

Lunchtime Intrigue

I've never pretended to understand human relationships. If the truth be known, I've never really thought about them in any great depth.

Looking back now, relationships always seem to have happened to me without any conscious volition on my part. If they worked they worked. If not, I amicably strolled away from them or simply let them fade away.

Perhaps this approach to life is why Adie's reaction over lunch last week left me so completely non-plussed.

She'd simply been one of a group who'd often shared a lunch table at Jakes Coffee Shop.

After my wife died it gradually happened that during most of these meetings we landed up at a table for two. I thought nothing of it. I enjoy intelligent female company and we had many interests in common.

Last Tuesday Adie was, unusually, late and dressed to the nines.

She was in a bubbly mood as she sat down with a, "Sorry I'm late."

Ignoring her apology I reacted with, "Wow Adie. You do look gorgeous today. Have you a hot date lined up?"

"Well," she smiled, "one never knows. I may well have."

Seizing the opportunity I teased her, "Ah, a secret liaison. Are you going to tell me more?"

At that moment dependable Faith appeared at our table, "Hello Papa, hello Mama."

"Hello Faith, nice and busy today."

"Yes papa. What do you want today?"

I glanced at Adie, "The usual?"

I thought I detected a conspiratorial air about her response, "Oh no. Today I want something more celebratory. I'll have a glass of white wine and the house's prawn special."

"Ooh. Daring. Is it your birthday?"

Her, "No," invited further questioning, which I chose not to pursue.

"Right Faith, I'll join her in a glass of wine but I'll stick to my favourite."

"OK, papa."

Leaning forward slightly Adie challenged, "Would you be upset if I had a secret liaison?"

I'm sure that a puzzled frown must have preceded my, "Why should I be?"

She sat back, "That's such a typical male response."

Perhaps at that stage I should have been aware that something was brewing. My wife had always maintained that my inability to read nuances or signals left, particularly women, quite non-plussed.

But I digress.

Before I could respond the drinks arrived.

I lifted my glass, "May all our children have rich parents."

Adie replied, "To our future."

Ignoring her 'our' I hastily added, "And may all your secret liaisons fulfill their promise."

Adie changed tack and took off with, "I listened to that podcast you gave me covering the interview with Howard Jacobson about the *Finkler Question*. I was fascinated by the author. I'd also never heard of him before. I was so taken with his responses to the

questions that when I walked past Bargain Books the next day I asked if they had a copy. To my delight they'd just unpacked one. I finished it last night and - well I would first love to hear what you think about it."

Our train of thought was interrupted by the arrival of our orders.

Adie's face lit up, "Thank you Faith, that looks really delicious."

Reacting to her obvious delight I commented, "Adie that looks right up your alley. Enjoy."

"Thank you, I will. But I still can't understand why you don't like seafood."

"That's not true, I like certain types of fish, like angel fish and kingklip – the more firm types – but I can't handle crayfish and prawns. As for mussels, calamari and such like 'ongediertes'"

"You silly man, you don't know what you're missing."

Faith interrupted, "Some more wine papa?"

I glanced at Adie. She nodded.

"Thanks Faith, two glasses."

By this time the *Finkler Question* was forgotten.

"Alex, I've noticed that you're not a great meat eater either."

I smiled, "Ever since a child I've never been able to face pink meat or fat or sinew. My mother used to slice fillet very thin before beating it with a mallet and then cremating it in order to get me to eat meat."

"The poor, long suffering woman."

I smiled, "She never complained. Ironically, years later I actually went through a twenty odd year period when I was a vegetarian."

"What made you return to meat?"

"My wife and I both completed Reiki courses. I started mine after she'd finished. Following my final initiation one of the Reiki masters apparently told her that I was living with both feet in the hereafter and that she'd better get me to eat root vegetables and red meat to ground me, before I float off."

Adie laughed, "She was right," then added, "I didn't know about the Reiki. Do you still practice it?"

"No. I discovered during the final course that I disliked using it on people but found that I was perfectly happy practicing it on animals. Our cats and dogs loved it. They were amazing. They would lie dead still and lap it up until they'd had enough. Then they'd just get up and wander off."

