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SIMON BOOKER

THREE'S A CROWD



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For Abigail

TOM

What would happen if an estranged father and son fell in love with the same woman? It's not something I'd considered – until it happened to me. Who would win? Could there *be* a winner, or would the whole thing end in tears and sick? If you'd asked these questions a few months ago I'd have told you to stop being an idiot, but life has a way of teaching us lessons we don't want to learn. Especially when it comes to what I can only describe as my father.

'If you love someone, set them free. If they don't come back, hunt them down and drown them in a sack.'

I think he was joking when he sent that text on the day Mum left in search of 'some space' but given his oddball sense of humour I can't be certain. We haven't spoken for a year. Our last phone call was typical.

'Are you blaming me for your mother's behaviour?'

'No, Dad, but let's face it – you *are* difficult to live with.'

I heard him light a cigarette before uttering the harshest insult in his lexicon – the B-word.

'Don't be boring, Tom. You want to know what's difficult to live with? Haemorrhoids. Me, I'm a day at the beach.'

If you think my father sounds a zillion years old, Jewish and American you'd make his day but he's none of the above. Truth is, he's more Cricklewood than Hollywood but as a fan of Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David he sometimes likes to mimic the way they speak. Nudging fifty, he's, like, six-foot tall – a fedora-wearing silver fox, improbably fit for a lifelong smoker and seldom seen wearing anything other than a Paul Smith suit. I once saw a woman walk into a lamppost, distracted by his bum.

'How's the great British musical coming along?'

His question oozed sarcasm. I can't blame him. Two years ago I made the mistake of telling him I was writing another musical, my fifth attempt – or was it sixth? By working evenings and weekends I'd notched up four and a half songs and a patchy libretto without a satisfying arc or resolution. The show is about dysfunctional families. God knows where I get my ideas.

My excuse for such slow progress was the day-job. Unlikely as it may seem, churning out articles for *Double Glazing Monthly* involves the same part of the brain needed to write a hit West End show, which means I'm out of creative juice by the end of the working day. So sue me, as my father might say.

'I'm hoping to finish it soon,' I said.

'And I'm hoping for lunch with Scarlett Johansson. How soon is "soon"?'

'Like, end of the year.'

'This year? Next year?'

'This year.'

'I won't hold my breath.'

I'm used to my father throwing shade at me. The worst day of his life was when I beat him at tennis. I shit you not. I was eleven. I know he thinks I'm, like, gay because, well, musicals, but I happen to be straight.

'I've had a terrific idea,' he said. '*Depression: The Musical*. What do you think?'

'Are you okay, Dad?'

'Never better.' I heard him drag on his cigarette. 'So why did you call?'

'Mum told me she's taking a sabbatical in Goa. She said I should look after you.'

'I don't need looking after. Especially by someone who thinks I'm difficult.'

'Mate, you *are* difficult. That doesn't mean I don't, like, *care* about you.'

'Care-schmare. And for God's sake, stop saying "like" every five seconds. It makes you sound like an idiotic American schoolgirl.' Then came the kicker. 'And don't call for a while. If your mother can go off the radar, so can I.'

His voice had fallen to a whisper.

'Dad?'

No reply.

'Dad?'

But he was gone.

*

That was a year ago. I phoned every day for, like, weeks. Left a dozen voicemails, maybe more. I cycled to his flat, the top two floors of a grand white-stucco house in Belsize Park, a leafy enclave for bankers who think proximity to Hampstead lends an air of intellectual respectability. Dad bought the flat years ago, before the London property market went nuts. Lucky bastard.

The lights were on and his car was parked outside, its engine still warm, so I knew he was at home. There's no mistaking the classic Jag – a 1964 red E-Type, number plate: RY 1. I rang the doorbell a million times. No response. Over the next couple of months I paid more abortive visits, left scores of messages and sent dozens of emails. Finally, I gave up and I guess we're now officially 'estranged'.

I know he's alive because I sometimes hear the first few minutes of his show. Every so often, at noon on a weekday, I find a pretext to nip out of the office and hold my mobile to my ear to catch him introducing the first 'lunchtime love song' on Silk FM. Then I know he's okay, just being Dad. Which is fine.

Absolutely fine.

Actually, it's an improvement. When I turned six, he barely spoke to me for over a year, except to ask me to tell Mum something, like he'd be away for the weekend or the school said I had nits. He stopped speaking to her for that same year – literally not a word – but never explained why. Neither did she. Go figure.

As for Mum, I receive monthly emails from the Blue

Moon Yoga Retreat on Patnem Beach along with copious instructions on how to breathe. I refrain from reminding her that I've been breathing fine for twenty-five years. I also resist the temptation to ask what she's playing at.

