

It's A Thin Line

Thursday night was always dominoes night at the village hall. For some this was reassuring, a bit of certainty to hang onto. For others it could be a case of familiarity breeds contempt. Before she was widowed Gladys had never played dominoes. For someone that doesn't drive, living alone in a small village offered few social opportunities. Dominoes wasn't the only regular activity at the village hall, but Gladys hadn't the first idea how to play bridge, at 70 she felt too old for badminton and she just couldn't get on with darts. There was nothing else within walking distance. There were no buses in the evening and the cost of taxis was prohibitive.

After a metaphorical two years in black Gladys had thought that it would be socially acceptable to consider a new relationship. In her own mind, or should that be in her own heart, she had felt she was ready. That was thirteen years ago, thirteen years of hoping to meet somebody else. Thirteen years of being bored by dominoes. Every time a new man walked into the village hall there had been a frisson of excitement; could this be the one? Could this be the man to ask her out? Could this be the man to end her boredom? Could this be her knight in shining armour? Questions that had over the years been answered with unerring consistency, in the negative. In thirteen years eleven frissons, all short lived, none lasting more than thirty seconds before a second new face sidled up to him and turned out to be his wife. Thirteen years to prove that village life wasn't going to fulfil her romantic ideals.

Moving to a town wasn't an option, property prices tended to be higher in towns. She had no capital to put toward a new house and insufficient income to consider a mortgage, not that any lender would offer her one at her time of life. Downsizing wasn't a realistic option as she currently resided in a very small house. Even though she had long accepted that dominoes was never going to bring Prince Charming and boring as it undoubtedly was, it was still an evening out, a chance to socialise with the other players.

When Malcolm walked into the village hall, a gentleman who looked to be of a similar age, Gladys barely acknowledged his presence. As 70-year-olds go, he was undeniably handsome in a distinguished sort of way. From experience Gladys was certain that in a very short space of time he would be joined by another new face, a female, wife-type of new face. Unless of course he was gay. Gladys had never personally known a gay man, but she knew that the world was changing and that many more men now felt comfortable about letting others know about their sexual orientation. She had heard that gay men could often be fastidious about their appearance. This new man was reasonably tall with no fat. He held himself well, looking almost athletic. His shirt patterned with small checks had a country gentleman feel about it. The crease in his beige trousers sharp enough to slice bread, his brown shoes so shiny he could have used them as a shaving mirror. Here was a man that any self-respecting woman of 70 would be proud to be seen on the arm of.

The new fella floated around the hall with an almost balletic ease, talking with several of the regulars as though he had known them all his life. He seemed to be getting on better with

them than Gladys ever had, and she'd known them for years. The grace and poise of the man suggested he would be a good dancer, he clearly had impressive social skills. Gladys, and every other woman in the hall for that matter, could tell that he would represent quite a catch.

Several minutes had passed, still no wife by his side. Gladys mused that he must be gay, but then thought that perhaps he had left his wife indoors, possibly because she was feeling a bit under the weather.

"Even if he does turn out to be straight and not have a wife I have no chance, he's way out of my league." Thought Gladys.

Stan the man who had organised the dominoes for the last ten years was well aware that they were late starting play and sounded a little irritated as he asked everybody to take their seats. Here was one man at least who appeared not to have been charmed by the charmer. He was very much in the minority.

The new gentleman, or 'handsome stranger' as Gladys had dubbed him came over to the table where Gladys sat. This really shouldn't have been a surprise after all he had seemingly endeavoured to talk to everybody else. Malcolm smiled warmly as he introduced himself looking into Gladys's eyes. Gladys hoped that nobody had noticed her blush but people walking past on the other side of the street casting a casual glance through the window would have been able to spot it. In an instant she knew that his easy-going charm could easily sweep her off her feet, if only he wasn't married or gay.

"Do you mind if I sit down here?"

Gladys didn't mind, she didn't mind at all, but where would his wife sit? Somebody as polite as Malcolm would not make the faux pas of choosing a seat where there was no room for his wife. This could be regarded as prima facie evidence that his wife wasn't coming. Besides she surely would have been here by now. Dare she hope that there was no wife.

