

A Tray of Ice Cubes

Daphne and Colin were spending Friday evening as they spent most Friday evenings – in front of the telly with a microwaved dinner and a bottle of sweet German wine, watching their favourite programme; *a camcorder compilation of matrimonial mishaps and wedding-day disasters* called ‘The World’s Worst Weddings’.

Each programme treated its viewers to a parade of doomed brides tumbling down church steps, or skidding backwards and landing legs-in-the-air on dance floors. Beautifully crafted, four-tiered wedding cakes toppled slowly sideways like Pisan towers and then collapsed into rubbly heaps of icing. Horses bolted with their empty landaus from the church gates. The weather outside the churches was always turbulent, lifting the brides’ dresses up over their heads to reveal saucy bridal lingerie, or whipping the top hats off the heads of the men who chased them through churchyards like farmers after troupes of grey hens.

This anthology of crookedly shot, poorly focused visions of minor catastrophes had Daphne and Colin in stitches. They laughed until they hurt. They winced at painful bits (drunken sword-dancing, marquees bulging with stored rain), drew in their breath, gave each other mock-horrified looks, groaned, giggled, shook their heads pityingly and put their hands over their mouths.

By the end of the programme, as the credits rolled quickly over a reprise of the choicest clips, Colin and Daphne felt exhausted. Their jaws ached and their voices were hoarse. But at the same time they felt refreshed and reassured by the sense they had that other people’s lives were a train of small calamities, and that while their own lives might not be everything they’d wished for, at least they were ordered havens of static objects and common sense people. The World’s Worst Weddings renewed for them each week

their sense of their own worth as people while fortifying them for the routine struggles of the week ahead.

Daphne was manager of the Erith branch of BurgerWorld where she supervised a crew of twenty surly teenagers and two shift managers. She could handle (though rarely needed to) one hundred and fifty customers an hour. She was a good branch manager. She had, in the words of Dale, her area executive, 'ketchup in her blood'. She was blonde, wide, buxom and clever. She was forty-seven.

Colin her coeval, childhood sweetheart and husband of thirty years was a bus driver. He had power-steered red double-deckers from Trafalgar Square through the suburbs of South East London for almost as long as they'd been married. In the early days he had sat alone in the forward cab of a Routemaster, obeying the bells, buzzers and knocks of his conductor. Then, at the beginning of the Seventies, he was asked to merge two people into his one body and become both driver and conductor of the new pay-as-you-enter buses. It had been difficult at first, and he felt bad about the conductors who lost their jobs, but he managed the transition with some panache. He has twice been a finalist in the South East Bus Driver of the Year Awards. He genuinely cared about his human cargo. He took corners carefully. When he stopped he stopped gently and his passengers all nodded in unison. His sedentary life and fondness for the odd pint had given him a roly-poly figure and a thickening of fat around the neck. His hair was dark but thinning on top, combed back and out of the way behind his ears, half an inch short of unkempt. His teeth were sharp, symmetrical, stained with cigar tobacco.

He was stretched out on the couch, still in his bus drivers' uniform which, with its wine-coloured blazer and striped tie, made him look like a ridiculous schoolboy. This added to the shock Daphne felt when he turned his brick-red face, still damp with laughing, towards her and said, in a voice quiet with excitement,

"Love, I think I'm pregnant."

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Daphne was busy with tomatoes, slicing them in a machine called a tomato shark.

India, one of her shift managers, was preparing burger cartons. There was a lull in trade at BurgerWorld, as there usually was mid-afternoon. India hated these lulls as they made the time drag, although she found a simple satisfaction in the clever origami of her burger cartons. A flat card envelope is extracted from the packet which, with a deft twist of the thumbs, flips into a three-dimensional box with hinged lid, catch and steam vents.

Of all the crew India was closest to Daphne. They did not meet outside the workplace (apart from the Christmas do) but in BurgerWorld they regarded each other as friends. India liked Daphne's boldness, her sturdiness. She admired her. She thought if Daphne was a building she would be a provincial town hall – solid, sensible, yet not without ornamentation and humour. India would be one of those little striped tents workmen erect over manholes. So she reacted at first with disbelief and bewilderment when she noticed Daphne was crying.

