
Dot.Homme

Jane Moore

1

Goodbye thirty-three. Hello thirty-four. I can say this quite calmly, so clearly the mid-life madness isn't going to strike me down just yet. Maybe next year.

After all, it was thirty-five that did for Julia, my trusty drinking partner from college days. She literally went to bed one night, full of anticipation of our forthcoming 18-30 holiday (OK, so we lied on the application form, but doesn't everyone?), then woke up the next morning sobbing that she was on life's giant shelf and was sick of just being taken down and dusted occasionally.

'I want some permanency in my life,' she wailed, before cancelling our holiday and marrying the first man who crossed her path. Literally. I went to her wedding to the pizza delivery man, but haven't seen her since.

So here I am, on my way to my 'surprise' birthday party, organised by my dear friend and fellow TV producer Tabitha. Except that I know all about it, because my sister Livvy rang to warn me. She knows that I loathe and detest surprises and would be highly likely to walk straight back out again if one is sprung on me.

Instead, I shall arrive at the pub where I'm supposed to be meeting Tab for 'a quiet drink', then put on an Oscar-winning performance of shock and delight at seeing the others there too.

As I walk in the door, I crane my neck above the crowds to seek her out. She leaps to her feet as soon as she sees me.

'Hi! Happy birthday!' She envelops me in a hug then stands back and gives me the once over. 'You look great. Come on, I've booked a quiet table for the two of us through here.'

Leading me by the hand, she guides me through to a small, oblong-shaped room with a circular table plonked in the middle of it, rather tellingly laid out for several people and decorated with lots of birthday kitsch from the pound shop. At one end of the room there's a dark plum velvet curtain from which a jewelled mule is protruding quite obviously.

'Ta da!' Mule-owner Maddy emerges from behind the curtain, tugging it back to reveal my other 'mystery' guests, all grinning like jackanapes and chorusing 'Surprise!'

'Oh my gosh!' Pulling my best Macaulay Culkin expression, I shriek loudly, then start running up and down on the spot for good measure. Seeing Livvy glaring at my

pitiful over-acting, I stop immediately. 'Wow, you guys really fooled me! I had absolutely no idea.'

There follows an excruciating few seconds where they all burst into a half-hearted chorus of 'Happy Birthday', a cacophony of flat notes, high-pitched wailing, and even a moment's hesitation when they clearly forget who they're singing it for.

'Thanks.' I beam insincerely. 'Shall we sit down?'

Now thankfully the attention has shifted from me and everyone is jostling for position and opening their napkins, I should take the opportunity to introduce you to a few of the usual suspects.

First of all there's Maddy, my social salvation. That's her sitting directly opposite me, fussing over who wants still and who wants sparkling. She's single too and, consequently, we see an inordinate amount of each other in our quest to find the 'perfect' man we can then try to change beyond recognition. In the meantime, Maddy happily indulges in lots of meaningless flings, not least because she's stunning and slim and a lot more successful at attracting men than I am. She thinks it's every man for herself and, as a dancer, her ability to lift her leg on to their shoulders in wine bars helps enormously. Tonight, as usual, she's wearing what I always describe as one of her 'nuclear' outfits, with fifty per cent fallout. But as she once told me, she never shows her underwear unintentionally.

At the table, she's flanked either side by Richard and Lars, or Dick and Arse as I affectionately call them. Richard and I met when we were both TV researchers on Good Morning, Britain. He worked in the showbiz department, whilst I was 'human interest.' You know, those 'I had one black twin and one white twin' kind of stories which are really just car crash viewing, but we have to pretend we're doing a public service by highlighting this problem and run a phone line: 'If you've had twins that are different colours and would like help, then call this number . . .' Blah blah blah.

Richard has stayed in light entertainment, though he's risen to the lofty heights of a senior producer on the Saturday night game show Till Divorce Do Us Part - catchphrase 'The bounty after the mutiny' - where warring couples win the glittering prize of an all-expenses paid decree absolute.

