

# The Interesting Society

Joanna, the only female member of ‘The Interesting Society’, had always considered the The Pig and Bull an ironic choice of venue.

Tonight, as usual, everyone was there: Miley, Arthur, Bob and, of course, Geoffrey. Having declared the meeting quorate, how he loved that word, her husband moved his glass to its cardboard coaster and folded his hands, like a priest at the altar table.

‘Gentlemen and *lady*,’ he said, with a mannered nod towards her, ‘you know the rules; each member must say something interesting, and it must be true.’

Everyone banged the table. There were smiles, a few hear-hears, and a half-hidden belch from Bob who, having finished a long day up a ladder roofing, had already sunk six large whiskies and three pints of beer.

Arthur raised a hand.

‘I’ll go first.’

He cleared his throat.

‘The only words in the English language in which the vowels appear in their correct order are abstemious and facetious.’

Bob’s eyes, not straight at the best of times, performed a sideways swivel as if someone had turned a crank inside his head, like it was a tabletop football machine. Brows furrowed and Geoffrey rubbed the end of his pencil against his hairy nose.

‘Facetious and abstemious,’ thought Joan, glancing at her husband, ‘just like you.’

Really, what was the point of their meagre, loveless marriage? That morning she had caught him polishing the soles of his shoes, again. The *soles*, no less. And lately he had taken to walking behind her with a brush and pan, sweeping up whatever invisible specks

she left behind. If he could he would have her sitting in one place, never moving, never causing clutter or mess.

How different Arthur was.

His toecaps were scuffed and his socks were odd. Today he was missing a shirt button and she stared at the thread it had left behind. He hadn't bothered to trim it and she found herself wishing that she could repair it for him. It would be the simple act of a moment to sew a new button and every time he wore that shirt she sensed an opportunity missed.

Arthur worked at a fertiliser plant mixing dangerous chemicals. He was not a professional man but he was well read and shy and, unlike his brother, Bob, he was not a drinker.

'Abstemious and facetious, bravo,' said Geoffrey, in the stentorian voice he reserved for meetings and the breakfast table.

Joanna sighed and sipped at her Port and Black.

How had it come to this, she wondered? Not that the Interesting Society was boring, per se. At times it could be fun, and, it was true, she had learned many unusual things; a Mastodon's penis, for instance, was three feet long, roughly the size of a prize-winning leek.

But what good was that to her? And why had it stuck so stubbornly in her brain?

Miley went next.

'Eight thousand years ago there were no people with blue eyes.'

Murmurs of appreciation rose from the table and Bob's eyes, which seemed to work independently of each other, crossed with the effort of comprehension.

Not a bad fact, Joanna thought. Unprovable, of course, except through DNA analysis,

but at some point the Stone Age tribes migrating North from the Rift Valley must have encountered colder weather, a minor Ice Age perhaps, and with it a new evolutionary need for less pigmentation in the skin and eyes.

What a shock that must have been; the first blue-eyed child in a brown-eyed world.

She herself had blue irises, and, when she looked around the table everyone had brown or green or, in Bob's case, scarlet eyes. Geoffrey's, however, were oyster – a soft, pulpy grey that was becoming more colourless with age. Perhaps one day they would fade away completely and become transparent, like water. Then she would see into the vacuum that was his brain and find there... what?

A feather duster, probably.

He was, undoubtedly, a handsome man but in thirty two years of marriage he had never once said anything remotely interesting. Before the meeting he had delivered a statement so banal, so buttock-clenchingly tedious that she seriously thought she might faint.

'Tomorrow, I shall clean the lightbulbs,' he announced, as if he had just been awarded an MBE for services to mindless domestic activities.

She almost screamed.

'Joanna, are you listening?'

He rapped his knuckles on the table.

'What, oh sorry,' she said, 'no people with blue eyes.'

'We've moved on. Do keep up, dear. Bob says that in Greenland prisoners sleep in their cells at night and are allowed home in the day, even to go hunting! What do you think of that?'

Prison, she thought, would be a blessed release from you, even in Greenland. And

what is my life anyway, except a prison of my own making?

‘Come on,’ he barked, ‘say something.’

And so she did.

She stood up.

‘I’m leaving you Geoffrey, I can’t take this anymore. I feel like a potted plant that you can’t find a place for.’

‘What?’

‘I’m going to Greenland to rob a bank. At least then I won’t spend *every* day in prison.’

There was silence around the table. Finally, Miley said,

‘Is that your interesting statement?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is it true?’

‘It is.’

Everyone was watching her, even Arthur. He lifted a hand to the loose thread that had been troubling her all night. Somehow it felt like a message, but what exactly he was saying was unclear.

‘If it’s interesting and it’s true then Joanna deserves a point,’ he said, and quietly marked it down.

Joanna never did go to Greenland or rob a bank and there were no more Interesting Society meetings at the Pig and Bull for her, although Arthur remains a stalwart member to this day. He still wears odd socks and scuffed shoes but his shirt buttons are always beautifully stitched.

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