Okay, so she too will soon hit the Big Five-O and deserves some me-time, especially after seeing her beloved LadyKabs go bust (thanks Uber!) and putting up with Dad, but leaving him alone for, like, *a whole year*?

I glimpsed him once, a couple of months ago, on his birthday. I was cycling past the Silk FM studios on Shaftesbury Avenue and saw him getting into a taxi. He was with a blonde woman in sunglasses. I could pretend I was just passing, but my office is on the Embankment, in an ugly seventies block overlooking the Thames, so there's no getting away from the fact that I was checking up on him.

God knows how things will be when he's old and can't wipe his own arse. Given our history, no one could blame me for letting him rot but I won't, even if Mum stays away forever. He may have been a rubbish dad but at least he was *there*, which is more than can be said for his own father, last heard of fleecing wealthy widows in Monaco and Palm Beach.

Meanwhile, there's a pain-in-the-arse new editor at work and no sign of Ms Right, or even Ms Right-Now. Last week, I had a haircut I didn't need, just to feel a woman's hands running through my hair. I had a crescent moon tattooed on my forearm for the same reason, to feel a woman's touch. If that's not tragic (okay, borderline creepy) I don't know what is.

On the bright side, the barista at the New Dalston Café is worth paying over the odds for below average coffee. She's older than me – I'm guessing mid-thirties. Her name's Harriet. She has long chestnut hair and the most beautiful green eyes I've ever seen. This morning we bantered while she sprinkled extra cinnamon on my cappuccino. Great smile, gorgeous voice.

Not gonna lie, I think she likes me.

HARRIET

Dear blokes, on behalf of women everywhere, you have no idea how little you need to do to impress us.

A) Learn how to listen.

B) Don't be a fuck-nugget.

C) There is no C. Just A) and B). Trust me, the bar is really low.

Take 'Extra Cinnamon Guy'. Okay, he's easy on the eye but when it comes to chat-up lines and banter: must try harder.

Yes, I'm new at the café.

No, I don't bake the muffins myself.

Yep, they do look tasty.

And speaking of blokes, note to self: next time you fall for some random dick-wazzock, ask outright – are you married? And don't stop there, obvs. Are you married with kids and do you get a kick out of stringing women along for *two years*, especially women with what you'd call 'body-clock issues'? Just 'cos I *seem* worldly-wise doesn't make me anything of the

kind. I'm thirty-five and I've had three proper boyfriends. Exhibit One fell in love with my so-called best friend. Number Two announced he was gay during a weekend in Marrakech then disappeared with a waiter. Hashtag Bastard #3 omitted to mention his WIFE AND TWO KIDS, which makes him not only a shit but the shittiest shit ever to come from Shit-world and leave a shitty trail of shite.

Better out than in, as Nan would say.

I'm not in a state because of Damian, aka Love Rat, aka Cockweasel (that scar is fading, thank God) but because The Thoughts keep coming and **OMG I COULD THROW SCALDING WATER ON THAT CUSTOMER RIGHT NOW!** (there you go, right on cue). There doesn't seem to be anything I can do to stop them happening whenever they like. Apparently, they have a name: Intrusive Thoughts. The CBT woman told me they're more common than you might think, a form of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and pretty much everyone has them at some point, but while she was speaking all I could think was, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy is bullshit and **WHAT IF I STABBED YOU IN THE EYE WITH YOUR PEN?**

Still, I completed the six-week course – part hope, part desperation. Because when you're an actress and The Thoughts keep coming while you're onstage in front of an audience or surrounded by cast and crew on a TV or film set and all you can think is **I'M GOING TO FLASH MY BOOBS!** you end up paralysed with anxiety and suffering the worst form of stage fright, something people dismiss as

luvvie-speak for 'a bit nervous' but which makes it impossible for you to do the job you've spent your life training for and killing your career stone dead. It's not the same as Tourette's, BTW, that's a neuropsychiatric disorder that usually takes hold in childhood, whereas The Thoughts only started to become *really* intrusive when I hit my thirties.

Thank God people seem to like my voice. I'm okay in a little sound booth, just me with a producer on the other side of the glass working the widgets. A radio ad here, an audiobook there means I can still call myself a professional actress, but only just. Things might pick up when the full moon brings a grand cross with Jupiter, but lately even voice-over work seems to have dried up, which explains why I'm pulling double shifts at the New Dalston Café.

It's also why I entered the competition to be the Voice of London.

You know those tannoy announcements on the tube? *Mind the gap between the train and the platform edge. The next train to Cockfosters will arrive in two minutes.* That disembodied voice on the bus? *Seventy-three to Stoke Newington.* That could be me, assuming my voice hits the sweet spot with whoever dreamed up the competition on behalf of Silk FM and Transport for London. First prize: five thousand pounds and the chance to be the Voice of London. I'm guessing it would mean a few days in a small Soho studio, recording the announcements. I could handle that.

