

Custard Club

By

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For Alex and Kate

Chapter One

Hippo, birdy, two ewes.

John blew a short sharp blast of air down his nose. His face was close to the mirror, tweezers poised near his left nostril. He clamped them hard on to a tuft of white hair, then froze, one eye shut, wincing in anticipation. He snatched the tweezers down sharply, at the same time, jerking his head back.

“Oooh bugger.” He inspected the tuft of grey hairs still clamped in the jaws of the tweezers. He blew again – nothing. Next was the foliage peeping out of his right ear.

“Oooh,” he bleated at the second plucking attempt. He moved his head from side to side, stared hard at the mirror, “Then there’s my bleeding eyebrows, don’t know whether to pluck ‘em, plait ‘em or stick some trellis on my forehead and train the bastards.”

A few minutes later, and with a few more short hairs in the sink, he put the tweezers away.

“Right then, do I go to the pub early, at say, seven o’clock and be there first to buy the drinks as they come in, or should I get there at nine o’clock when everyone has arrived and buy one big round?”

He paused and looked at himself in the mirror, “Well make a decision,” he said to his reflection, which was exactly what his reflection had said to him, “Or just sod it and go to the pub at eight o’clock as usual?”

John had been in this quandary all day and had been talking to himself regularly for the last five years. It was five to nine as John Arnold walked through the wet streets of Lichfield, a small city in the heart of England mostly populated by commuters who trundled to work every day by train, to the ‘second city’, Birmingham. He glanced across at the illuminated cathedral, the fine raindrops were picked out by the spotlights so that it looked like it was raining more than it was. In all these years of living in Lichfield he had never walked past St. Mary and St. Chad’s without looking in awe at its architectural perfection.

At one point this evening John had decided not to go out at all. He hated all the fuss, having to be pleasant to people he didn’t really know that well, and them being pleasant back because they needed an excuse to enjoy themselves, it all seemed like a disruption to what should be a routine night out with his mates. After all, reaching seventy years of age was no big deal anymore, it just seemed you were supposed to have retired, but who could afford to do that?

“Seventy years old,” said John, “that’s no age, the Cathedral has stood there for hundreds, what’s seventy years in the grand scheme of things?”

John turned into Market Street, the only lit windows were those of Kilkennys public house. As he walked past the half frosted windows of the pub he could hear the familiar sounds of chatter, laughing, and the chinking of glasses. This was his local, a home from home, inside there would be many friendly faces and a warm welcome, especially tonight. He paused outside, “It isn’t just the beer that makes this a good pub,” thought John, although they serve a good pint, “it is everything about the place. It is not luxurious but it is comfortable, its got history, its been lived in and enjoyed. It’s the smell, ale and damp overcoats, wax polish and Brasso, and something else, what was it? The people, that was it, it smells of friends.”

John stood at the side door under cover in the entry. He looked at the brass fittings on the red door, they glinted with reflected light. He shook the raindrops from his coat then pushed against the cold brass plate and the large door swung open. He hung his damp coat on a peg in the hallway, wiped his feet on the thick wet matting, turned and walked to the bar door. He ran his fingers through his thick grey hair and entered the bar. The noise seemed deafening after the quiet streets, the glorious warm humid smell of the pub hit him like the fog of a steam room, inducing a deep breath.

“Here he is, the birthday boy,” boomed Frank from behind the bar.

A few people gave half hearted cheers. This prompted some distinctly feminine singing of ‘Happy Birthday’ from the window seat, the sound grew rapidly as the beer fuelled full volume singing of old men joined in. John could only smile, he smiled to the point that it almost hurt his face, a smile so broad he was sure his ears were creased. A round of applause and a few cheers followed the final ‘Happy birthday to you’. Someone from the dominoes corner, obviously swept along with the festivities started into ‘For He’s A Jolly Good Fellow’. The lone singer who had started in full voice, quickly faded when no one else joined in. This prompted lots of laughing and pointing, Wayne shouted ‘Wanker’. The poor chap who John didn’t even know that well, tried to laugh off his embarrassment but he was clearly feeling very uncomfortable. Wayne, who was sitting on his usual stool at the bar, turned to Frank and announced in a loud voice, “A pint of Pedigree for the latest member of the old bastards club.”

“It’s my birthday Mr Kerr, so it’s my round, now come on, what you havin’?” asked John.

“I’m sorry Beatle but this is my round ‘cos I’ve already started it, but don’t you worry, yours is next.”

