

Date Night

“I’ll murder her”.

Clare was standing across the road from Carter’s Bar, shifting from one foot to another. In a vain attempt to appear innocuous, she had turned up the collar of her grey overcoat and covered the lower part of her face with a paisley-patterned silk scarf.

As she stood staring straight across the road, she could see bright coloured lights bursting through the windows. Every time someone departed or arrived via the main doors, she could hear laughter and convivial chatter emanating from the apparent near-full room.

She whispered to herself. “I should never have listened to her, this is madness, I’ll bloody kill her next time I see her, I mean, at my age, waiting outside a pub like a nervous teenager on a first date. I must have been mad to have agreed to this. I don’t think I can go through with this.”

Clare checked her watch. 5.55pm.

“I’ll damn near strangle him”.

Toby checked his watch again. 5.45pm. He was sitting at a table for two in the corner of Carter’s Bar, nervously fiddling with a beer mat. A large tumbler of Talisker single malt Scotch whisky, submerged by three ice cubes, sat untouched in front of him.

He had nearly ducked out at the last minute. Toby chastised himself; he shouldn’t have listened to Peter. Peter was the cause of all this. Whispering to himself, Toby murmured, “Dating apps, pah, if all this goes belly up, then I’m going straight for his jugular”.

As the chatter and laughter swirled around him, he saw the door open. He checked the time. 6.00pm. He spied an individual looking around the bar; he could see she was sporting a paisley-patterned silk scarf. Toby stood up and waved to the person wearing the scarf and simultaneously pointed to the red handkerchief just visible in the top pocket of his grey jacket.

“It just isn’t working, is it ...?”

Clare wasn’t surprised when Joe, her partner of eight years, suddenly announced he was moving out and their relationship, such as it was, was over. He assured her there ‘*was no one else.*’ It was just that he felt everything had ‘*gone stale*’ and he was looking for a ‘*new direction*’. Clare had been expecting his declaration for some time; in fact, if she had been a tad braver, she would have beaten him to it.

The following evening, after she arrived back from work, Clare saw that all of Joe’s things had gone. She was well and truly pissed off to see he had taken ‘their’ microwave oven.

However, to his credit, he had also taken the Cezanne print, *Les Grandes Baigneuses*. This pleased her as she always thought it was rather vulgar.

Although Janey, her best friend, called round as often as she could, life for Clare had become tiresome and mundane. However, the ever-resourceful Janey had dreamed up an alternative. One Friday evening, when the pair had drunk far too much Merlot, Janey took it upon herself to enroll Clare on a popular dating website. Clare tried to protest, but the 'send' button was clicked, and Clare became officially 'available'.

The next morning, Clare woke late. Her hangover headache was treated by two paracetamol and two pints of welcome tap water. Saturday was always Clare's wash day. As the pain in her head began to subside, she busied herself separating her clothes into the correct bundles and readying them for the washing machine.

It was when she was putting in her third load that Clare heard her phone 'ping'. After switching on the washing machine, she went in search of the summoning object; she eventually found it nestled underneath Janey's blue cardigan. Janey must have left it behind last night when her boyfriend, Richard, came to pick her up.

Clare picked up the phone and checked her emails. OMG! She had a 'match'. A fit-looking fella was staring at her, introduced as Toby. Hmm, mused Clare, he's the right age, right height, football - *Yuk*, he appears well read and 'enjoys nights out at the theatre or cinema'. Clare mentally marked Toby eight out of ten, and tucked her phone back under Janey's cardie.

Later in the evening, with all her washing completed and hung out on the balcony to dry, Clare revisited her phone. There were no more 'matches' but she noticed a missed call from Janey, followed by a message, *'Did I leave my cardigan at your place? Call me when u can. J x.'* Clare immediately messaged back. *'Yep, u did r u in tonight? I'll drop it round I've something to show u.'* Two minutes later Janey replied. *"Yep OK for tonight, Richard is on a late shift, so I'm on my lonesome. Come after seven."*

"Well, good for you."

Janey and Clare were sitting opposite each other in Ted's Café on the corner of High Street and Church Walk. The pair were each cradling a large Latte, which they both agreed was Ted's finest concoction.

Clare looked up and nodded. "I must be bloody mad, you know, like at my age and everything, but he does come over as nice, we've spoken several times on the phone, and anyway, finally, we agreed to meet."

"Good for you", repeated Janey. She frowned. "Err ... where are you meeting him? Remember the rules: a well-populated restaurant or bar, lots of people around, you know, just in case ..."

“Janey, I’m not stupid, we are meeting early evening at Carter’s Bar, you know, the one on King Street. I’ll have my phone pre-dialled to 999, and I’ll make sure I’m wearing my big girl knickers, I mean those will put him off for a start!”

Janey and Clare shared a giggle. They tapped cups, “Here’s to Friday, I hope it all works out.”

“So it’s all been set up then, eh?”

Toby sipped his beer and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and nodded to his companion.

“Yeah, Carter’s Bar, six o’clock next Friday, she’ll be wearing a paisley patterned silk scarf and I’m covering my face with a ski mask ... only joking ... I’ll be wearing a grey jacket with a red handkerchief in the top pocket.”

Peter sighed, “Hold on ... what’s that all about? You’ve swapped pictures of each other; surely you’ll just recognise each other?”

“Yes, I know Pete, my old mate, but we wanted to make it, you know, like a bit ‘romantic’ if you get my drift. This way it’ll be more like a ‘*strangers in the night*’ sort of thing.”