There were four people sat around the table but there were two that Gladys no longer noticed. Malcolm was far too well mannered to ignore the other two players but clearly spent more time engaging with Gladys. He missed no opportunity to praise Gladys's skill at dominoes, a new but not unwelcome sensation. It would be fair to say they got on like a house on fire. During the course of the evening Malcolm revealed himself to be a widower of two years standing. He felt that it would now be socially acceptable to look for female companionship. It transpired that he had remained fit and healthy largely due to being a more than competent tennis player and yes, he could dance.

Following the best domino session ever, there ought to have been a solitary walk back through the village to her humble abode but on this magical evening Malcolm had offered to see her home. Their route passed 'The Dog And Duck'. As they approached the pub Gladys sensed that Malcolm had some interest in calling in, but he hadn't said anything. Could this be because he didn't want to presume too much in their fledgling relationship? Or was it that he considered the possibility that for a respectable woman the local might

seem like a den of iniquity. Not wanting this glorious evening to end Gladys decided to take the bull by the horns.

“Did you want to pop into the pub?” She asked.

“I would have liked that very much but unfortunately I’ve come out without my wallet.”

Gladys knew she had £10 in her purse, her last £10.

“That’s OK I’ll get these, but it would look better if you asked for the drinks and paid.”

So saying she handed over her one and only bank note before Malcolm opened the door to the saloon bar. As they walked in she said

“If they do wine by the glass, I’ll have a Chardonnay.”

The barman had some bad news, no Chardonnay, he offered Sauvignon Blanc or Pinot Grigio. To Gladys he was speaking a foreign language, she hadn’t heard of either. There was potential for embarrassment but her knight in shining armour came to her rescue and ordered a glass of Pinot and a pint of IPA. The bill being £7.60, the £2.40 change went into Malcolm’s pocket. Gladys certainly could have done with that change and hoped that Malcolm was being discreet and would give her back the change later.

Sitting down Gladys sipped at her wine.

“This is nice. I’ve never had this wine before.” She enthused.

It seemed as though they had moved on from a friendship/companionship type of meeting to a date. Malcolm was very attentive, a good listener, amusing and knowledgeable. He proffered several compliments making Gladys feel better than she had done in many a long year. As they left the pub Malcolm’s left hand felt for Gladys’s right hand where it was keenly accepted. An electrical charge of excitement propelled itself up Gladys right arm and throughout her entire body. This was no mere frisson, Gladys had known nothing like it. As they walked hand in hand, slowly through the village it was now dark but still warm from the heat of a fine summer’s day. To Gladys it was the perfect evening.

“This is me.”

Said the happiest woman in the world as she reached the path leading to her door. On the doorstep Malcolm stopped and faced her their hands still very much together. Now his right arm reached around behind her and brought her closer. She offered no resistance as their lips came together. He kissed her in a way that she had never been kissed before. He kissed her in a way that she wanted to be kissed for evermore.

In her joy it was difficult to think at all let alone think straight. Gladys wanted to ask him in for coffee. Her romantic ideals would have him be too much of a gentleman to accept such an offer when they had only just met. But long-feared extinct desires were being strangely resurrected and she found herself hoping that Malcolm would come in and stay for breakfast. This could be the acid test, was he gentleman or cad? Looking back on it Gladys felt it was a win/win situation.

Traditionally knights in shining armour are gentleman, chivalrous to a tee. Malcolm having been cast in this role was compelled to decline the invitation. He did however exchange phone numbers and arranged to call the following morning for a drive in the country.

As a euphoric Gladys closed her front door, she thought to herself. "He has a car. That has to be the icing on an already scrumptious cake." The only downside was that she wouldn't have time in the morning to ring her two sisters and tell them of her tremendous, good fortune. She would have to wait until the evening to ring her son and daughter as they would both be out at work.