John watched as the Pedigree settled, it changed from a caramel milk shake into a beautifully clear amber liquid with a small dense creamy head. While he was waiting, he looked around the thronging room, Kilkennys was often referred to as a drinkers pub. This meant it had regulars, repeat business, a micro community, John smiled at this thought. Old Sid and his cronies, flat cap Phil and tight Barry shuffled over.

“We’re off now, it’s Barry’s round and we can’t shame him into buying it.”

“Piss off Sid, I bought the first one,” said an indignant Barry. “But we’ve had three, so it must be yours next,” said Sid shaking his head.

“Steady on lads, don’t fall out over it. I’ll buy you a round,” said John.

“Well done,” said Sid, whose real name was Brian, but since his teens had been known as hissing Sid because of his lisp.

John turned to the bar. “Frank, three pints over here please for these distinguished old fossils.” They all laughed, “Bloody cheeky kids,” grinned Sid as he shook John’s hand.

While Wayne was distracted by a passing ample cleavage, John discreetly beckoned to Frank and leant across the bar.

“How much is a round of drinks going to cost me Frank?” said John in a whisper.

“Call it a hundred,” said Frank, “I’ll run a tab if you want, one drink each?”

“Thanks Frank.” John palmed Frank his charge card, “Can you give me Janet and the ladies round now, I’ll take it over.”

John turned to Wayne, “Where’s Geoff, he’s late?”

“Mutton? He’ll be here in a minute, he phoned, he’s got to get his missus off to bed.”

“She’s not well again then?” said Beatle.

“No, but she’s not been right for years has she, but she’s getting worse I reckon, she’s not the same woman I knew all those years ago. You might think it’s cruel, but she needs the old Dutch bedside manner, ‘dis vill ‘elp you sleep my dear’, you know what I mean.”

“I’m sure Geoff would be pleased to know how much you care,” said John in the most disapproving tone he could muster, considering he knew that Wayne was not as insensitive as he sounded, he just opened his mouth before engaging his brain. Frank passed John a tray of drinks of all shapes, colours, and smells, there was a hint of aniseed in there, and definitely a gin, he added his pint to the tray. John

weaved in and out of unsteady pensioners, the mildly bewildered and the totally smashed, to get to the window seat.

“Hello ladies, I have come to get you sloshed.”

“You’re about an hour too late for that!” shrieked Janet, the ladies all laughed.

“I’d better take them back then,” said John, starting to turn for the bar.

“Oh no you don’t, just put them down here. Shove up gals, make room for the only decent man left in Lichfield.”

“When’s he expected to arrive then?” laughed Sue.

John shot Sue a sideways glance and gave her a harsh look, which melted in to a rye smile and a wink,

“Thank you for starting the singing girls, it was very nice, not at all embarrassing.”

“It was until those old farts joined in,” said quiet Carol.

John went to sit down between Janet and April. “Do you want to swap seats April, and sit next to Janet?”

“No, you’re fine where you are,” said April. John sat down.

April was a West Indian lady, whose age was very difficult to determine. Her skin could be that of a thirty year-old, but her short hair was greying and her eyes had the soul of a mature person. She was very petite and fine boned and always dressed as if she was going to an official function or church. John didn’t know her that well because she had only been in the flats for about a year and she kept herself to herself. When she did go out, it was always with the girls and as Janet dominated any conversations in the group, chatting to April was never easy. It seemed that April didn’t mind just observing, but he always suspected there was something more to her than met the eye.

Janet was telling Sue and quiet Carol what she was going to say to someone the next day about some problem at the flats. Whatever it was, it was probably nothing to do with her, but that never seemed to stop her getting involved.

John turned to April, “Sounds like trouble for someone tomorrow?”

“Christine has been hanging washing over the balustrade again, it’s nothing really,” said April.

“Nothing,” said John in his best feigned angry voice, “nothing, it’s an outrage, washing on the balustrade, she should be flogged!” said John with a smile.

“Or hung by her heels from the balcony?” added April.

“Over a big pile of old men’s underpants,” laughed John.

“That’s a little more detail than I needed,” said April laughing but also pulling a face of revulsion.

“Thanks for the drink Beatle, yeah, cheers Beatle, Happy Birthday,” said a group of drinkers at the bar raising their glasses of free beer.

“My pleasure lads,” shouted John, although most of them were older than him and had not been lads for some considerable time.

“Why do they call you Beatle?” asked April.

John looked down at his drink, “Oh, it’s an old story, from many years ago, it’s nothing, nothing at all really.”

“I’m sure it’s more than nothing,” said April.

John looked at her, and then paused. “It’s slightly embarrassing shall we say.”

“Aren’t you a little too old to be embarrassed by anything anymore?”

John gave her a sideways glance.