I think.

If I win (not gonna happen, I *never* win anything), and

assuming I can beat The Thoughts, maybe I'll finally pluck up courage to use the £5k to try my luck in Hollywood. Three months sofa-surfing should be enough to hook a decent agent and cash in on the demand for Brits. Assuming The Thoughts stop, of course, which is a big 'if'. I keep telling myself, 'think positive, Harriet' and 'fake it till you make it' and all that other self-help crap. Okay, here goes.

I'm visualizing it now. My name above the title.

Starring Harriet Brown . . .

A suite at the Chateau Marmont . . .

A star on Hollywood Boulevard . . .

On the other hand, if I never get well enough to go to LA I can spend the rest of my life as a bag lady, riding the tube all day and listening to myself bossing commuters about.

Please allow passengers off the train before boarding.

Move down inside the carriage. Please use all available space.

See? That's typical. I'm always planning for when things *don't* work out. Probably because apart from a six-week stint on *EastEnders* and years of what-the-hell-was-*that*-all-about? fringe theatre,* the truth is I'm just another wannabe, still living with Mum and Dad and serving lattes with a smile that doesn't reach my eyes. And no bloke. At thirty-five. Ideal for someone who was six when she decided on names

* I forgot, last year I 'played' a dead body in *Midsomer Murders*. I was able to do it because it didn't involve any actual lines, just lying in a ditch, because, you know, corpse. Even then, every time the director called 'Action', The Thoughts kept coming: **I'M GOING TO START SINGING AND RUIN THE TAKE!**

for the sprogs she'd have with Mr Right. (Annie, Dot and Freddie.)

Meanwhile, Mum and Dad are on their once-in-a-lifetime cruise. Three months with no escape from each other. Bet they're fighting like rats in a sack.

Actually, it's their bickering I miss most – the way the house comes alive when we're all at home: me watching telly, Dad botching some DIY, Mum baking a cake. After they left, I managed two nights on my own then moved in with Nan in Walthamstow. She always makes me laugh. Last night, after her bedtime Baileys, she listened to me wanging on about Cockweasel, took out her teeth then said, 'The best way to get over a bloke is to get under a bloke.' I like her style. (Not sure about her dildo collection, but that's another story.)

RICHARD

Every family has secrets but ours has more than most. For instance, no one knows I'm on happy pills, and Tom has no idea why his mother took off for Goa, nor the slightest inkling about what she calls 'the stuff' and that's how it will stay.

Meanwhile, yours truly is keeping shtum about my depression. I can't risk the bosses at Silk FM thinking I'm anything other than the cheery soul I pretend to be between noon and 3 p.m., Monday to Friday.

If being a DJ was a daft way to make a living when I was nineteen, it's more so now. Still, it keeps me in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, even though my salary is half what it was in my heyday. Somehow, more niche radio stations and DJs equals more choice for listeners and advertisers but less £££ for the people behind the microphone. Unless you're on the A-list, which I can't help noticing I'm not.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining. At the risk of sounding smug, the secret of professional contentment is simple: big fish, small pond. You get the kudos that comes

with a modicum of celebrity (decent tables in restaurants, etc.) without the neurosis that seems to make the premier league behave like arseholes.

It's not a bad life. While most of London fights for a seat on the tube, I stroll through town, arriving at the studios around 10. Over coffee, my producer, Pam, and I scroll through the emails and select six problems submitted by listeners, one for each half hour of the show – anything from bereavements to broken hearts, from eating disorders to erectile dysfunction.

Or loneliness.

I've learned a lot about that subject this year. My shrink told me 'depression is anger with nowhere to go', so I told *her* where to go and now I'm saving enough money to buy a better class of vino.

After selecting the problems of the day, I make notes on sources of help and information – advice that has been known to rescue listeners from despair. According to letters I receive, it may even have saved a life or two. So it's a daft way to make a living but it does no harm – perhaps even a little good.

After prepping the *Dear Richard* emails, I leaf through the red tops, looking for showbiz gossip to sprinkle among the classics for which *The Richard Young Show* is known.

By rights, I should be on Radio 2 at this stage of the game. I'm too young to be working for what one snarky critic labelled 'Stairlift FM' but like all freelancers, I take what I can get. Besides, I've come to appreciate the likes of Frank

Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Tony Bennett, Nina Simone et al. – giants whose talent will outlast even the best of today's so-called stars. Ed Sheeran? Adele? Gimme a break.

The session singers who recorded my jingles placed the emphasis on my last name (Richard *Young!*) which is why I chose a single-syllable surname when starting out. Let's face it, my real moniker was never going to catch on. Imagine the jingle.

Dick BROCKLEBANK!

I ditched the 'Dick', reverted to 'Richard' then toyed with other surnames.

