

## Playing with Matches

“Dear Martin. I saw your profile on MatchNow, and I thought you looked...”

No. That sounded considered, as though I was impressed by a slim jaw and carefully tousled hair, the posing and posturing of picturehood. How could a flat screen ever truly convey the brilliant gleam of life, the shine of an amusing comment or the texture of unhappiness?

“Dear Martin. You sound like the sort of person I would like to meet.”

Was it true? Did his profile really meet with my criteria for ‘a person I would like to meet’? Did I *have* criteria? If I did, was there an implication of lists, of nights spent sitting alone with a notepad, scoring out lines of potential suitors simply because they ‘liked to travel’?

Perhaps Martin, with his smiling image and beautifully punctuated personality, was thinking similar thoughts as he searched through a gallery of flicked hair and careful pouts. Was he reading about ‘Caroline, thirty two, divorced, likes country walks’ and wondering if this meant strolling through the heaped sunshine under gently skeletal trees or tendon-popping days along mud-scabbed trackways? Did ‘Janine, widowed with four children’ conjure images of happy family days on the beach, hand in sand-gloved hand while kites flew like alien birds, or the tight-mouthed chill of a resentful kitchen, plates cracking to leak dirty gravy-blood over a dying argument? Maybe Martin cared nothing at all; was simply sitting back and waiting for the eager women he hoped he might ensnare with a clever camera and thesaurus-description.

When I was young, courtship never went like this. Ticked boxes were held in the mind, a relationship could be won or lost on the sway of a hip, a certain glint, a readiness. Now, as I stared at my computer, it seemed that a perfect partner could only be found by electronic elimination and a willingness to believe that this mindless machine could select a man who would appreciate me for what I was, when what I was had been reduced to a mess of bytes and megapixels.

Danny hadn’t needed a computer to select me, just a fairground ride so fast that the scenery bled into itself and the random screams and cries dopplered into the demonic. It had been so warm that the night had lain down around us, scattered into fragments by the jewelled lights and we’d walked hand-in-hand from the candyfloss to the river where the moorhens were not the only creatures to cry among the reed-beds that summer. Danny... with his Irish-dark hair and eyes so blue you could almost feel the sapphire-cuts on your skin... saying he was Gypsy; telling my future in the places where the river ran deep and cold and the fish lay still, telling my fortune and putting himself inside it.

“Dear Martin. Your eyes remind me of a fairground in August when I was seventeen...”

Did Martin ever walk cold fields with frost aching under his feet, sniffing at the air and remembering how it had been boastful with the sweaty smell of onion slithers? Did the memory of the scent of hotdogs ever bring the bile sliding sour into his mouth? From the confident tilt of his head I would think not, yet there was a crease to his eyes that said that he had known his share of shruggedly re-treading old paths.

Here was my own profile. I'd dragged at the pull-down menu with its limited options; spelling myself out and hoping that outside of me there was someone who could read between the lies. Kate, I'd called myself. Not Katherine. Katherine was older than her years, Katherine still cared what her parents thought. Kate wore make-up, Katherine didn't dare, for fear of her mother's tuts and rolling eyes; Kate allowed herself late nights with wine, while Katherine stayed in and indulged her father's love for David Attenborough.

Never married, no children, Kate. Five feet six, medium build. Greying hair, blue eyes.

"Dear Martin. I've lied on my profile..."

Had Martin lied? Ever felt that stinging, breathless fear of discovery, ever been brutally thrown out into reality after the detection of a warm, nurtured falsehood? Maybe his whole life as laid out before me in 12 pitch was a lie. Married, with a worn wife whose existence he denied in frenzied scrambles with younger, blonder women, breasts defiantly pert and un-stretchmarked. A crumpled cushion of a man, in love with himself and his habits; space saved only for the rampant behaviour of another who came with no demands and no memories.

Could I allow a lie? If one, then more? How many, before I knew that I was with him only to save myself the loneliness of the permanent Katherine; trapped forever in mother-approved clothing?

