vanessa and me.

"We went to the same uni."

"Met in halls."

"You see each other often?" Susan asked?

"We hadn't seen each other since graduation until a coupla months ago. Bumped into each other outside a pub."

"Seem to be a lot of coincidences like that lately."

"Indeed." Steve said, with a tone I might have described as suspicion.

"We had a lot of fun back when we were student though." Vanessa said wistfully.

"Only because you knew all the good places to go." I turned to Steve. "She had a real knack for finding the most random events."

"Oh god, you mean like that variety show?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I was thinking."

"Variety show?" Susan asked.

"It was terrible. There was this one guy, a ventriloquist. His dummy was dressed as a monk."

"And he'd taken a vow of silence!" Vanessa and I said in perfect unison.

We laughed briefly at one another, sharing something of an in-joke, then turned and realised the others were staring at us blankly.

"So, Susan, what do you do?" Vanessa asked.

"I'm in advertising."

"A creative? Sounds interesting."

"Not really, I mostly sort out placing ads in magazines and things."

"Enjoy it?"

"Well, its work. The people I work with are great, have some fun nights out. What about you?"

"I work with a charity."

"Oh, that's great."

"I like it."

"How about you, Steve. What line of work are you in?" I asked.

"I'm an accountant." He didn't sound like he enjoyed it. Luckily, our waiter arrived with a bottle of wine, saving me from having to come up with a follow up question.

We engaged in a four-way introductory conversation, discussing our work, social lives and various other qualities that my e-mail conversation with Susan had already revealed. I became increasingly aware that Vanessa and I were monopolising the conversation somewhat, despite our best efforts to include Susan and Steve. Its far easier to talk to someone you know than it is to get to know a stranger, even if you're trying your hardest to favour the latter.

A single bottle of wine doesn't go very far between four. We were onto our third bottle once we reached the main course.

"Ever feel like you can't drink as much as you used to?" Vanessa asked, blanching slightly at her half full glass.

"I have a theory there." Steve said, "I think its more that you don't want to get as wasted as you used to."

"What do you mean?" Susan asked, intrigued.

"Well, we're all working now. Getting up in the morning and all that. When we were students it wasn't that big a deal to sleep in and skip a lecture."

"But what about the weekends?"

"Well, I'd like to think we're a bit more mature than we used to be. Perhaps a bit more embarrassed to be acting like a drunken moron. So you've given yourself a new limit and stop sooner."

"Can't say I really drank a lot in uni." Susan said, making no attempt to disguise her boredom.

"There's an exception to every rule." I offered.

"God, when I think how much we used to drink when we were students." Susan said. "I can't imagine how we could afford it."

"Two words. Cheap booze." I said.

"You mean like those ready-mixed cocktails from Sainsbury's?"

"Exactly. Those things were like drinking paint." The memory made me slightly nauseous. "You seemed to like it though."

"I don't remember a whole lot from that night. That was the night before we moved out of halls, wasn't it?"

"Think so. Turned out the drink we had left over from the year wasn't enough for the party, so we went out for more." I explained. "Our judgement was a little impaired by that point. We still thought drinking more would be a good idea, for some reason."

"That's exactly my point." Steve said. "You wouldn't be seen dead getting that drunk now."

"I seem to remember you swearing you'd never drink again after that night." I teased Vanessa.

"Well, it didn't last too long." She replied, raising her glass in a miniature toast.

"Good thing we didn't have to move out until the afternoon."

"Steve's right though. I have no intention of getting that drunk again."

"Glad to hear it. I'm not holding your hair back while you puke again."

Everyone fell silent.

"That was telling too much, wasn't it?"

I adopted my best sheepish look, Vanessa's brow furrowed like a child's approximation of a bird in flight. Steve burst out laughing, followed by Vanessa and myself, my own laughter out of sheer embarrassment. As the laughter reached a crescendo, Vanessa leaned forward almost unintentionally and slapped my thigh, squeezing it slightly before suddenly sitting bolt upright, her laughter ceasing. I looked

at her, mildly shocked, then turned away quickly. I didn't notice it at the time, but Susan wasn't laughing.

We finished the meal without much more in the way of conversation, sharing our plans for the weekend in the driest terms. Upon paying the bill, we decided to head to the pub next door for a couple more drinks. We headed towards the bar and Steve offered to buy a round. For some reason, I politely declined. Part of me didn't like accepting drinks from people I'd only just met, and another part wanted to separate the two dates a little more. Vanessa and Steve got their drinks and headed to sit down. I turned to Susan to ask what she'd like, but she beat me to it and spoke first, words that seemed to have been brewing for a while.

"Is there something going on with you two?"

"What? Between me and Vanessa? No, of course not."

"But you want there to be, don't you?"

"What? No."

"Oh come on, you were totally flirting with each other."

"We weren't." I half-lied. "We're just friends."

"You totally were flirting. And I saw the way she was looking at you." At least she hadn't noticed anything else. "And when she grabbed your leg." Guess I was wrong.

"We're just good friends. We don't get to see each other very often and we have a lot to talk about."

"But did you have to talk about it all on a date?"

"Ok, I'm sorry about that. I thought a double date might have been a bit different, something fun."

"Wasn't what you expected?"

"Not at all."

"Well, me either."

"Can I make it up to you sometime?" This was more from guilt than any particular feelings. I hadn't really got to know her well enough to know if we'd like to meet again.

"Tell you what. If you can tell me where I studied, I'll give you another shot."

I stared blankly for a moment. It had come up at some point I knew, but looking back, I think I was just about to start a side conversation with Vanessa about recent happenings with a mutual friend who'd studied the same subject. Susan knew it.

"Thought so. Maybe there is something to be said for making that special effort." And with that, she left.

I stood there in shock for a moment, before wondering whether to go over to Vanessa and Steve alone, or leave, my tail tucked firmly between my legs. I ordered a pint so I could mull it over, and while I was paying, my dilemma resolved itself. Vanessa appeared at the bar beside me.

"You ok?" She asked.

"That was a little odd. Susan just left."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Not your month is it?"

"Guess you heard about Anne as well."

"If not, I might have assumed it didn't work out."

"Good point. Kinda knocked me for six that one."

"That why you've not been about the last few weeks?"

"Yeah, this was pretty much my first night out since."

"Seems like a great one to come back on." She said, sarcastically.

"A brilliant one. Where's Steve?"

"He's gone too."

"Why was I afraid you were going to say that?"

"Did Susan think we were flirting too?"

"How did you guess?"

"Maybe guess we were a bit too familiar."

"You think so? Isn't that ok behaviour for good friends?"

"I'd think so. Maybe it seems like we're more than that."

We stared at each other for a moment, various cogs turning in our minds. We both moved to say something, then we got embarrassed and turned away.

"Nope, we're definitely just friends."

"Totally, maybe even just acquaintances."

"Colleagues, even."

"Colleagues who can't hold a date together."

"I'll drink to that."

We raised our glasses. "To failure!"

# The Slaughterhouse

"Yes, of course its turned on, I just can't get my email. Yes, I've tried rebooting. No, it didn't make any difference, that's why I'm calling you. I've checked my network settings, I can get to websites, I just can't download my e-mail. It says it can't connect to the mail server. I just said I've checked the settings, its just the mail that isn't working. So the server's down? Its been down an hour? And you knew that? Why didn't you just tell me? Oh, so support have sent out an email to tell us. To tell us the email server's down. Any idea when it might be back up? You don't know. Well, guess I'll get an early lunch then."

I hung up and resisted the temptation to shout an expletive.

"Oh, by the way, the mail server's down." Stu said from the across the partition, without looking up from his monitor.

"Thanks for the heads up." I said, standing up. I wasn't exactly sure why I stood up, so I sat back down again, just as my mobile lit up and emitted a few staccato beeps to tell me I had a new message.

*Post-work bevvies tonight? Bunch of us meeting at the Slaughterhouse around 8. Feel free to invite more peeps. A.*

I had no plans for the evening, and no serious errands to do, so didn't need to put much thought into whether or not I wanted to go. Wasn't entirely sure about the location, although this was based primarily on the name of the bar. I set about extending the invitation to those of my friends that Andy wouldn't already know. There were surprisingly few of these, as during and after his welcome party, Andy had merged quite effectively with the overlapping social groups centred around the flat. I was still learning his friends' names.

Additional invitations sent, I began to get a trickle of replies over my lunch hour. Pretty much all negative.

*Sorry mate, bit short notice. Will have to meet up soon tho.*

*Aww, wud but Im out of town. Drinks soon tho.*

*Who's this?*

I was pretty much resigned to going without a single additional guest - although this didn't take much in the way of resignation, it wasn't exactly mandatory - when I got a message from Vanessa.

*Love to, off elsewhere first though, so might be a bit late.*

I felt a little guilty about dragging her away from whatever exciting and crazy activity I imagined she might have been doing beforehand. But on the plus side, I was relieved that introducing Vanessa around the group might help remind me of some of the names.

The Slaughterhouse was a newly opened bar, best described as a cross between a fairground ride and a strip club. All bare bulbs, mirrors and leather sofas that don't match. I arrived a little after 8, having hung around at work far later than usual to avoid waiting around for people on my own. I walked through the door and began surveying



the room for any familiar faces. I was beginning to worry I'd not quite left it late enough, when I spied a few of Andy's friends sat at a couple of tables that had been hastily shoved together.

I wandered over to the group, noticing that Andy himself was nowhere to be seen. I hovered for a moment around the table, waiting for a break in the conversation when I might jump in. Every time I saw a large enough pause, I took a breath, preparing to speak, at which point someone else burst out with a quip or comment and the conversation was off again at full pace. It seemed as if I'd never get anywhere by being 100% polite, so I cut off a tale of falling asleep on a bus while drunk and made my presence known.

"Hi all."

"Oh hi! Ben was it? Andy's flatmate." The guy I'd interrupted exclaimed. Everyone seemed surprised to see me, as if I'd appeared in a puff of smoke.

"Yeah, where's Andy?"

"Late." They all said in unison, laughing a repressed, middle-class laugh.

"Gather that's normal for him, then?"

"Surprised you didn't know that by now."

"Anyone for a drink?" I said, pointing around the table at nobody in particular. There were a series of waves of half-full glasses and polite negatives and I headed away to buy a single drink. There's something about offering a round when nobody needs a drink that makes me feel both sneaky and a failure at generosity.

I returned to the table and placed my drink down, at which point the ratio of people standing to empty chairs led me to the conclusion that I should go in search of a spare one. I circled the room in the hope of finding an empty chair tucked away under a table, or perhaps one that was pulling temporary bag holding duty, and finally found a table for four with only three occupants. Right next to the table where we were all stationed. In retrospect I should have circled the room clockwise.

I carried the chair back to our table and deposited it in the largest empty space, which happened to be in the recess where the two round tables met, and also at the boundaries of the two circles of chatter that had formed in my absence. I took up my seat and found that the chair was of a slightly different model to everyone else's, leaving me a clear three inches lower than the rest of the group. Being sat in the middle of the two groups also meant that everyone was ostensibly facing away from me.

