Date Expectations

Paul Reizin

Chapter 1

WARNING: THIS EXTRACT CONTAINS EXPLICIT LANGUAGE!

I AM EARLY. I'M early for everything. It comes from a morbid fear of being late. Which itself flows from a pathological dread of being left behind.

Any further back, to the infantile trauma that may lie at the root of it all, there is only darkness.

She will be late.Women are allowed to be. Are supposed to give it a fashionable five, ten minutes before making an entrance. By the time she comes sashaying into the bar, I shall be comfortably in position, easy to identify in my midnightblue Paul Smith suit, black roll-neck, and copy of The God of Small Things. She won't need to dither helplessly; she'll be able to swing right up to me, smile, deploy a slim hand for me to shake, and agree that if I am Paul, then she is Miriam. (I've thought this through, you can tell.)

But I am early.

Really horribly early. Twenty minutes, probably. With her ten-minute margin on top, we're talking half an hour of standing around getting nervous. I already feel uneasy about picking this place, the Library Bar at the Lanesborough Hotel on Hyde Park Corner. Now that I'm here, it seems far too grand, far too corporate for our purposes. I'd recently read something about the head barman being a cocktail star and the Martinis being world class. The name came right off the top of my head when she'd asked if I knew anywhere in town where we could meet.

Her voice, sexy and breathy on the telephone. I'd fallen for it instantly. Even when she revealed that she was a data analyst, I wasn't put off. I pictured glasses, creamy white blouse, layers of shiny dark hair falling against one another. I imagined her working late at the office, a pool of light cast by a desk lamp; head full of algorithms, the heart that yearned for romance . . .

'You're a boffin!' I cried, when she told me she'd studied Pure Mathematics at university.

'Not really.' A breathy resonance. Never had the words not really sounded more beguiling.

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Published by Bantam Press

'Bloody hell, though. Algebra.' There was something powerfully attractive to me about a girl who was good at algebra. 'Do they still call it algebra?'

'I believe so.'

'We did something called vectors at school. Do they still have vectors, or have they been abolished?'

She giggled. 'My work's more statistical . . .'

'The only statistic I remember is that on average 75 per cent of all adults, broken down by age and sex, say they have difficulty getting out of bed in the morning. The remaining 25 per cent were broken down by alcohol.'

She laughed like it was the first time she'd ever heard it.

'I read something the other day,' she offered when the hilarity had worn off. 'Ninety-six per cent of all documents that are filed are never looked at again.'

'Is that true?'

'It's quite sad in a way.'

'Is it? I suppose it is. Hard to feel sorry for documents, if you know what I mean.'

'All that effort. And time.'

'The futility of existence.' It was a long shot, but I thought I'd chuck it in.

'I do sometimes wonder what the point of it all is.'

'Do you? Do you really? How funny . . .'

This was marvellous. These were my sentiments exactly: what was the point of anything at all in the face of an uncaring cosmos? We seemed to be getting on famously, me and the mathematician. It was easily the sparkiest conversation I'd had since I finally plucked up the courage and began leaving replies for the lonely hearts whose ads I'd circled in the paper. I used to listen to their haunting voice messages on the phone before hanging up guiltily. It felt a little like eavesdropping on private pain.

'Isn't it a bit . . . desperate?' said Angela, one of my oldest friends, when I told her about Miriam.

There. Someone had uttered it. The d-word.

I'll tell you what's desperate, I replied. Desperate is leaving it to chance; desperate is continuing to drift through one's forties, hoping somehow to find a mate when one doesn't meet anyone new - never mind suitable - for months on end. Desperate is

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joining the book group or signing up for wineappreciation classes - not for the Julian Barnes or the Chateau d'Yquem, but on the microscopically small off-chance of copping off with a kindred soul (Angela had done both). Desperate is hauling oneself off to yet another dinner to endure yet another bungled attempt at matchmaking. The latest had been Sally.

'You must meet Sally,' Angela had told me. 'She's an absolute riot. I'll have a dinner.'

Sally jabbered, smoked like a train and had a worrying laugh. She was a riot only in the sense that one wished to suppress her brutally with water cannon.

'So you didn't like Sally. The laugh is problematic, I agree.'

'There's no hyena in her family, is there?'

'Oh, don't be horrid. She's lovely really. Anyway, you want to be careful replying to adverts. You could meet a madwoman.'

'Really? You think so?' Men are actually rather attracted to madwomen (it's the suggestion that they could be mad in bed). However, I did agree that I needed to be careful who I dated. My conversation with Celia the social worker was a case in point.