"That's incredible."

"I've just remembered something rather interesting. Karen, the other Reiki master who'd conducted my wife's initiations, had said that she felt she 'knew' my energy. I wasn't aware of this but when I met her I immediately had a vision of us as children, holding hands and running through a meadow."

Adie was intrigued, "How absolutely fascinating."

"I had to write a poem about my feeling."

"You must show it to me."

"It's on my iPad."

"I see you've got it there, so don't keep me in suspense."

It didn't take me long to find it and I handed the iPad to her.

When she'd finished I could see that she was impressed, "That's extremely deep."

“Thank you. Karen was quite taken with it. She’d said that no-one had ever dedicated a poem to her.”

Adie leaned forward, “There is so much about you that fascinates me. You are a deeply sensitive person yet there seems to be a crust of cynicism over that softness.”

“Rather a healthy dose of reality.”

“Really Alex, reality? I think you just hide behind that.”

“Reality is actually very boring, I love living in my imagination. You know, I used to think that I was quite alone in this view but then I read a book where the author wrote about how the receipt of an eagerly awaited letter, ‘. . . always replaces the agonising delights of anticipation with the colder flood of fulfillment.’ ”

“Oh no, that’s so negative.”

“No, it’s real - at least for her, and me. Every time, throughout my life, the actual fulfillment of any anticipated desire has always fallen short of my expectations.”

“How can that be, you appear to be such a happy person.”

I smiled, “Yes, and that’s due to the fact that I don’t anticipate anything, I merely flow with life. I’ve learned that if I expect nothing I can’t be disappointed. If you start off from a zero base then you can only go up.”

“Oh no,” she exclaimed, “fulfillment is a delight, the aim of, and the fruit, of anticipation.”

I shrugged and smiled, having no desire to convince her that I held a different view.

“Alex, tell me, do you look forward to our lunches?”

“I do, I enjoy your company.”

“So the fulfillment is better than the anticipation?”

“There’s no anticipation. The pleasure of your company is a pleasure that arises from scratch every time.”

“I think that you are just playing with words.”

I responded by simply gazing into her eyes.

She stared back for a long time, like an Alpine ibex measuring the gulf between itself and the desired rock ledge, before daring that final bound.

“Alex, I think it’s time to take our relationship to the next level.”

I nearly choked on my wine, “What are you talking about?”

“I can see that you’re getting sweet on me.”

“Adie I regard you as a friend. I’m passed the ‘getting sweet’ stage.”

The corners of her mouth betrayed a little triumphant something, “What would you say if I told you that I was in love with you?”

My vagus nerve seemed to roll my stomach into a tight knot, sending a cold chill down my spine.

My mind raced and groped back into the past. I vividly recalled how I’d drifted into marriage. As a naïve, immature young man, when the girl next door suggested that we get married, I’d simply acquiesced. It had seemed like the expected thing to do in that era. Now, with a lifetime of experience behind me there was no way that I was going to walk that path again.

I remained aware of her steady gaze during my long pause.

I thought she looked pleased when she spoke again, “You look shocked.”

“Uh . . . yes. Somewhat taken aback.”

“Why?”

“I’m way past those sorts of relationships.”

"I don't agree."

"Adie, I've nothing to offer."

"Don't be so modest, you have much to offer."

I reiterated, "I've nothing to offer other than friendship. Neither companionship nor love."

"Why do you think that you can't offer love?"

"Come on Adie, love is what we call that feeling we get early in life when the breeding imperative is at its height."

"Rubbish."

I remained silent, waiting for her to continue.

"I'm really perplexed by your reaction. You're such a warm, sociable person and what you say does not tie in with the Alex I know."

I hesitated for a moment before responding. It dawned on me that I knew absolutely nothing about Adie other than what she presented over our lunch meetings. While I'd freely shared episodes about my life and my wife, she'd never mentioned anything about her or her past. I wasn't someone who'd normally pry into other's lives and I wasn't about to start now. Besides, that would indicate an interest that simply did not exist. So I merely responded with, "I really enjoy social interactions over meals, teas and the occasional ballet – that sort of thing – but I don't want the clinging, cloying togetherness of a permanent relationship."

