

PC PAIRING

1979

Mary first slept with Joe on November 5th 1979. She was twenty-six, he was thirty-one. She had just bought a back-to-back in Leeds with her friend Lynn and was holding a housewarming party to coincide with the street bonfire. The house was at the top of a red-bricked terrace that climbed up from Roundhay Road – front doors on to pavements, washing lines strung across the street, stray dogs patrolling cobblestones in a proprietary manner. But the area was friendly and Mary being the sort of person she was – outgoing, sociable and a born organiser – had already bonded with her elderly neighbour, Mrs Cowgill, befriended a young unemployed couple across the road and become a favourite customer of Mr Patel at the corner shop. She saw the coincidence of bonfire and party as an opportunity to integrate friends and neighbours and to reposition her personal life in the context of the community.

Joe lived nearby in a house in Chapeltown. He shared it with a couple called Malcolm and Ruth, but despite rumours it was no *ménage a trois* – more Mum, Dad and teenage son than Jules *et* Jim – and the only unconventional element was a ritual sharing of Ruth's iron bedstead on Sundays to sip tea and read the Observer. Joe first met Mary when Ruth brought her home after a demonstration against domestic violence. Mary worked for Women's Aid and had taken along a band of battered wives to swell the ranks. 'You'll like her,' Ruth hissed as she passed Joe by the upstairs loo, 'she's a good laugh.' And Mary did laugh. In fact she and Ruth laughed from the moment they came in to the moment – an hour later – when Joe came down to make tea. After introductions he stood waiting for the kettle, an all-purpose smile

on his face. He hadn't a clue what they found so funny, but didn't want to appear stupid. The women ignored him.

After that first meeting Joe dismissed Mary as superficial but with a sexy bottom, and Mary marked down Joe as aloof but svelte in the body department. Only on her third visit, when she arrived at the house before Ruth, did they discover common ground. They were both from middle-class families whose values they rejected; both in a circle of friends whose outlook they accepted; both quick witted and critical of the people around them. They went out for a drink. Mary told Joe she was having a relationship with a married woman. Joe told Mary he was between affairs but shared a bed – non-sexually – with Ruth when Malcolm was away. They were, they agreed, keen to modify monogamy, but capable of commitment when the right person came along.

On the day of the party Joe drove over early to fry sausages and put them on sticks. He found Lynn alone – Mary was at the refuge dealing with an irate husband – and, having just completed a script about a man who two-times a girlfriend by sleeping with the nanny of his brother's children, was in a good mood. The film, despite its bizarre plot, was, he explained to Lynn, a treatise on sexual politics from all angles – except sex.

“No way of depicting women naked without exploiting them,” he declared as the sausages sizzled.

"Depends *how* you film them," replied Lynn, dipping apples in toffee. She didn't want to talk about Joe's film, but hadn't much choice – he wouldn't talk about anything else.

"What do you mean?" said Joe, piercing a sausage.

"Do it in long shot, avoid the close-ups. It's big boobs and bottoms that offend."

"Still be voyeuristic."

Joe picked up the sausage and ate it.

"I disagree," said Lynn, rescuing an apple that had drowned in the toffee. "There's nothing intrinsically wrong with watching people fuck. We watch them eat."

At that moment the front door blew open, letting in a blast of cold air.

"Give us a hand, somebody."

Mary stood on the threshold struggling with a man in an overcoat who was either drunk or ill. He kept falling on his knees, his legs bending in a painful manner, his head lolling on to Mary's shoulder despite her efforts to keep it upright. As she turned to close the door, she lost her grip. The man fell to the ground and his head came off.

"Damn!" shouted Mary.

The disembodied face stared up from the floor with a fixed smile.

"The irate husband?" said Joe, picking it up.

Mary and Lynn lugged the decapitated corpse into a chair and collapsed on the sofa. Joe took the head to the kitchen to touch up its turnip nose.

"Should burn well," said Lynn.

"Needs some trousers first. They hadn't any spare at the refuge."

Mary smiled to herself and shouted over her shoulder.

"Hey, Joe? Yours would fit!"

"I'm not taking my trousers off – for anyone."