“Are you nervous? I mean she could be some sort of psycho, you know, a man-hater ready to enact revenge for her murdered best friend.” Peter slid his forefinger across his throat.

Toby laughed, “I’ll wear a stab vest if it reassures you. But seriously, though, she seems really nice, we appear to have a lot in common, although she hates the footy, but it could be worse, she could have been a Spurs fan!”

“Well, it couldn’t be worse than your last one; you were well rid of her.”

Toby nodded in agreement. The pair clinked glasses, “Here’s to next Friday, I hope it all works out.”

“Well, it couldn’t be any worse than your last one”.

As Toby walked back to his flat, his mind turned to the remark his friend Peter had said earlier in the evening.

He had been besotted, blinkered to everything going on around him, and oblivious to the warnings from such well-meaning friends and colleagues that maybe she wasn’t all she seemed.

It was inevitable that when she had had her fill, she’d be off seeking out another ‘victim’ utilising her well-practised ‘girly charms’.

After she had steadfastly drained all his resources and left him massively in debt, she finally walked out on him. Toby's single life had become tiresome and boring. His best friend, Pete, came to the rescue, helping him to clear his debts and generally doing everything mates do ... like getting him pissed regularly.

It was after a long session in Jimmy's Bar, Peter slurred something along the lines of, *'Why don't you do one of them dating apps? Everyone's doing it these days ...you might find the love of your life. It's a better friggin' alternative to what you've currently got in any case.'*

It was a week later when Toby was sitting alone in the kitchen idly browsing some word game apps when a dating app surfaced. Peter's remarks in Jimmy's Bar flooded into his head. *'Bollocks'*, thought Toby, *'I'm going for it, I mean I've nothing to lose, I can't carry on like this, I'm turning into a flippin' hermit.'*

When Clare's profile emerged with an accompanying image, he found himself instantly replying.

"So, how's it going then?"

Janey narrowed her eyes. Clare suddenly became totally absorbed by something completely invisible to Janey, which lay on the floor of the café.

"Err ... Clare ... babe over here ... cooe!" Janey waved her hands frantically, trying to get her friend to engage.

Clare looked up. "Well, it's like this ... um ... err ... well ... you see ... well ... like ..." She took a deep breath.

Janey rolled her eyes. "Come on, spit it out."

"We're moving in together."

Janey leaned forward and embraced her friend. "So, *IT IS* going okay then, blimey I didn't see that coming. Is he moving into your place, or are you going to his?"

"Neither. We've sorted out a flat, two-bedroomed, near Baron's Court, and we've just signed a one-year lease, so to answer your question, yes, it is going remarkably well. I wish I'd found him ten years ago, instead of wasting all my affections on a loser like Joe."

Janey got up, "This deserves a proper celebration, get up, girl, and we're gonna go to Christie's and knock back a few bubbles."

"Say that again ... but this time a bit more slowly."

Peter and Toby were propping up the bar at the Red Lion. Peter had ordered two double whiskies, and the pair were slowly sipping the reassuringly warming amber liquid.

Toby suddenly downed a large swig and fixed a gaze straight at Peter. "Me and Clare ... we're shacking up, we've got a place over by the Hammersmith Tube, and we've just signed a year's lease. I've chucked my place in and so has Clare, so it's all systems go."

"Fair play to you mate, she's a good sort, is your Clare, I'm dead made up for you both." He gave Toby a hearty slap on his back that nearly made him spill his drink.

Peter signalled to the barman for two more doubles.

"How much longer are you going to be in there?"

Still in his pyjamas, Toby was shouting through the bathroom door, "Come on Clare get your arse into gear, I've got a meeting in an hour."

The bathroom door slowly opened, and its hinges creaked as if they were in an old-school horror movie.

Toby immediately noticed an unmade-up, ashen-faced Clare staring directly at him. He glanced down. In her hand, she was clutching a long white plastic stick, which at first glance resembled a type of pen.

Toby frowned.

Clare cleared her throat and thrust the stick under Toby's nose.

"Look, two bars ... I'm pregnant."

"So how did he take it?"

Janey and Clare were soaking up some late spring sunshine, seated on a bench adjacent to the Tate Gallery. The place was swarming with tourists, all eagerly heading towards the museum entrance, ready to view a new exhibition dedicated to the artist Tracey Emin.

"Well, he was bloody stunned, naturally. I mean we remembered we did 'it' a while ago now, and we were both well into the wine, so we ... err ... forgot to do what we should have done ... if you get my meaning... you know ... precautions."

"But he's okay about it now?"

"Oh, yes, actually he's pleased, he hot-footed it over to see his mate, Pete; there was a definite spring in his steps."

"And you ...?"

"Well, I was a bit shocked at first, but the pregnancy doctor says I'm in good shape, so all should be okay. He said that women having babies in their late thirties is very common these days.

Janey smiled. "I'm dead pleased for you both."

"You stud, and at your age as well."

Peter and Toby settled into their seats at the Emirates. The match was due to start in half an hour, and already the fans of both teams were piling in.

"How did it happen? It must have been a mistake, surely."

Toby took off his jacket and laid it over his knees.

"Well, I reckon it happened when we both got totally slaughtered one Saturday evening. We'd not got any condoms in the flat and we were both well too pissed up to go out and get some, and anyway, we were both gagging for it ... so I reckon that's when it happened."

"The doc we saw the other day reckons she's in good order, so it should be plain sailing from now on in."

Peter slapped Toby's knee. Good on yer fella, you fuckin' ram, all we need now is a good win for the Gunners.