"If you were always like this how did your wife cope with this attitude?"

"We had a wonderful relationship. As inevitably happens, I changed over the years, as did she. We gradually developed different interests and fortunately allowed each other the space to follow our own desires."

Adie changed tack and challenged me. "I've noticed that you relate well to women and seem to enjoy their company."

"Yes. I've always enjoyed intelligent, stimulating female company. But I don't want to get emotionally involved. I don't see why the opposite sex cannot have platonic relationships."

"How can you be so naïve as to believe that?"

"Adie, I've always believed that if you want to keep a good relationship with a woman then leave sex out of the equation. Somehow it always lands up muddying the waters and ruining a relationship."

"How can you say that? It's such a natural part of love?"

"As I said, love is something that belongs to our early life when we are driven to maintain the species. Once we've reached our design goal that early love metamorphosises into something different over the years. Just look at any long term relationship, whether in a marriage or not, if you want to achieve a degree of honesty, greater than that within the reach of most civilized beings, you have to admit that sooner or later sex becomes a weapon or a bore."

"God you are cynical."

"I don't think so. Can you show me a perfect marriage? I venture to suggest that . . ."

"Oh for God's sake," she interrupted, "Every part of life has its ups and downs and relationships are no different. . . ."

I interjected, "I've often thought that a celibate marriage might be a better bet."

"Don't be ridiculous. You surely don't think that a celibate relationship can last?"

“Why not?”

“God you are frustrating. Are you deliberately goading me?”

“Of course not. I’m merely illustrating my point of view. Look, for example, we’ve discussed office liaisons before. You know how many times there’s a supposed chemistry - read lust - between two staffers. Eventually they land up in the hay and invariably it turns out to be a dumb idea.”

“So, what’s wrong with that?”

“Simply that they realise that the sex is unfulfilling and the person isn’t really what they expected them to be.”

“So, you’re never going to try something new just because you think it won’t work or be enjoyable, whatever?”

“Adie, sex is not just ‘something new’ it’s an act which can have myriad serious consequences. For me, I’ve always maintained that I couldn’t possibly have sex with someone that I don’t know well and that I’m not actually fond of.”

“You’ve told me that on business trips to Joburg that you’ve taken a friend’s wife to the ballet and that you used to have dinner with another of your wife’s divorced friends.”

“That’s right.”

“I know how romantic and fairytale-ish you are after a ballet performance; didn’t you ever want to . . . ?” she paused and raised an enquiring eyebrow.

“Perhaps.”

“You see, you wanted to. What stopped you?”

“I was married. STD’s. Sanity always prevailed.”

“I think you were scared.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps just sensible. As a woman you must know what it’s like to have fantasies. You also know that the last thing you actually want is for those fantasies to be realised, to come true. Fantasies are all part of the fun of anticipation. I’ve always thought that the perfect love is unrequited love – that way you live in a hopeful expectancy forever.”

“That sounds absolutely awful. Is there no part of you that could – would – kick over the traces, just once?”

“No. I’ll happily forgo any pleasure or temptation to avoid any possible future conflict. One hour of pleasure is simply not worth years of drama. To paraphrase Omar Khayyam, ‘To hell with the cash in hand – just run.’ ”

“Oh, come on, that’s so negative.”

“I’ve no need for drama in my life and one sure way of avoiding it is to learn to walk the straight and narrow. Let me tell you what happened on one of my business trips. I booked into the City Lodge and then went off to have supper with that divorced lady. While I was there my wife phoned her in a panic to say that I hadn’t booked into the hotel. She replied that I was with her and handed the phone to me. My wife shat me out from a dizzy height, accusing me of shacking up with her friend for the week. I drove straight back to the hotel and asked to speak to me. They said there was no such person there. I handed them my room card and asked them who the hell they thought I was. They’d typed another name into the computer under my room number. I stood there while I made the manager phone my wife and apologise.”

“Oh that’s so funny.”

“I’m glad you think so. If something as simple as that can potentially cause such problems do you really think that I would risk sex?”

“You’re over-reacting.”