My parents had brought me up so carefully with their approval. I knew the right things to do, the correct things to say, but Danny had kissed the proper words out of my mouth, replaced them with improprieties and new, unfamiliar words which tasted rough, drawn from the darkest parts of me. I'd become wild, filled with the power of the earth, the beating, blinding light of the hanging sun in the gong-bronze sky and we'd run, Danny and I, pretending a freedom we could never have, living that summer for every heated, shared breath.

"Dear Martin. I learned to hate, one wet Spring in Wales..."

A rented cottage with only my mother for company. I tired easily, and she had little to say to me, so we spent much of our time sitting staring at the birds threaded into skeins across the wide, white skies. She knitted, her fingers still strong and untwisted by the arthritis that thirty years had brought. It shocked me now to realise that she was the same age then as I was today, she'd seemed old forever, aged by her persistent disapproval.

It had been the summer of the Jubilee, my father in London for work phoned us every night with details of the parties and the programmes we were missing, as though we were in exile. At school, A-level students in my year were holding fancy dress competitions, photographs of old friends were posted to us and we were supposed to laugh at the sight of Hugh Davies dressed as a baby, with his mother's best bath towel as a nappy and a huge sugar dummy sticking out of his raw face. I preferred the pictures of Charlotte Wilson and Annalouise Jameson in their 'St Trinian's' uniforms; honed, slender figures in micro-miniskirts with their ice-white shirts against honey-brown skin and morse-code flashes of lacy black underwear. I was to have been a third in their group, I'd revelled in the secrecy and the planning; but, that had been before.

And June had edged on, as uncomfortable as the silence.

"Dear Martin..."

But did it have to be Martin? There were other men here, on MatchNow, their faces glowing in 32-bit colour resolution. There was Sebastian, pictured with his body resting coyly against the bonnet of a silver-grey Mercedes. Or Malcolm, whose hobbies included 'spelunking' and whose details were sprayed with a scatter-gunning of commas. Could I ever bear life with someone who thought so little of himself that he wouldn't edit his self-advertisement? Or David, with his big, bowling-ball face? Or James and his search for 'uncomplicated fun'?

Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor...

My mother had taken away my spoon when I played that game. The version in her head ran 'Lawyer, Teacher, Doctor, Trust Fund...' She never said that aloud, never told me in words that I should be saving myself to marry a Professional Man, no, she indicated it with sly swipes of her head towards fitting mates. She would toss her head whenever a medical man entered a room or someone at a party spoke of their son, the solicitor; her neck would brace at the mention of a degree and talk of a Doctorate would bring upon a curious oscillation of her eyes, including her silent daughter in the conversation without a word being uttered. But that summer of seventeen, when I discovered that love needed no qualifications, she stopped mentioning my future.

"Dear Martin. I think my life stopped thirty years ago..."

Danny had gone. Of course. One evening the fair lay in the meadow by the ford beyond the church, alive, with the pulse of music beating through its core. The bark and howl of the pack-people who flooded its gates to eat and fight and mate in the dusky, sweet corners behind the booths could be heard from the centre of town even above the choral cries of those selling small hopes in the shape of games of luck. The next night, when I walked through the heat-thickened dusk to the river to watch the lights twist and drown, it had vanished. The grass was crushed to a lifeless grey where the tents had stood, wheals and sores of mud clotted around the spaces which had been the Corkscrew and the Dodgems. Danny and his people had left like heavy phantoms.

The people of the town recovered slowly. Like drowned souls surfacing to new life they opened bleary eyes and began again their dull routines, now without the brightening view of a coming evening to be spent brawling and clenching, eyeing up their neighbours' wives under cover of the foetid dark; excited brief fumbblings on the Big Wheel, the press of hard sweetness in a shared toffee apple.

I did not recover. I sank.

“Dear Martin. Has your heart ever turned to stone?”

