

JANET AND JOHN (1200 words)

By Michael Percy

John's taking me out to dinner tonight. And it was all his own idea. I don't want to sound ungrateful but when he takes me out it's usually my idea. I let him think it's all his own work but it never is - never has been. So you'll understand why I'm a bit on edge. Not sure what to expect. Or why.

More worryingly - it's a Friday night. Friday night is club night- John's Club Night. It's a railway society and he's not missed a Friday night by choice for twenty years.

My first thought was - that's nice, and it's a Friday. He must love me. Then I thought - what's he up to? What's he want? What's he planning? But I wasn't going to ask. No chance. But I've spent all this week checking a few possibilities.

It's not my birthday and it's not his. Felicity is not pregnant - although I wish she'd get on with it before I'm too old to enjoy my grandchildren. Our Peter's not lost his job again or announced he's gay.

It's not our anniversary, although he may think it is. I'll kill him if he's got the date wrong again. Twenty-seven years it will be - in January.

Twenty-seven years. The time has flashed by. I can remember our wedding day and then my life has been like one of those speeded up sequences in a film. Whoosh and here I am - piles, stretch marks and two grown up kids.

He keeps grinning, it's driving me mad. I've tried to think of everything - birthdays, anniversaries... It's not Christmas - not even he could get that wrong - and Easter was months ago. It could be some kind of announcement. Promotion...no, unlikely. Birth, death, marriage, divorce. Divorce, there's an idea. He wouldn't, would he - take me out for a meal and tell me he's leaving? No, he'd phone or write - from as far away as possible.

But divorce, how do I feel about that? Starting again.

Sounds like a lot of hard work.

Dating. Oh God, I can't bear the thought. All that being nice to each other, getting to know each other and for what? Just so you can get married and spend the rest of your life comfortably ignoring each other. I've got that now.

There is another possibility and he could be planning to spring that on me tonight. God forbid.

He wants us to buy a canal-side tea shop, "we just need a tiny second mortgage so we can buy a going concern and we're set for life".

No way.

"We can live on the canal in the summer months when we make our money and come back here for the winters."

In his dreams.

The most worrying thing is that John has never managed to keep a secret from me in all the time I've known him. So why didn't I spot this coming? Maybe I've misjudged him. Maybe he's an accomplished liar and all this time he's managed to make me think that I can see right through him. The cunning bastard.

But then I couldn't complain about that could I? Not with my track record. You see, I had an affair once.

I went to a night class - conversational French it was. Not that there was much call for French on the Staffs and Wotsit Canal but I lived in hope. Etienne was the teacher.

It wasn't just sex - even though it was with a Frenchman. Me, with a Frenchman - hard to believe. Sometimes, when me and John are having a row, I want to shout - "...and I've slept with a Frenchman." But I never do.

The end came when Etienne asked me to go away for a weekend. We worked it all out - told our lies. I even lied to the kids.

On the day I had to meet Etienne at the station I saw my mother in a shop so I ducked behind a parked car so she wouldn't see me. Then I saw my reflection in a shop window opposite - crouched in the road frightened someone might see me. But it was me who saw me.

I suppose you could say John won - not that he knew he was in a competition. Etienne had the electricity but I loved John.

We do a lot in the name of love. Love is the only thing that would keep a man repairing photocopiers for twenty years. He has done that for love - love of his family. If the opportunity had been there I know he would have sacrificed his life for us: joined a militia to fight an invader; rescued us from a burning building; led us to safety through a

flood. But the opportunity never came. So he did what was asked of him - he repaired photocopiers.

It was a lovely meal; that little French restaurant in the High Street. I'd been dropping hints for a while about how nice it looked so I suppose John wasn't being as spontaneous as I first feared. And there was no danger they'd recognise me - not after nearly twenty years.

And the announcement? He had a lorry named after me. One of Eddie Stobart's delivery trucks. They are very smart - green and red livery and gold lettering. And there is a fan club.

Can you believe that: a fleet of delivery trucks with a supporters club? And John is a member - that's another little secret he's kept from me. There is a truck spotting book in which these people tick off the trucks they've spotted.

Members of the club can have the name of someone they love emblazoned on the front of the cab of one of Eddie Stobart's delivery lorries. And that is what John has done for me.

We caught up with Janet at the Rothersthorpe services on the M1. The driver used John's camera to take a picture of us standing in front of the engine part at the front, where the name is. Janet. I was gobsmacked.

When John told me what he had done I must admit to having mixed feeling. To be honest, I nearly tipped his escargot over his head. But the more I thought about it, the more I realised what he was getting at. It meant so much to him, he was so proud, and he was doing it for me.

Anyone can walk into a shop and buy an eternity ring or a bunch of flowers. It's easy. It requires little thought so what does it really mean?

I know the term trainspotter is sneered at and anorak has become a term of abuse - but that is John. He particularly loves steam trains and top of the scale for him would be having a train named after me but that's impossible unless you're royalty. What he's done for me is unique to us. He has drawn me into his favourite world because he loves me.

Etienne would never have thought of writing my name on a lorry.

(end – 1200 words)

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