She left her teetering tower of yet-to-be-filled cartons and walked hesitantly towards Daphne as if to a statue that had moved. Closer she could see it was true – Daphne, good old blonde-haired, piss-taking, dependable Daphne was crying. The water was spilling out of her eyes, falling off the end of her nose and salting her tomatoes.

“Are you crying, Daph?” India uselessly asked.

Daphne, whose head was hanging, suddenly drew her face back, as if to make the tears withdraw into her eyes. It was as though she hadn't known she was crying. She fumbled in her pocket for a hanky, couldn't find one. India gave her a serviette.

“Stupid,” said Daphne, holding the paper to her eyes like a blindfold, still with her other hand on the lever of the tomato shark.

“Anything I can do?” Said India.

Daphne took a deep breath, held it for what seemed like a dangerous length of time, then exhaled loudly. She took the paper away from her eyes, looked at India with a half smile that was meant to say ‘I'm fine now’, then collapsed into uncontrollable sobs. Some of the other staff noticed. Baseball-capped heads peered round the sides of broilers, or beneath frier hoods. India took hold of Daphne's shaking frame (the first time, she realised, that she'd touched her manager) and guided her into the cramped space of telephones, files, lists and memos that served as an office.

“What’s up Daph? What’s going on?”

“I can’t say. Nothing. Sod it.”

“Don’t you think you should talk about it?”

Daphne gave a choked laugh.

“I wouldn’t know where to begin.”

“Try the beginning.”

Daphne compressed her lips, shook her head so slightly it was like trembling.

“Is it your old man? Is there something wrong with Colin?”

This was an educated guess. Colin’s health was a regular topic of conversation between Daphne and India - his latest digestive problem or heart attack scare, his creeping arthritis, even his occasional lack of libido. India had never met Colin but she thought she must know more about his body than his own doctor.

India could tell by Daphne’s stillness that she’d hit the mark.

“What is it? Is he ill?”

“It sounds so stupid, India love. I don’t know how to say it. I haven’t told anyone, not even my Mum.”

“You can tell me.”

“Well I’ve got to tell someone...” Daphne was whispering now, even though there was no one within earshot, “...a few months ago – about six months ago – Colin got this idea into his head – I mean he really believes it, that he’s...”

“Yes?” India’s eyes were round and expectant.

“He thinks he’s pregnant.”

Silence.

Then India let out a giggle, quickly put her hand to her mouth as if to catch it, but she carried on giggling into her hand, muffled.

“Don’t India, please love.”

“I’m sorry, but this has got to be a joke, yeah?”

“That’s what I thought at first. A joke. A sick joke. We gave up trying to have kids ten years ago. I’ve told you all about that. There isn’t a day goes by, even now, when I don’t think about the kids we could have had if things had worked out. I could have been a gran by now. But I thought Colin had forgotten all about it. You know he never

was that bothered, not really, even when we were going up to the clinic every week. He was doing it for me really. But now it looks like something's got to him... He's started converting our spare room back into a nursery. We had it as a nursery when we were going for the treatment. Just hoping we could put a baby in it. Just to have the chance to muck around with baby things. When we finally called it a day we gutted the room. It broke my heart. We didn't throw anything away, it was funny, but suddenly everyone we knew needed baby stuff. Most of it went to my sister – the clothes, the cot, the majority of the toys. We painted over the Tiggers with oatmeal, then I used the room for my china painting. You know me and my china. We never miss a craft fair. I had a little kiln in there and everything. But now he's gone and painted new Tiggers on the walls. He's splashed out on a posh cot with brass bits on. He says we have to have everything ready in time. It's due in November."

"Daphne, you've got to get him to a doctor. Get his head sorted out..."