Mary winked at Lynn. Lynn, not wanting to be involved in one of her friend's flirting sessions, returned to making toffee apples. Joe came in from the kitchen, replaced the severed head and bent down to kiss Mary on the cheek.

"Hi. How are you?"

"Fine."

She glanced up at him and flashed her eyes. He responded, but lost confidence and took his glasses off. Mary patted the sofa. Joe sat.

"Ruth and Malcolm send apologies," he said. "Both down with flu."

"That's a shame," said Mary.

But she was glad. She felt self-conscious flirting with Joe in front of mother.

The bonfire – made up of wood borrowed from the fences of the better off and torn mattresses tossed on for good measure – burnt well and the turnip-nosed Guy quickly succumbed to the fury of the flames. Fireworks flared and fizzled, bangers landed at random amongst onlookers, children screamed and yelled. Joe, put in charge of pyrotechnics by Mary, ignited Catherine Wheels and Roman Candles and – resisting a small girl's suggestion that he 'put one on its side and see where bugger goes' – sent rockets soaring skyward. Mary stood with Lynn watching sparks shower the house.

"We are insured, aren't we?" said Lynn.

"I think so," replied Mary.

"Take more than a bonfire to burn down Bayswaters," said a voice behind them.

They turned and saw Mrs Cowgill grinning up at the night sky. She had led a campaign to stop clearance of the area and had a framed picture of herself from the Evening Post shaking a fist at a bulldozer under the heading: 'Cowgirl stops bull!'

"You'll come in for a drink later, won't you, Mrs Cowgill?" said Mary.

"Aye, if you twist me arm."

So as the bonfire burnt down, the front room filled up. Joe stood in the kitchen doling out sausages to crafty kids – ‘One for me, two for me mam and four for nan!’ – Lynn positioned herself on the stairs and waited for people to come to her and Mary squeezed round with a bottle, filling glasses, laughing at jokes and getting drunk herself.

"Eh, Mary," shouted Cheryl, a large broad-shouldered woman from the refuge, "how'd you get him working in kitchen like that?"

"Just good friends," Mary yelled back. "That's how."

A moment later she saw Joe make his way out of the kitchen, trying to bypass the refuge women unnoticed. They spotted him and cheered, part mocking, part sincere. He responded with a shy smile and headed for Mary.

"Hi! How you doing?" she said, offering him a glass of wine.

"Fine. Sausages all gone."

"Good."

She leant forward and kissed him. Joe glanced over his shoulder. Mrs Cowgill winked – the women sniggered. Sex, the common denominator, he thought; rituals varying from generation to generation and class to class, but all leading to the same end. And whatever the style or status, however rich or poor or young or old the players, someone had to make a first move. He looked at Mary. You could never be sure how the other person felt. You could test the ground with a ‘Fancy coming back for coffee?’ but once inside you still had to act. And fear of rejection often meant nothing happened; coffee drunk, coat back on, both sides wondering why the other hadn't moved. Joe was a bad initiator. He preferred women to set the pace.

"Did you bring your car?" said Mary, breaking into his thoughts.

"Yes. Want me to drive Cheryl and co back?"

"No, no. They've got the refuge van." Mary paused. "I meant you could always sleep here – if you've had too much to drink."

"Oh, right."

"The sofa makes into a bed."

"Right."

As she turned back to her guests, Mary's thighs rubbed against Joe. He felt warmth spread from his stomach and cool into shivers at the top of his spine. He spotted his best friend Charlie – for once without Sarah – and moved across to take him in hand.

Mary sat down next to Lynn.

"Bet I have to do all the work."

"What do you mean: 'all the work'?"

"If I want to sleep with Joe."

"And do you?"

"Yes. Yes I do."

"Can't think why. Big nose. Moustache."

"It's the bottom."

Lynn laughed and gave Mary a hug.

"Be careful."

"Not planning to get involved. Sex once or twice, then back to being friends."

"That's what you said about Vivien."

Cheryl came over, hugged Mary and said how much she was enjoying the party, especially her chat with a psychologist bloke called Charlie. He'd listened to her tales of woe and asked if he could come and interview her sometime. She'd said, no, but you can come up and see me anytime. He hadn't

got the joke and that was her only grouse: nice blokes, no balls. Better a man with no balls than a man who beats you, said Mary. Cheryl wasn't sure.

