

The Joker

By Tony Lindsay

Joe scanned the room, searching for clues. The bookshelves that covered the walls were impressive. He looked at the dog. He was not good on dogs but it seemed friendly enough, putting its right paw on his seated knee. 'NCD, ETL, DL, TLFK, LRW, SIELF' –that's all the ad. had said, plus a box number of course. No GSOH's or WLTM's or N/S's. No *'Attractive, slim late 30's – interests include reading, swimming, travelling, eating out, cosy nights in - looking for a soulmate,'* and the like.

The door opened and Lorna came in.

"Bollocks!" she exclaimed.

"What's up?"

"No, nothing," she replied. "That's the dog."

Ah right, he thought, this is not going to be any normal form of relationship, wherever it's going.

She handed him a cup of coffee and subsided into an armchair. It engulfed her in its cushions, though somehow she seemed able to keep her own cup level and upright.

"So..." said Joe airily.

"Yep. This is me. Here I live with Bollocks and Fitz."

"And who's Fitz?"

"The other dog. Or bitch, should I say."

"A bitch called Fitz?"

"Yeah well, come on, use your imagination – bit of rhyming slang."

This is very different to Nadya, thought Joe. He'd met Nadya on the internet. She was very beautiful, but she did not seem to have a separate being to his own. When her visa had run out he had refused to marry her and she had gone back to Indonesia.

Sitting in an Indian restaurant waiting for the date – if the date don't come, you get your kicks from staring at the restaurant wall – I am the eggman...

And then she'd come in. How could he describe her? Not beautiful in an English rose sense, but beautiful in a high cheek bones, thirty-eight year old beautiful, languid-smiling chic sense.

Trousers, little make-up, a turquoise scarf swathed around her neck, she had launched into a bottle of red without much ado. They'd talked about this and that - her the ridiculous charade of dating websites, him the girl who'd found a guru and was never the same. But she said he'd have to wait to figure out what the ad. meant.

They had not really touched when they'd parted, merely an acknowledgement, the barest brush on the shoulder; but her eyes said yes, I will see you again. He had invited her to a premiere but she had insisted on her house. This was his initiation.

"Want to go for a walk?"

He was a city boy. He was used to going to the cinema or the newest restaurant or an art gallery on a Saturday afternoon.

But 'That would be great,' he said gamely.

"Well you can't go like that. I'll get you a coat and some wellies."

"Aren't you going to translate the ad. for me first?"

"All in good time. Anyway it's not difficult. They're not riddles. It's just me. "

"Well, just the first one – NCD?"

"Have a guess."

"National Car Distribution? No Chance for Dinosaurs?"

"The No is right. The C is for City."

" No City..."

"Dwellers. No City Dwellers."

Lorna nodded.

"I fall at the first hurdle then," said Joe, crestfallen.

She shook her head. "The student has the space to learn, so says Confucius," she said mysteriously.

"Did Confucius really say that? Sounds more like Yoda."

Before he knew what was happening, a huge barbour that seemed to drown him in its embrace was wrapped around him, and his brogues were swapped for a pair of old green wellingtons.

Lorna re-appeared looking as chic as before, but somehow prepared for battle with the weathers in designer boots and jacket. Excited behind her came Bollocks and Fitz. She unhooked the leads and they marched out of the back door. Joe was acutely aware that his wellies were cold and made a sort of squelching, squeaking noise each time he took a step – a testament, he felt, to his lack of confidence in the countryside.

Bollocks bounded around exuberantly, longing for the open fields where he could go chasing after rabbits, pheasants or plain thin air; but in the meantime decided that Joe was a friend of his mistress and so leapt up at his waist.

"Don't worry about him," said Lorna. "Labradors are about the friendliest dogs in the world."

The only problem was that neither Fitz nor Bollocks seemed terribly obedient and soon all hell broke loose as they headed in different directions. "I'll get Fitz," shouted Lorna. "You get Bollocks."

Joe picked up a stick and headed off down a path in the wood in the general direction that Bollocks had headed.

"Bollocks... here," he called, mimicking Lorna's cries for Fitz.

Then louder, "Bollocks, here," and as he did so, an elderly couple came round the bend of the track, looking at him oddly.

He beamed at them, trying to convey with his smile that this whole situation, the lost dog, let alone the name of the dog, had nothing to do with him. But it was too much to accomplish with facial expression alone and the couple passed on, probably muttering to themselves about people from the city.

“Bollocks,” he shouted, exasperated. And then out of the undergrowth came Bollocks, panting and friendly. Joe didn’t know what to do. He did not have the lead and Lorna was nowhere to be seen. He patted the dog tentatively on the shoulder.

“Lorna,” he called out.

He heard a faint cry.

Bollocks went racing off into the forest in the general direction of the cry. He would disappear, then come running back and wait while he caught up. After fifteen minutes, Joe felt he was lost.

“Lorna,” he called again, but there was no answering call. Perhaps Bollocks was leading him on some wild goose chase into the depths of the forest, never to be found again.

“Lorna,” he shouted more loudly.

“Yes, I’m here.”