His Dutch boyfriend Lars, a striking six-foot-three black man, is one of the dancers who high-kicks their way across the studio floor when the contestants win the chance to live happily ever apart. I met Maddy through him.

Oh, hang on. Something's happening. My sister Livvy is banging on the table, causing her husband Michael to flinch.

'Here's to Jess. Happy thirty-fourth birthday. Cheers!' She raises her champagne glass and takes a swig, and everyone follows suit.

'Cheers,' I parrot, knocking back a mouthful myself. 'This really is terribly nice of you all.'

Livvy is my elder by two years and something of a heroine of mine. Other siblings so close in age may get irritable with each other but she has never been a thorn in my side. For as long as I can remember, far from being a tormentor, she has always been supportive and caring. Most memorably, when I had nightmares as a child, she would sit and stroke my hair until I drifted back to sleep.

When she left home to go to Bristol University, I was distraught for at least a week, sobbing into my pillow and refusing to be consoled by our mother. Then I met a boy in sixth form and became temporarily obsessed by him instead.

The tinny sound of cutlery banging against glass drags me out of my nostalgic thoughts.

'Shall we do presents?' It's Kara, the friend I have known the longest but like the least. We've all got one, haven't we? Inexplicably, we stay in touch with them, drawn like moths to a flame, even though they drive us to distraction most of the time. Men are pragmatically ruthless in such situations, unashamedly severing ties with anyone they consider surplus to requirements. But we women hang on in there, making excuses for the excesses of a ghastly friend, loyal to the bitter, drawn out end, ever hopeful that one day they'll justify our patience.

But Kara, as you'll learn, is particularly dreadful. Sooner or later, you'll wonder why I put up with her, so I may as well address the issue now.

You see, she once saved my life. Not in a grabbed-my-cardie-just-as-I-was-about-to-step-out-in-front-of-a-nearby-car kind of way. No, it was much more than that. She really saved my life, in the kind of dramatic way they make afternoon movies about.

It was the summer of 1988 and we were both among a crowd of friends going for a swim in the local river. Stupidly, I went in alone after several gin and tonics, getting into difficulty when my foot caught in something. Flailing around and screaming for help, I suddenly seemed miles from the bank. Worse, the others - pissed and not very quick on the uptake - seemed to think I was mucking around. They were all laughing raucously and waving back.

Except Kara. She understood the gravity of the situation immediately and, without a thought for her own safety, dived in fully clothed. Swimming across to me, she ducked under the murky water and freed my foot from what seemed to be an old, abandoned boat mooring. Exhausted, I could barely tread water, so she flipped me over and tugged me back to safety just like in lifesaving classes. Minus the pyjamas of course.

We'd always been on the periphery of each other's lives since meeting at sixth form college the year before, but from that moment on we formed a deep bond. To my mind, she had totally and utterly saved my life, and there was never any way I could repay her for that.

I was always aware that Kara had a slightly prickly, odd personality, but convinced myself that it was just her way and, underneath it all, she had a heart of gold. But my parents and Livvy have always disliked her and despaired of her influence over me.

I can't quite put my finger on when it really started to go wrong, but over the years her loyalty became questionable and her face increasingly sour. These days there's definitely an undercurrent of jealousy on her part, and it's as if she only hangs around to delight and luxuriate in the bad things that happen to me. Any happy event in my life seems a tangible disappointment to her.

I suppose the best way to sum her up is that she's always there when she needs you. But I put up with it because . . . well, how could I not after what she did for me.

Tonight, she has dragged along her boyfriend, Dan. He's an amiable enough chap who wombles through life doing no one any harm, but for some reason he's been ensnared by Mrs Danvers. Kara has already told me he will propose by Christmas, but I'm not sure she's told him that yet.

Everyone places their presents in a huge pile in front of me and, rather self-consciously, I start to unwrap them with oohs, aahs and you-shouldn't-haves in all the right places. A beautiful fawn-coloured pashmina from Livvy, a Walkman from Richard and Lars, a popcorn maker from Tab and Will, and a suede-covered photo album from Maddy, with pictures of our various excesses glued inside . . . finally, Kara hands me an envelope.