“Well,” she said.

“Okay. I’ll tell you, but then I may have to kill you, or at least tear out your tongue with rusty pliers to protect my secret, do you understand?” He looked at her and smiled, “Discretion please.”

“I think that’s a little extreme, but okay, absolute discretion,” replied April with a worried expression, she crossed her heart with her index finger.

“Well, you see my mother was a really big Beatles fan, she had me in nineteen sixty five when she was only just eighteen, so perhaps she was a little immature.” John paused, “She named me John Paul George Ringo Arnold.”

April beamed at him as if to laugh but didn’t, her eyes were wide in disbelief, “Really,” she said.

“Really,” said Beatle, “I was going to change it when I got older, but I just kept it a secret for sixty odd years, until I moved to the flats where I had to show them my birth certificate to get a flat and Wayne got a look at it, so he called me Beatle.”

“He would wouldn’t he?”

“Yes he would.” They both looked across at him, as if on cue the dominoes corner erupted in laughter at a Wayne punch line.

“I get my own back though, I call him Mr Kerr,” John smiled, “his name’s Edwards really.”

She looked into his eyes and scanned his face, “Beatle, it’s a good name, it really suits you,” said April, “your mother was obviously very perceptive.”

“My mother was a flake,” said Beatle, “but that’s another story that I’m not going into now.”

April now looked down at her drink, “I think I should tell you a secret in return, about my name.”

“It can’t be worse than mine,” said John.

“Don’t be so sure,” said April.

She bit her bottom lip and looked up at Beatle.

“Well, my maiden name was Day.”

“Go on,” he said.

“I was born in Jamaica in April nineteen sixty seven, it was a beautiful day, and my father was so pleased with his first child that he called me April, Sunshine, Day.” She looked up at John and smiled, he smiled back.

“What a beautiful name and a lovely story, good on your Dad,” he said.

They looked at each other and smiled.

There was a commotion at the door into the bar, some people were trying to leave and a tall skinny man was trying to get in, he was looking stressed, and older than his three score and ten plus two.

“Come on Mutton,” shouted Wayne, “you’ve just got time for a couple of quick ones.”

“Not with me he hasn’t,” shouted Janet.

“He hasn’t got one good ‘un in him, let alone two,” said Sue.

“Oh shut up you dirty old slappers,” said Wayne with a big grin.

“I must go and have a drink with Geoff,” said John to the ladies, “his wife’s not been well again, I think that’s why he’s a bit late.”

Geoff had his usual pint of bitter shandy, no matter how much Wayne tried to persuade him to ‘have a mans drink’ on Beatle’s birthday. John tried to listen to Geoff talk about his wife’s trouble, but he was now on his third pint and he found himself drifting elsewhere. He thought about Jamaica in the nineteen sixties, it sounded like paradise. The Day family would drink from fresh coconuts while lying in hammocks strung between palm trees at the top of the beach, while at the edge of the surf, Sean Connery and Ursula Andress would be shooting a Bond film. Well perhaps it was not quite like that, but tonight, that’s how he wanted it to be.

Wayne was openly ignorant to Geoff’s problems, he would just interrupt and start talking about last nights football. Geoff never took offence, he had known Wayne for donkeys’ years and he remembered last year when his wife had been particularly ill. Wayne un-prompted had taken them

several bags of grocery shopping and wouldn't accept any money for it, and he'd never mentioned it since. Geoff knew Wayne was as good friend as a man could have, it's just that he also happened to be ignorant, bigoted, opinionated, insensitive and loud, in fact, at times, an all round pain in the arse.

Frank rang the bell for last orders, which shook John out of his Caribbean trance. Lined up in front of him was another pint of Pedigree and two measures of Jim Beam.

"Where did they come from?" asked John.

"Geoff got the pint and Janet and April bought you the Jim Beam," said Wayne, "I should watch it mate they might be trying to get into your pants?"

"You do talk bollocks at times Wayne," said John with a smile.

"That cockney talks bollocks all the time," said Frank to John with his hand cupped round his mouth, as if Wayne shouldn't hear.

"The trouble with you carrot crunchers and turnip kickers from out in the sticks is that you don't even know that someone from Watford ain't a bleedin' Cockney, an' another thing..."

"Last orders please," shouted Frank, ignoring Wayne.

"An' another thing," shouted Wayne, "are you coming for a Balti tonight?"

"I'll be there," said Frank, "give me about half an hour, I must get the glasses in the washer, tidy round and cash up, but I'll be there."

