

**DON'T
SWIPE
RIGHT**

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An Aries Book

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For all my red herrings.

ONE

I've done some bad things.

I don't mean your everyday, run-of-the-mill misdemeanours. Listen, I'll freely admit I've got at least two more credit cards than I need, a mild crisp addiction and I really, really need to work on my core. No, I'm talking about the *truly* awful things, the ones you'd like to bury so deep that you can pretend they never actually happened.

Rough estimate, I'd say I'd done, maybe fourteen things, total, that Mary Berry would raise a concerned eyebrow at. But out of all of them, I'd say the *second* worst thing I'd ever done was currently unfolding right in front of me: my best friend's hen do, a.k.a. the hen do from hell (I say hell, but I was pretty sure even the devil had never been forced to drink Bellinis out of penis-shaped straws at 8.30 p.m. in Cameo's on a Thursday evening).

And, plot twist, as maid of honour, it was totally my own fault. My excellent plans for karaoke and Chinese food had been deemed 'untraditional' by Sarah's old school-mates, as if dressing in T-shirts emblazoned with the badly photoshopped face of the groom was what Henry VIII had

envisioned when he invented hen dos (I'm assuming he had something to do with it along the line). So, this was what I'd come up with instead, and it was currently dying on its arse.

'Everyone! Time for Mr and Mrs!' shouted Amy (I was pretty sure her name was Amy, but it could equally well have been Helen or Anne. Or Daisy).

The six of us were sitting awkwardly around an overly shiny table in one of the U-shaped booths that surrounded Cameo's (currently very empty) light-up dance floor. It was too early to be busy, and we pretty much had the place to ourselves, save for a couple of businessmen at the bar, who looked about two vodka and Red Bulls away from wrapping their ties around their heads and attempting the haka.

'So... question one, what is Richard's shoe size?' Amy/Helen/Anne/Daisy asked.

I closed my eyes and sank into the faux-leather, hoping it would envelop me.

'Fuck knows,' Sarah slurred as she fiddled with the Bride-to-be sash that hung around her shoulders, her face turning a ripe shade of beetroot. 'Ask me something dirtier!'

'Okay, umm...' Amy (probably) said, frantically looking down the list of questions for something suitably risqué before giving up. 'Err, what's his favourite position in bed?'

I couldn't take any more of this. As the group groaned in unison into their Bellinis, I pulled myself out of my seat and took slow steps backwards into the clouds of dry ice that billowed up from the dance floor. Guided by the neon lights that spelled out 'Create your own adventure' across the wall, I made my way to the sanctuary of the bathrooms, praying someone had dug an escape tunnel behind the condom machine.

Once there, I found an empty stall, nudged the toilet seat

closed with my foot and sat down. As the thumping bass of the generic house music faded to a dull thud, I pulled my phone out and opened Connector, the dating app *du jour* that was either: a) thwarting any chance I had of a sensible post-break-up recovery, or b) providing a useful distraction from my increasingly dubious life choices, depending on who you listened to.

After a good ten minutes of swiping through the endless stream of almost identical men looking far too fresh after climbing Machu Picchu, I was interrupted by the sound of the bathroom door swinging open. Seconds later, I heard Sarah's voice echoing off the tiles.

'Gwen! Are you hiding in here? You're going to miss Pin the Cock on the Groom!'

'Shit,' I mouthed, quickly stuffing the phone back in my bag and poking my head out from the stall to see Sarah standing in the middle of the bathroom holding two plastic champagne flutes.

'Ah, there you are,' she said, handing one to me. 'Please tell me you've not been sat in there playing on dating apps again?'

'No, just reading the graffiti,' I lied.

Sarah looked at me the same way people look at a really cute puppy that's peed on the floor.

'I know what this is about,' she said, shaking her head and smiling sadly. 'I was worried all this might be a bit much for you. It's only been a couple of months since, well, you know. You don't have to stay if you don't want to...'

'What, and miss sticking a cardboard penis on a picture of your naked fiancé? No way! I mean, I'd only be doing the exact same thing at home anyway.'