I was left with a choice of conversations to join, as I didn't know anyone well enough to prefer one group over the other. My typical indecisiveness resulted in my ping-ponging between the two groups, occasionally working up the courage to chip in a random point that may or may not have been related to the conversation at hand:

"I don't drive much, usually just hire when I need a car."

"Don't you think the tabloids' obsession with immigration will marginalise people?"

"There's no point owning an immigrant in London, public transport's too racist."

I was about halfway through my pint, and wondering whether I should switch to the left or stick with the topic on the right when Andy arrived at the table. A few of his friends had spied him coming in and he was immediately swamped with a series of greetings, each person seeming to use a different nickname, some formal, some decidedly less than formal. With the greetings out of the way, Andy made a single hand gesture before taking orders for drinks. In sharp contrast to my earlier efforts, Andy ended up taking an order from everyone around the tables. I was the only one to refuse, which I did as politely as the others had earlier, lifting my half full glass to indicate my lack of need.

Andy returned a short while later, somehow having avoided any particular queues at the bar, he bore a tray full of drinks, somehow defying gravity as he moved his way through the bar, the occasional chinking of glasses signaling those standing nearby to part like a teenager's hair in the 90s. The weight of the tray bore down on the whole table as he approached, and we quickly cleared a space of glasses, personal effects, and any stray body parts just in time for the tray to land safely, barely a drop spilt. The drinks were distributed, and Andy quickly located a vacant chair at a table nearby that he could pilfer, gaining permission almost wordlessly. He wrestled the chair into a spot opposite me and sat down, chinking glasses with various people on the way down, praise for the bringer of beer.

"So you made it, fantastic. Do you know everyone?" Andy asked me as he took a first sup of his drink.

"Think I got all the names." As usual, I'd forgotten them. "Is Dave coming?"

"Nah, he's going for dinner with Carla, her birthday."

"I thought she was born in October." It was barely July.

"Maybe an anniversary."

"Thinking in French again?" We both paused for a second, before locking eyes and pointing at one another.

"Aaaaah." Mutual appreciation for a joke that didn't really deserve laughter.

"I see what you did there."

"So we waiting on anyone else?"

"Nope, think this is about everybody. You invite anyone else?"

"Bit short notice for most, but got an old uni friend joining us. Has something else on so she'll probably be late."

"Cool, anyone I know?"

"Probably not, but I never know with you."

"Errr, yeah, about that."

With impeccable timing, Anne and Max walked through the door.

"Ah."

"Sorry, man, didn't really think. Hope its not a problem for you."

"Course not, I'm not about to tell you who you can be friends with. Its not like the two of us left it on bad terms, anyway."

"She slept with another guy!"

"Yeah, but we didn't speak about it after."

"I can't believe you're not angry about this. I'd want to throttle both of them."

"Oh, I do. But..." I stopped speaking, my brain not quite having the remainder of the sentence ready for my mouth. For a few moments, I held a gormless expression like an aquarium fish who's deathly bored of his surroundings. I wanted to say I was terrible at dealing with confrontation, but suddenly had a flash of inspiration and attempted an analogy. "Its like when you cut off a leg. Something big like that happens, you go into shock, you don't feel anything."

"So its still not sunk in? Its been three weeks, man."

"Good point, I'll go to the bar then I'll sit as far from them as the table will allow."

"That's the spirit!"

I stood and finished my drink. "Anyone for another?" Again, there was a parade of nearly full glasses. I was well and truly out of sync. As I headed to the bar, I began to weigh up the options: either drink incredibly slowly or incredibly quickly to allow me to partake in at least one round before the evening was out. Nothing says outsider better than only buying your own drink when everyone else is part of a shared purchase scheme.

I returned from the bar with my solitary glass and returned to my seat; Anne and Max having taken up a place at the far end of the table to my left.

"Good day at work?" Andy asked, thoughtfully blocking my view of the new arrivals.

"Not bad, didn't get much work done, though."

"Lazy day, eh? I'll drink to that."

"I wish. Someone tripped over a plug and half our servers went down. Couldn't get my e-mail, shared files, nothing."

"Put you behind?"

"Nothing I can't catch up with."

"Still must have been annoying."

"God yes. What about you? Good day?"

"Can't complain. Would've been here earlier but got a call just as I was about to leave the office."

"Always the way, isn't it?"

"Especially when you've got clients in different timezones."

"Early call for them, late for you?"

"Yep, although apparently he thought it was earlier here. What is it about time differences that makes people forget how to add?"

"Don't ask me, my mental arithmetic is terrible at the best of times."

"Is that why you always want to split the bill when everyone goes out to eat?"

"Hah. You got me. Its nothing to do with fairness, I just can't be bothered to work out what my order cost."

"I would have thought dividing would be harder."

"Only one of us has to do that."

"That does run the risk that Nick will total it up, though."

"You know, its never come to that."

"Guess he's not the volunteering type."

"Not if there's maths involved."

"Speaking of the flat, did you get chance to ring the landlord?"

"Shoot, completely forgot about that." The shower bracket had broken a few days earlier and the shower head was currently stuck at the lowest position, which was around chest height. The only way to wash your hair was to engage in some strange approximation of the limbo, with the inherent risk of slipping and breaking one's head on the taps below. An embarrassing was to end your life if ever there was one: death by shower limbo. Of course, upon realising we could just take the shower head out of the bracket, this particular concern had become moot, and getting it fixed seemed somewhat less urgent.

"Ah, never mind. Think we'll manage a bit longer, its not like the hot water broke."

"Aha, look who's here." I said, having caught Vanessa's entrance out of the corner of my eye. I sat up and waved gingerly to try and grab her attention, then gradually more and more vigorously until she saw and started to walk over, just before I reached the point where I would be interfering with the glasses of the woman sat to my right.

"Vanessa, hi. Hope we didn't drag you away from anything too fun."

"Nah, just a few drinks with work." Evidently this had been more than a few drinks, as her eyes had the half-aware look that only came with mild intoxication. The fact she was swaying from side to side was also something of a clue.

"Vanessa, this is my new flatmate, Andy. Andy, this is Vanessa, an old friend from uni." I said, putting on my best formal introduction voice.

"Nice to meet you." They both said in near-unison. They didn't bow.

Further introductions followed, and I did my best to remember names now I was hearing them for quite possibly the third time. The combination of two friendly faces and a warming dose of alcohol helped me loosen up a bit, and I joined the table nearest me in the wonderful brand of non-conversation that happens in pubs. We discussed music,

philosophy, the latest blockbuster with better special effects than plot, you name it. Just as someone I may or may not have met at Andy's welcome party was finishing a story about a crazy man's ramblings on the tube, I looked up and saw that Vanessa was talking to Anne. I immediately felt something of a knot in my stomach, as I questioned whether or not Vanessa was actually on my side. This was immediately followed by the self-hatred that comes with feeling something you promised yourself you wouldn't. This went on as I found myself listening to their every word.

"I've got to the point where I just keep my bag on the table, at least then I can keep an eye on it."

"I know what you mean. I had my bag stolen last year in a pub. Was practically on my knee and they still managed to take it."

"That must have been awful, did you lose much?"

"Absolutely everything, spent weeks ringing round trying to get all my cards replaced, change the locks, the lot."

"Wow, what a pain."

"Yeah, everyone I called was pretty good about it, though, didn't take long to get it sorted."

"Well, that's something, but its hardly compensation."

"Sorry, just realised I didn't get your name."

"Oh, sorry, I'm not normally this rude. I'm Anne."

"Wait, didn't you used to date Ben?"

"I suppose you could say that."

"Suppose? You were dating for weeks." Vanessa's word carried a note of venom, softened only by the slight slurring of someone on the verge of having had too much to drink.

"Its not like it got serious." Anne replied, dismissively.

"So that made it ok to sleep with someone else?" Max took interest at this point and turned to face Anne and Vanessa, listening intently.

"What?"

"At that party. You turned up with Ben and left with some other guy."

"Hey, I'm sitting right here, you know." Max said, with a disbelieving chuckle.

"And did you know that she was seeing Ben at the time?" Vanessa asked, stepping up her assault to include Max.

"Not that its any of your business, but yes, I did."

"Don't you at least feel the slightest bit of shame? The two of you?"

"Ok, first of all, this is nothing to do with you, and secondly, me and Ben only went on three or four dates, that doesn't constitute a relationship."

"It does in my book. How do you think Ben felt?"

"Who are you anyway? His mum?"

"No, I'm his friend friend and I care about him."

"Well why don't you date him, then?"

Vanessa fell silent. This was something of a catch 22, she couldn't say she would because that would technically lose the argument, and she couldn't say she wouldn't lest she admit to a double standard.

I couldn't bear to continue watching this silently, and I didn't really want to get embroiled in an ethical argument. "I think its time we probably left. See you later, Andy." I said, before shooing Vanessa from the table.

We walked down the street silently towards the nearest tube station, shoulders hunched, arms folded across our chests, defensive. Before we reached our destination, we stopped and both attempted to speak at once, before pausing to each let the other continue. We repeated the procedure, but this time, I wasn't as polite.

"You really didn't need to do that."

"You were just happy to let them carry on as if it didn't matter?"

"They can think what they want, I know I didn't do anything wrong, so I'm happy."

"You don't want to get back at them at all?"

"Of course I do, but what's the point? There'd just be an argument."

"You really don't like confrontation, do you?"

"No, of course not. Do you expect me to enjoy it?"

"Well, once in a while, doesn't hurt."

"I'd just like to make that decision myself." Vanessa looked hurt, her efforts to assist utterly rejected, the feeling amplified by alcohol. I stood looking at her for a moment, and completely lost my ability to be angry with her.

"But thanks for trying, it's nice to know people care." Her efforts validated, she smiled and kissed me on the cheek before turning to leave. Catching something out of the corner of my eye, I turned to find myself stood by the window of a restaurant, behind which Dave and Carla were seated, both giving me a hearty thumbs up, before waving me on to chase after Vanessa. I smiled back at them, then headed in the other direction.

## Lydia

There's always been something about the summer that doesn't sit quite right with me, something strange and other worldly that made summer days seem somewhat fake, like a half remembered dream or a poorly animated stop motion dinosaur. It wasn't until I started working full time that I realised what it was; it was all the extra light. Being able to read comfortably outdoors at nine in the evening just didn't seem natural. God knows how people managed in Iceland, I'd never be able to sleep if it were still light at three am. Advantages to farmers aside, the additional daylight hours were a dangerous gift for an office worker, making it seem entirely reasonable to work a full twelve hour day. At least until you looked at the clock.

Upon realising that British Summer Time was in full effect, I set about trying to escape work even earlier than I usually would. This was no mean feat, as it had the side effect that I was seen to be leaving far earlier than everyone else was. To redress the balance, I'd started coming in earlier and earlier, fighting the few early risers and "I live within walking distance" show offs for the accolade of being the first in the office of a morning. The first time I won that particular contest, my prize was the realisation that I didn't know the code to disable the alarm, and my dedication to work was noted not only by my boss, but also by the police officers who attended the incident.