Celia (professional, late thirties) sounded depressed. Her answer to my question, 'So what sort of people do you tend to deal with, then?' ran for a good five minutes, and left me feeling considerably glummer about life than before I'd asked it. Her reply to my next inquiry - 'What do you do for fun?' - was no more uplifting, unless you believe sewing quilts and gardening are the answer to everything. I'd fired a little Chinese philosophy back at her when she mentioned the gardening thing.

'Confucius said if you want to be happy for an hour, get drunk. If you want to be happy for a year, get married. If you want to be happy for life, get a garden.'

There was a long pause.

'Have you ever been married?' she asked.

'No, I haven't, not as such. Not at all, actually. Not even nearly.'

I was trying to be light and frivolous, but I had a feeling I knew what was coming next.

'I was married very young,' she said. 'Much too young. I have a daughter.'

'Really? That's . . . that must be nice for you.'

'It is, we're very close. Nerys lives with me. She's in her second year at uni now.'

'Golly.'

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'Actually, I'm a little older than I put in my ad. I'm forty-four.'

My age.

'If you're a woman and you say you're in your mid forties, it puts some men off. Men who might want children.'

'I see.'

A pause. 'Do you want children, then?'

Well? Do I?

'I . . . I suppose so. Theoretically, I do, yes.' One of those nice quiet children. Who gets on with its Mr Men book. Who doesn't crayon all over my groovy yellow Conran sofa.

'I wish you luck with your search.'

'Thank you.'

'I'm probably too old for you.'

'Ooh, I er. It's.Well. You know.'

I pictured the gloomy garden flat (Highbury, she'd said). The stripped-pine furniture and quilts everywhere. The careworn mother. The lissom daughter wafting about. The all-pervading top note of cat pee (odd, because no cats had been mentioned).

She was right; it wasn't for me. And it had been decent of Celia to bow out.

But Miriam is mid thirties, lives in Chiswick. Likes reading, films, plays. Going out with friends. Occasional trips to the countryside. On the telephone she sounds like the bastard lovechild of Marilyn Monroe and Albert Einstein.

What's not to like?

I order a world-class vodka Martini and wait.

Mild nausea stirs in the pit of my stomach as a number of thoughts do laps round my skull: What the fuck am I doing here? I feel completely out of place in this smartypants bar. It must surely be obvious that I don't belong, despite the posh suit and the nonchalant way my newly shined shoe rests on the brass rail. The other people here, smart couples, groups of businessmen, they all look so assured, so . . . so grown-up. I bet the first encounter with their other halves wasn't like some spy drama in wartime Prague ('a tall balding man in a blue suit will be at the bar. He will be carrying a copy of The God of Small Things'). I bet it happened how it's supposed to: at work, at a dinner. A casual introduction from a friend of a friend. I wouldn't be

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at all surprised if he (the good-looking brute smoking the fat cigar) just walked up to her (the willowy blonde with the Chanel handbag) at a party and said hello in a certain insinuating way.

I tried it once myself. It was one of those great roiling thrashes that Angela used to throw, everyone slugging red wine out of plastic cups. The dialogue went like this:

ME: Hello.
HER:What?
ME [bellowing above the noise]: Hello!
HER: Oh. (Pause.) Hello.
ME: Do you know anyone here, then?
HER (after a pause): Sorry. I've just seen someone I know.

All relationships have to begin somewhere, however. Ralph, who I play tennis with, once told me how he met his partner. It wasn't in the lobby of the Danieli Hotel in Venice. Or the dining car of the Orient Express. It was the Islington branch of Marks and Spencer. He was standing at the checkout and found himself glancing into the basket of the woman in front of him. It contained, as he put it, 'a load of cakes, and sweets and crappy girly yoghurts and stuff'. There was obviously some sort of expression on his face, because when she noticed him staring at her shopping, her opening words were, 'What the fuck are you looking at?'

Ralph and Leanne now have two children together.

I was present when Caroline and Patrick set eyes on one another for the first time. It was in the 1980s. We were all employed by the same company, though Caroline and Patrick worked in separate departments. One evening, they both appeared at the local wine bar where colleagues gathered to medicate their stress. I have never forgotten the moment when someone introduced tall, handsome Patrick to beautiful, glamorous Caroline. I swear the light in the room changed; the actual air molecules between them seemed to vibrate differently. It was like that chemistry experiment when you add thingy sulphate to whatnot carbonate and the whole shooting match goes whoosh up the test-tube because of some profound atomic rearrangement.

Patrick and Caroline have been together for fifteen years and have three children.

