

Looking for a mixed relationship?

BY Al McClimens

He was doing a crossword puzzle when I first saw him. Glasses halfway down his nose, pen poised near his mouth and a look of complete concentration all over his face. As I walked by collecting glasses I wondered if I could ever inspire such focus. Just then I heard him mutter, 'For fuck's sake', as he scribbled on the grid. Charming.

Half an hour later his mobile told him he had to be somewhere else. He brought his glass back to the bar and gave me a big smile as he left. Sandra nudged me. 'Out of your league, our Hazel. Observer cryptic crossword. Out of your league. Now let's get the bar tidied'. The darts team were in by then, all beer bellies and tabloid invective. They didn't look as if they could spell 'newspaper' never mind actually read one that wasn't full of pictures. I hoped H didn't think this was the league I should be playing in.

Next Sunday he was there again. Same routine. Same result. Same exit smile. I gave him one in return. Well, no harm in trying, is there? He gave me a wave as he went by in his car as I was picking up the empties from the tables outside. It was only a two-seater sports car with the top down, his sunglasses on and a noise from the engine that sounded like thunder locked in a box.

'John, my ex, he had one of them', said Hazel. 'Always breaking down. Now, have we got enough bottles in the fridges?' It was only on the road home that I wondered if she meant John or the car.

I spent the rest of the week in a panic. It was my weekend off and I was desperately trying to figure out what to do about Sunday lunchtime. I realised I was becoming a

bit obsessed but what's a forty two year old, divorced mother of two with no current affection in her life to do in these circumstances? I'd done the internet dating, the speed dating and the batteries on my rabbit were constantly on recharge. I was stood in the queue at Tesco metro in Woodseats wondering if the bottle of South African Shiraz meant that I was an alcoholic in the making when I saw him at the self-service checkout. I spun round, nearly taking the teenager behind me to the floor and dashed for the machine next to his. He never looked up. I scanned the Shiraz and the screen alerted the floor staff. She came over and pressed some buttons to confirm that I was old enough to purchase alcohol.

'Excuse me', he said. My heart bounced. But he was talking to the floor staff. 'Excuse me, could you.....?' She looked at him and his bottle of upmarket champagne. 'You sure you're over eighteen?' The cheeky cow was flirting with him. 'There you are, love. Ooooooh, chocolates as well? They for your wife are they?'

I couldn't believe it.

'Not married. Been there done that. They're for my mum',

'Oh, bless'. She had her hand on his arm then. I could have punched her. The machine spat my change into the tray and I gathered it up and fled the store. I stood for a moment by the bus stop opposite the Palace just to catch my breath. The bitch. The cow. The cheap plastic was digging into my fingers and I put the bags down on the pavement.

A hand tapped my shoulder and I turned, ready to swipe the arm from my presence. Fucking teenagers blabbering on about 'respect'. I'd give them some 'respect'.

'Sorry, you left this in the dispenser'.

He handed me the fiver.

'They come out of a separate slot'.

I just stood and gawped.

He looked at me with the same puzzled look I'd seen him use on the crossword.

'Aren't you.....?'

'Yes, please.....'

He paused for a beat while my heart skipped.

'My car's just round the back'. He glanced at my bags. 'Can I give you a lift?'

It was six o'clock that evening and when the phone rang I nearly broke my leg diving across the settee to grab it off the coffee table.

'You alright? You sound a bit breathless.'

It was Rod, the manager, looking for an extra pair of hands for the fishing club social. I could hear Sheila in the background advising him on tactics. Then the phone was handed over as Rod was called away to deal with a delivery.

'Listen', she said. I know you don't have the kids Tuesdays so what's up? The tips from the social are brill. You'd clear two easy. So, come on, spill'. I told her. Then I had to hold the phone away as she shrieked and screamed.

'Who is it? Not crossword man! Nooooooooooooooooooooo! He's fucking gorgeous and Hazel says he's got a Maserati or summat. Oh I don't know what to say.....'

This didn't stop her going on and on for another ten minutes but eventually she gave up and I spent the next 24 hours in a complete daze. And then we had that date.

And then I spent the next three months in an even bigger daze. And then he showed me how to do crosswords. Not just any crosswords, cryptic crosswords. This is what happened.

The Sunday afternoons were to become a habit over time. We'd drop the kids off at my sisters, round to his for a lazy shag then down the White Lion for a couple before picking up the Observer and heading back to mine for the crossword.

'Look at this one: it's an anagram'.

'You mean like the conundrum on Countdown?'

'Yeh, but they don't tell you upfront that it's an anagram, you need to find the trigger word in the clue that alerts you to the fact. Look, 'Her co-star upsets big band (9). 'Upset' tells you that it's an anagram and you need to look for a nine letter cluster, not necessarily one word that, when you unscramble it, gives you a word that means 'big band' or something like. Ok?'

I looked at the puzzle but nothing happened. I looked harder and repeated the clue. Still nothing. It was like being a teenager and snorting the talcum powder somebody's brother's mate had sold you down the youth club, wondering when the amphetamines were going to scramble your brain. Nothing. Her co-star upsets big band, her co-star upsets big band, her co-star....her co-star was nine letters....something that means the same as a big band then.....her co-star, hosterrac, chasteror, her co-star..... then I had an epiphany and the junk kicked in and the answer jumped off the page. I felt light headed. This was better than drugs. Orchestra. An orchestra is like a big band. The answer was orchestra. I had solved a

clue in a cryptic crossword. I scribbled it into the grid. I shouted at him, 'Orchestra!' and handed the paper over.

He gave it the full school teacher before looking up. 'By George, I think she's got it. Now try seven down. Same principle. I'll put the kettle on'.

When he came back with the tea tray I had worked out another three anagrams. I was hooked. Even after his work took him away to Africa and he never came back I still kept up the Sunday routine. The kids were amazed. I amazed myself sometimes. And I'll never forget the first time I completed it. I was too scared to send it in though. Even though I knew it was all correct. I started looking at the names and addresses of the winners after that, just in case there was anyone local.

And just last week it happened. I was checking on the few missing answers when I glanced at the list. It was his name, odd spelling of the first name and that almost unique surname that betrayed his roots. It was him alright. And who else with that name lived in this country never mind that village? But there was something else, or someone else. It looked like he'd finally gotten married again. Well, I thought to myself, congratulations. And then I wondered if he fancied a true lady looking for a mixed relationship - eight letters.