So now I was arriving early in order to leave early, which left me paradoxically working even more hours than I was over the winter months. And having failed to redress the balance in my sleeping patterns (i.e.: going to bed earlier), I was now getting an average of about five hours worth of sleep a night, provided the bloke in the flat upstairs didn't feel like a 2am DJ session. The end result: I was sufficiently tired that upon arriving home and neatly collapsing into the living room sofa, it took me a good 30 seconds before I realised that I had just walked in on Nick watching porn.

The cuts between slightly predatory expressions of pleasure and various arrangements of human flesh were unmistakable. This was either pornography or high art. My eyes grew wide as I rewound the previous few seconds, trying to recall anything unusual about Nick's state of dress as I entered. I slowly turned to face him to find that not only was he fully clothed, but his outfit was accessorised with a clipboard and pen.

"Nick, why are you watching porn at eight o'clock in the evening? In the living room of a shared flat? With the curtains open?"

"Its homework." Nick said, his gaze not leaving the TV.

"What?" I mouthed, my surprise confusion having temporarily removed my ability to force out sound.

"I'm reviewing it, a bunch of us get together every week and chat about a porn we've all watched. Kinda like a book club."

"You mean you're in a porn club?"

"That's what they call it! Have you been to one?"

"No." I quickly continued. "How the heck did you find a club like that?"

"Online."

"That makes a heck of a lot of sense."

"Its not seedy or anything, we talk about the plot; the characters and their motivations."

"Don't they all have pretty much the same motivation?"

"Well, most of them, but they have it in different ways. Take this guy for example." Nick pointed to a mustachioed beefcake on the screen. "He says he's there to fix the air conditioning, but he'd rather things got hotter."

"Sounds very deep."

"I've got another three to watch after this. We're studying porn across the UK this week. I've also got 'Ulster Encounters' from Northern Ireland, 'Lucky Heather' from Scotland and the Welsh film 'Tickle Myfanwy'."

I flicked through the DVDs Nick was offering for my perusal. Most of them seemed to feature the same woman in various positions on their covers, with a tattoo of a French Flag cynically emblazoned on her upper arm.

"How cosmopolitan."

"Did you hear about Dave and Carla?"

"Their engagement? Yeah, heard from Dave."

"They set a date or anything?"

"No idea, think they said something about getting married next summer, but nothing definite."

"I meant a date for their engagement party. I'm long overdue for a night out."

"Didn't you go out last night?"

"Exactly. Speaking of which, you coming to the pub quiz tomorrow night?"

"Afraid not, got a date."

"Anyone I know?"

"Nope, nobody I know either."

"Another first date?"

"Bingo."

"Well, if you get lucky, give her one of these from me." Nick turned the volume back up, just as the two bodies onscreen emitted a simultaneous moan permeated with a squeal of delight, their figures knotted in such a way that I spent a few seconds trying to distinguish an arm from a leg. I realised it was neither. The fisheye lens was not a good idea.

"Why mimes?"

A word to the wise: discussing your biggest irrational fear is not a great way to impress a date.

"They never speak and all their stuff is invisible! Don't you even find that a little creepy?"

"Not really. They're funny, in a sad kinda way." Lydia, my date for the evening, said.

"You wouldn't be laughing if you got an invisible knife in your back."

"Were you abused by a mime as a child or something?" She asked, barely stifling a laugh.

"You promised you wouldn't laugh."

"I did not! I said I wouldn't think less of you. Doesn't mean I can't laugh."

"Well, ok, now its your turn. Biggest irrational fear, go!"

"Oh, I don't know, spiders?"

"Spiders?"

"Yeah, spiders, all spindly and hairy, make my skin crawl."

"That it? Just spiders?"

"Yep, pretty much."

"Ok, you owe me some seriously embarrassing facts about yourself. I gave you mimes and you give me spiders, totally not a fair trade."

Lydia and myself had met for dinner at a cozy Italian restaurant near Westminster and were currently waiting for the main course. We'd exhausted much of the usual getting-to-know you conversation through a series of surprisingly long emails and had moved onto slightly more obscure personal qualities. I hadn't chosen wisely.

"There's nothing wrong with being scared of mimes. Its just a little unusual. Do clowns bother you?"

"Not really, unless they do mime as well." I shuddered slightly at the thought.

"Weird, still, I'm sure there are plenty of odd things about me. You'll get your own back before long." Lydia said with a wink.

"Speaking of which, you put your job down as 'actor' on your profile. Have they stopped using the word 'actress' or something?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. Its kinda sexist, don't you think?"

"Hadn't really thought of it that way. Does it bother you to have a separate term for women?"

"Yes, why should you be different just because you're a woman?"

"You are kinda different though."

"But that shouldn't matter."

"Presumably it makes some difference when casting, though."

"That's different. You wouldn't have a different word for black actors, would you?"

"Ooh, good point." Argument is a strange sport. There are times you can appreciate a good attack on your own viewpoint, and times when it drives you into a rage. This was thankfully the former, as gender politics wasn't an area in which I had particularly strong viewpoints. The discussion was brought to a neat conclusion as our meals arrived. Lydia had ordered Calzone, which I was surprised to discover was effectively a giant Cornish Pasty with pizza filling. I had considered a number of the exotic and interesting offerings on the menu, before giving up and ordering the safe option: Lasagna. We shot each other a slight smile across the table, acknowledging the good timing, and began to eat.

"That was fantastic." Lydia said as we received the bill. "I wish I could cook like this, would save a lot of money."

"You eat out a lot?"

"Yeah, not normally places like this, but don't cook at home much. It never turns out quite like I hope." Lydia dipped her eyes slightly, laughing in spite of herself.

"Cooking not your forte, then?"

"Oh god, no, unfortunately. I try to follow the recipe but things always seem to go wrong. Do you cook?"

"I like to, but don't get a whole lot of chance these days. Seems a bit of a waste to cook for one."

"You mean you'd rather share your handiwork with someone who'll appreciate it?" Lydia said, suggestively.

"No, I mean I can never get the measurements right for one. Do you know how hard it is to measure out a quarter of a teaspoon of anything?"

"Well, you can cook for me anytime you like."

"Is that an invitation for a second date?"

"A lady never asks for such things." She said, adopting a faux upper-class accent which clumsily drifted into one more at home near the Mersey.

"Well in that case, would you care to attend my home next Monday, where I shall prepare a banquet fit for a queen." My own shot at a gentry accent landed somewhere closer to Bristol.

"Sure, sounds good to me." Lydia said, dropping any pretext of class, which paradoxically made her sound classier.

"Great, shall we say around 8?"

"Works for me. What's your address?"

"Tell you what, I'll text it to you, don't have a pen on me."

"Now that's a sneaky way of getting a girl's number, mister."

"Well, fair trade for my address, don't you think?"



We swapped numbers and decided to call it a night. I walked back to the station with a slightly warm sense of satisfaction, not only had it been an enjoyable first date, but we'd managed to sidestep any awkwardness over whether or not we'd want to meet again, sort of. There was something strangely familiar about Lydia, almost as if we'd met before. I put this down to us being something of kindred spirits, which helped take my mind off the fact that she was clearly out of my league in terms of looks. I sat down on the tube with a subtle, yet smug smile on my face, which melted as I realised I needed to find something to cook next week.

I went to answer the door with a tea towel draped over my arm to present the illusion that I knew what I was doing in the kitchen. I had discovered a recipe for goulash while flicking through a cookbook Carla had once lost in our bookcase. Thus far, I had learned two interesting facts. Firstly: cooking is far more stressful than I remembered, and second: spices actually have a use-by date. The latter fact required an impromptu visit to the nearest shop, fingers crossed all the way that they would carry paprika. Luckily they did, saving me a far more time-consuming visit to the supermarket. I opened the door to find Lydia smiling back at me, offering up a bottle of wine.

"Hi, great to see you. Find the place alright?"

"Well, I think I missed a right turn somewhere between Paris and Lyon but I carried on and came out on the right street in the end."

"And I'm very glad you did." I said, moving slightly closer.

"Me too." Lydia responded, coming almost nose to nose with me, "So is this your flat?" And moved right past.

"Yeah, lemme give you the grand tour." I led her through the various rooms in a manner that was both ceremonious and entirely without ceremony. "Kitchen, bathroom, those are the bedrooms." The latter I pointed out without opening doors. "And here's the living room."

Nick was waiting in the living room. I'd expected he'd be out this particular evening, but I guess his plans had fallen through. Not wanting to shoo him from the communal areas, I'd decided to invite him to join us. Never one to turn down free food, he'd accepted with gusto.

"Lydia, this is Nick, my flatmate. Mind if he joins us tonight?" I asked, indicating Nick's form on the couch.

"Of course not. Hi Nick." Lydia said with a little wave.

"Nice to meet y-" As Nick turned to shake Lydia's hand, he caught sight of her and his eyes grew wide. They shook hands without issue, but Nick appeared to be struggling to swallow, for some reason. The greeting complete, Lydia turned back to me.

"You mind if I use your loo?"

"Course not, help yourself." With which, I was handed the wine for safekeeping and she disappeared down the hallway.

Nick was still sat midway through a handshake, his mouth gaping, as if in some form of shock.

"Nick, are you ok?"

His pupils narrowed and he seemed to come back into reality before breaking into a laugh. "Mate, you're dating a porn star."

"What?"

"Lydia. She's been in porn."

"Oh she has not."

"She has, I'm telling you. And she lied; her name's not Lydia, it's Candy Caine."

"Don't you think that would be her stage name?"

"It was in the credits."

"Where people use stage names."

"Really?"

"Well, don't you think that 'Candy Caine' sounds just a little bit 'porny'?"

"Of course it does, how else do you think she got into porn acting?"

"You reckon that's part of the audition? 'Ok, next applicant, Candy Caine. Perfect! She's hired. Don't care what she looks like.'"

"They probably wanted to see her acting as well."

"Its porn. Of course they didn't care about her acting skills. Anyway, I don't want to talk about this any more. Besides, its probably not her, she just looks familiar."

"Its totally her, don't you recognise her from the film I showed you the other day?"

"She was in that? Wait, no, stop, I really don't want to talk about this."

"Don't you want to know?"

"Know what?"

"What she looks like naked."

"Oh christ, you've seen her naked."

"Its somewhat necessary for all the onscreen sexing."

"No, no, stop right there. Its not her, we're not talking about it, and for God's sake, you're not mentioning it over dinner."

"You OK, Ben? You've been a bit quiet."

We somehow managed to get ourselves sat down and eating without much incident. Although Nick's revelation weighed somewhat on my mind, and hadn't said much since. Partly through disbelief, and partly because I didn't want to set myself up for a Freudian slip of the tongue. Or give Nick cause for one.

"I'm fine, guess I've just had a hard day." I said, the lie coming to me almost without thought. Nick sniggered into his glass of wine at the word "hard".

