

Some Enchanted Evening...

Back before world leaders started gaslighting entire nations of people, no-one would have known what you meant if you said with weary gloom: 'They're a gaslighting narcissist.' So in 2003, Finn Peck was living in clueless oblivion, along with everyone else. She felt pretty carefree as she made her way along the side of Greenland Dock, on the way home to her houseboat. As she passed the Wibbley Wobbley, she glanced through its portholes, to see if she could see anyone she knew. Indistinct groups of people stood at the bar swilling drinks and telling tales of sea voyages to destinations all over the globe, even though the old boat they were drinking on was now a pub and not going anywhere, since it was permanently moored in this London dock.

The old boat's swing doors flapped open and Finn heard laughter swirl out into the night. She urged her feet to keep on walking past the allure of frivolity. The steep gangplank bridged the gap between land and water, responsibility and freedom. She needed to get home and pack for an early-morning train but at the last minute she ran down the gangplank, as if making bad decisions quickly wasn't like making them at all. Freedom had always been her default go-to.

Remnants of the Wibbley Wobbley's sea-going days were dotted around the pub's interior, alongside the trappings of its current incarnation as flytrap for barflies. A juke box sat opposite the helm and the floor-standing compass. The bar curved across the forward cabin like a flat sea with a horizon of optics slicing through her bow. Finn sidled up to it and ordered a drink. She hadn't been in there for a while, but she knew she'd know someone and sure enough, one of the regulars propped up the bar.

'Hey Finn!' he said, looking around the two strangers between them.

'Dennis!'

He sauntered over and pulled her into a bar hug. It was like a bear hug but with a lot more boozy breath and the scent of cigarettes enveloping you with the strength of arms. He grinned a lazy smile at her.

‘Haven’t seen you in weeks, Finn. Been away?’

‘I was away for a year...’

‘A year! I missed you!’

‘Then how come you didn’t know I was gone?’ Finn laughed. ‘I’ve been back a year too.’

‘It doesn’t seem that long since I last saw you,’ he mused.

‘Same old Dennis,’ said Finn.

‘Where did you go to?’ he asked.

‘Argentina, Uruguay, Peru, Chile, Antarctica...’

‘Antarctica! Jesus, Finn! How d’you get all the way down there?’

‘I hitched a ride with the Chilean navy...’

‘Hey!’ someone clapped Dennis on the back, interrupting Finn’s story. ‘I thought you were going to call me.’

‘I was just going to,’ said Dennis.

‘No you weren’t,’ laughed Finn. ‘Dennis doesn’t call anyone.’

‘And who is this?’ asked The Stranger, looking at Finn and unleashing a megawatt smile.

‘This is the person whose story you’re ruining,’ she said.

‘Apologies, I didn’t realise you were telling a story,’ he said.

He reached out and shook her hand, telling her his name. He waited for Finn to tell him hers which she didn’t, but still he kept holding her hand.

‘Who *is* this, Dennis?’ he asked, never taking his eyes off hers.

Her hand was still caught in the static handshake. His other hand rested further up her arm, as if he was about to pull her towards him.

‘This is Finn,’ said Dennis, from the periphery, struggling not to be eclipsed by the radiance of The Stranger’s smile. ‘She lives on a boat here, as well. Haven’t you two met already?’

Finn slipped her hand out of The Stranger’s and picked up her drink. He leaned over the bar and the young girl serving behind it abandoned the person she was talking to and rushed over to him. She looked like she wanted to slide over the smooth wood and straight into his arms.

‘Heeeey! You’re back!’ she cried.

‘Janine!’ said The Stranger, shining his brilliant white teeth at her. ‘Great to see you, again!’

Ah, one of those, thought Finn, as she finished her drink. A dance with me ‘til dawn

smile for everyone.

‘I’m off,’ said Finn to Dennis.

A drink appeared at her elbow.

‘Stay,’ said The Stranger, using his presentation of the drink to insert himself between her and Dennis. ‘I got this for you. I want to hear everything about Antarctica.’

So he did know he’d been interrupting her. Cheeky bastard.

‘Nah. I’ve got an early morning train to Liverpool,’ she said. ‘I’ll leave you and Dennis to it.’

‘Come on, Finn. Look! He’s abandoned me already.’

Dennis had been collared by one of the many people he owed money to and was trying to wrangle himself out of the situation.

‘Stay,’ The Stranger wheedled. ‘I don’t know anyone else.’

‘Janine’s smile tells a totally different story,’ said Finn.

‘She’s just a young girl. I want to talk to you. I need friends my own age.’

Janine, who apparently had the hearing of a Labrador, flew back down the bar, brimming with youth and the certainty that aging would never happen to her.

‘The Daily Mail says you’ve got more chance of being killed by a terrorist than finding a new friend after you’re forty,’ she said. ‘Or a husband,’ she shot at Finn.

Finn resisted the urge to point out that she wouldn’t be forty for another year and that

she didn't particularly want a husband. Janine flashed a smile at The Stranger, as if to say she could be more than his friend if he played his cards right.

'Maybe if you stay, by the end of the night you'll have found a new friend and a husband,' said The Stranger to Finn.

Finn laughed. 'The Daily Mail is full of shit,' she said to Janine. 'You know there's next to no truth in what they print, right?'

