

The Killer Heels and The Sheepskin Slippers

Dina Chevens

Simon thought carefully about his choice of author and novel. He knew Barbara belonged to a book club and several of Ian McEwan's works had been their focus. And there had been that infamous incident at the Literature Festival where McEwan's first wife had allegedly wrestled the microphone and heckled him in the question and answer session. No, there were several choices that would not be appropriate and he was keen to convey the exact tone. 'The Children Act' was not one of these. Neither was 'On Chesil Beach' or 'Atonement' but he felt McEwan offered a certain gravitas without being too pseudo-intellectual. This was a Valentine's gift after all.

Simon liked to think he and Barbara were soulmates. They had met on line some nine months ago and Simon was keen. This was their first Valentines 'à deux' as he put it. Barbara, or Ba, Simon's pet name for her, had been widowed young and whilst she gave the impression of being disorganised and ditzzy, was a shrewd mathematician with a steely core. She had held it all together as a single, working Mum and was now supporting both her boys through University.

Obviously some 'bons mots' would be written using his trusty, ancient fountain pen. He pondered anxiously about the inscription, working and reworking the script, practising on the back of envelopes, worrying about smudging the ink when he finally committed to the actual copy. Mont Blanc's Mystery Black ink at 17 quid a bottle had, for Simon, been a wild extravagance. He was careful with money and not prone to frivolous purchases but this was an exception. The novel had been bought on line- always more economical- though he'd even considered a second hand copy but decided too risky a purchase under the circumstances. He failed to appreciate the smell of musty- fresh, printed word and the thrill, excitement and anticipation of opening a brand new book.

Simon remained on cordial terms with his ex-wife, communicating mostly on matters concerning their children. They were polite and civil though he would never understand why she moved out after 23 years of marriage. He had provided a good home, regular steady income in IT and she hadn't seemed to mind the hours on the golf course at the weekend. It was as if the prospect of his retirement and an empty nest had somehow 'tipped' her. He had envisaged

a comfortable co-existence, pottering in the garage with his circuit boards, soldering iron and regular, lovingly prepared meals when he stopped for a break. Simon had never been one to cook. Or travel. Holidays were always marred by his severe constipation.

Like many middle aged men who find themselves alone, Simon had taken up the guitar, bought himself a leather jacket and immediately subscribed to online dating. He had joined social meet up groups and a dance class. His pride severely dented, he was determined to show the world that he was still an eligible, sought after guy who could be seen with an attractive woman on his arm. But he had severely underestimated Barbara's brain, seeing only the cascade of curls which enhanced her youthful outlook and demeanour.

With painstaking precision, Simon sat in his study, pen poised. His hands were mottled with both age spots and ink, like the blight on a rose leaf. His writing was unmistakably male, barely decipherable with its casual cursive style and slanting arrangement. The message, he felt, offered just the right amount of genuine affection, solemnness and class without being too gushing. Theirs was an adult relationship after all.

Dearest Ba

Happy Valentines Day

You deserve to chill and take it easy reading this book.

Enjoy the peace and the love.

Simon xxx

Barbara taught GCSE maths at a pupil referral unit with the most challenging of students. She had picked up her career once her sons had become less dependent. It was exhausting, both physically and mentally, dodging the daily barrage of insults and defeatism towards herself and the subject. 'I hate maths. Can't do it. What's the point? My phone's got a calculator. You married, Miss? How many men you had?' She knew it was never personal, it just came with the territory. She knew with time and patience, skill and experience, she would win them round. Their results spoke for themselves. She smiled, never rose to the bait and pretended to count extravagantly. In truth there had only ever been one man.

Reluctantly, Barbara had joined WAY- widowed and young. She had been in her 40's when her partner had gone out for a run and simply hadn't returned.

Protecting the boys had been her utmost priority and the organisation offered bereavement support for them all. Slowly, she had picked up the pieces of life and was more than functioning now with work, family, friends and a great social life. Of course she missed the boys in term time but she was obviously proud of their achievements and they remained in close contact.

A wicked sense of humour had never deserted her and it was after a prosecco fuelled evening with the girls that she had signed up to the dating website under the pseudonym 'Irresistibly Optimistic'. She had been advised to have low expectations to avoid disappointment. This was to be approached as a hobby, a bit of fun when there was nothing on the tele. Maybe just a bit of window shopping. Barbara was amazed at the number of hits she received but laughed them off or showed them to her girlfriends in the first process of positive vetting. Simon had passed the initial cull.

They met for coffee. Daylight hours. Safe and time limited. Neutral. The only concession Barbara made was to wash her hair. She had grown it long and the length pulled the curl so she had the look of a pre-Raphaelite muse. She was totally unaware that as her head moved there was the soft sensuous smell of coconut and vanilla. Simon talked a lot about himself and was clearly nervous but she liked his gentle way and intelligence. They agreed to meet again and so began their burgeoning romance.

A predictable, steady arrangement followed. Meeting at the pub, maybe a meal, cinema. Gradually they met each other's friends and children. Comfortable and to some extent cosy. Barbara yearned excitement, passion and spontaneity. Hers were the killer heels to his sheepskin slippers. The incendiary to the one bar electric fire. So, how to acknowledge their first Valentines together? Ignore it as crass commercialism? Some gesture was needed but she really did not want to give any false expectation or hurt his feelings. In fact, she was increasingly beginning to think she needed to extricate herself from this friendship. Timing was crucial.

Barbara unwrapped the gift with some trepidation. It was obviously a book, a paperback so fortunately no great romantic proposal or pitch. She had invited Simon around for supper and had made it clear that as a week night, with work the following day, they would not be late and he should have no expectation of staying over.

If there was some subliminal message in the choice of novel, Barbara chose to ignore it. The gift was acknowledged with a quick peck on the cheek, a kiss devoid of all passion, almost asexual from her perspective. Perfunctory. She skimmed Simon's words and smiled brightly before turning back to the kitchen to busy herself with supper. No it was definitely time to move on.

The irony of chucking 'Enduring Love' into the charity book bin was not lost on Barbara. Should she rip out Simon's words? She gave them but a moment's thought.