I used to think I knew the story of how my parents met. It was Rome, 1946. My mother, aged twenty-four, is standing outside a greengrocer's shop staring at a display of oranges. After six years of war, it's been a long time since she's seen an orange. My father, then thirty-six, comes sauntering along, stops, and offers to buy her one. They fall in love and travel to England. In the fullness of time, I am born.

I like this story, because it seems to contain a truth about the chaos and randomness of the human condition. I also like it because for some reason I think of myself as the pip in that orange. Until my late thirties I used to purvey this account to friends as an accurate summary of how I came to be here.

But it isn't true.

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When I offered this version of our family history to my mother some years ago, she told me that, excepting for one detail, it was completely fictitious. She couldn't imagine how I had come by the scenario. (And nor, in truth, could I. I can only conclude that I dreamt it.)

The real story is this: Rome 1946. My father is standing in a bus queue when he hears Polish being spoken. Some men are having a political discussion, and he joins in. After a few moments, a young woman in the bus queue addresses my father in Polish. She'd 'admired the way he talked' apparently, with his characteristic intelligence and passion. She invites him back to where she is lodging with her mother and two younger sisters, the youngest of whom he falls in love with. They come to England. In the fullness of time I am born.

I have wondered recently why I invented the story with the oranges. Why I liked it so much that I allowed it to go unchallenged for so long.

Was it so satisfying because it spoke of the redemptive power of love after the horrors of war? Was it because I had orange hair as a child? Is there something life-enhancing about citrus fruit?

Is it, in fact, for all these reasons, and one more? That it's a better story than the boring old truth. A more magical one.

Like a blind date without the arrangements.

London, 1999. I am waiting to meet Miriam. I found Miriam in the Soul Mates pages of the Guardian. She was there in a long list of other 'Women Seeking Men'.

Attractive professional F, slim, mid thirties, WLTM sympathetic professional M with GSOH.

'Never bother with anyone who doesn't use the word attractive,' advised my friend Toby. 'Indicates low self-esteem. Probably justified.'

Toby had once 'done' the lonely hearts. Like everything else he turned his hand to, his trawl was exhaustive. Even if he hadn't discovered the love of his life, he had at least gone out with several 'bloody good sports'.

'I've been through all this malarkey,' he told me. 'It's like learning a foreign language. You just have to get hold of the phrase book. I'll be your phrase book until you get the hang of it. Use me as a resource.'

Toby speaks like this because he sees himself as a can-do sort of personality. He used to work in corporate finance until he was downsized. Now he's 'juggling'.

'If she doesn't say she's attractive, she'll be a hound. Probably have two heads. Three, quite possibly. And don't bother with anyone who claims to be bubbly. It means

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insane. Or fat. Personally, I could never go out with anyone who says thee-etter instead of theatre. You'll have your own prejudices, I expect.'

Toby stopped doing the lonely hearts when he started going out with the woman who lived in the flat across the road from him. One evening he watched as she tried to kill a wasp on the inside of her sitting-room window. This is just the sort of thing Toby is excellent at. When he saw she was getting nowhere, he performed a mime at his own window, offering to help. Angela and I think he and Wasp Woman may get married.

Miriam had not only specifically employed the a-word, she'd kicked off her advert with it. Bubbly had not shown up on the roster of blacklisted vocabulary. I'm fairly certain she even pronounced theatre in a way that Toby would have approved of. After our conversation, I had a clear picture of her in my head, even down to the brown glasses she wore that I felt denoted a shy, yet sexy and playful quality behind the intelligence.

But as I wait for Miriam to arrive, I feel nervy and out of sorts. My life is full of firsts at the moment. A few weeks ago, I broke a tooth on a bread roll for the first time. Only last week, a card came through the post advising me of the passing of someone I used to know very well, 'after a brave and cheerful struggle'. Sue couldn't have been older than me.

And now my first blind date.

A woman has materialized at my side. In an instant I know that this evening is going to be a disaster. Is already a disaster.

It's Miriam - no question about that - she's mid thirties, five eight, slim build and everything, but she's definitely not the Miriam I'd been waiting for. This Miriam has one of the strangest faces I've ever come across. The phrase that arcs across my brain is Easter Island statue. It's a long, almost ferocious countenance that meets mine. High forehead (an estate agent might call it double-height). Thick, dark eyebrows. There are ears, really quite prominent ears, poking through straight dark hair in a most uncompromising manner. Her mouth seems awkwardly over-large; not in a sensual, vulnerable way but in an awkwardly over-large way. The eyes are brown, as advertised - yes, I'll give them that - but they lurk behind lenses that do not speak of a shy, sexy, perhaps playful intelligence. These lenses speak of an owner who is very, very short-sighted. All my nerves dissolve. I struggle to keep the disappointment off my face.