"Busy day at work?"

"Yeah, have a lot on right now. Guess after the weekend I'm just not feeling up to it." Nick started coughing, a hunk of bread colliding with another snigger.

"Wow, Nick, you need to slow down when you eat." Lydia warned. "You might choke, or gag or something." The innuendo did nothing to help Nick's condition, and it took him a good minute to calm down. At which point, he continued eating, ignoring his mild outburst.

"You reckon you'll have another busy day tomorrow?" Lydia asked.

"I don't know." I replied, wondering how far I could take this untruth. I spoke in a stilted manner, thinking over every word to avoid any further innuendo. "We're getting a lot of hassle. From. Accounts?"

Nick almost squealed, trying to stifle a laugh.

"Oh, come on, Nick! How is 'Accounts' dirty?"

Lydia looked at us both strangely, as if she'd missed out on an in joke. Which, somewhat by necessity, she had.

"So what do you do, Nick?" She asked, trying to get back into the conversation.

"All sorts, really. Mostly working with kids."

"In a school, or something."

"Not quite, he's a birthday clown."

"Ah, so you're a fellow entertainer!" Lydia said with mild delight, unaware of how loosely Nick actually fit the definition of an entertainer.

"Yep, that I am." Nick said, proudly. "Do you work in entertainment?" He asked, probing.

"Yeah, I'm an actor."

"Don't you mean an actress?"

"We've gone over this one, Nick." I laughed, trying to steer him away from his potential next question.

"So what kind of acting do you do?" Guess I'd failed.

"Could you pass the soured cream, Nick?" I asked, trying to delay his inevitable next question. Nick obliged, and as I spooned a rather unnecessary dab onto my plate, my nerves got the better of me, and an errant dollop managed to escape the confines of the spoon and land slightly east of the crotch of my jeans.

"Oh no! Look at that." Lydia exclaimed. "That's going to stain if you don't get it out."

I made to stand up, but she grabbed my shoulder and eased me back into my chair. "It's ok, I'm good with stains." She grabbed a napkin, and expertly began clearing the spillage, dabbing at it fiercely once the worst of it was removed. I looked up at Nick. His eyes were making an admirable attempt to leave their sockets.

"That was lovely, thank you." Lydia said, stood by the door, ready to leave.

"You're welcome, and thanks for coming."

"See you again soon?"

"Sure, I'll drop you a line."

"Great, look forward to it." We moved in closer to one another, clasped hands and both adopted a somewhat sleepy, longing look. We drew closer and closer, smiling with a combination of adoration and embarrassment. Until finally...

"You doing anything for lunch tomorrow?" I bottled it, but some part of me was still interested.

"No plans yet. You?"

"Probably a sandwich at my desk, but it might be nice to get out of the office for a while. Want to join me?"

"Sure. What time?"

"Will depend on any meetings. Can I let you know tomorrow morning?"

"Course."

"Great. Well, see you tomorrow, then."

"Tomorrow it is."

"Night."

"Night." I opened the door around her. "Nice meeting you, Nick." She called.

"Nice meeting you, Candy." He called back from the living room. Lydia's smile turned to a perplexed look briefly, before she grinned at me and backed out of the door, waving with the tips of her fingers. I closed the door gently, then stormed back into the living room.

"What the hell did you say that for?"

"Say what?"

"You called her Candy."

"Did I? Christ."

"Oh what the heck. It doesn't matter anyway, it wasn't her, so your slip of the tongue won't mean anything to her."

"Look, I'll prove it to you."

Gets out a DVD, puts it on and skips through a number of scenes, each showing a highly cliched location.

"There she is. See, it is her."

"I haven't seen that part of her before, Nick."

"Hang on." Nick freeze-framed through a number of unsavoury stills.

"There's her face."

"Ok, it looks a lot like her, but even if it is her, how old is this film?"

"About three years."

"Well there we go, she probably needed the money, it was a few years ago, its all in her past and really nothing to do with me."

"Don't want to influence your judgement, but there's a few more."

Nick handed me a stack of DVDs, the top one was emblazoned with the name

"Candy Caine in...". I flicked through the stack.

"Candy Caine is..."

"Candy Caine and Buster Chastity"

"Candy Caine as you've never seen her before."

I turned the last box upside down and squinted a little before my eyes shot wide open. Yep, that was her alright.

I met Lydia for lunch the next day at a family-run coffee shop just across the river from work. We chatted a little about my fake busy week ahead, but I had to ask her about the porn. I hated myself for it, but just couldn't pretend it didn't bother me any more.

"Have you done much film work?" I asked, stopping short of enclosing the word "film" in finger quotes.

"Not sure what you mean."

"Well, have you been in any films intended primarily for a gentleman audience?" I pressed, raising an eyebrow.

"What?"

"Nick said you done a porn." By this point I'd lost all sense of grammar.

"Oh."

"You mean its true?"

"Well, yes. I did wonder why he was looking at me weird all last night. Look, it was a long time ago, I was a student, needed some money, and it seemed like fun."

"Fun?"

"Well, yeah. Guess I've always been a bit of an exhibitionist, just love showing off."

"You certainly looked like you were enjoying it."

"You mean you've seen it?" Lydia asked, partway between repulsed and intrigued.

"Nick insisted on showing me." I said, defensively. "He wanted to prove it was you."

"Sure he did." She countered, somehow topping sarcasm onto sarcasm so they cancelled one another out, leaving a weird form of sincerity.

"Are you still..." I began.

"Still making porn? Christ no. I did it to make some money while I was studying, it was years ago, way in the past."

"Don't you ever worry it'll come back to haunt you?"

"Hasn't come up yet. After all, you had such a hard time bringing it up, imagine how hard it is for someone I haven't been dating."

"So what kind of acting are you doing now?"

"I'm in theatre, kinda."

"Kinda?"

"Well, I'm not at the moment, but its always what I'm aiming at. I'm auditioning for Sweet Charity next week."

"Isn't that about a prostitute?"

"Well, yes. But its very tastefully done."

I squirmed slightly in my seat, trying to get the image of Lydia servicing a queue of men on camera, the line stretching over the horizon.

"Does the porn thing really bother you?"

"I feel kinda stupid saying this, but I really don't think I can deal with it. Part of me says I should grow up and forget about it, but I can't seem to get it out of my head."

"That's a real shame." Lydia said, not quite disappointed. Disappointment requires surprise. "You seem like a really nice guy, pity we won't be able to get past this. If it helps, I don't blame you."

"You don't? You think you'd feel the same way if you were in my place?"

"Hell no. I mean most men can't deal with it."

"Most men?"

"Think about it, you met me through an online dating site. You really think you're the first guy who'd already seen those films?"

"Harsh."

"Friends?"

"Sure." Somehow the prospect of being friends with a porn star seemed infinitely more fun than dating one. It was almost counterintuitive in that way. That said, I fully expected never to see her again. Not because I'd actively avoid her, but it is quite difficult to maintain a friendship when you have no mutual friends or hobbies.

The bill arrived almost as we ran out of things to say on the subject. I paid out of guilt.

## Tess

"So how did work go for you today?"

I was sharing a few post-work, getting-to-know-you drinks with Tess, a teacher who I'd carefully established did not have a side-line in adult entertainments. My date selection process had now gone from a finger in the air test based on a few e-mails, to a rigorous screening process involving showing a picture to Nick and making sure he didn't get overly excited. Tess had passed this particular test, much to Nick's dismay.

"Hard." Her voice heavy just thinking about it. "Think I overdid it a little at the weekend."

"What you get up to?"

"Went for a few drinks with friends on Saturday, then a pub lunch Sunday. Which ended up with us going to the cinema and for drinks after."

"Nice."

"Didn't get home till late though, and I was already down on sleep."

"No wonder you were paying for it today." It turned out that saying these words without seeming condescending was a lot harder than I expected.

"Yeah, been absolutely sparko all day. Had to drink coffee pretty much non-stop to keep going."

"You've been what?"

"What?" Tess said, absentmindedly.

"What does sparko mean?"

"Did I say sparko?" The test of a good slang word is usually that you use it without realising. For Tess, it met this requirement. However, another requirement is that other people know what you mean. In my case, there was a clear failure on that particular criteria.

"Yeah, you did a bit." My slight confusion was apparently manifesting itself in a need to quantify things unnecessarily. "What does it mean?"

"It means, well, asleep I guess."

"I've never heard that one before."

"Really? Surely everyone knows what 'sparko' means."

"Guess not."

"Wow, that's weird."

"Believe me, it sounds weirder hearing it for the first time." I repeated the word a number of times to try it out, with the overall effect that it no longer had any meaning whatsoever.

"I guess it would be." Tess laughed.

"Makes me wonder what slang I use that would just confuse people."

"Try me, I'm sure there's some I won't have heard."

"Ok, well what about 'knackered'?"

"Course, everyone knows that one."

"Hang on, I'm just warming up. How about 'jammy'?"

"Yep."

"Smarmy?"

"Yeah."

"Spawny?"

"Uh-huh."

"Foogly?"

"You made that up!"

"Just checking. 'Cakehole'?"

"Indeed."

"Hacked off?"

"Often."

"Lairy?"

"My classes usually are."

"Barmy?"

"Are you?"

"Cheeky."

"Guilty."

At which point, the tension we'd built up snapped like the elastic on a fat bloke's underwear, and we dropped our eyes to the table, laughing at ourselves.

"So you feeling more awake now?"

"Much better, the coffee helped a lot."

"Can't beat a coffee high." I said, with an air of authority.

"Probably going to crash later on though."

"That is the downside."

"Might have to call it a night after the next round."

"Understandable."

"After all, we've both got work tomorrow."

"We have indeed. Will be a shame to cut the night short, but I guess we can always carry on another time." I probed.

"That'd be good. But I think I can keep my eyes open a while yet."

"Great. Can I get you another drink?" I offered, pointing to Tess' glass, which was rapidly nearing empty.

"Sure, one more can't hurt. But just one." She warned, playfully.

Three rounds of drinks later and Tess was showing no signs of coming down from her caffeine high. The cluster of empty glasses a testament to the failure of our resolution, and possibly an indicator of the success of the date.

"You're kidding! That's my favourite film too." Tess said, reveling in the oft-awaited "me too" moment of the date.

"Really? What's your favourite part?"

"I love it just after she's realised she loves the guy and runs after him, then the loud, fat woman's won't let her past, so she punches her." I began to wonder if I might not have picked a manly enough film.

The last orders bell rang out in from the other end of the bar, its rhythm reflecting the weariness and general sullen mood of the barman who was more than a little keen to get home.

"Wow, its getting late." I said sheepishly. "So much for an early night."

"I know, we should probably get going."

"We probably should." I turned to lift my jacket off the back of my chair. "You headed to the tube?"

"Yep."

"Same here. Shall we?"

"Sure."

We got up and headed out of the pub, turning in the direction of the station, which was handily almost around the corner.

"You got far to go?" I'd successfully managed to forget where Tess had listed as home on her profile.

