



## WHEN THE CHIPS ARE DOWN

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It was a Tuesday. I was walking along Streatham High Road to Terry and Julie's house and I was thinking that things couldn't get any worse. Then it started to rain. Then the sole fell off my shoe. Then a car skidded and hit a Siamese cat and made it shriek and a woman pushing a pram was startled and she let go of the pram and the pram rolled off down the hill.

But still things couldn't have been worse because things were pretty bad already. That was a fact.

My house had burnt down and all I had left were (a) the clothes I stood up in and (b) a tea towel a sympathetic friend had given me. Thinking laterally I had tied the tea towel into a triangle and I was using it as an alternate pair of underpants. One morning I washed out my underpants, one morning I washed out the tea towel. I was homeless, I was destitute, I was penniless but I wasn't a bum.

No sir.

A bum I wasn't. So things weren't so bad. Then it started to rain harder. The drops were like those silicone implants woman put in their breasts. Only they were water and therefore wetter.

I stepped up my pace and tried to put all bad thoughts out of my head. Instead I tried to think pleasant thoughts. In fact, I thought fish and chips, fish and chips. I would get fish and chips on account from the Vegas chip emporium and I would take them to Terry and Julie's.

'Fish and chips!' I would shout as I went through the door. 'Fish and chips for all!' And we would pick at the steaming bundle like crows until only the paper was left. Then I would scrunch the paper up into a ball and I would kick it around the front room with their kid like a goof and they would shake their heads and say what a goof, what a goof but secretly they would be glad that I was a godfather and Liam, their son, was my godson.

That was a nice thought.

Fish and chips. Yeah.

As I said, it was a Tuesday. The sign on the door of the Vegas chip emporium said, 'Closed down Monday. Shop to LET!'

The 'let' was like that, in capital letters with an exclamation mark after it as if that was the most important piece of information. Let me tell you, it wasn't. It was only bad medicine.

I put my hand up to the glass just in case the sign was lying. Signs, in my experience, often do. But in this case it was right. The shop was empty, the fryers were gone, the counter was bare and they'd even taken the goddam insectocutor. I'd always wanted that thing and now I would never have it. More importantly, I wouldn't have any chips.

So it was in a chipless state that I made my way to my friends' house and that weighed heavy upon me. What kind of person was I to turn up without even one chip?

'Sorry,' I said as Terry opened the door, 'I didn't bring chips.'

Terry shook his head and looked back over his shoulder. 'Julie,' he shouted, 'No chips!'

'No chips!' shouted back a voice like a kid's cry from the far side of a river. 'Not even one?'

Terry looked back at me. I shook my head.

'Not even one,' shouted back Terry. Then he looked at me and pulled down the corner of his mouth. 'Never mind,' he said. 'We'll do without.'

Little Liam will be disappointed though.’ Terry shook his head again. The corners of his mouth went down further so that he looked like a painting by Picasso.

I was still standing in the rain. It was worse than I thought. I made a mental note to cancel the following Tuesday.

Then little Liam scooted up. He was like Tintin on the moon. Bounding.

‘Hello Uncle Gay,’ he said. ‘You’re just in time. Mum’s making chips. She’s in the kitchen and she’s making chips. Enough for everyone.’

It stopped raining inside my head.

‘Don’t call Mark Uncle Gay,’ said Terry.

‘OK,’ said Liam and he walked back along the hall saying ‘Uncle Gay, Uncle Gay’ over and over. I could see his shoulders going up and down as he laughed.

When Julie walked into the lounge she was holding a plate of chips in one hand and a family size jar of tomato ketchup in the other. She looked like Eleanor Roosevelt doing a guest appearance in an early episode of Doctor Who. I don’t know why, but she did.

When she saw me she said, ‘Get those wet things off!’ That was what motherhood does to you.

‘I’m OK,’ I said.

‘Get them off or no chips for you,’ said Julie. ‘I’m not running a house for the recently sodden.’ She looked like she meant it. The chips looked nice. The battle was won. So off came my clothes and Julie marched them off into the kitchen. I knew they would envy me. After all I was here with the chips.

When Julie came back another battle was being fought. It was the Battle of Chip High 2003. Terry had lined up his chips along the battlements of the sofa in what seemed like an impregnable position. However Liam was flanking to the left with a chip sub and I was on the right doing a scissor chip manoeuvre I had recently viewed in a Hong Kong movie at the Ritzy. The outcome was less sure than a toss of a coin.