Richard KNIGHT!

Richard PRINCE!

Richard LOVE!

Richard *Young*! won when Bonnie said she liked it. 'Young by name, young by nature.'

So that was that.

I'm not sure when I became 'the Agony Uncle of the Airwaves' but I suppose the nickname gives a USP to distinguish me from my fellow DJs, most of whom are little more than the human equivalent of a jukebox.

Even real talents such as Chris Evans pale alongside true originals like the late great Kenny Everett and, in his own daffy way, the indefatigable Tony Blackburn. Me, I'm halfway down the B-list and happy to muddle through to the final curtain. (Speaking of which, I promise not to have 'My Way' at my send-off. It's the most requested song at funerals. What is *wrong* with people?)

Assuming my ratings stay healthy, I'll soldier on till I drop at the mic. Welcome to the life of the DJ. Zero security and you're only as good as your last RAJAR figures.

As for what the doctor calls my 'low mood', losing my wife to a yoga teacher does little to boost serotonin levels. I haven't told Tom about his mother's affair and I doubt she's had the guts. Apparently, he's 'too sensitive'. Hmm . . . He certainly behaves like a snowflake. He also dresses down, even at work, like Mark Zuckerberg without the billions. And if he says 'like' one more time . . .

I know I haven't been fair on the boy – ignoring calls and emails, pretending to be out when the doorbell rings – but he's twenty-five, it's not my job to put a gloss on the world. Besides, going off the radar is more honest than pretending things are hunky-dory when they're not.

As for the rest of our so-called family, Bonnie's parents are no longer with us, neither is my mother, and it goes without saying that confiding in my father is out of the question. More anon, as they say.

I spend a lot of time hanging around the Silk FM studios, so I'm seldom alone for long, which is a blessing. The flat can seem very empty, the atmosphere as cheery as a launderette on a rainy Sunday night. Tom suggested a pet but I'm allergic to cats and dogs are too needy.

(I can hear Bonnie now. 'Pot meet kettle.')

If you believe her, I've never had a talent for friendship, one of my many shortcomings. Maybe she's right. It's not that I don't have ways of killing time. There's usually a PR

bash in the evening – a book launch or a screening, somewhere to scoff canapés so I needn't resort to the microwave every night – but I don't mind admitting: I miss having someone to do *nothing* with. As for women, I'm resigned to being invisible to the opposite sex. Unfairly, it happens to men later than women – around forty in my case – but it comes to us all and surely it's better to resign oneself to the inevitable than turn into one of those tragic Peter Pans, flirting for England and trying to catch any passing eye in the hope of an ego boost.

(Incidentally, anything you want to know about ready meals, I'm your man. My favourite is Marks and Spencer's Scottish Lochmuir oak-smoked salmon topped with Pacific-fresh king prawns. I also have a soft spot for their moussaka: intricate layers of tender minced lamb, sliced potatoes and roasted aubergines with a creamy béchamel sauce. I might write a book: *Ready Meals and Other Staging Posts on the Road to Hell*.)

I suppose there's a slim chance that Bonnie might come to her senses. Until then, there's *The Richard Young Show* to keep me from navel-gazing, plus a ton of extracurricular activities, like sifting through entries to the Voice of London competition. Over the years, I've talent-spotted several successful wannabes, plucking their DJ demos from the slush pile, so when Transport for London asked if I'd judge the shortlist of entrants it seemed like what Tom would call a no-brainer.

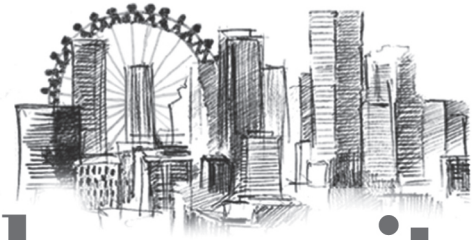
Few people understand the importance of a voice. Its timbre – its character – is as unique as any fingerprint. Reactions to a voice can determine the course of a life: jobs

you get, friends you make, people you fall for. When I met Bonnie she said mine sounded like 'honey on hot buttered toast'. God knows what she'd compare it to now. A worn-out Brillo pad?

Think about it. The voice you want to hear reading a bedtime story is different from the one you want whispering sweet nothings, and worlds apart from the voice you need ordering you to fasten your seatbelt and prepare for turbulence.

So far, my favourite Voice of London entry comes from an out-of-work actress who's making ends meet as a barista in a Dalston café. She sounds classy yet classless, calm yet authoritative, clever but not smart-arse. There's a husky quality to her voice that I find enticing. Apparently, her dream is to make the Hollywood big-time so she can buy her Nan a rose-covered cottage in the country.

No promises, my lovely, but if you're half as nice as you sound, you're very nice indeed. I'll put you at the top of the pile.



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