'Paul?'

'Miriam!'

'Sorry. Am I very late?' Only the voice, the breathy squeal, is unchanged from the mental picture, much too sweet for the solemn, not to say scary features from which it emerges. Juxtaposed against the granite-carved visage, the contrast is surreal. She sounds like she's been dubbed.

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'Not at all.Would you like a drink?'

'Oh dear. I thought I was going to be terribly late. The Victoria Line . . .'

'Not at all. Don't worry about it.'

The barman shimmers up before us, eyebrows cocked. 'Good evening, madam.' It crosses my mind that perhaps he knows her. 'What would you care for this evening?'

I watch her face as she studies the drinks list, still flushed from whatever drama the Victoria Line has inflicted. Maori warrior princess, I'm thinking. A Maori warrior princess trapped inside the grey skirt and jacket of a London officeworker. Or Aztec fright mask. Something a bit fish-like, too. This was a face you'd see in your sleep. In a coma, quite possibly. 'Could I have a ginger beer?' she asks.

The barman doesn't flinch. Permits himself a discreet nod of the head. A weariness descends on me as I indicate that yes, I will have the same again.

'So,' she gushes. 'Here we are.'

You know how some faces look better when they're sad, or in repose - asleep even - than when they're lit by some happy emotion? I think that could be the case here. The big smile she fires up is undoubtedly sincere.Yet there is something anxietyinducing about its uncurbed enthusiasm.

'Here we are, all right,' I echo.

Damn it. She beams at me again, like I've just dropped the bonniest bon mot she's heard in a long while. A huge facesplitting grin which doesn't suit her at all. Her eyes do something blinky behind the powerful specs. Then she sighs heavily, exhaling into my face. Her breath smells of peppermint with a hint of green olive.

'I don't really know how to do this,' she says.

It's an absurdly frank admission. By this, I take it she means the whole blind-date thing. The whole artifice of the occasion - or do I mean absence of artifice? Normally when a man and a woman talk in a bar, they haven't specifically travelled there to discover whether or not they fancy one another. It may be that they do, or do not - and they do or do not act accordingly - but nothing is unspoken about the actual encounter. Here, our meeting seems circumscribed by the invisible infrastructure of the occasion.We Both Know Why We Are Here. In truth, it occurs to me, I don't know how to do this either.

'I think you just say the first thing that comes into your head.'

The world-class Martini has started to earn its purchase price. I can feel the cold vodka slipping into the co-pilot's seat alongside me. I am pleasantly losing sensation

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in that part of my brain that deals with embarrassment. If I don't fancy this woman - and I don't - there'll be no need to try and impress her. I can relax.

She sort of stares at me for a few seconds, like she's trying out a few things that might be passing through her head.

'So what do you actually do, then?' she asks.

'Sorry, I thought I'd said. I'm a producer.'

'I know you are. What I mean is, what does a producer actually do?'

Oh fuck. That old chestnut.

Briefly, I am tempted to give her a straight answer. The one about the producer being the bloke who brings together all the other talents and then attempts to manage them. I am tempted to quote Jackie Mason. His line about how everyone in New York says they're a producer: Here's my card, they say, I'm a producer. I'm a producer, here's my card. And that's all they produce - cards. But somehow I can't bring myself to do the accent - can't actually be bothered to try and make her laugh. I gaze for a long moment at her strange visage, each individual feature fine in itself, but all put together . . . well, for me, it just doesn't work, as we say in the TV biz. A configuration, you might say, that's been badly produced.

My heart sinks. What the fuck am I doing here?

But then my second Martini arrives.

'Did you get many replies to your ad?' I inquire, changing the subject. Attractive, she'd written. Strictly speaking, she wasn't unattractive. Just weird looking.Well weird.

'About thirty,' she replies.

'Really?' So many? 'So how many chaps have you seen?'

'None. One. Well, you actually.' Heavy sigh. 'You're the first.'

And then she blushes.

Oh great. Oh, just fucking great. Two blind-date virgins.

If anything was ever pointless, this surely was it.

I must be a fast learner. It's only my first blind date, but already I've absorbed Lesson One.

LESSON ONE:
The telephone is like radio.

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The pictures are better.

As Miriam tells me about the building work she's having done at her flat in Chiswick - and I chuckle knowingly about the perfidy of the men in white vans - I marvel at the contrast between the mental picture I had developed based on her voice alone and the remarkable female actuality that sits before me now.