'This is from me.' She gives me a thin excuse for a smile.

Oh, puh-lease, a bloody gift voucher or book token. How original, I think mutinously. But when I open the envelope, there's a folded piece of A4 inside and my brow furrows with curiosity. All eyes are on me as I pull it out and, worryingly, I notice that my sister looks particularly apprehensive.

The first thing I clap eyes on is a photocopy of a rather indistinct head and shoulders photo of me, grinning vacantly like a halfwit. I remember it was taken at my birthday party last year, shortly before I vomited into the wine bar's ice bucket after drinking my own weight in Sangria. Classy, huh?

To one side, there's a printed paragraph and I start to read it out loud.

'I am a 34-year-old fun-loving woman interested in meeting someone similar. My friend is baffled that I'm single, so perhaps you're the one to clear up the mystery' . . . My voice tails off, my blood freezing in my veins as it dawns on me what this is.

'Please tell me you haven't already placed this?' I look directly at Kara who is positively glowing with relish at my discomfort.

'Of course I have!' She smirks. 'It's your birthday present!'

I scan the others for signs that this is a joke, but absolutely no one is looking me in the eye except her.

'Get it stopped.' I throw the piece of paper across the table and point at her mobile. 'Call them right now and pull it.'

'Can't. It's already on the Internet.' She's trying to look apologetic, but I can tell she's extremely pleased with herself.

Taking a deep breath, I hold it for a few seconds. Knowing Livvy inside out, I glance at her quickly and realise that this whole ghastly business isn't a wind-up. It's one hundred per cent genuine.

'Did you know about this?' I look at her beseechingly.

'Yes.' She nods slowly, wincing with discomfort. 'But only when I got here this evening, so there was absolutely nothing I could do about it. None of us knew beforehand.' She looks round the table for support and the others all nod hastily in agreement.

The Exorcist's Linda Blair has nothing on the head swivel I use to turn back to Kara.

'How

ing dare you!' I glare at her and it takes all my willpower not to lunge for her scrawny throat. 'You had no right to do this, it's totally intrusive.'

Even she looks taken aback by my sudden outburst, and pouts. 'It's only a bit of fun.'

Richard turns down the corners of his mouth and stares at the table.

'It might be a bit of fun to you, but that's my name on there.' I jab my finger at it. 'Not yours. I can't believe you think I'd find that funny . . . I'm going to put a stop to it first thing in the morning.'

Having swallowed my meal along with a large, indigestible helping of righteous indignation, I knock back yet another glass of house white and close my eyes for a second. When I open them, Richard has sidled into the now empty chair beside me.

'Hi.' He smiles sheepishly.

'Low,' I reply, with my best disconsolate expression. 'I'm at rock bottom and starting to dig.'

'Darling, just relax,' he drawls.

'Relax?' I scoff. 'It's only the tension that's holding me together.'

The pair of us stare across the table for a few silent seconds, watching Livvy and her husband Michael totally engrossed in their own conversation, his hand caressing the back of her neck.

'On the one hand,' I say, nodding in their direction, 'they give me faith. On the other, I despair of ever meeting anyone I could love that much.'

'Of course you will, darling,' says Richard in the syrupy, patronising tone my mother always used to assure me that, provided I did my best, I would pass all my exams. I took her advice but flunked most of them anyway. 'But, of course, you won't meet him if you refuse to put yourself out there.'

I raise my eyes heavenward. 'Dick,' I say pointedly, a tactic I always use when he's doing or saying something ludicrous, 'I'm hardly the hermit woman of Balham. I do go out, you know.'

'Yes, but only with me or Tabitha, and we're hardly ideal for attracting heterosexual men. I mean, bless her, Tab easily hits the danger zone on the mooseometer.'

I feel terrible laughing, but do anyway. 'Don't be rotten.'

'You need a more direct approach,' he continues. 'And, by the way, you live in Tooting.'