"Not too far, but the connection at Vauxhall always take forever. Then they always sit for ages before they unlock the doors. Just long enough so you start to wonder if they're going to leave without you. So annoying."

"Especially when you've been drinking." I helpfully added.

"Then there's always the guy playing obnoxious music really loud in the seat behind you."

"Oh god, yes. And you don't want to say anything, just in case."

"Yeah, could get nasty and stab you or something."

"Indeed. Or just turn the music up louder."

"Or that."

"You know, living in a city would be a heck of a lot easier without all the people."

"I don't know, some of the people are fun." Tess said as we drew to a halt at the ticket barriers and faced each other. She placed a hand on my lower arm and smiled, I finally realised that she had meant me. I wanted to say something smooth, but as ever, the part of my brain dedicated to being cool, flash, or otherwise socially capable had frozen and needed rebooting.

"You going north or south?" I finally asked.

"North."

"Ah, ok. I'm going south, so guess this will be goodbye."

"Guess so." Tess smiled at me, seeming to urge a more intimate farewell. I leaned in slightly, and placed my hands on her shoulders, tousling her hair slightly. She did likewise, although the hair tousling wasn't particularly successful and morphed into a form of neck stroking. We gazed into one another's eyes and I began to self-consciously debate my next move. I considered moving closer, or modifying the hair-tousling action into something more neck related in response to Tess' own handiwork. I was suddenly all too aware that we were blocking a ticket barrier and there were queues slowly and politely forming at the others. I finally settled on passing a compliment.

"You know, you have really big tear ducts."

For some reason, it seemed to be a nice compliment in my head. Tess burst out laughing. I stood there mouthing the words to myself as she walked away. They sounded dumber every time I repeated them.

I sleepwalked through most of the next day at work, the episode of the previous evening repeatedly drifting to the fore of my thoughts like a toothache I just couldn't ignore. Every instance of laughter seemed directed at me, despite my knowledge to the contrary. Even mundane and everyday things somehow became cruel reminders through subtle transfigurations by my addled mind. "Did you see the match last night?" becoming, "Did you know what a twat you were last night?"

Gradually I tried to justify my slip up, wondering if I had subconsciously wanted to sabotage the evening. Thinking back I just couldn't picture things going further than they did, even ignoring my misguided attempt at a compliment. Considering it further I wasn't entirely sure what I'd really wanted out of the evening. We were having a nice time, she was more or less exactly my type but strangely enough, I had no desire to sleep with her, either then or in the near future.

I returned home after what amounted to my third least productive day ever (the first two involving pub lunches), and set to the only task that immediately came to mind: idly flicking through dating profiles online.

None of them appealed. Some seemed interesting, some shared my interests, some were even attractive when their photos were taken at the right angle. But there was something missing in every case. Some intangible quality that would make me even the slightest bit likely to express my interest in a tangible way, even if it was no more than an automated and woefully impersonal digital wink. I began to think I might have finally been worn down. Maybe this recent glut of dating had jaded me. I hadn't been less interested in sex since the hot water broke in the showers at the gym.



I needed to consult someone. Needed someone to listen to my worries and throw me some kind of platitude that would take my mind off it. Granted it wouldn't solve my perceived problem, but might just help me forget the problem until I made precisely the same mistake again. Unfortunately, I could only really think of one person who would be able to provide such a confidence booster, and that was Vanessa. And we hadn't spoken since she blew up at Anne.

I glanced at my phone, then stared back into space. Then I turned back and picked up my phone. I scrolled through my list of contacts; many of whom I didn't call nearly enough, some I hadn't called for long enough that I probably wouldn't call them again, and a few I was certain I'd had reason to call at some point, but now couldn't even remember why that was, or who they were. As I reached the end of the list - as dictated by the rules of alphabetisation - I came to Vanessa's name. Then I clicked off the Contacts list and put my phone back down. My often-obstructive sense of politeness thought better of phoning out of the blue for a chat as if the last time we met hadn't involved an awkward altercation and mild rebuke from myself. The thought that she might still be mad at me created a somewhat impenetrable barrier to my contacting her, and I was left paralysed by my own fear of confrontation. I suddenly realised the root cause of my boss' insistence that I attend assertiveness training. And also why I never actually got around to booking it. I swallowed hard, in the mistaken belief that this might steel me for a second try, and reached for my phone. My hand hadn't quite managed to make contact with the plastic when the radio-oriented lozenge sprang to life and grew half its size again, the vibrate function whirring obnoxiously.

For a moment, I considered that this might be fate. That myself and Vanessa were entertaining the same thoughts at the same time, both unsure as to whether to call one another, and her finally reaching the decision only moments before I did. That somewhere out there, a higher power had ordained that I and possibly both of us, needed this conversation and set the wheels in motion that would allow it to come to pass and lift me victoriously from the fog. Then I read the screen and saw it was Carla.

"Carla, hi."

"Hi Ben. How're things?"

"Not bad, thanks. How's pre-married life?" I asked in the most original and amusing manner I could think of. Which thinking back was probably neither.

"Good, thanks. Although much the same as pre-pre-married life."

"Except for the whole ring thing."

"There is that." Carla said, disguising her excitement with nonchalance. I knew what that sounded like. I sounded like that whenever I had exciting news.

"So you guys set a date yet?"

"Not quite, still hunting around venues. Got it down to a choice of three now."

"Hope you two aren't arguing over which one you want."

"Of course not, he doesn't have any say in the matter." Carla said as if I should have been well aware of the arrangement. Which was indeed the case.

"Ah, complete submission, the cornerstone of any successful relationship." As if I was an authority on the subject.

"You coming to the engagement party?"

"Of course, wouldn't be any kind of a friend if I didn't."

"What kind of friend are you if you haven't replied to the Facebook invite?"

"A busy one who hasn't managed to sign in lately?" I suggested, defensively shifting in my seat like a nervous politician. Luckily, such body language doesn't tend to carry over the phone.

"I'll let you off. Just wanted to get an idea of numbers."

"Well, I'll certainly be there."

"Great."

I was about to say my goodbyes, when I began to wonder.

"Carla," I paused, still debating whether to ask or not and moreso whether or not I've like the answer. "Have you spoken to Vanessa recently?"

"Yeah, we went for coffee the other weekend. She was wondering why you haven't been in touch, actually."

"Really? You mean she's not mad?"

"Mad? What are you on about?"

"Did she tell you what happened last time we saw each other?"

"A little, she said she'd had a go at an ex of yours. She was still a little embarrassed about it, if I'm honest. Been worried you didn't want to speak to her."

"And here's me thinking she didn't want to speak to me."

"You should probably call her." Carla laughed.

Once I'd got past my own embarrassment at the misunderstanding, I sent Vanessa a text to say hi. I wasn't quite far enough past being embarrassed to make a phone call. The response came relatively quickly and was as amiable as ever. We exchanged the usual pleasantries, never once mentioning the incident with Anne. Once the formalities of getting back in touch were dealt with, we arranged a meeting over coffee to share tales of our recent dating experiences. It seemed she had plenty of stories saved up for me. Suffice to say, I had a few of my own.

"You dated a porn star?"

"Well, she wasn't a porn star at the time." I protested, with all the strength of a moderately tired kitten.

"How did it end?"

"I couldn't really deal with the thought of her...doing that." I shuddered, "So I broke it off."

"I would've thought that would be every guy's dream."

"Nick wasn't too happy with me. Didn't speak to me for a week."

"I wouldn't have thought he was the type to bear a grudge."

"Oh, he isn't. But I guess I'd crossed a line by passing that one up. Said I was dead to him."

"Wow, harsh."

"He's ok now, I bought him a few copies of Mammoth Mammaries Monthly and he soon came round."

"Is that a dirty magazine?"

"No, it's a periodical on elephant glands." I said, with sarcasm thick enough to spread on toast.

"I'll take that as a yes."

"So you got many dates lined up?"

"One or two, maybe." Deliberately evading answering a 'yes or no' question either way is always a sure fire way of giving exactly the answer you don't want to give.

"Aren't we the little man-eater. Any seem promising?"

"Don't know, really. Seems like the usual parade of drunks, morons and the socially inept."

"Nice to know my fellow men are making such a good impression on you."

"Nothing wrong with being pessimistic. It means I can be pleasantly surprised."

"Nor is there anything wrong with being original." I teased.

"What about you, then, Casanova? Who's the next object of your affections?"

"Haven't got a clue."

"Can't find a willing victim?"

"Kinda the opposite. For once, I just can't seem to find anyone I actually want to date."

"Not seen any profiles that take your fancy?"

"Not really. Not enough for me to want to meet them anyway."

"I'm sure something will turn up, plenty of women out there who haven't signed up yet."

"I don't know. Usually I'm happy to date anything with a pulse." I stopped, mulling over the words. "Not in a sleazy way." I hastily asserted.

"So for once in your life, you're not wondering what it would be like to sleep with every woman you see?"

"Pretty much."

"I think that means you're growing up."

"Very kind of you to put it that way."

"I think it's a good thing. You're finally figuring out what you want, so when you find it, it'll be really special."

"Have you ever found exactly what you want?"

"Of course not, if I had, I wouldn't be sat here lamenting with you."

"Are we lamenting? I thought we were whinging."

"Lamenting's more poetic."

"I'll drink to that." I raised my mug, and Vanessa did likewise. We didn't quite go so far as knocking them together. Actually drinking a toast with coffee seemed ever so slightly wrong.

"I wonder what it is we're doing wrong, all these dates we're going on. You'd think we'd get it right sometime."

"Well, some of them go better than others, maybe it's about kissing frogs."

"Well, I've certainly not dated anyone who could be described as a frog. Well, maybe one, but I think she had food poisoning." We laughed at the absurdity of it all, and settled back down with a slightly renewed perspective.

"Guess there's only one thing for it, just have to keep going. Eventually we'll meet the right people."

"Suppose so." The words 'long haul' came to mind. "Well, in that case, best of luck to you."

"And good luck to you." Somehow, I immediately started to feel better about the whole thing. This might have been just the platitude I needed.

"Thanks." I said, before immediately wanting to move onto another subject lest I think about it too much. "Speaking of working at relationships, are you going to Dave and Carla's engagement party?"

"I was thinking about it, but I'm not sure how many people I'll know there. And if I've only got the couple themselves to talk to, I'll hardly manage to get near them for well wishers."

"I don't think you need to worry about that. You'll know me for a start."

"You going then?"

"Course I am, they'd never forgive me if I didn't turn up. Well, at least not until the wedding itself."

"Well, in that case, I'll be there."

"Ah, so you're going just because I'm going." I raised one eyebrow, with far greater effort than I expected. "You know in some circles, that might be called a date." I forced a playful laugh, just to show I wasn't entirely serious.

"It's definitely not a date." She stressed the word 'not' so much, that I couldn't be sure if she was in on the joke.

"No, definitely not a date." I said, dourly. An apology for the bad joke.

"Not unless you're paying." She said with a wink.