Several dates followed in which Malcolm always managed to convey his appreciation of Gladys's company. He was never less than attentive, always witty and charming. If Gladys thought that all of this was too good to be true, there was yet further good news. She found out that Malcolm was a dab hand with a screwdriver and a paintbrush. He seemed to be able to accomplish any feat of DIY, plumbing, electrics, nothing phased him.

The sisters, children and grandchildren were really pleased for her, glad that Gladys had found happiness and were keen to meet the new man in her life. Malcolm on the other hand had no family itching to meet Gladys. He had outlived his siblings and not kept in touch with their offspring. Nor had he maintained contact with the family of any of his three wives. He did have a son from his second marriage, but the son had taken his mother's side when they divorced and wanted nothing to do with his father.

These were surprising revelations given that Malcolm always seemed so affable and at ease in any company. Gladys had to believe that fault lay with the other party in each instance despite the statistically unlikely nature of her conclusion.

As the weeks turned into months and all of Gladys's family having given their approval it seemed only right that the relationship should be allowed to develop.

Soon thoughts turned to taking a holiday together. A bit of winter sunshine had definite appeal. There was however one significant obstacle. Malcolm elucidated.

"I'm afraid I don't have any money for a holiday. I have no savings, my late wife's funeral left me with nothing. With my pensions it is a struggle to pay my rent each month."

This was a body blow for Gladys, whenever her flights of fancy included moving in together she imagined Malcolm to own his house and the possibility of selling one of their homes to have capital to enjoy through their last years. She had never seen Malcolm's home; he had the car so he came to her. It possibly was a little strange, in their village it cannot have been far to walk. He had said remarkably little about where he lived, Gladys had dared to hope that it was a nicer home than hers. Meanwhile Malcolm was still unburdening his soul.

"In going out with you I have spent beyond my resources and got into arrears with the rent. My landlord has mentioned eviction. You see if I were to move in with you we could live a lot cheaper than maintaining two separate households. We would save more than just the rent."

Fortunately, Gladys was more than ready to cohabit. It wasn't the ideal scenario; it wasn't the way she would have liked this to have happened, but it served a purpose. Malcolm had more to say though.

"If you took out equity release, we could clear my rent arrears and go on holiday."

"I don't understand equity release."

"It is a product offered by insurance companies. Effectively they make you a loan as a bank or building society might. It is a loan without repayments secured against your house. Over the years they add interest to the amount borrowed. When your house is sold the insurance company has first call on the proceeds of the sale. In effect when you die you do not have the whole current market value of your house to pass on to your children. Usually, you can borrow up to 30% of the current market value. They charge a fee for arranging the loan and you need to instruct a solicitor, but these are costs that can be paid out of the loan, leaving you with tens of thousands of pounds to enjoy."

Having known nothing of this Gladys was impressed that Malcolm was such a man of the world. Having been struggling to make ends meet for so long the thought of having money to spend was a glorious one.

"Neither of my children could be said to be in need of money from me. Let's do it, let's enjoy our retirement."

Wasting no time Malcolm rang a well-known insurance company and arranged an appointment. Whilst they were waiting for the valuation, they opened a joint bank account and arranged for their pensions to be paid into it and various direct debits to be paid from it.

Next came the bit that offered Gladys the most trepidation, Malcolm bringing all of his stuff round to her little house. Where on earth would she put it all? In the event she needn't have worried Malcolm had surprising few possessions to show for seventy years on this planet. No furniture, just clothes, a gentleman's traditional grooming tools and a few odd mementos.

Six weeks later with the best part of £60,000 sitting in the joint account Malcolm was able to pay off his rent arrears. The future looked decidedly rosy. Plus they had Gladys's granddaughter staying for the weekend and booking a holiday to look forward to.

On the Monday Malcolm had popped out in the car on an errand leaving Gladys to the washing up. The phone rang, it was Caroline her daughter. Gladys took the opportunity to say how wonderful it had been having her granddaughter for the weekend and to enthuse about having had a good time. She was particularly proud of how well Malcolm had got on with the granddaughter.