‘Gwen,’ Sarah sighed. ‘You can drop the act with me. It’s okay to be upset about Noah, you don’t have to—’

‘I keep telling you, it’s fine, I’m fine, really, everything is *fine*,’ I said.

Usually, I found that if I repeated the word fine often enough, I could at least convince myself that everything would be, well, you know, fine.

‘Okay, well, good, I guess,’ she said. ‘Come on then, I need you out there, I’m getting totally mullered at Mr and Mrs.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ I said, hopping up onto the bank of sinks so I was at her eye level. Sarah was a good three inches taller than me, even without the block heels. ‘Sar, are you really sure about all this?’

‘The hen night?’ Sarah said. ‘No, not really, it’s awful, but you said Flares wouldn’t let us in again after you—’

‘No, no, not the hen. I mean, are you sure about *this*.’ I pointed to her neon-pink bride-to-be sash. ‘The wedding, Richard...’

‘Oh for God’s sake, not this again.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘I know you and Richard aren’t exactly BFFs, but you don’t know him that well yet—’

‘Do you?’ I interrupted.

After some bad experiences with dodgy boyfriends at uni, Sarah had mastered the art of spotting red flags, immediately jettisoning any man who showed even the slightest indication of being a tosspot. That’s why I’d been surprised when she fell for Richard so quickly. While there was nothing intrinsically wrong with him, beyond his obvious good looks and trust fund, there was nothing very right with him either. I guessed that’s what she liked about him – he was completely average. Their romance had snowballed since

meeting (in real life, just like our grandparents used to!) at a work conference last summer. Shortly afterwards, Richard had surprised her during a hike up some random hill with a ring secreted in one of the many, many pockets boasted by his favourite cagoule.

And now, six months later, Sarah was about to move out of our shared flat, leaving me to face the horrors of singledom without her. And that was absolutely fine. I was totally, totally okay with it and anyone who suggested otherwise didn't know me very well *at all*.

'We may not have been together long, but I do know he's one of the good ones,' Sarah said. 'And God knows there's not many of those around. So I would love it if you two at least tried to get along.'

I looked down at my scruffy Converse. As I opened my mouth to say something, a telltale beep rang out from the depths of my bag, cutting me off. Sarah's eyes swivelled towards it like a trained sniper.

'I knew it!' she cried as I reached for my phone. 'You *have* been swiping! Can you leave that thing alone for just one evening? This is supposed to be the best night of my life!'

'Um, isn't that the wedding night?'

'No, that's the second best. The best night,' she said slowly, taking my wrist and pulling it gently from my bag, 'is dancing 'til two a.m. with your closest friend in Eastbourne's second worst club and getting pissed on champagne.'

'Hun, this is not champagne,' I said, waving my plastic flute at her.

'Whatever.' Sarah released my wrist. 'It's the end of an era, right? Sar and Gwen, one last night on the town before I move out. That's just as important to me as the big day.'

‘Well then, you really should straighten your tiara, mate, it’s all wonky.’

As Sarah turned back towards the bathroom mirror to fix her tiara, I stole the chance to reach into my bag again. That familiar beep only meant one thing: I had a new Connector message, and I was insanely curious to see who it was. But just as my fingers curled around my phone, I heard Sarah exhale loudly, like the air being let out of a tyre.

‘For Christ’s sake, Gwen, have you forgotten how mirrors work? I can see you!’ she snapped. ‘Give me that thing!’

‘Fine!’ I sighed, holding the phone out for her between my thumb and forefinger. ‘It’s your wedding photos that will look asymmetrical if I don’t find a plus-one before next week.’

The wedding was, predictably, on Valentine’s Day.

‘If it’s going to be a dickhead off this thing,’ she said, putting down her glass and plucking the phone from my hand, ‘I’d rather you didn’t bring anyone.’

‘Hey, come on, they’re not all bad,’ I cried.

‘Really? What about that guy last week who used hand sanitiser instead of deodorant?’

‘Well, at least he was resourceful,’ I offered. ‘And at least I’m trying to get back out there. It’s not easy, you know. We can’t all magically bump into the love of our lives in a conference centre in Milton Keynes.’