"I know. The trouble is, in every other way he's completely normal, you know, so Colinish, so bloody boringly Colinish. He's still driving his buses, though he reckons he won't fit behind the wheel for much longer. He's given up the pipe and cigars. He doesn't even have a drink now. He says he's got to take care of himself. But what really frightens me is that I'm starting to believe him. It's like I'm going mad as well. I find myself looking at his beer gut to see if it's getting bigger..."

"And is it?"

Daphne allowed herself a brief, sneezy laugh.

"I keep thinking it *is* getting bigger. And he's off the beer. When he's asleep I put my hand on it and feel for movements. Maybe I do feel something kick, or is it just a bubble of wind? Then I'll listen for a heartbeat. I can hear something, but is it just Colin's heart. I don't know..."

"But Daph, you've got to hold on to the true facts. You've got to remember he can't be pregnant."

"But why not?" Daphne's voice had acquired a haughtiness that was new to India. India tried to match the tone,

"He's a bloke isn't he?"

Daphne closed her eyes dismissively.

“Colin spun me this long story about how he went to a clinic where they’re testing out a new type of fertility treatment, which means the man carrying the embryo instead of the woman.”

India is dismissive now.

“It’s true,” Daphne continued, “I’ve read up about it. There are people doing work on it right now. They say they don’t need any wombs, just a place in the body with a good blood supply. They’ve planted fertilised eggs on the outer wall of the large intestine of a male mouse and it’s gone on to give birth. I know they need one of my eggs but Colin says they kept some from when we were going for the treatment. He reckons they’ve got a whole dish of them up there. I know it’s rubbish but I can’t help thinking sometimes. And then I look at that huge tummy of his and it moves...”

“Daphne, I don’t want to know. Of course he hasn’t been to any clinic. He’s flipped his lid. He’s got to that age, all men get to it.”

Daphne laughed inwardly at the confidence with which eighteen-year-old India talked about men.

“His tomatoes have gone to pot. The whole crop. Every year he grows these wonderful tomatoes. They’ve got the best spot in the garden, sunny all day long. He even goes down the stables with a shovel so he can mulch the horseshit into them. They’re ready by late August. Well, this year he’s just left them. He’d lost interest by June. They were still green in August. He says he’s gone right off tomatoes now, because of his condition. We used to have such lovely salads,” Daphne looked across at the bowl of heaped tomato slices, like opened hearts. “I had to pick them myself. Still green. He wasn’t going to bother. I put them in brown paper bags and kept them under the stairs. They’re only just beginning to go yellow now. He has cravings for potatoes.”

India didn’t know what to say. She noticed a poster on the back of the door which reminded staff of the importance of ‘add-ons’, and provided a script which specified the exact phrasing to be used. If a customer wants a hamburger, staff must say ‘would you like fries with that?’ If a customer wants a hamburger with fries, staff must say ‘would you like a drink with that?’ BurgerWorld provides staff with a script for almost every possible interaction with a customer, from the cheery greetings to the cheery goodbyes. Staff are expected to follow these scripts to the letter. India found it very helpful at first,

in dealing with customers, to have her words written for her in advance, but after a while she found that it damaged her ability to talk spontaneously outside the workplace. She wanted scripts for every social encounter, and had to work hard at relearning her ability to converse. Now, with Daphne, she longed again for guidance from head office.

“I’m out of my Depth, Daph.”

“I’m alright, India love. Get back to your prep. I’ll sort my old man out somehow.”

India went back to her prep, magicking cartons out of nothing. Daphne went back to slicing her tomatoes. They never, for the rest of their lives, say anything to each other on this subject again.

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The World’s Worst Weddings is on. Daphne is watching it alone. Colin is having a lie-down upstairs.

Daphne isn’t finding the programme funny this week. She is watching it but the laughter isn’t coming. Those toppling wedding cakes just look sad now. The windy wedding days, flooded marquees, runaway carriages. One clip in particular makes her wince – when a groom faints during the ceremony, falls into his wife-to-be and knocks her to the floor.

But she watches the programme anyway, even though she hasn’t found it funny for weeks. It is November now. Last year this programme saw them into winter, took them up to Christmas. But Daphne wonders if she’ll watch it again.