We've found ourselves a quiet pair of armchairs opposite a pillar. She's gobbling the world-class complimentary nuts - I am fascinated at the way they vanish between her powerful jaws - and relating a fairly dull tale about a trip to a specialist bathroom-tile outlet with her friend Jonathan. The point of the story seems to be that if you have a small bathroom, you can make it feel bigger by using really big tiles - or is it really small ones? Anyhow Jonathan, who had recently renovated his own bathroom, had firm and specific views on the topic. However, once they reached the outlet, which for some reason was located in Croydon, and with Jonathan's help she had selected some very expensive limestone tiles, there followed a major disagreement between Jonathan and an employee of the outlet over their suitability for a confined space.

'Jonathan got terribly heated, because he studied the subject.'

'Bathroom tiles?'

'Art and design. At one point he started talking to this man in Italian.'

'Excitable, is he?'

'I think the tile man took against him when he started on about Renaissance architecture. In Croydon. On a Saturday afternoon. It was all rather embarrassing.'

Miriam mashes several cashews into her open maw with the palm of her hand. As she continues with the story, I allow my eyes to sink beneath the surface of my Martini, and summon to mind the woman that I'd imagined behind this voice. Oddly, that woman didn't have ears.Well, she did, but they weren't so defiantly in your face as these were. That woman's brown eyes contained a shy intelligence rather than a goggling myopia. That other woman's lips, though full and sensuous, did not look like they could take a hard-boiled egg in one. Sideways. That woman, in a nutshell, resembled Sandra Bullock. Or Renée Zellweger at a pinch. If this one resembles any sort of movie star, it's Harpo Marx.

'I think Jonathan was still upset by the argument, because that's when he went through the red light and the policeman pulled him over.'

Was it true, as the old proverb has it, that men fall in love through their eyes, women through their ears?

'He just totally lost it. Not with the policeman, with the steering wheel. He was slapping it and swearing. He actually went purple with anger.'

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Other people's lives. They're so peculiar, aren't they? Not odd peculiar necessarily . . . peculiar peculiar. There's something of other people's farts about other people's lives. Something a bit warm and disgusting about the dreadful little details. The aesthete male friend. The cosy car trip to Croydon. What was he doing helping Miriam buy bathroom tiles in the first place? Who was Jonathan? An ex, maybe? And why such a hair-trigger? Was he one of those talented youths who have grown old and angry at the widening gap between their beautiful dreams and mundane reality? Was he perhaps on powerful medication? Why was I being told all this? What, above all, did any of it have to do with me?

'He was in quite a lot of pain. And it actually turned out he'd dislocated his finger when he bashed the wheel.We had to wait three hours in casualty.'

I laugh. Serve the pretentious little fucker right, is what I am thinking.

'I suppose it is quite funny really.'

She sighs. Peers at me through the queasy aquarium lenses.

'I mustn't keep going on about myself. What about you?'

I have a sudden vision of what's lurking in my fridge. Cold roast chicken and coleslaw. That's what I'd rather be doing right now. I'd rather be at home, eating cold roast chicken and coleslaw. And chips. The plate on my knee, watching - what am I missing for this? - the documentary on Channel Four about plane crashes. If you survive the impact, you have ninety seconds to escape the flames, it said in the TV preview.

'What about me?'

She thinks about it for a moment. 'When did you lose all your hair, for example?'

'I haven't lost all my hair,' I retort. 'There's still quite a lot left, actually.'

I'm pretending to be hurt by the clumsy phrase for ironic purposes. Underneath, however, I really am a bit hurt.

'You didn't mention it on the phone.'

'Didn't I?'

'You said six foot two, blue suit and-'

'The God of Small Things. Perhaps I thought it might have-'

'. . . it wouldn't have put me off.'

I was going to say it might have put people off.

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'So when did it go?' she persists.

'It didn't just go, as you put it. There was no one moment. It happened imperceptibly slowly over the last twenty years.' Anyway, when did you wake up and discover you had a face like a haddock?

She sits staring at me. Perhaps my last reply came out a bit more sharply than I'd intended. In a consciously warmer tone I say, 'You know, I never think about it until someone reminds me. Is it a problem?'

'Oh no. Not at all. My dad was as bald as a coot - I loved him to bits,' she adds quickly.

The waiter approaches.

You should never drink more than two Martinis. It's more or less an internationally accepted principle. By rights, fish-face and I should shake hands, call it a goal-less draw, and retire to our respective suburbs. But somehow this doesn't feel quite the right moment to conclude the proceedings.

'Well, I will if you will,' I find myself saying.

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