

Our Relationship Reboot by Chris Cottom

Swathed in her silk kimono, Marie's at the breakfast bar, giving hell to half a grapefruit. As usual, she's as sharp as a sniper.

'What happened last night?'

'Nothing happened last night.'

'It doesn't take two hours to take Charlene home.'

'I was too wired to sleep. Dinner with your neo-fascist brother always winds me up.'

'So, you treated her to a taste of your socialist outrage, did you? I'm sure any babysitter would be putty in your hands after that.'

'I took her home, parked up somewhere and smoked a couple of joints.'

'Until two o'clock?'

'I was chilling to some Rachmaninov.'

'You expect me to believe that?'

'Maybe it was the Ramones.'

She's pissed at me because she thinks I made out with a seventeen-year-old. I'm pissed at myself because I'm way past all that. And because, if I'd suggested anything, Charlene would doubtless have run for the hills, yelling how she doesn't put out in cars with flabby forty-somethings. Or not with this one. At least, not in his wife's Honda Civic. But a man can dream.

Marie has post-project blues, now we've finished transforming a tumbledown threshing barn into a family home fit for *Elle Decoration*. We're done with arguing between

Farrow & Ball Red Earth and B&Q Tuscan Glade, and it's time to get on with Baby Two. As I keep reminding her.

I shake too much instant into my Mr Messy mug, splosh in some water from the kettle and stomp across the Sicilian quarry-tiled floor as noisily as possible for a man of fifteen stone in Dennis the Menace slippers. At the door, I glance back to assess the impact of my bruised-but-dignified retreat, but Marie's staring out of the window, her serrated grapefruit spoon in mid-air.

'It's raining,' she says.

I say nothing. Bad weather is always my fault.

Slurping my coffee on the open-tread oak staircase, repurposed from the timbers of a Gravesend workhouse, I discover Marie hadn't boiled the kettle. I turn the power shower as hot as I can stand, let it pummel my pate to stimulate follicle rejuvenation, scratch the back of my scrotum, and remember an article in the *Guardian's* magazine called 'Reboot Your Relationship in Four Days'.

I spray on industrial quantities of Marie's 'Heartless Helen by Penhaligon'. Refreshed and tangy, I hunt everywhere for the magazine before digging it out from Spartacus's litter tray. Our hypoallergenic Russian Blue observes me with the disinterest characteristic of his species, or more likely he's tired. The nocturnal screeching from the garden suggests our Lothario of the Laurel Hedge is getting more nookie than his lord and master.

The article is damp but readable. Apparently, a four-day reboot stopped 'Tim and Angie' sliding towards a marital P45. Maybe the paper will be interested in a 'Matt and Marie' follow-up.

But 'Day One – Laying Everything on the Table' continues to go badly.

'You used all the hot water,' Marie yells. 'Do you think I like cold showers?'

'Go on,' I say, 'Lay everything on the table.'

'What? And stop leaving your manky boxers on the floor. Try putting them in the washing machine. It's a white metal thing with a door like a porthole.'

I'm tempted to select a weapons-grade putdown from my mental copy of my, as yet unpublished, magnum opus *Great Insults of the World – A User's Guide*. But this is day one of our new life together, our rosy-tinted dawn. Either that, or it's shit or bust.

'Thank you for pointing out my shortcomings in the hygiene department, darling. I'll try to redress my offending behaviour before our next one-to-one, which—'

'What did you just say?'

'I was about to say we'll put it on the agenda for our next review.'

'You called me darling.'

'Yes darling, I did call you darling. Because, darling—'

'Listen. There's no way you're having sex tonight.'

~

The *Guardian* magazine is getting pongy, so I retire to my man-shed to swot up on 'Day Two – Making Time and Space for Each Other'.

'We need to make time and space for each other,' I tell Marie as she sits at our toddler-distressed refectory table for the family Sunday lunch I'd risen early to prepare, slow-roasting the organic, on-the-vine tomatoes to tease out the flavour. 'We're both so

busy. Do you want to get your assistant to call mine? You know, get something in the calendar? Perhaps we could do lunch?’

‘We’re *doing* lunch now, in case you hadn’t noticed. And Harrison won’t eat that stuff. I promised him fishfingers.’

I slide my copper-bottomed signature dish of Daddy’s Famous Pasta Sauce back onto the hob. ‘No problem, petal. I could easily rustle up some goujons of wild plaice which might amuse his young palate. Maybe with a light tomato coulis?’

‘Just get the Birds Eye ones out of the freezer.’

‘Now, I have a space-planning suggestion. Simply kicking the tyres here, you know, stir-frying some ideas into the family think-wok. I thought we might sit at right-angles. Perhaps facing each other is a teensy-weensy bit confrontational.’