An hour later, Mary waved goodbye as the women drove off. She closed the door and went to the kitchen. A radio came on upstairs – Lynn going to bed; Joe with Charlie in the living room – tail end of a party. She put glasses in the sink and filled them with water. The alcohol was wearing off, her intentions clouding. Perhaps she should just stay friends, not complicate things.

Charlie poked his head round the door.

"Night, Mary. Thanks for a great do. Sarah sends her love, says she's sorry she couldn't make it."

"And mine to her," said Mary, accepting a peck on the cheek from Charlie. "Glad you could come. Night."

She heard Charlie start his car and drive off. She reached under the sink and took out a bottle of whisky, hidden behind a bucket. She poured herself a drink and went through to the living room.

Joe had taken off his sweater and was converting the sofa into a bed. Mary sank into an armchair by the fire.

"You're staying, then?"

"Might as well."

Joe lay down on the sofa cushions and smiled at Mary – an old friend's smile.

"Successful party?"

"I think so."

"Good."

Joe played with his hair, twisting a strand round his finger and pulling hard. Mary watched through her whisky.

"What were you talking to Charlie about?" she asked.

"My script."

Mary nodded, uncrossed her legs and lay back in the chair.

"Ooh! I feel quite drunk."

Joe wished he were drunker.

"Any ciggies left?"

Mary pointed to a cupboard above her chair.

"There's a packet in there."

Joe stood up and leant across to the cupboard door. His groin touched her shoulder. She could smell his body and wanted to grab it.

"You can sleep in my bed, if you like," she said.

Joe straightened up, knelt by her chair and lit a cigarette from the embers of the fire.

"Yeah. Alright."

She laughed.

"Don't sound too enthusiastic."

"No, that'd be nice. I'd like to."

"Good."

Your move, Joe.

He leant across and kissed her on the mouth. His moustache tickled. She took his head and pushed her tongue between his lips. He tasted of tobacco and wine and his mouth felt harder than a woman's, but softer than she'd remembered men's to be. His hand strayed down her back. Hers unbuttoned his shirt, moved over the hairs on his chest and down to the smooth stomach where she felt more at home. His hand pushed in between the seat of the chair and her jeans. She began to undo the top of his trousers, keen to renew her acquaintance with the 'little difference' – though a little worried she might be

disappointed. She slipped her hand inside his underpants, but then slid it to the back. He did have a nice bottom, firm and round. She stroked it, her fingers running up and down the crease. His tongue pushed hers back, his hand moved up inside her sweater. She eased her fingers to the front. His penis was silky and soft, hardening slowly in her hand.

She squeezed it and whispered in his ear.

"Come on. Let's lie down."

They scrambled out of their clothes, forcing trousers over boots and shoes, heads through buttoned shirts. They stood naked – touching and being touched, urgency replacing tenderness – then fell on to the corduroy cushions. Joe wanted Mary on her stomach. Mary wanted Joe on his back. They rolled and heaved, sucked and pulled, sometimes this way, sometimes that. Having sex, not making love; taking, not giving; thoughts of who they were for each other, replaced by thoughts of what they could do with each other, to each other. Close friends become close bodies, dissolving the distance of friendship – breaking the rules and changing the game.

Later Mary whispered, 'Come inside me,' after coming herself outside, around his lips. Joe lay back. She sat on top, curious to feel a man in her again. Down and around, enclosing and holding. No earth movement, but more than pleasant. Joe closed his eyes and arched his body. He wanted to impress with his prowess, with his staying power. Images of other sex flooded through his head – his body under control, functioning in a hard masculine way. He felt an orgasm approach, lustful and sharp.

Then, suddenly, he wanted to change it, wanted his climax to be warm and loving. He opened his eyes and glanced at Mary, but she was lost in her own pleasure. He wanted to give himself to her, show his vulnerability as he came – feel the sweetness of orgasm spread through his body like honey. But

she was into his hardness, her second climax close. She bucked and came, forcing the semen out and into her; he whimpered like a child, his gaze on her face. He put his arms up to hold her, to be held. She opened her eyes, staring at him blankly, and then smiled.

"Wow!"

"You liked it?"

She nodded and laughed, and then bent down to hug him.