I went back to the Sixth Form, among those who had been a year behind me. Smiled when they asked why, explained that I had been in Wales, watching my mother watching the sky. Studied hard. There was nothing for me in teenage life, in the new punk music, the raging throb of discord strummed by fierce men, shouted through spittle-flecked lips, their absurdities of fashion passed without my acknowledgment. I had no passion with which to rebel. My blood was drained, replaced by dust; all heats which I had previously known now cooled to lukewarm uniformity. I breathed, I moved, I made semblances of conversation, but like a dream-walker I caused no impression on the surface of life.

Martin's hobbies are reading, playing sport and cooking. His profile says that he likes cats, and hopes to holiday in France this year. My profile says I'm forty-seven. Or rather, *Kate* is forty-seven. I left her hobbies blank, not certain what would appeal; Katherine's hobbies are small, relentless things, nurtured like pets with loving interest – collecting postcards, the works of Shakespeare, needlework. I think Kate has big, wide interests but cannot quite see the edges of them to describe. Perhaps she will like to travel, to visit places which have no point of contact with home, where even the buildings are strange; to seduce young men in Parisian cafes with her feline smile and feral pacing. Maybe she will ride a horse, black as insanity, across the winds, soundless galloping with only her breath in her ears and the beat of tearing hooves.

Or perhaps she lives at home, hovers through on Sundays and helps her father work the video recorder.

Perhaps.

“Dear Martin, what do *you* think?”

Katherine is a teacher. Do you think Kate is a teacher too? Does she sound to you like a woman who might stand in front of a class of small children of unashamed dampness and teach the beginnings of numerical proficiency? In a room that smells of inadequate toilet-training and Plasticene, of cheap glue and long-dead dinners? A woman who treasures the clammy-handed cards every December, bearing drunkenly improbable snowmen and Santas of porcine proportions, messages painfully lettered in green crayon, or pink ‘To Miss, Hapy Crismus’? Does Kate cry at the end of every Summer term, knowing that in September her charges will have moved on to the mercies of Mr Taylor,

who doesn't hand out sweets for good work and who hasn't learned all the words to 'We Are the Champions' for Sports Days?

I could have been Kate. That summer, when the heat webbed around us and Abba sang 'Dancing Queen', I could have shed the skin of Katherine and emerged in bright new colours; I could have left the tiny splinter of town among the blue northern hills and gone south, following the sun. But I chose to let the shadows lengthen over me, to let winter come, and then to tell. When it was too late, when I thought I was safe.

And so, to Martin, to the others, I *will* be Kate. Still Katherine to my parents, still living the Katherine life; dutiful, silently caring. Helping with the cooking when peeling potatoes is beyond the abilities of humped, crooked fingers, observing that David Attenborough is looking well for his years twenty times during each pre-recorded excursion into the world of gorillas. Futile to point out that he is older now. As am I. Older than that seventeen-year-old that they trapped, fixed in their amber middle-age thirty years ago, much as they have David Attenborough ensnared on video in permanent, smiling presentability. To them I am still a feckless seventeen, my forays into the world of make-up and dating still as laughably inept, my judgements still as unwise, my opinions as unworthy.

"Dear Martin... Somewhere... somewhere out there, lives my daughter. I can't see her, or speak to her, but I feel her existence every day of my life. For thirty years she has been connected to me through that invisible thread that connects all mothers to their children..."

She was born on Jubilee day. 06.06.77. The date I use as my password for MatchNow. Kate had a daughter. Katherine gave her for adoption. In the Welsh hospital which only let me hold her for a day; watching the celebrations on the little ward television, the smiling, cheering crowds which greeted her arrival, and all the while knowing.

And trapped.

"Dear Martin, one day soon I hope to be free."

All the while knowing, I shall never be free from this. That however much Kate tries, there remains a part which remembers.

That is still Katherine.

"Dear Martin..."

"Dear Martin..."

<SEND>