‘If you think you’re going to sit in Harrison’s place, you’ve got another think coming. They warned us about this at the NCT classes, remember? Father feels replaced by baby and fights for affection. Such a cliché.’

‘Don’t you think we should challenge the status quo? Harrison needs to confront his personal paradigms, loosen the bonds constraining him into becoming a carbon copy of his parents.’

‘Harrison is three years old. He likes sitting there. He likes looking at the birds on the terrace.’

~

'Day Three – Innovation' means we're half rebooted. I go in straight off the bat over my lightly toasted artisan sourdough with low-sugar quince marmalade.

'We need to try new things together.'

'I've told you before. I'm not getting my kit off on some south-coast beach just because you want to perve at anyone of Charlene's age stupid enough to confuse Torquay with St Tropez.'

'Actually, I was thinking we might try the cinema tomorrow. You know, like a date. A date night, that's what they call it.'

'What? Where you invest a tenner in the hope of a grope in the back row?'

But I see a glimmer of a smile cross the glossed lips of the beautiful girl Marie had been in the dusty wedding picture on our Shaker-style sideboard. I press on. 'There's an interesting Korean film that's had very good reviews. Subtitles of course.'

'You know I hate all that arthouse crap. Isn't there a new James Bond or something?'

'I'll see if Charlene's free.'

~

'Day Four – Getting Physical Again' dawns wet and windy. But there's sunshine in my heart and hope in my groin as, after work, I prepare a couple of aphrodisiac-strength cocktails and practice my best Daniel Craig voice. 'Would you care for a Bellini before the cinema? Made with pureed white peaches, picked by Neapolitan maidens this morning and flown by Alitalia direct to Stanstead.' I don't want Marie to rumble I've used Aldi

Sparkling Blanc De Blanc instead of Prosecco, so I neck the rest of the bottle and bury it in the recycling bin.

I pop the Bellinis into our Smeg mega fridge and decide to shower before cleaning up the kitchen. Marie's late home anyway, probably gassing with the yummy mummies or hipster dads at Harrison's nursery. I'm careful to minimise my water usage while lathering every personal nook and cranny with everything smelly and expensive-looking I can find.

I shave off my designer stubble, and reckon I'll spice things up by doing my pubes as well. I've not tried this before and the jut of my gut and the lack of a full-length mirror means I can only see the target by standing on the toilet and peering in the mirror over the basin, a manoeuvre which should probably involve a written risk assessment. I'm halfway hairless when my phone pings and I give my sack a nasty nick with my Bic. I jump down, pull a fluffy flannel from the pile, shove it between my legs, and find a text from Marie.

'I'm at my mum's with Harrison. You've been behaving really strange. I need some space so we're staying here for a bit. Then you and I need to talk.'

The doorbell rings. I pull on my shorty dressing-gown and hobble downstairs, clutching the flannel between my thighs. The hall mirror tells me there's shaving gel on my chin, so I smear a minty blob across my cuff before opening the door. I haven't put my glasses back on but Charlene's different somehow.

'I'm sorry,' she says. 'I must be early.'

Except it isn't Charlene. It's her mum.

'Charlene's got a date. Some boy she's really keen on. We couldn't let you down so I said I'd do the babysitting. Only this once.'

She walks in, pulling off her coat. She's hot. She might have a teenage daughter but she's as hot as hell.

'Actually,' I say, 'there's been a change. I've just made a couple of cocktails. Would you care for one?'

I remember Charlene mentioning her dad wasn't around. The evening might have its compensations, even if my crotch is shouting 'A&E'.

'Take a seat in the lounge and I'll bring them through. Hope you like Bellinis. How about some cheesy nibbles?'

She doesn't answer. Her coat in her hand, she's staring at a once-white flannel spotted with blood on the sage-green rug. It's Cath Kidston meets Texas Chainsaw.

I drop down to grab it. As I stand up, my gown falls open.

'Look—'

'No thank you,' she shouts, sprinting for her car.

As her tyres screech out of the drive, I slip the gown off, dip a sleeve in the downstairs loo, and start rubbing the blood on the carpet. I'm butt naked on my knees in the open doorway when a car turns in.

A Honda Civic. It's Marie.

I stand as she walks slowly towards me, with a look in her eyes I recognise from a long time back.

'Harrison's staying at Mum's. I left them reading *Owl Babies*.'

She's carrying an issue of the *Guardian* magazine which looks familiar.

'Interesting article in here. Mum showed me.'

Down below I'm still a bit bloody, but she presses herself against me.

'What have you been doing to yourself, you naughty boy?'

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