‘The problem isn’t *you*,’ Sarah said. ‘The problem is, this app is chock-full of absolute bellends.’

As if to prove it, she began poking at the screen with her index finger, like a grandmother trying to choose a chocolate biscuit from a selection box.

‘See what I mean? They all look like serial killers,’ she said.

‘Woah, woah, slow down!’ I cried as she abstractly swiped

left and right through about twenty profiles. 'You're missing some real potential there!'

Suddenly the phone beeped again.

'Oh look, it says you got a match.' Sarah sighed.

'Gimme that!' I squealed, snatching the phone from her.

I scanned the app frantically, terrified to see who she'd accidentally matched me with. But the image on the screen was surprisingly pleasant. Dirty blond with dark eyebrows, 'Parker, 34, Data Analyst from Eastbourne' had an almost feminine face that made him quite striking.

'Likes going out and staying in, travelling, movies and roasts on a Sunday,' I read out loud.

'And, oh, works in fucking IT, obviously,' Sarah said, looking over my shoulder.

'Well, nobody's perfect.' I shrugged. 'Look, it says here he has a good sense of humour, doesn't take himself too seriously and, as you can see from the excellent selection of photos, he really enjoys laughing in various pubs with two to three different mates.'

'Is there an "unmatch" option?' Sarah said, miming sticking a finger down her throat.

'Well, I could block him, but...'

'Good, and when that's done, turn that thing off and come back to the table.'

When she saw me wavering, her face softened for a second, and she placed her hand on my shoulder.

'You promised to lay off the dating, remember, at least 'til after the wedding. All these silly boys won't replace Noah, you know?'

I bristled. My ex was the last person I wanted to think about right now. I sighed and put my phone face down on the sink.

'Oh, and listen, don't hate me, but Richard's on his way,' Sarah added matter-of-factly.

I flung my head back and groaned dramatically. If there was one thing that could make this night even lamer than it already was, it was Richard.

'Are you fricking kidding me, Sar?' I whined. 'Is that even allowed? What happened to this being a traditional hen night?'

'Oh come on, Gwen, I think it stopped being traditional the second Daisy inhaled the willy-shaped helium balloon.'

'Dammit, I knew her name was Daisy!' I hissed to myself.

'Don't stress, he won't cramp our style,' Sarah continued. 'He can just sit quietly in the corner until we finish the games.'

'Great, can it be the other corner?'

'Gwen! Be nice. It's the twenty-first century, everyone is having a "Sten Do" now. And it's a good chance for him to meet the girls before the wedding. Please try, just for me, okay?'

I folded my arms sulkily. 'Fine. Just gimme a minute to freshen up, will you?'

'You're not going to message that Parker guy, are you?' Sarah said, looking at me suspiciously.

'Definitely 100 per cent not,' I said.

'Smart,' she said, checking her tiara one more time before turning to leave.

'Hey, Sar, wait a sec,' I called out.

'Yeah?' she said, looking back over her shoulder.

'Twelve,' I said.

'What?'

'Richard's shoe size,' I said. 'It's twelve.'

'Shit, of course,' Sarah said. 'Thanks! How do you even know that?'

'Cos I wrote the quiz, you idiot,' I told her. 'Now get out of here.'

And with that, she blew me a kiss and walked out, leaving me sitting on the bank of sinks staring at my distorted reflection in the stainless-steel tap. I might have been stranded in singledom, but I desperately wanted Sarah to have the wedding of her dreams and never, ever have to navigate her way through the minefield of flotsam on a dumb dating app to find a halfway decent human being to share her life with. Deep down though, something about this particular 'happily ever after' didn't feel so, well, *happy*.

I hopped down from the sinks in an attempt to shake the feeling off. As I went to stuff my phone back in my bag, I caught a glimpse of Parker's profile, still open on the screen. I paused, my finger hovering over his face. With my other hand, I grabbed my glass and downed the last of the warm prosecco.

'Fuck it,' I thought, as I typed out a message.

Gwen: wyd? currently stuck at the hen do from hell, fancy giving me an excuse to get out of here?