## Otherwise Engaged

"Thanks for letting me come here first, don't think I could have managed coming all the way from home in these shoes."

"Oh, don't worry about it. Might stop me being late." I joked. Dave and Carla's engagement party was booked at their favourite restaurant, which just happened to be just down the road from the flat. One of the advantages of an even hosted by your flatmate of several years. That being the case, Vanessa had come to the flat to change into her smart shoes. She arrived in a shapely and not too ostentatious blue dress that despite not being ball-gown formal, still left me feeling guilty for not wearing a tie. At least until I looked down at the shoes she'd worn for the first part of the journey. A rather stylish pair of white trainers with Day-Glo pink soles.

"Hah, you're never late and you know it. Really though, this is a lifesaver, I love these shoes but they're horrid to walk in." She said as she worried her feet into a pair of white heels.

"Why do women do this to themselves? Don't they make comfy shoes that look nice? Maybe some flats or something?"

"Of course not, that's the whole point."

"Guess so." I said, resigning. I then suddenly remembered my manners. "You're looking great. Just try not to upstage Carla."

"Hah! Perish the thought. I'll bring out the big guns for the wedding itself."

"Now that's just evil, lulling someone into a false sense of security like that."

"Where are Nick and Andy?" Vanessa asked, swiftly changing the subject away from her feigned evil nature.

"Andy's off elsewhere tonight, ever the social butterfly. Think Nick's coming straight from work."

"On a Saturday?"

"Busiest day for kids' parties."

"Still doing the clown thing?"

"Yeah, lucky sod actually enjoys his job."

"If only we could all be so lucky."

"Yeah. But it's a bit out of town so he's got to drive over to his parents' place and drop it off then go straight there."

"You been to this restaurant before?"

"Yeah, it's a tapas place, pretty nice. Speaking of which, we should probably get a move on. Wouldn't want to keep anyone waiting."

"Yep, let's go." Vanessa said, rising to her feet in a practiced maneuver that minimised pain at the minor expense of grace.

We walked the short distance down the road to the restaurant and entered, following a momentary conflict between the expectation to hold a door open for a woman and the expectation to let her pass through it first. As the door opened inwards, I was left half passing through the door and creating space for Vanessa to complete the crossing first by bracing myself against the door like a secondary character in an adventure film sacrificing himself by holding up the roof of a collapsing cave so the other, more important characters can escape.

Once we'd traversed the treacherous threshold, we were left with a long and difficult hike to the bar, tacking and weaving through a dense archipelago of tables, and the human reefs that surrounded them. Finally, we ran the gauntlet of friends and acquaintances, deftly avoiding the siren song of conversational gambits until we'd reached and properly greeted Dave and Carla. After all, it was their party.

"Hi, great to see you." Carla said, with well rehearsed intonation. "We're a little early, so they're still pushing tables together. Shouldn't be long though."

"Time enough to get a drink, then." I suggested.

"Or maybe two." Dave helpfully replied, ever the hedonist.

"Good plan. We'll be right back." Vanessa said, directing me towards closer towards the bar to allow another new arrival to do their duty in checking in with the hosts.

There were about fifteen of us; an assortment of close friends, old friends, and people we hadn't seen since meeting them randomly at a student party and weren't entirely sure if they lived in the house or not. Thus, the single stride to the bar and the wait to be served was filled with unsure looks of recognition, followed by a pleasantly surprised hello and a complaint that we really don't make enough of an effort to see each other. Exactly what we said the last time we saw each other.

I caught the eye of a clearly fatigued, yet surprisingly chipper barman, and ordered a Mexican beer that often passed as authentically Spanish in much of the UK. As I was raised to believe that only buying yourself a drink was rude, I turned to Vanessa.

"What can I get you?"

"Don't worry, I've got it covered." She said, pointing to the pair of drinks she was in the process of paying for. She nudged the nearest one to me. A bottle of exactly the same drink I'd just ordered. Either she'd managed to commission a far more efficient barman than I, or she knew me a heck of a lot better than I thought. Given that I still had time to cancel my own order prior to the ritual beheading of the capped bottle, I chose to believe the latter. I also resolved to pay a bit more attention to detail the next time the two of us met up for drinks, although I managed to entirely neglect to notice what drink Vanessa had ordered for herself this time.

As we turned to make room at the bar for the next punter, the crowd of which we were part began to disperse to the now-prepared table. Suitably armed with beverages, we followed, and flitted around the edge as everyone slowly filed in and began to choose their seats. All but three of us were there as couples, so we took the safest option for singletons, and waited until everyone else had sat down before choosing our places, under the assumption that the others might actually prefer to sit with their partners than complete strangers. The side-effect of this policy was that myself and Vanessa ended up being seated next to each other anyway.

Nick - the third of our unattached trio - arrived just as this process was winding down, only to discover that the table was missing a seat, and stood around looking lost for a minute or so, trying to grab a waiter without having to stray too far from the group. He eventually located a waitress who seemed unsure whether to be annoyed at us for having the extra person, or embarrassed that the staff had failed to prepare for the complete booking. Nonetheless, an additional seat was procured, and chairs bounced in various directions to make room without separating anyone from their significant other.

Tapas as a cuisine presents an interesting problem for parties of above about six, even if you set aside the problems of who is allergic to what, who doesn't like olives, and who is on a prescribed diet that prohibits red meat on Tuesdays or when drinking white wine. The more fundamental issue to deal with is how to go about selecting and ordering, should one person order for the entire table, do you order in small groups or do you choose individually and share around? We opted for a strange combination of Dave placing a main order of random items while a collection of people at the far end of the table ordered individually, not quite having got the message. Ordering wine might have been similarly complex, had there not been a number of consortiums and

alliances formed to share individual bottles to be ordered separately. A few neutral bodies broke with form and ordered spirit mixers.

Conversation became gradually more philosophical as more and more wine was consumed, everyone being too polite to take enough food to soak up the alcohol. At a minor lull in conversation after various plates had been taken away to be replenished, Carla's younger sister, Alex, posed her latest pet theory to the group. She was a fresh faced student, whose bubbly nature made me slightly regret the amount of actual work I did during my university days.

"I've realised recently, that you can judge pretty much any human relationship based on how often you have breakfast together."

"What's breakfast got to do with anything?" Asked Carla, who'd spent much of the evening, and quite possibly their lives in general, asserting her superiority over her sibling.

"Think about it, who do you have breakfast with regularly? Your family, flatmates, your partner. People you're close to. Then you've got the friends you've been on holiday with, friends who stay over after a party, that sort of thing."

"What about the guy who passes out on the couch after the party so you can't get rid of him?" Someone chipped in, her voice dripping with scorn for the accused.

"You tend to just throw him a bacon sandwich." His other half replied, clearly remembering the incident.

"Exactly." Alex said with delight. "You only give the eggs to true friends."

"I hate eggs." Nick said with mild disgust.

"Guess that means you don't have any friends then." Carla laughed.

"He could have hash browns. They're pretty special." I suggested, trying to defuse the attempt at making a logical extreme. I wanted to see where this was going.

"That's more like it." Nick grinned, helping himself to exactly half of the remaining Spanish Tortilla.

"I don't think it works that way." Alex directed herself at Dave and Carla. "Did you two eat breakfast together today?"

"Of course." Dave said. "Part of the reason we're all having dinner."

"Here's to many more breakfasts." Someone said, making a toast without anyone else realising they were supposed to join in.

"Well, what did you have?"

"Cornflakes."

"Aha! That proves my point exactly!" Alex said, triumphantly.

"How?"

"Well, that's something you have every day. The kind of thing you only have with someone you have breakfast with every day."

"So you're saying that the quality of your relationships is inversely proportional to the number of calories you have at breakfast?"

"What I'm getting at is, you only have breakfast regularly with people you care about."

"Isn't that just because you're willing to sleep under the same roof?" The bacon sandwich maker suggested.

"Or the same duvet." Added her partner with a wry smile.

"But if a man were to eat breakfast at work every day, wouldn't someone suggest his family life was lacking?" Alex said, having thought this through at great length.

"Perhaps." I said, risking getting involved in the debate. "But you might say the same for a family who didn't eat dinner together."

"You might, but that's beside the point. My point is, nobody's at their best in the morning, and if you can enjoy eating with someone at that point, at their most grumpy, tired and with bad hair, then they really must mean something to you. Take you two for

example." Alex pointed at myself and Vanessa. "How long have you two been together?"

We looked at each other awkwardly for a moment, before I decided I should set the record straight. "We're not actually together."

"Really? You could've fooled me. Didn't you arrive together."

"Well, yes, but only because it was handy."

"More to the point, will you have breakfast together tomorrow?" Asked Alex's boyfriend, with a wink straight out of a camp 1970s comedy.

"I sincerely doubt it. And if we do, it will be as friends, which I believe Alex has already said is allowed."

"What about people who skip breakfast?" Vanessa said, confident she was scoring a decisive blow as Devil's Advocate.

"Well, they're dead inside."

"Speaking of being dead inside, are we moving on to somewhere after this or all being dull and going home?" Nick asked as many people as were listening.

"I could probably go for another drink or two." Dave replied. "Shall we get the bill?"

We managed to get through the process of splitting the bill with decidedly less fuss than ordering, although the choice of exactly where to go next was somewhat more tricky, as nobody was entirely sure which bars would still be open. Finally agreeing at least on a few places worth trying - even if not the order we would try them - we stood and began filing out. I felt distinctly wobbly as I rose from my seat, and as it turned out I wasn't alone.

"Think I stood up too quick there." Vanessa said, reeling.

"Sure it wasn't the wine?"

"Might be, isn't going away." She laughed with a distinct lack of focus.

"Feeling a bit tipsy myself. That third bottle was a bad idea wasn't it?"

"Probably. Or maybe we should've split it with someone else. Think I might head home."

"Might be a good idea. You'll need to get your trainers, won't you?"

"Ah, yeah."

"Righto, then." I turned to Nick, almost having to grab him before he went out the door. "Nick, Vanessa's going home, just need to go get her shoes from the flat. Can you text me when you get wherever you're going? Might come along later if I'm feeling up to it."

"Ok, mate, will do." He slurred.

We paused before leaving to say our goodbyes to Carla and Dave, myself still unsure of whether they'd be temporary or final for the evening. Then we set off back to the flat, taking a far less direct route than on the way to the restaurant. Exactly the same street, but involving a lot more weaving from side to side.

"I really think I've overdone it." Vanessa said, leaning precariously on the doorframe as I put my key in the door, before stumbling in as the solid body of the door swung away.

"Is the room spinning for you as well?" I asked, steadying myself on the wall opposite as I went in.

"Lil bit."

"Want a glass of water or something?"

"Might help." She headed through to the living room and began clumsily changing her shoes on the sofa, while I hunted around for some clean glasses, with equal clumsiness.

"I suppose there's one good thing about being single." I called through the door.

"What's that?"

"You don't have to worry about your embarrassing your other half by being drunk."

