

Marriage a la mode . . .

HENRY READE walked into a downtown bar he had visited a few times and was surprised to see Agnes from personnel sitting at the far end of the counter. The lights were low-hanging and dim, but it was certainly Agnes. She saw Henry moments later and was as surprised as he and, it seemed, distressed. She looked away, then looked back at him. He nodded to her, and decided to try to rescue the situation and walked down to where she was sitting.

‘Agnes? Surprised to see you in a dive like this.’

She did not at first reply.

‘Sorry, I’ll leave you alone.’

She said thank you. She seemed embarrassed, but as he began to walk back up the bar she called after him.

‘Henry!’

He turned to her.

‘Can I explain?’

‘There’s nothing to explain. I mean . . . ‘

‘I’ve never been here before, ever.’

‘Agnes, it’s none of my business.’

‘I know, I know, but . . . I wouldn’t want you to start thinking things.’

‘I’m not thinking anything, Agnes. I just came in here to meet . . . well, to meet a friend, and saw you, and . . . Anyway, I’ll leave you to it.’

He turned and walked back up the bar. Henry Reade was not pleased he had been seen, either.

. . .

Damn, damn, he’ll tell the whole bloody office. Shall I ask him not to? Shall I explain? No, not that, I can’t. Damn, bloody damn, I shouldn’t have come, I knew it, just keep quiet and hope for the best.

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Agnes did hope for the best, and was relieved when it seemed likely that Henry Reade had not told anyone. But then perhaps he couldn't really. Nothing was said, she was not asked odd or pointed questions, heard no ambiguous comments hinting this or that, nothing.

Agnes and Henry Reade would not really see much of the other in the building except when in and around. She was in personnel and he worked in IT, and if he (or anyone else) had to contact personnel, they would use the phone. Henry Reade knew Agnes a little from the cafeteria and because she was friends with Julie he worked with. He had once joined Julie and Agnes at a table, but that had been a while ago.

One day just after he had finished his lunch of a latte and a Danish and was gathering his paper cup and plate, she appeared at his side and asked to join him.

'Yes, of course, yes.' There was a certain stilt in the air, an edge, he could feel it and so could she. But Agnes had taken the initiative and now she began to speak.

'The other night, well, quite a few weeks ago when . . . ?'

'Well, yes, but it's nothing to do with me.'

'I thought I should explain, you know . . .'

A further stilted silence.

'I'm not sure there's anything to explain, I mean, we were both in the same bar and . . . what's there to explain?'

'Well, I'd never been there before, that was the first time and . . . I was wondering what you were doing there.'

...

Damn, damn, damn, damn, I shouldn't have gone there again, I knew I shouldn't, I knew it, I wasn't going to, then I did and now this, damn, damn, bloody damn. And why was she there?

Then the why dawned on Henry Reade. Agnes (and he didn't know her second name)? Agnes? Why not? Agnes from personnel? Well, why not. Of course it was possible.

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Henry Reade lent over a towards Agnes on the other side of small round table and asked in a quiet voice:

‘Maybe we should talk somewhere else? Can we?’

Agnes looked at him and he saw relief in her eyes.

‘How long have you got left?’

‘At least another 20 minutes. I was going to sort out . . . but that can wait, it doesn’t matter, what about you.’

‘I’ve only just come on break, we could . . .’

Agnes and Henry Reade left the cafeteria and took the back elevator to the basement car park. From there they headed up the exit ramp. This gave way onto a side-street and down the street was the small park with a play area. They said nothing as they walked to the park. It was cold, damp and a little misty and the park was empty. There was certainly no one there from work. In the park and without a word they headed for the wooden pagoda to the left, climbed the few wooden steps and sat down side-by-side on the bench. Still neither spoke and neither looked at the other. Finally Agnes asked:

‘Were you surprised to see me there?’

‘Yes, I was . . .’

‘Because I was surprised to see you there, in fact I was surprised to see anyone from work.’

Then she added:

‘And I didn’t want to see anyone who knew me.’

This broke the ice a little. Bit by bit talking became easier.

Henry Reade asked:

‘So . . .’

‘So?’

‘Julie told me you were married.’

‘Not any more. I was married, but things weren’t going well, he found someone else, and, oh it was a while ago, about seven years. And we didn’t have children.’

‘So? Was . . .’

Agnes sighed.

‘Who knows, who knows, who bloody knows. Are you married?’

‘No.’ Henry Reade paused.

‘And that was never going to happen, I always knew that, I came close once but . . . but she was a nice girl and I liked her and it just didn’t seem fair on her. I mean . . .’

Agnes looked at Henry Reade and put her hand on his.

‘That makes you sound like quite a decent man. How about now, anyone now?’

‘Why do you think I was down there?’

‘I suppose. That figures.’

‘And you?’

‘Why do you think I was down there, you get . . . No, not at the moment, not someone I feel strongly about. I wish there was but, well . . . There was someone for a while, but it didn’t work out.’

Both were quiet for a few minutes and both felt a calm and a relief. When they spoke, they spoke at the same time:

‘I’ve got to say . . .’

‘I’m glad . . .’

‘No, you first, Agnes.’

‘I was going to say I’m glad I decided to speak to you when I saw you in the cafeteria, I didn’t plan to, it was a spur of the moment thing, but I suddenly felt . . .’

‘I’m glad you did.’

Henry Reade found he had not felt so peaceful for many a year.

‘So we sorted that out, then.’

‘Yes, I suppose we have, we’ve sorted that out. But . . .’

‘What? We’re still alone?’

‘Yes. And I . . .’

. . .

Had Agnes and Henry Reade known it, their daydreams and musings followed the same pattern over the days and weeks. Agnes found she liked Henry Reade and Henry

Reade was, in his way, taken with Agnes. They soon bumped met again in the cafeteria, chatted, and decided to go for an Italian. The meal was followed by several others and they became friends.

Marriage was Henry Reade's suggestion, though Agnes later told him it had also occurred to her. They bought a house and they both liked the arrangement. It left them free to make other connections, but both cherished the companionship they now had. It was unexpected and priceless.