I scowl for a moment, puzzled by his remark. Not the Tooting bit, he's always ticking me off for pretending to live somewhere slightly posher than I do. No, I'm thrown by the direct approach bit. Then it clicks.

'No. Absolutely not!' I slam my hand so hard down on the table that a narrow vase containing a single yellow rose topples over and spills its water. 'I flatly refuse to date some anorak-wearing cyber-man from the Internet.'

Richard pulls a pooh-poohing face. 'Why not? Everyone's doing it these days. It's the new sexual revolution darling, but instead of Woodstock and flower power orgies, it's taking place through your fingertips.' He mimics tapping a keyboard.

'Not through mine,' I retaliate. 'I prefer the old-fashioned method of meeting a man.'

He places a hand over his mouth and feigns a yawn. 'What, endless nights spent propping up a bar in the hope that one of the surrounding men might be single? If they've registered on the Internet, you know they're looking for a relationship so it cuts out all the crap. It's the fast track to fun, fun, fun.'

I wrinkle my nose. 'It's just not me.'

'Yeah, yeah, I know.' He waves his hand dismissively. 'You're unique . . . just like everyone else.'

His remark may have punctured my ego somewhat, but inside I am reluctantly admitting that he has a point. My persistently single state indicates that maybe I have been going about dating in the wrong way, that maybe it is time for change.

Possibly suspecting a slight thaw in my chill, he warms to the theme. 'There are literally thousands and thousands of them on line, just waiting to be plucked. Darling, even you stand a chance with those odds.'

'Cheers.' I smile sarcastically. 'I'm still not doing it.'

Richard pours me more wine, presumably in the hope it will help weaken my resolve. 'Take a look, at least. That won't do any harm. You can log on and scroll through the potential dates. Just think - your very own hunk hypermarket, and they won't even know you're there.'

'Hmmm. The best I can offer is that I'll think about it.' Put like that, I don't know what else to say.

Maddy hoves into view, her eyes crossed with frustration. 'God, how do you put up with her.'

'Ah, Kara.' I smile, following her glance. 'Yes, she's quite a girl isn't she? Who's she been spitting bile about now?'

Maddy casts a furtive glance over her shoulder. 'I was talking about dancing, and she said, "Bit old for that, aren't you?" Fucking cheek! She barely knows me.'

'Oh, that never stops her. Everyone is entitled to her opinion.' I steal a crafty puff of Richard's cigarette while my censorious sister is looking the other way. 'The only thing that cheats Kara out of the last word is an echo.'

'And she's got such an innocent, harmless look about her,' continues Maddy. 'As if butter wouldn't melt.'

'Yes, the face of a saint,' agrees Richard. 'Trouble is, it's a bloody Saint Bernard. I just feel sorry for that poor sod of a boyfriend. Talk about under the thumb!'

'Nah. Dan's easygoing but he's no pushover,' I say. 'I'm sure he stands up to her, he's just too polite to do it in public.'

'Anyway . . .' Maddy looks at Richard but jerks her head towards me. 'Have you persuaded her yet?'

'Persuaded me to do what?' Then it sinks in and I let out a low groan. 'Oh, God, you're not on about that wretched Internet thing again?'

'Go on, it'll be a laugh if nothing else,' says Maddy. 'What have you got to lose?'

'My dignity?' I retort. Then a thought strikes me. 'I tell you what - I'll do it if you do.'

Of course, as a woman who makes Mae West look positively virginal, Maddy is quite simply the worst person I could have thrown out this challenge to.

She shrugs. 'Absolutely fine by me. But I'm not the one looking for a serious relationship. I'm happy with the occasional fling with whoever life throws at me.'

'She's so discerning.' Richard smiles sarcastically. 'Anyway, she says she'll do it too, so that's it now, you have to go ahead with it.'

My heart doesn't just sink, it's got concrete boots on. 'OK, three dates, no more,' I say resignedly. 'But if none of them turn out to be Mr Right, then it's back to the old method of trawling wine bars and late-night bus-stops.'

'Fantastic!' Richard slaps his thigh D'Artagnan-style. 'All for fun, and fun for all!'