I awoke the next morning to find my head buried under a pillow, and my left leg exposed to the cold air. I stirred slightly, the scraping of my body against the bedsheets like a jackhammer pounding inside my head. Slowly, I drew my head out from under the pillow, and found myself near blinded by the sunlight pouring in through the window.

Gradually, the white light faded, and the darker colours began to show through. As the room came into focus, I found myself nose to nose with Vanessa. We both let out a scream, and leapt in opposite directions. The back of my head collided with the light switch, and I was left sliding down the wall bracing my head from both sides; the crown for the recent impact, and the front for the hangover.

We started at each other in shock for a while, breathing heavily with hysteria and drink related nausea.

"What the hell happened last night?" Vanessa's voice was nearly an octave higher than usual.

"I don't know. Did we?"

"I don't know!"

"I can remember coming in. We were drunk."

"Very."

"Extremely."

"I think you offered me water."

"Yes, did I break a glass?"

"I think you might have done."

I hung my head. "You were having trouble with your shoes."

"Yes." Vanessa's eyes went wide, remembering. "Then you offered to help, and I kept saying we were just friends."

"We agreed it was ok for friends to hug."

"And hold hands."

"And..."

"We did." We both said in unison, a vague recollection bleeding into our consciousness.

"Oh god."

"Oh God."

"Oh. GOD." Ironically, we're both atheists.

"Was I good?" It seemed like a sensible question to me at the time.

"Even if I could remember, now isn't the time to ask that."

"You're right. Its a bit irrelevant anyway. We wouldn't have done it if we weren't..."

"Yes. Does this make us bad people?" Vanessa asked, sincerely dismayed at herself. And possibly at me.

We sat on the bed next to each other. We shuffled slightly, unsure of whether or not we were sitting too close or too far away.

"Is this going to damage our friendship?"

"Only if we let it."

"Do you want to let it?"

"Of course not, do you?"

"No, course I don't."

"So what do we do now?"



# Inevitable

*One year later*

I stood by the altar, my mouth dry and the collar of my rented suit cutting into my neck, which I'd shaved raw less than an hour before. I resisted the urge to pace back and forth and turned my mind to the dilemma of whether to keep my hands clasped behind my back or tucked away in my pockets. I considered a compromise of putting them in my back pockets, but then aborted to clasping on realising how that would look from outside my own head.

The heavy, unnecessarily tall doors to the church swung open, the light from outside cascading in silhouetting the figure standing outside. I took a deep breath.

"Manage to find it, Dave?" I called across the empty room.

"Yeah, was by the gates, pin must have dropped out." Dave replied, walking up to the front of the room holding the rediscovered buttonhole.

"Well, least it took your mind off getting hitched for a while." I teased, as I gathered was customary when your friends get married.

"Thanks for reminding me."

"Doing ok, mate?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine. Wish we hadn't stayed at the pub so late last night though."

"Tell me about it, I'm dehydrated as instant soup."

"Do I look like I only got four hours' sleep?" He asked, adjusting his jacket unnecessarily.

"Nah, doesn't show at all. Don't even look nervous."

"That might change when the extended family arrive."

"Well, we've got a while yet."

"Shame I don't feel up to a pint right now." Dave lamented, taking a spare pin from a box on a pew, and fumbling to affix the flower to his jacket.

"Not sure we'd want you slurring through your vows."

"Just to take the edge off, I'm not going to be slurring."

"You were slurring a bit at that karaoke bar last night." I laughed, half-remembering his rendition of 'Eye of the Tiger'.

"We went to a karaoke bar?"

"Yeah, you were so wasted you were holding the mic upside down."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Go man the doors, someone might get here early."

"Sure." I said, half chuckling. "Which side was which again?"

"Right is bride, left is groom."

"Gotcha." I turned and began heading to the door.

"Wait, Ben." Dave called, his voice addled.

"Yeah."

"Left is bride, right is groom."

Now I was really confused. I took up a position by the door and busied myself stacking and re-stacking orders of service. Put them in three piles, then four piles, then three again. Folding the orders of service into the hymn sheets. Realising that made no sense and folding the hymn sheets into the orders of service.

I was entertaining the notion of a fifth pile when Nick appeared through the open door, arm in arm with his girlfriend, Emma. A few months ago, he'd met her performing at her kid's party, and they'd hit it off right away: at least as quickly as a single mother and a children's entertainer can. Apparently a clown suit makes it surprisingly difficult for two people to get close, as can the demands of a 5 year old. But their relationship had gone from strength to strength, and had somehow left Nick a responsible, model

human being. He'd started getting up before midday, started cooking with vegetables. I gather he'd even started flossing.

"Nick, hey, you made it." To be honest, there was never any doubt he would turn up, but his reputation for lateness had been somewhat difficult to shake off.

"Hi Ben, not late are we?" Of course now he was actually concerned about punctuality. Especially seeing as he was serving as best man.

"Little bit, show's over and everyone's already gone." I said, looking over the rows of empty pews. "I'm just trying to figure out where they keep the sacramental wine."

"Very funny. You've met Emma haven't you?"

"Indeed I have. Hi, Emma. Not brought Nathan with you today?"

"Left him with my sister for the day."

"Bit of a day off, eh?" I said, nudging Nick suggestively without having formulated a reason.

"Well, he can be a handful, and it didn't seem right seeing as I don't really know the couple."

"Oh, he's not a handful." Nick's voice almost sounded fatherly.

"Didn't he try to set you on fire when you first met him?" I asked, remember him coming home the day he met Emma, smitten but smouldering.

"Certainly wasn't the first birthday boy who's tried to burn Nicky Noodle the Red Faced Clown."

"Bet you hope its the last, though."

"Part of the job, God bless the NHS. Free burn treatment 24/7."

"And health and safety requirements for flame retardant costumes."

"It's all good. Anyways, where's the man of the hour?"

I pointed to where Dave was quite plainly stood by the altar, adjusting and re-adjusting his waistcoat. "Over there. You remember the rings?" I joked, rather predictably.

Nick fumbled in his pockets for a moment, a look of horror forming on his face, which quickly melted into a grin. "Are you kidding? Carla doesn't want me near the things until the service starts."

"Easy job for you then. You guys should probably go say hi."

"See you later." Emma said as Nick led her away, proudly displaying his newfound leadership qualities. Or in this case, gentle dragging skills.

I returned to the piles of paper and readied myself with a bundle for handing out, just in time for the arrival of a crowd of family whose resemblance I couldn't quite establish, forcing me to ask them "Who's side are you on?". It ended up sounding more like a challenge to a duel rather than a friendly inquiry, but with it not being an occasion for fighting - at least not until the reception - they helpfully informed me they were with the bride. I directed them to the left, then the right, then the left again, then chased after them to pass a stack of booklets to the rearmost uncle, cousin or hanger on. I arrived back at my post just in time to direct a contingency from the groom's family into the pews behind them. Being too embarrassed to correct my mistake, I watched as their own intuition left them questioning their placement amongst themselves. It was a full thirty seconds before they glanced in my direction with confused looks and made a series of hand gestures at various areas of the church. Having a vague idea as to their meaning, I nodded and they reseated themselves at the other end of the church. A job well done. Despite the fact I'd forgotten to hand them their orders of service.

The trickle of guests quickly became a flood. Various family members, friends both close and only just beyond acquaintances, and an aunt I had been convinced was a metaphor. I dropped into a comfortable rhythm: greet, direct, give stuff, next. Eventually I even started sending people in the right direction.

As the pews filled, the rate of arrivals slowed, and my own pace slowed to match. Which left me feeling the urge to have a bit of a chat when Vanessa arrived. We'd not seen a whole lot of each other over the past year, our little bedroom encounter having left us - or at least me - unsure of how to act around each other. We'd been pleasant enough at group gatherings, but they had seemed few and far between, and we hadn't really made much of a real effort to see each other otherwise. We hadn't told anyone why.

"Hi, long time no see." I said, nonchalantly.

"Yeah, it's been a while."

"How've you been?"

"Oh, same as always. Working, going out, the usual. You?"

"Not much to tell, to be honest. Been a bit of a quiet year."

"You still...seeing people?" She asked tentatively.

"Not really, just haven't been sure what I want out of it. Nobody's really stood out for me lately."

"Me too, I've seen a few guys, but there was something missing."

We looked at each other for a moment, then looked away, terrified of what the other might be thinking. Slowly we looked back, and moved in slightly closer to one another, stopping just short of any actual contact.

"I've missed our little chats lately." Vanessa said hurriedly.

"Me too. We should catch up over a drink later. You've not got an early train to catch or anything have you?"

"Nope, staying in the hotel."

"Excellent, plenty of time to chat then."

"Great."

"Great."

"Good."

"Nice."

"Yeah."

I was about to utter another pleasantry to extend the conversation, but then I noticed that a crowd of eager guests had gathered behind Vanessa, all eager to be shown where to go and what to do. We nodded a lingering goodbye and she went to her seat. Without an order of service.

The remaining crowd turned out to be the last arrivals and I followed them to take up a seat myself, handing the remaining stack to a man on the second rearmost pew to be handed out in the manner of homework at school: take one, pass them on.

The ceremony itself seemed surprisingly short, as wedding services always have to me. Greeting, hymn, vows, hymn, rings, kiss, BAM, you're married. That always seemed odd to me. You could blink and miss entering into a life-changing agreement to effectively become the same legal entity as someone else. The final word of the last hymn had barely finished echoing around the church before the register had been signed and everyone was led out again, following Dave and Carla with their shiny new rings and halved burden of surnames.

The line of people snaked out of the door to the church and began to well at the main gate as the herd mentality met the desire not to be crushed by the flow of traffic outside. Gradually, after much careful waiting, fevered dashes between oncoming vehicles, and a particularly boisterous gentleman using his hands to halt cars so the more elderly and infirm member of the congregation could cross, we all gathered at a patch of grass across from the church for the obligatory confetti throwing and photos. The confetti throwing was a simple enough affair, requiring only that everyone vaguely surround Dave and Carla without getting in the way of the photographer. The photos would have been a simple affair as well, just requiring that everyone stay relatively

nearby while all conceivable combinations of family, friends and everyone who didn't fit into either of those categories was called to be photographed. Of course, this was also the part of the proceedings that people tend to forget takes any time, and no sooner had the groom's family been dealt with than a queue of taxis had formed outside the church. The bride's family disappeared off to apologise to their respective drivers, resulting in a hasty rearrangement to bump the university friends to the front of the queue, at which they also decided to go and notify their respective taxis. This process continued until everyone had been successfully photographed and apologised to someone providing their transport. Luckily my taxi was late.

The convoy of hired vehicles and teetotalers with people carriers weaved its way to the reception venue, a large hotel just outside of reasonable walking distance (or well outside it for those guests in heels). The line remained close and relatively orderly up until the drop off point outside the main gate, creating a strange mismatched motorcade and almost formal series of entrances like a scene outside a premier or award show. Although with only one photographer.