But Janine had already walked away. She was already bored by The Stranger's inexplicable interest in any woman who wasn't her.

And so they began.

And soon he wouldn't be The Stranger, he'd be The Boyfriend. And Finn would be holding his hand in the street. And enjoying deep, public kisses without a trace of embarrassment. And talking for hours in bed. And laughing until their faces hurt and tears poured down their cheeks. And talking with ease about all these emotions that Finn didn't even know how to name but which he seemed to be able to identify with ease. And he was treating her like she was the most important person in the world. And he was introducing her to his two children. And she was finding a friend. And love. And she was nearly forty. And he was forty-five. And even though she'd never really thought about marriage, he kept asking her. And finally, she said yes. And the Daily Mail could go fuck itself and stop fucking with people's heads.

Because, now, Finn would have a husband for that.

Love and Marriage...love and marriage...go together like...?

‘So, me and The Boyfriend are getting married,’ said Finn, as she trailed behind her cousin, Bridget, who was picking up a trail of dirty kids clothes strewn throughout the house.

‘Are you copying me?’ her cousin asked.

‘Are we still teenagers?’ asked Finn. ‘Jesus Christ, you’ve hardly been married a minute yourself. And you’re not the only person in the world who’s ever done it, you know.’

‘I know, but I’m the only one out of the two of us who’s ever done it. And I guess, I thought that’s the way it would stay. I might have only been married a minute but I’ve already got three kids under five. And raised another one to successful adulthood, all by myself I might add. You’ve never seemed interested in doing any of that.’

‘Don’t hate me cos I’m beautiful, and about to be a bride,’ said Finn, pouting model-like, then taking a gulp of her juice.

‘I don’t. I hate you because you’re a knobhead,’ said Bridget.

Finn spurted laughter out of her mouth and juice out of her nostrils.

‘Here, beautiful bride!’ said Bridget, picking up a dirty sock from the floor and giving it to Finn to wipe her face with. ‘Hey, if it’s what you wanna do, go for it...’ she said.

‘But?’ said Finn, getting her choking under control, and throwing the sock into the laundry basket that Bridget had put down on the table.

‘...but, what about travelling? Isn’t that your great love? The open road? I thought you were a free spirit. A love ’em and leave ’em type of gal.’

‘Well, this free spirit is choosing to get married,’ said Finn, a little bit irritated that Bridget didn’t seem happier for her.

‘And what did your mum and dad have to say about that?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Nothing?’

‘Yep. And I mean, absolutely nothing. We were away for the weekend. I’d finally said yes – and if I’m honest I was feeling a bit weird about it, so I said to The Boyfriend, what do people normally do in these circumstances? And he said: call your parents! So I called Pearl and Gregory and told them we were getting married and all I got was dead air on the end of the line.’

‘Are you sure they could hear you?’

‘They heard. I could hear them breathing. I didn’t expect cymbals and whistles but I did think they might manage a little bit more than conversational tumbleweed.’

‘Maybe they thought you were a free spirit too?’

‘Actually, that *is* what they said when we got back and they called to apologise. What the hell is it with this vision of a free spirit everyone has of me? Does that mean I have to be alone for the rest of my life?’

‘No, but...’

‘What?’

‘Just be sure this is what you want, Finn. Marriage isn’t all rainbows and unicorns,’ said Bridget.

‘Mmm,’ said Finn, tilting her head, then shaking loose her doubts. ‘Anyway, we want to keep it small and do it quick. Registry office and the pub.’

‘Sounds good.’

‘The only thing I can’t decide on is what to do about my name? I mean, should I keep Peck? Change to his? Or double-barrel it?’

‘Don’t we have enough posh wankers with double-barrelled names in this country?’ said Bridget.

Finn nodded agreement. ‘I don’t think they’re all posh wankers now though,’ she said. ‘Lots of women do it cause they don’t want to change their name completely.’

‘Hasn’t change always been your default go-to?’

‘When it comes to countries and jobs, yes. Names, I don’t know. I’m not particularly attached to mine.’

‘You’re not particularly attached to anything, are you?’

‘Only to you.’

‘Back at you, cuz,’ said Bridget.

‘So you’re voting for change, Bridge?’

‘I’ll vote for anything that isn’t a right-wing wanker,’ she said. ‘Did you ask him if he’d change his name to yours?’

‘I did but he said he didn’t want to because his kids have his name.’

‘Mmm,’ said Bridget. ‘It surely is a man’s world, isn’t it.’

‘I bet you never even suggested that Joe change his to yours when you got married.’

‘Nope. You got me. We were just about to have a baby, so... I rest my case.’

‘And you’re happy you changed your name?’

‘I don’t really think about it.’

‘OK. I’m going for it then.’

‘OK, then,’ said Bridget, rallying around her cousin’s decision, although not with much enthusiasm, Finn noted.

Finn still couldn’t tell if she agreed with her decision herself, or if she really agreed with marriage, but she subdued her doubts. She might not have known how to be sure of anything in a relationship but she’d always had a passion for adventure, and surely that was what this was.

‘Look at us, both getting married in our forties,’ said Bridget, raising an eyebrow.

‘And not a terrorist in sight,’ said Finn.

Not an obvious one anyway.