Colin is watching it on the portable upstairs, which produces a stereophonic effect. The laughter from the programme is thus given a strangely haunting quality, as though it is not coming from the television, but from the house itself.

Daphne, as the programme finishes with a curious note of triumphalism, barely notices the call coming from upstairs. Colin’s weak voice comes down to her

“Daph, love.”

“What is it?” She calls back, slightly impatiently. For the last two weeks Colin has been off work and has spent most of the time in bed.

“Can you come up, love?”

She leaves it for a few minutes, clears away her mostly uneaten pizza, puts a half-empty coffee mug into the sink, wipes the worktop and then goes wearily upstairs. Six months of worrying have exhausted her.

She walks into the bedroom. Colin is lying on his back on top of the bedclothes. His abdomen looks huge to her, suddenly, a great dome, all blubber, she is sure, but it has grown anyway over the last six months. He has the tv remote in his hand and is gripping it so hard his knuckles are creamy white. The portable set on the dressing table is a babble of advertising.

“What’s up?” She was going to say, but on seeing Colin’s face realises. He is red, his breath is short and his face is loose with fear, the eyes helpless.

“It’s starting, love.”

Daphne sits beside him. His whole body seems to clench and unclench like a fist. She puts her hand on his clammy forehead.

“Take it easy, love,” she says, “Just stay calm.”

“I feel funny in my tummy, Daph,” he says, “Love, I can feel it coming out. I think my waters have broken.”

She notices a dark stain on the bed spreading out from between Colin’s legs.

“I’m scared, Daph, all this stuff’s coming out.”

“Don’t worry.”

“Can you stop it coming out, Love, get a towel or something.”

She goes to the bathroom, returns with a bath towel they were still paying the catalogue for.

“Open your legs, Love.”

He opens them. An unpleasant odour rises. Daphne presses the towel up against him.

“Shall I get the doctor, Colin?”

“No,” he says urgently, “No, please.”

“A midwife?”

“I think it’s too late, Love.”

The bed is warm and wet. Suddenly Colin clasps his swollen belly, shouts to Daphne,

“It’s coming, Daph. Get something to catch it. Quickly, Love, a bucket, anything.”

She rushes to the bathroom again. There is nothing suitable. She has to go downstairs to the kitchen. The only thing she can find is their non-stick wok. Daphne has only used it once in five years.

Colin is moaning when she returns. She puts the lips of the wok up against his perineum. Thin, cloudy liquid dribbles into it. The bedroom reeks. Colin is crying, tears running sideways down his face, his lips wide, his tongue like a plump little plum in his mouth.

Later Daphne clears up. She yanks the sheets off the bed, piles them into the already overloaded washing basket, then wonders what to do with the mattress. Colin is downstairs on the couch in a dressing gown. She has given him a bath and he smells nice. After she has sorted the bedding out Daphne comes downstairs into the tv room and kisses Colin on the crown of the head, where his hair is thinnest, taking in the fragrance of his scalp.

“How about a drink?” She says.

Colin thinks for a moment, then nods, almost apologetically.

“A nice gin and tonic?”

Colin nods again.

Daphne goes to the kitchen, takes a tray of ice cubes out of the fridge. A dozen nuggets of frozen water. As usual she has trouble extracting them. She bends the tray as much as its metal will allow, and there is a tired, creaking sound. Then something snaps and an ice cube pops out and clatters on the worktop. She has to use a knife to get the rest out, levering dangerously at the chipped edges of each cube. There must be an easier way of making ice, she thinks as she divides her four cubes between two tumblers, splashes some gin and tonic water on top of them and listens to the wheezes and cracks as they expand into the warmth of the alcohol.

She takes the drinks into the tv room and sits with Colin for the rest of the evening, then they go to bed. Daphne leaves the tray of ice cubes out on the worktop. She forgets to put them back in the fridge.

In the morning, when she comes down into the kitchen, yawning and almost happy, her heart falters when she sees the tray of ice cubes on the worktop; it is a trembling, lively, blood-warm tray of water.