

# I

## ‘A Nice Dream’

*Tom*

*Cemetery Road, Sheffield*  
*15th July 2015*

I don't talk out loud to my grandad. It feels unnatural when I see other people do it. Like they've seen it in a movie and thought it worth copying. I do still talk to him, though. Just in my head. I tell him about what's happened over the last month. I tell him about my band and the music and how things are going pretty well. And today, I tell him about the girl in the coffee shop, because, why not?

‘It would be handy,’ I confess through the power of thought, ‘if I didn't instantly fall in love with anyone who threw a smidgen of attention my way. I mean, all she did was, maybe, smile at me and I was fantasizing about us owning a cat, a cot and a cottage by the sea.’

I conjure up a response from him. ‘That sounds like a nice dream.’

The cemetery is deserted. The sun high enough in the sky to cast only tiny shadows on the rows and rows of headstones taking the form of crooked teeth in the ground.

Grandad reminds me, 'Back to this girl in the café?' His invented interruption takes me back to drinking coffee an hour before. I couldn't describe what she looked like now. For any would-be criminal, me doing an e-fit of them would be the equivalent of a get-out-of-jail-free card. I do remember her brown hair and brown eyes. I have a type, after all. But as time and distance grow between us, her face fades.

'What would Sarah think of all this?' Grandad replies with his bark of a laugh.

Sarah is my girlfriend. Sort of. She, rather coincidentally, also lives in Sheffield, so when I take the trip from Edinburgh I can kill two birds with one stone. Visit my grandfather's final resting place and see my fictitious other half. I made Sarah up after the boys in the band started questioning why I wouldn't talk to any girls after our gigs. Instead of confessing that I have crippling anxiety – that seems to be worse around the opposite sex – I thought it slightly more manly to just pretend I had a girlfriend who lives far enough away that they'll never have to see her. 'Sarah' is a junior doctor and so she works *a lot*. She's also incredibly intolerant of all forms of social media. Handy, that.

Sarah's been 'alive' for over a year now and, to date, her invention has had no negative consequences. When people ask when they'll meet her, I offer loose plans about soon or maybe at such and such, then when the day comes 'Her

work is a bit busy' or 'She has some family stuff going on.' It's a lie that will eventually be caught out, but for now it works wonders.

It's a long way to come to Sheffield from Edinburgh, but it's a journey I'm always glad I've taken. Grandad is the one family member I get on with. And while, true, he's been dead for five years, in many ways I still prefer his company. He was the reason I got into music.

Patrick Delaney, while never a household name, had a following of some pretty devout fans. He left behind three studio albums and one live record, as well as lending his skills to a number of other albums by better-known bands. His death, and the circumstances surrounding it, only added to his mystique. But to me, his only grandchild, he was a hero before I knew he'd toured the world. Before I knew he'd been praised by everyone from Dylan to Bowie. Thus began my journey to what is undeniably an all-encompassing obsession with music. It's why I'm so resolute that we will make it. I am driven by an absolute certitude that our music will one day take us to places we could only dream of.

Who cares if, right now, I'm rendered unable to speak to anyone I deem remotely attractive? Because in a few years' time, when me and the rest of our band are gracing the covers of every music magazine still in publication, then, well *then* I'll have confidence. I want that so-called normal life, and ironically, my best hope for getting there is through unbridled success. And with that success, in my own way, I'll keep my grandad's legacy alive. When

they ask me what my biggest inspiration is, I'll say, Patrick Delaney.

I'm suddenly motivated, for the first time ever, to say this last bit out loud.

'Love you, Grandad. See you next month.'

BOOKENDS

# Little Wiener Men

*Jess*

*Matilda Street, Sheffield*  
*15th July 2015*

The messages from Matt start off nice. Lots of checking if I'm OK. Concerned but respectful. About five minutes after my weird manic moment of running after a complete stranger, I decided our first-date set-up really wasn't going anywhere and so I let him down gently. Actually, I didn't do that. I said I wasn't feeling well and asked if we could rain-check, knowing full well that no matter how sunny the next day, there was no way I'd be seeing Matt again.

Within the first few minutes he'd wittered on about TV and films I just *had* to be watching and explained to me the virtues of the *beans* we were drinking and why they were *so special*. He was undeniably handsome. But I prefer a face with a little character. I'm not saying I'd love a partner with a gigantic nose or a mug with tattoos, just something unique

so I won't get bored gazing at it if we end up together for the next several decades.

Like that guy in the corner of the coffee shop. He had something interesting going on. Heavy-set, sure, but he wore it well. His Scandi-look of scarf and hat, even though it was inside and July, set him apart from anyone else I'd seen since the leaves turned green. I don't know. Maybe I was just looking for a distraction from Matt's disappointing introduction.

The nail in the coffin for Matt was his reaction to me finally getting a word in edgeways and telling him about my comedy. His response? 'I dunno. I just don't find women that funny. Is that so wrong to say?' Yes, Matt. Yes, it bloody well is.

My phone buzzes. Speak of the devil.

I hope I didn't say anything to upset you.

I'll reply when I get home. Let him know that we're just incompatible. It's fair that I'm honest rather than playing the game of 'Let's do this again sometime!' in the hope that he knows exactly what that means.

Another buzz. I'm Captain Popular today. Oh, it's Matt again.

I just don't understand what I did wrong. Please reply. Please.