"Debbie is nearly 14 and looking quite grown up, a proper young lady."

She was rudely interrupted before she could gush any further

“Mum that’s what I want to talk you about. Last night I had a long chat with Debbie. She said that when she greeted Malcolm with a hug his hand strayed to her bottom.”

Gladys’s heart sank. She hoped that this was something of an exaggeration if not an outright lie. Her daughter hadn’t finished though.

“She said that on Saturday night/Sunday morning she awoke to find Malcolm leaning over her, like he was about to kiss her. His pyjama trousers were ‘round his ankles. They had a whispered conversation in which Debbie explained the best that he could hope for was that she didn’t scream the house down. He pulled his pyjamas up and left.”

“Do you believe her?”

“I wouldn’t have rung you if I didn’t. I wouldn’t have taken the day off work to ring you if I didn’t believe her. We haven’t yet told her father.”

“Look I don’t know what to say. Malcolm isn’t in at the moment; I’ll get his side of it when he comes home. Perhaps I could ring you back then.”

The next day Caroline rang again.

“I’ve taken another day off to hear what Malcolm had to say for himself.”

“He hasn’t come home from when he went out yesterday morning. I haven’t heard from him. I fear something may have happened to him.”

“I fear it may be an admission of guilt. I’m wondering if I should call the police.”

“I thought that you had to leave it 48 hours before reporting a missing person.”

“That’s not what I meant. I mean in relation to the incident with Debbie.”

“Have you told her father yet?”

“No, I wanted to hear Malcolm’s side of it first.”

“You’ll need to talk to Debbie’s father first. He will have a view on whether or not to involve the police.”

“Of course.”

“All I can say is I’m sorry that we find ourselves in this situation and I’ll let you know when I hear from Malcolm.”

Gladys was pleased that she had managed to hold back the tears until she had put the receiver down. They then flowed freely for the best part of an hour.

Tuesday night arrived before Malcolm did. Gladys resolved to report Malcolm as missing.

On Wednesday, however her resolve betrayed her and she spent a long, lonely day wallowing in self-pity.

Thursday morning’s post brought two official looking envelopes, one addressed to Gladys, the other to Malcolm. Her’s informed her that a direct debit had been refused because

there was insufficient funds in the joint account. Alarm bells rang loudly. Gladys wondered why she hadn't done this sooner as she checked Malcolm's drawers in their bedroom. There was very little of his left behind, clearly, he had packed his bags, he wasn't coming back.

Now the letter downstairs addressed to Malcolm grew in significance, she had to know the content. It has been claimed that envelopes can be opened using the steam of a kettle so that the addressee doesn't know the contents have been read. Initially Gladys put the kettle on but soon decided that in the circumstances she was perfectly entitled to read whatever was inside and just ripped the envelope open. It was from Malcolm's landlord, threatening legal action over his significant rent arrears.

The mist was lifting, the picture was becoming clearer. She needed to go into town to check with the bank and then on to the police station. A kindly neighbour had on occasion offered to drive her in to the next town, now seemed like the right time to take her up on her offer.

Fortunately, Mavis was home and seeing her neighbour in obvious distress was only too eager to help.

At the bank they discovered that all of the money in the joint account had been transferred to another account the previous week. The name on the other account was not Malcolm's however, it was in the name of George Williamson.

Gladys and Mavis were at the police station for over 3 hours. There they were informed that neither Malcolm or George was his real name, they were two of seven aliases known to be used by Sidney Long. Long had a criminal record for deception, fraud and bigamy. He had been married nine times, three of them legally, and each time had departed, never to be seen again, with his wife's money. George Williamson had emptied and closed his account.

It was a sorry catalogue of events and Gladys could kick herself for being so beguiled by him. She now felt a real loathing for the man. She had no doubt that Debbie was telling the truth and found herself hoping that her son-in-law caught up with Malcolm before the police found him. She now realised that there really is a thin line between love and hate.

As they left the police station Gladys trying to sound philosophical turned to Mavis and said.

"I should have known I couldn't trust him; love means nothing to tennis players."