“Really? Consider this, what made that episode worse is that our divorced friend had told my wife that her psychologist had suggested that she sleeps with her friend’s husbands.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope.”

“That’s so ridiculous coming from a counsellor.”

“Precisely.” I paused before continuing, “What if you fall in love with the person you’ve just slept with?”

“Alex, you cannot believe that you fall in love with every person you sleep with?”

Ignoring her question, I went back a while in our conversation, “Adie, just now, when I suggested that a celibate marriage may be a better bet, you dismissed the idea. Well, I’ll let you into a secret, the last fifteen years of our marriage was celibate and it was absolutely wonderful. Without the ‘will she, won’t she’, ‘should I, shan’t I’ that invariably develops over the years, our relationship eased into something much deeper, much more relaxed, than before.”

From her immediate expression it seemed as though she’d either not wanted to hear what I’d said or that she’d dismissed it as a fabrication, a ploy.

She remained quiet for a while before reaching out and asking, “Give me your hand.”

She took it and said, “I told you Alex, I’m in love with you and I want to share my life with you.”

“Adie, as I’ve said, I’m flattered but I can’t reciprocate.”

“Don’t you love me?”

“I’m very fond of you, I enjoy your company. You’re well-read and have a keen brain. We can speak about any subject under the sun – including those taboos of sex, politics and religion. I value your company as a friend, but love No. I’m not in love with you.”

Ignoring that, she continued, “I don’t want to spend the rest of my life alone. I want to share it with someone I love. I love you and you could learn to love me.”

“Adie, please, don’t go down that track, it leads to nowhere.”

“What are you afraid of? Are you one of those men who can’t commit?”

“I voluntarily did it once, that was enough.”

“Why? I thought your marriage was good, everyone said you were the ideal couple.”

“That’s because we didn’t live in each other’s pockets, didn’t smother each other.”

“So? Why can’t we be like that? If you had it all over again I’m sure you’d marry her again.”

“Definitely not.”

“What makes you say that?”

“All the reasons I’ve just outlined.”

“That’s simply not natural.”

“I’ve told you before that I don’t fit the normal or so-called natural mold.”

I could see her mind seeking ticking over, seeking another point of attack, “One needs a companion when we are old, someone who can look after us.”

“I neither want to be looked after, nor do I want to look after anyone. If I can no longer care for myself then I’ll end it.”

She looked shocked, “With what?”

“I have a little bottle.”

“Did you wife know? What did she wife think of that?”

"We had a pact. If the one needed to go then the other one would help. And as the stupid, interfering, nanny world we live in would not approve of this, we'd go together."

"I can't believe what I'm hearing."

"Why not? There you go, reacting like all the nannies in the world."

"Suicide and murder are against the church's teachings. Don't you believe in God? Are you an atheist?"

"Let me first respond with the fact that I've always maintained that religion and the church have precious little to do with God. For example, the major beef of both The Christ and The Buddha was with the established churches, temples and their priesthood. They both saw them as corrupt and self-serving. I see no difference in the churches today."

"I don't agree with much of what you say."

"Ah, you see, I do have very different views from you. There are obviously insurmountable differences in our philosophies of life. Why can't we just maintain a friendly relationship?"

She stared at me for a long while before shaking her head, "I can't continue to see you on this basis. I need to – no want to – be part of an intimate relationship."

"I'm sorry Adie; I just can't live a lie."

He demeanour changed in a flash, "Then why did you lead me up the garden path?" she hissed.

"What are you talking about? I never once indicated that you're more than a friend to me."

"That's not what your actions showed," she snapped.

"Adie you're imagining things."

"No. You're devious. You lead women up the garden path. You're nothing more than the male version of a cock tease."

A confused, "A what?" was all that I could muster as she grabbed her bag, overturning the chair in her angry haste.

Her eyes flashed momentarily as she glared at me. She opened her mouth to speak. No sound came out but tears welled up in her eyes moments before she spun round and flounced out of Jakes in a huff.

An immense feeling of relief washed over me as I watched her disappear down the boulevard.

Turning, I caught Faith's eye.

Putting a finger on my glass I mouthed, "Another one."