All right, Matt, bit needy. It's only been ten minutes. If you're acting like this between the time it takes for me to

get to the next bus, I'd hate to think what you're like if you couldn't get a hold of me for . . . *Buzz* . . . Seriously? . . . *Buzz*.

Why are you being like this?

What's wrong with you?

Well, this is escalating quickly. To reply or not to reply? That is the question. Sort of intrigued as to where this is going if I don't. Another two buzzes.

I meet women like you all the time. You think your so special.

It's 'you're' not 'your' and what does 'women like me' mean? You spent approximately five minutes in my company. 'Women like me.' Oh. Right. Yep. I can see where this is heading. He's going to call me a bitch in the next one.

Just wait.

5, 4, 3, 2 . . .

Screw you. I wasn't into you anyway. And you've got fat legs.

Fat legs? I love my legs! I'm not always keen on the rest of me but, buddy, if you're looking to draw blood you can do better than insult my legs. Well. At least he didn't call me a . . . *Buzz*.

Bitch.

There it is.

So bloody predictable. Self-entitled tool. Should I reply? Chastise him for his unacceptable behaviour? I could, but my silence is clearly infuriating and I'm getting a cheap thrill out of him sitting in his chinos, sweating over what he may have done wrong. And really, what do you even say when someone is that thin-skinned? Why did I even hope for more?

I'm done. Done. Done. Done done done. Comedy career first. Little Wiener Men a very distant second.

'It's good material for our next show,' Julia says, buzzing around our kitchen making herself a gargantuan sandwich.

In the few years we've been housemates she's really made an art form of turning negatives into positives. It's why, whenever we bomb at an improv class, or one of our stand-up shows tanks, I always feel like it went better than it did. She's the Queen of Optimism by Osmosis and has prevented me throwing in the towel on many occasions.

'That's one way to look at it, I suppose,' I offer, as she hacks into a loaf to make a doorstop that would hold open the gates to Fort Knox. I'd like to see the funny side of this but this Dark Side of the Man is becoming a little too commonplace of late.

'Where was this one from?' she asks.

'Birmingham. "*This one*" – you make it sound like I go on a million dates. I'm twenty-seven. People aged twenty-seven are allowed to go on a few dates. And this is only, like, my third in a year.'



She affects a dodgy Brummie accent. ‘Birmingham, eh?’ It’s not Julia’s strong suit. ‘We could do a series of sketches, call it “Date Britain”. I’ll play the horror dates from across the UK, you play the poor unfortunate subject of their affections.’

‘Why do I have to play the sap?’

‘Because you have beautiful big brown eyes and thighs that make me very fucking jealous. Men love you within seconds.’

I throw a tea towel at her head because it’s hard to take a compliment, even from your best friend. Even if I do like my thighs very much, thank you, Matt. If I’m honest, I give the tea towel a little more force than needed, because if anyone in this duo gets men to fall in love with them in seconds it’s her. She has cool blonde hair (that always falls the way she wants) and flawless porcelain skin (that would make a china doll weep).

‘If all men loved me within seconds,’ I reason, ‘I think I’d be able to find someone that doesn’t make me want to scratch my eyes out with my own severed toes.’

‘Ooooooh, dark.’ Julia adds half a bag of lettuce to her sandwich, rendering the monstrosity half the size of her head. I gaze at it in wonderment. When she sees me, she radiates pride. She continues, ‘Maybe that’s where you need to go next. Dark and edgy. And sexy, with great thighs.’

‘Because that’s how we make it in the world of comedy?’ I trowel on the sarcasm. ‘By having nice legs?’

‘They helped get us booked for the show tonight.’

I’ve been working on my death stare and deliver it with aplomb. Jules retreats and changes the subject back to my latest car-crash date.

‘Don’t worry, you’ll find someone who isn’t a complete knob. One day. And you’ll make them very happy.’

She assesses how best to tackle her lunch, measuring it from every conceivable angle, trial and error. Then in a breathtaking act of physicality I didn’t think possible, her jaw widens and the sandwich goes in.

‘I’m not the only one,’ I add.

Through a mouthful of half-masticated food, Julia tells me that who knows, I might meet someone at our next gig.

‘An “industry boyfriend”?’ I reply with dripping disdain.

‘They won’t all be like Olly.’

The mere mention of his name sends a shudder down my spine. Olly, the boyfriend who genuinely had me believing in the existence of ‘good men’. Until the texts and the lies and the ex, who he just couldn’t live without, but didn’t have the balls to tell me about until he was sure she’d take him back.

I shake his existence away.

‘Nope. None of that, thank you,’ I tell her, while pinching a crisp off her plate. ‘I’ve decided, after today’s disaster date, that *all* of my attention needs to be on the comedy if I’ve any chance of making it.’

She senses the despondency and I know what she’s gearing up to do.

‘Jess,’ she begins, leaning into it, ‘who’s going to be a huge success?’

‘I am.’

‘Sorry, I missed that. Who’s going to be a huge success?’

‘I am.’

She puts down the sandwich and grabs me by the shoulder,  
her mouth thankfully now free of food.

‘Who. Is. Going. To. Be. A. Huge. Success?’

‘I am!’

‘One more time for the people in the cheap seats!’

‘I AM!’ I scream it with all my heart.

Our neighbours must love us.

BOOKENDS