She sounded closer and after another couple of legs through the woods and undergrowth he could hear Fitz coming to greet them.

The two dogs seemed to confer and discuss the situation, then moved ahead together, Joe following panting. They came out into a clearing, a stream across it.

Lorna was lying on the far bank of the stream, at the side of a large greenish log. She was massaging her ankle and texting at the same time.

“Where did you get to?”

Joe felt suddenly responsible for leaving her.

“I went after Bollocks like you asked me to.”

“Oh, he’d have looked after himself. Anyway, you’re going to have to help me up. I’ve twisted my bloody ankle.”

Joe looked at her. She was on the far side of the stream and had clearly fallen off the slippery green log.

“Jump it,” she said.

He walked back, then launched himself forward, taking heroic, Usain Bolt-like strides towards the stream. But as he approached the edge, the resolve left him and he ground to a halt.

Lorna burst out laughing.

“Just do it, man,” she shouted, half in pain.

He went back a bit further this time. He set off, self-conscious, hearing his wellies squelching underneath him and feeling his lungs wheezing as he approached the edge.

Don’t stop. Don’t stop. Jump.

His stride pattern was all wrong and he took off a full metre too soon. He landed just short of the far bank, a huge splash ensuing and a cry from Lorna as the cold water engulfed her. He clutched at thistles and elder roots as he dragged himself up onto dry land, bedraggled and yet somehow proud of this city boy.

“You’re going to have to give me the next clue after that,” he said.

“ETL? – Extra-terrestrial lighting? Exotic taste in lettuce?”

“T is right. Think about the bookshelves.”

“Taste in...Literature? Eclectic taste in literature?”

“Yes...you’re soaking,” she said, as he eased his arm around her shoulders and gently lifted her forwards and up.

Now she was upright, one long, slender leg firm, the other hooked behind her, oh so sexy in any other circumstances, her arm wrapped about him in the forest clearing.

They got to the road after half an hour, the dogs yapping all about them at their slow progress.

“ So DL?” said Joe.

“That one’s easy.”

“Dogs? Dog Lover?”

Lorna nodded as a bright blue pick-up finally appeared.

“God, Tom, what took you so long?” said Lorna, easing herself by arse jumps along the front passenger bench. The dogs leapt in the back.

Tom, a swarthy young man with the ruddy cheeks and jovial laugh of a farmer, looked across at her.

“Casualty?”

He pressed a button on the steering wheel and the sound of an ambulance siren blared from the roof of the vehicle.

“No, just take me home,” she said, laughing. “This is Joe.”

“*Heyey Joe,*” sang Tom, “*Where you goin’ with that gun in your hand?* Sorry, couldn’t resist it. I rent her the cottage. Try to keep her in order.”

Lorna made it back inside, her arms clasped again around Joe’s shoulder.

“Don’t get any ideas,” she said, as she stopped to catch her breath. “No, we can’t stand here.”

“Why not?” asked Joe.

She pointed at a picture. Joe could not quite make it out but it reminded him of the Joker in a pack of cards.

“I’m just superstitious. It nearly killed Rufo, my ex, the guy I used to live with, stupid man.”

“What happened?”

“He was trying to paint the ceiling above the stairs. He rigged up this thing from the landing across to where the stairs turn. A plank and a step-ladder to support it on the other end. It was OK when he tested it on the landing end, but when he got beyond the middle the weight was too much for the step ladder and it slid inwards. The whole thing collapsed. He went flying and dislodged the picture on the way down. The corner caught him on the face. It was a complete mess when I came in – Rufo unconscious, magnolia paint and blood everywhere, the step ladder and the picture on top of him. He was lucky to get away with a broken shoulder and concussion.”

Under strict instruction, Joe found a bottle of Chilean merlot from the rack and a large bag of frozen peas from the freezer. He carefully skirted the Joker. The bottle was opened and dispensed into two glasses; only then was he allowed to apply the pack of peas to Lorna’s ankle.

He thought back to the ad. What had he learnt? No City Dwellers – she seemed to be cutting him some slack on this one. Eclectic Taste in Literature – he felt qualified. Dog Lover - well, Bollocks and Fitz seemed to like him and that was surely half the battle.

He remained intrigued. TLFK, LRW, SIELF to go.

“So...Confucius, he say, put me out of my misery. Can we go through the rest of the clues?”

“OK.”

“TLFK – Taste in Literature for ...Kids?”

“Last word is right.”

“Ah, Too Late for Kids. I’m cool with that.”

“LRW?” he went on, feeling buoyant. “Long Reign for William?”

Lorna drank from an air glass.

“Wine,” he said. “Red Wine...Likes Red Wine?”

Another one ticked off.

“SIELF?”

“Self-indulgent effusion and loads of fun?”

She shook her head.

“Self-interested ecstasy in lovely female?”

“Close.”

“E?”

“Eventually”

“She I’d...Someone I’d eventually like to...”

“Yup,” she broke in.

“And how am I doing?”

She said nothing, but as Joe left that night her wide, unbroken blue eyes smiled as her lips brushed his cheek and he knew he would see Fitz and Bollocks and the Joker again.

ends