With things running slightly behind schedule, and the additional time for overnight guests to check in, the drinks reception became something of a walk-through event, with staff stood by the door to the bar with trays of champagne and instructions to send everyone straight through to the dining hall, where the bridal party were already lined up to welcome everyone in.

I passed by the line quicker than most, unsure whether the questions as to my wellbeing that came with the greetings were rhetorical or not. That I hadn't actually met Dave or Carla's parents before left me feeling rude for both not introducing myself properly, and for keeping the person behind me waiting. I entered into a room tightly packed with slowly filling tables, and realised that the seating plan was actually outside the door. I sheepishly made my way back past the welcoming line and located the prominently displayed list of tables, feeling as if I was the only one to have made this particular mistake. I hadn't even started drinking yet.

I scanned through the list of names and located my allocated table, then squeezed my way past the line, explaining to everyone that I'd "already been seen" and wasn't just bypassing the line out of spite or eagerness to sit down. I weaved my way through the other tables to locate my place, standing behind my chair having never quite determined what the correct etiquette was at this point. I looked around and it seemed nobody else in the room had either, given that people were evenly split between standing and seated. I was first at my table and pretended to be casually shining hellos with my eyes at other standees around the room until someone else arrived. Carla's sister Alex and her boyfriend Gavin were the first to reach the table, and both immediately sat down. I did likewise, just as another of our table-mates arrived and remained stood up. It was Matt-or-Mark, who I hadn't seen since the New Year before last, and based on the name by his place setting, was actually called Mike. He was followed by a couple of Dave's cousins who had recently come of drinking age and thus graduated from the world of kiddy tables. Finally came Rob, an old housemate from uni, who it appeared had stayed in touch with Dave over recent years, but never actually made it down to London. I'd seen him exactly twice since gaining our degrees. Both times at weddings. One of which was this one.

"Rob, hi, haven't seen you in years."

"Ben, good to see you." Rob reached across the table to shake my hand, his progressed blocked by the edge of the table catching his waist, resulting in a strange attempt to extend both the length of his torso and his forearm. I engaged in a similar maneuver to meet him in the middle.

Greetings continued around the table. I finally addressed Mike by his real name, Rob introduced his other half Heather around the rest of the table, followed by Alex and

Gavin saying hi to everyone at the table they'd met before, which turned out to pretty much just be me, effectively passing my the torch of introducing them to Rob, Mike and Heather. Dave's more talkative cousin Julie joined in the introductions and informed us that her near-mute twin brother was Josh, a fact he agreed to with a semi-grunted "Hi". We'd just about managed to all be on first name terms when the traditional tinkling of metal on glass signalled a call for silence, the alarm broken only by Nick gulping down half his champagne between taps making the tone drop a full octave. There followed the traditional series of speeches: a heartfelt speech from Carla's Dad, a series of thank yous from Dave and reminders of forgotten thank you from Carla, and a surprisingly heartfelt speech from Nick, permeated by in-jokes that only Dave, myself and Rob actually got. I discovered at the end of the first speech that the champagne handed out upon entering was intended for toasts, and was left conspicuously raising an empty glass for each of the five ritual swigs that followed.

The speeches out of the way, an army of servers were unleashed upon the room to begin handing out starters. Conversation got off to a slow start, praising the ceremony with a sincere yet cliched description of the service as 'beautiful', before moving on to discussing the juicy gossip of which grandparent wasn't speaking to who resulting in our mishmash table of family from both sides and mutual friends. The topic of relationships came up around about when dessert arrived, surprisingly late given that relationships were the overriding theme of the day, and Julie chimed in wistfully.

"Those two are so perfect for each other. I only hope I can meet someone I click with like that."

"How long have they been together?" Josh surprised us all by breaking his silence, and by his lack of knowledge of his own family's affairs.

"About four years." I replied, forgetting whether I was rounding up or down.

"Long time." Josh remarked.

"Isn't that long, " Rob said, forgetting that to Julie and Josh, four years ago puts them just past the pre-teen phase, "I knew one couple who were together eight years before they got hitched."

"Some barely wait two, though." I recalled the last wedding I'd been to, although that was hastily arranged for religious reasons, more specifically an impatience to consummate.

"Sometimes you know you've met the one right away." Alex said, gazing into Gavin's eyes, their noses verging on rubbing in a sickly sweet display of affection.

"You guys thinking of tying the knot then?" Julie asked, clearly stirring something.

"All in good time, need to graduate and get jobs first." Gavin deftly avoided the question at hand, smooth bastard.

"How about you two?" Josh asked around a mouthful of bread, waving his butter-knife at Rob and Heather.

"We're just starting planning." Heather replied smugly, flashing her engagement ring.

"Wow. Congratulations, guys." I said, shocked at both the revelation and my own inability to notice a ring quite that shiny.

"How about you Mike, where's the other half tonight?"

"Other half?" Mike's eyes searched from side to side, as if hunting a memory. "Oh, yeah. That. Didn't work out." He trailed off, becoming very interested in his glass of wine.

"Sorry, mate. Should've thought, haven't spoken in ages."

"Nah, it's alright."

"What happened?" Julie asked, not knowing when to let well enough alone.

"Turned out she was cheating on me."

"That's harsh. Better off without her, then."

"Should've seen it coming though."

"Why?"

"Well, we met online, turned out she was already married. Online."

"Married online?"

"Yeah, some kind of role playing game thing."

"Like with the formula one guy and the Nazi prostitutes?"

"Not that kind of role play. She'd been married to a Shadow Ork for a year before she met me."

"She likes the dark green meat, eh?" Rob joked, displaying a surprising level of knowledge of such things.

"Yeah." Mike said, his embarrassment mounting. "What about you, Ben. Seem to remember you were planning on giving the online thing a go." Suddenly all eyes were on me.

"I gave it a shot, went on a few dates. Didn't really go anywhere. Just kinda going with the flow now, if I meet someone, I meet someone."

"Sounds a bit lazy to me." Julie said. "I'd much rather a guy make an effort."

"Well, it's better I make an effort with someone I know I like." My eyes wandered to the next table, where Vanessa was sat, looking back. Our eyes rebounded as soon as they met, and we returned to our table-mates.

"Got your eye on anyone here?" Rob accused.

"Nah, but you never know." I wasn't entirely sure if I was lying.

"Ladies and gentleman." Came a laboured shout from a member of staff appointed due to his reputation for being louder than most. "If you'd like to make your way through to the bar area while the tables are rearranged, it would be greatly appreciated."

A slow migration out of the dining room began, some of the more wily guests sneaking out of a back door to find a less crowded route to the front of the bar queue. Upon filtering through to the front of the queue and escaping drink in hand, I began to gradually move from group, catching up with old friends and acquaintances, with a brief break to witness Dave and Carla's first dance, signaling the opening of the dance floor. As the cleared area started filling up with the drunk and uncoordinated alike, I began fulfilling my duty as a professional wallflower. Surveying the room, I caught sight of Vanessa over the other side of the room, doing much the same thing. I wandered over, deftly avoiding actually walking onto the dance floor itself.

"Waiting for someone?" I asked as I sidled up next to her.

"Yeah, one of the guys from my table's getting a round in."

"Wow, that's good of him."

"Well, he kind of insisted."

"Is he getting everyone a drink, or just you?" I teased.

"Hah, pretty much everyone. Apparently he gets generous when he's been drinking."

"Sounds like the perfect guy."

"How was your table?"

"Not bad, bit of an odd mix. Only really knew a couple of people. You remember Rob from uni?"

"Course I do, been meaning to say hi to him. How's he been?"

"Very well, from what I can see. Happy in his job, got himself a nice place to live and he's engaged."

"Lucky him."

"How was your table? Anyone you knew?"

"Not really. A couple of people I'd met once or twice. Didn't make for great conversation."

"No?"

"Didn't really have anything in common with them. Strange, I've been feeling a lot that way lately."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I said I'd missed our chats. To be honest, I don't think there's anyone I get along with as well as you."

I thought about this for a moment. "I'm flattered. Have to admit I feel pretty much the same way."

"Think we should. Give it a go?" Vanessa said, stopping short of saying precisely what she meant.

"No." I said, somewhat solemnly. "I really enjoy being around you, I don't think I've got many closer friends. But what we did that night, just felt wrong."

"Thank god you think so too."

"Really?"

"I was just worried you wouldn't want to just stay friends. And if that was the only way it could work, it was worth a shot."

"Whatever made you think I thought that?"

"You're a guy."

"Guilty. You really think we can make this work?"

"The friends thing?"

"Yeah."

"I think so, we just need to make sure it stays that way."

"Right. Just friends, no sex." I warned.

"No sex." Vanessa agreed, holding out her hand to make the verbal contract official. I shook it as formally as I could.

"So we're agreed. You and I are never going to have sex." I said ever so slightly too loud. An elderly couple behind us shot us a confused and yet strangely approving look.

"We should probably go give our best to the happy couple." Vanessa suggested.

"Good plan, lead the way."

We sauntered over to where Dave and Carla stood chatting with a small crowd of friends and well-wishers, and hovered on the edge until there was a break in conversation.

"Hi guys, congratulations." Vanessa enthused. "How's it feel to be hitched?"

"Meh, haven't made up my mind yet." Carla replied, casually, her eyes exuding the opposite sentiment in Dave's direction. Dave cleared his throat for the official response.

"Great so far. You two having a good day?" He asked me and Vanessa jointly, which made me unnecessarily uneasy.

"Really nice, thanks. Lovely church service, great food, nice venue. Done yourselves proud."

"Thanks, Ben. Was worth all the stress getting it organised." Carla said, somewhat wearily.

"Oh, it wasn't that bad."

"You didn't have to do the planning, dear."

"She's got you there, Dave."

"Anyways, have you all met?" Carla asked, turning to the few amongst the crowd who hadn't yet joined another circle or started their own conversations. "Ben, Vanessa, this is John, Craig and Amy. Ben and Vanessa went to uni with us, John, Craig and Amy are old friends from school."

Various combinations of handshakes and platitudes ensued. After greeting John and Craig, I turned to Amy, and we caught each others eyes. Something clicked, and it

became difficult to turn away. Was this a mutual spark of attraction? Or maybe I just had food on my face.

"Amy's just got a new job, should be moving to London soon." Carla helpfully revealed. I briefly wondered if she'd noticed.

"Really, when?" I asked.

"A couple of weeks."

"Maybe you could show her around." Dave suggested, nudging me somewhat unsubtly. I have to admit, it seemed like a great idea.

"I'd like that." Amy agreed, before becoming distracted by a sudden shift in the tempo of the music. "This is a great song! They keep playing stuff I love, but nobody wants to dance. You want to join me?" She asked me, grabbing my wrist in preparation to take the lead.

I don't dance. But for some reason I felt compelled to agree. As we were heading over to join the more enthusiastic dancers, I turned to see Vanessa sharing a drink with a man I could only assume to be her mysterious drink benefactor. They were laughing heartily, Vanessa steadying herself on his shoulder. I turned back to see Amy beckoning me on, rubbing my palm slightly with her leading hand.

This was turning out to be a very interesting day.