Or it was.

‘Eat your chips!’ shouted Julie. She used the same voice she’d used on my clothes. ‘Don’t play!’ she shouted.

So we did and I think we were quite glad anyway. They were nice chips.

Just as about the last chip was eaten Liam, who had been quiet up until this point, made a comment.

‘Uncle Gay?’ he said.

‘Yes?’ I said.

‘Are you wearing a tea towel?’

‘Um....’ I said. I didn’t know what to say. Until recently I wouldn’t have been seen dead in any kind of kitchen accoutrement.

‘Birds of the Norfolk Broads,’ said Julie.

‘What?’ I said. ‘What?’

‘On your tea towel,’ said Julie.

‘Is it a cock or a cuckoo?’ said Liam.

‘Is it a coot or a peahen?’ said Julie.

‘Help me Terry,’ I said.

Terry stood up. He was like Caligula before he blushed. ‘Come upstairs,’ he said. ‘I’ll lend you some pants.’

‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘Thank you.’ And we made a rapid exit.

One by one Terry laid his underpants out on the bed. The tiger stalking the gazelle in the picture hanging above the bed eyed us suspiciously. ‘What are you two lugers up to?’ it seemed to be saying.

‘You can choose four pair,’ said Terry, hitching up his jeans and turning his back to the picture. ‘But don’t take all the blue ones.’

I sat down on the bed. Then I stood up. Then I sat down on the bed again. I shook my head. ‘Terry,’ I said, ‘I don’t know what to say.’

‘Actually,’ said Terry in a whisper, ‘I wanted to speak to you.’

‘I promise not to take all the blue ones,’ I said.

‘No,’ said Terry. ‘Not that. Hang on.’

Terry looked all about him and then hopped over to the door. Terry is fifteen stone and has a back that top doctors have scratched their heads about. I knew something serious was up. He doesn't usually hop.

'It's about sex,' he said.

'Oh,' I said.

Terry was now standing with his back flat against the door. I had been in this position once before and it had only been resolved by a very obnoxious blowjob. Terry was a mate. Besides we'd done the whole blowjob thing when we were fourteen. Julie was always bringing it up at dinner parties. It was the story that never died. Terry had threatened to join the church just to put a stop to it. I didn't think we were going down that path.

'Sex?' I said.

'Yeah,' said Terry. 'Sex. Me and Julie, we're not having it. I think she's gone off me.'

I looked down at the underpants on the bed. Terry had arranged them in rainbow order, violet at the top, red at the bottom. I looked back at Terry.

'It's probably just the time of the month,' I said. I had once come across a book about women and times of the month. I think it was by Jack London. Actually it might have been about a wolf.

'It's been six months,' said Terry.

'It can't be easy,' I said, putting that rugged woodsman Jack London to the back of my mind, 'with Liam,' I added.

'Liam doesn't push me on the floor when I snore and tell me if I fart one more time he's going to superglue my arsehole.'

'Oh,' I said.

'You're good at sex,' said Terry. 'All those men. All those shags. I need some tips.'

'It's not the same,' I said. 'I mean, Julie's a woman. I'm a man. I like men.'

'So does Julie,' said Terry. 'Go on. Think of something.'

'Well,' I said. To be honest I was still thinking Jack London. There was a man I would have liked to have met. He was an archetype. Masculine to a T.

'Please,' said Terry.

'OK,' I said. 'How about cooking her a meal. Lighting candles. Romantic music. Women like that kind of thing.'

'Tried that,' said Terry. 'Knocked the candle over, burnt the tablecloth.'

'Oh,' I said.

'Actually,' said Terry, 'I was thinking dildo. What do you think?'

'What?' I said.

'One of those motorised ones,' said Terry. He started wiggling his middle finger. 'Spins around like a dervish in a twirl.'

'I think,' I said, 'that I'll take two pair of red, one pair of green and just one blue.'

Terry's face lit up. 'So that's a yes then?'

'Yeah,' I said. 'It's a yes. Only don't say it was my idea.'

'If she doesn't like it I will,' said Terry. 'Now help me put those pants away.'

'OK,' I said. 'Will do.'

It was as I was putting the last pair of blue in the drawer that Terry asked me the question.

'One thing,' he said. 'Where do I buy a dildo?'

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