The Other Woman

Jane Green

Extract

Pulling a sickie is not something I'm prone to do. And, while I'd like to say I feel sick, I don't. Not unless pre-wedding nerves, last-minute jitters and horrific amounts of stress count.

But nevertheless this morning I decided I deserved a day off — hell, possibly even two — so I phoned in first thing, knowing that as bad a liar as I am it would be far easier to lie to Penny, the receptionist, than to my boss.

'Oh, poor you.' Penny's voice was full of sympathy. 'But it's not surprising, given the wedding. Must be all the stress. You should just go to bed in a darkened room.'

'I will,' I said huskily, swiftly catching myself in the lie — migraine symptoms not including sore throats or fake sneezes — and getting off the phone as quickly as possible.

I did think vaguely about doing something delicious for myself today, something I'd never normally do. Manicures, pedicures, facials, things like that. But of course guilt has managed to prevail, and even though I live nowhere near my office in trendy Soho, I still know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that should I venture outside on the one day I'm pretending to be sick, someone from work will just happen to be at the end of my street.

So here I am. Watching dreadful daytime television on a cold January morning (although I did just manage to catch an item on 'updo's for weddings' which may turn out to be incredibly useful), eating my way through a packet of custard creams (my last chance before the wedding diet goes into full acceleration) and wondering whether there would be any chance of finding a masseuse — a proper one — to come to the house last minute to soothe the knots of tension away.

I manage to waste forty-five minutes flicking through the small ads in the local magazines, but somehow I don't think any of those masseuses are what I'm looking for: 'guaranteed discretion', 'sensual and intimate'. And then I reach the personal ads at the back.

I smile to myself reading through. Of course I'm reading through. I may be about to get married but I'm still interested in seeing what's out there, not that, I have to admit, I've ever actually gone down the personal-ad route. But I know a friend who has. Honestly.

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And a wave of warmth, and yes, I'll admit it, smugness, comes over me. I don't ever have to tell anyone that I have a good sense of humour, or that I look a bit like Renée Zellwegger, but only if I pout and squint my eyes up very, very small, or that I love the requisite walks in the country and curling up by a log fire.

Not that any of that's not true, but how lovely, how lucky am I, that I don't have to explain myself, or describe myself, or pretend to be someone other than myself ever again.

Thank God for Dan. Thank you, God, for Dan. I slide my feet into huge fluffy slippers, scrape my hair back into a ponytail and wrap Dan's huge, voluminous towelling robe around me as I skate my way down the hallway to the kitchen.

Dan and Ellie. Ellie and Dan. Mrs Dan Cooper. Mrs Ellie Cooper. Ellie Cooper. I trill the words out, thrilling at how unfamiliar they sound, how they will be true in just over a month, how I got to have a fairytale ending after all.

And, despite the cloudy sky, the drizzle that seems to be omnipresent throughout this winter, I feel myself light up, as if the sun suddenly appeared at the living-room window specifically to shine its warmth upon me.

The problem with feeling guilty about pulling sickies, as I now discover, is that you end up too terrified to leave the house, and therefore waste the entire day. And of course the less you do, the less you want to do, so by two o'clock I'm bored, listless and sleepy. Rather than taking the easy option and going back to bed, I decide to wake myself up with a strong coffee, have a shower and finally get dressed.

The cappuccino machine - an early wedding present from my Chief Executive - shouts a shiny hello from its corner on the kitchen worktop, by far the most glamorous and high-tech object in the kitchen, if not the entire flat. Were it not for Dan, I'd never use the bloody thing, and that's despite a passion for strong, milky cappuccinos. Technology and I have never got on particularly well. The only technological area in which I excel is computers, but even then, now that all my junior colleagues are messing around with iPods and MPEGs and God knows what else, I'm beginning to be left behind there too.

My basic problem is not so much technology as paper: instruction manuals to be specific. I just haven't got the patience to read through them, and almost everything in my flat works eventually if I push a few buttons and hope for the best. Admittedly my video recorder has never actually recorded anything, but I only ever bought the machine to play rented videos on, not to record, so as far as I'm concerned it has fulfilled its purpose admirably.

Actually, come to think of it, not quite everything has worked that perfectly … The freezer has spent the last year filled with ice and icicles, although I think that somewhere behind the ice may be a year-old carton of Ben & Jerry's. And my hoover still has the same dustbag it's had since I bought it three years ago because I haven't quite figured out how to change it –I cut a hole in it when it was full one time and hand-pulled all the dust out, then sealed it back up with tape and that seems to do

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the job wonderfully. If anything, just think how much money I've saved myself on hoover bags.

Ah, yes, there is also the super-swish and super-expensive CD player that can take 400 discs at a time, but has in fact only ever held one at a time.

So things may not work the way they're supposed to, or in the way the manufacturers intended, but they work for me, and now I have Dan, Dan who will not lay a finger on any new purchase until he has read the instruction manual cover to cover, until he has ingested even the smallest of the small print, until he can recite the manual from memory alone.

And so Dan - bless him - now reads the manuals, and gives me demonstrations on how things like hoovers, tumble dryers and cappuccino machines work. The only saving grace to this, other than now being able to work the cappuccino machine, is that Dan has learnt to fine-tune his demonstrations so they last not longer than one minute, by which time I'll have completely tuned out and will be thinking either about new presentations at work, or possibly dreaming about floating on a desert island during our honeymoon.

But the cappuccino machine, I have to say, is brilliant, and God, am I happy I actually paid attention when Dan was showing me how it worked. It arrived three days ago, and thus far I've used it nine times. Two cups in the morning before leaving for work, one cup when I get home, and one, or two, in the evening after dinner, although after 8 p.m. we both switch to decaf.

And, as I'm tapping the coffee grains into the spoon to start making the coffee, I find myself thinking about spending the rest of my life with only one person.

I should feel scared. Apprehensive at the very least. But all I feel is pure, unadulterated joy.

Any doubts I may have about this wedding, about getting married, about spending the rest of my life with Dan have nothing whatsoever to do with Dan.

And everything to do with his mother.

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