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John stumbled out of the pub. The cold night air cleared his head for a moment then things started to spin, he took a few deep breaths and shook his head. The streets were wet but the sky was full of stars, the only noise came from inside the pub. He was sure that every one else had been just behind him as he left but he was now standing alone outside in the quiet street, "What a night." He started to fasten his coat. There was a burst of noise as the pub door swung open, a mass of bodies emerged each trying to support and be supported by the other, if one fell, they all fell. There was a female squeal, no doubt Wayne was the culprit. Frank followed them out with a cloth in one hand and a mop in the other, he started mopping the step as the rabble moved into the street.

"Are you coming to the Indian, ladies?" asked Wayne.

"Who are the Indian ladies?" shrieked Janet, she always shrieked when she was drunk, and sometimes when she was sober.

“No, we’re going back to Janet’s for supper,” said Susan, who always seemed to be going back to Janet’s for something.

John stepped forward, his coat now fully buttoned, but unfortunately, one button out of sequence, “Thanks girls for coming tonight, it’s been a great birthday bash.”

From behind John, Wayne shouted, “What about his birthday kiss gals?” John looked back at Wayne with horror, “Thanks mate,” he said sarcastically. As he turned back to say good night to the ladies, a large female face became planted on his own, a big tongue tried to breach his lips, there were two strong hands clamped to his head, the smell of gin and cheap perfume was overwhelming. Cheers rang out as Sue broke away, but before John could regain his composure Janet grabbed him at the back of the neck and wrenched him towards her, she seemed to be trying to get his head in her mouth, John could hear Wayne and Geoff laughing. Quiet Carol was the aniseed drinker, John winced as she kissed him but at least she didn’t try to remove his stomach lining with her tongue, and then, there stood April, looking just as uncomfortable as he felt. John smiled, “Go on,” shouted the girls, Geoff and Wayne just laughed. John and April faced each other, John stepped over to her, took her hand and kissed it, she smiled, so he gave her a little hug that was just long enough for him to whisper, “Thanks for the chat April Sunshine Day.”

“You’re in there April,” said Janet, “he’s gone all sappy.”

“Flat twenty two April, but bring your own protection,” said Sue.

“They don’t need protection at their age,” said Wayne.

“You haven’t seen April’s toe nails, a clash of feet in the throes of passion and he’ll lose toes,” shouted Janet.

“Better keep your slippers on,” laughed Sue.

“Oh shut up you disgraceful old bags,” said April, “Let’s go for supper.”

After shouting good night to each other several times, the ladies headed back to the flats, John, Geoff, and Wayne set off on the short walk to the Indian restaurant.

The Raj Balti house was very busy, as it always was on a Friday night, the aromas, deliberately vented into the street, aroused an instant appetite in anyone passing, no matter how much beer had been drunk a curry always seemed like a good idea.

“Good evening Jag,” said Wayne, “I trust our table is prepared.”

“Good evening sirs, everything is ready, let me take your coats.” Jagjit, took their coats and led them to their reserved table, he helped them to sit down.

“Four pints of Tiger please Jagjit,” said John.

“Not tonight sir,” said the waiter. He clapped his hands and a young Indian lad in a suit two sizes too big for him appeared at the table with an ice bucket and a huge bottle of champagne. “Compliments of the management sir, many happy returns.” The boy waiter put the Champagne in the middle of the table and Jagjit produced four rose tinted wine glasses.

“That’s very kind Jagjit, thank you very much.” John stood up and offered his hand to the waiter and owner of the restaurant, they shook hands.

Wayne eased the cork on the Champagne. It left the bottle with a very satisfying pop, cleared several tables the width of the restaurant and thudded against the young waiter’s back. The lad turned and smiled in that sort of ‘piss off you old fool’ type of way. Frank arrived.

“Well done Frank, reload time,” said Wayne, “just right for the free bubbly.”

“Jolly good,” said Frank. He took off his coat and passed it to Jagjit, “Hello Jag, you look busy tonight?”

“Yes Frank,” said Jagjit, “my clients have all stumbled from your establishment into mine.”

“Perhaps I ought to be on commission, what do you say Jag?”

“That would be fine but I will deduct the cleaning bills for those that are sick in the toilet due to your beer.”

“Touché Jagjit, touché,” said Frank, who then sat down, picked up his glass and slurped his champagne.

They studied the menu that was laminated by the glass tabletop, the very young waiter stood ready with his pad.

“Chicken Tikka Joe Frazier please,” boomed Wayne. The young waiter looked puzzled, John just rolled his eyes at Frank and Geoff. Wayne pointed at the menu.

“Chicken Tikka Joe Frazier,” said Wayne again.

“Oh, Jalfrezi,” said the lad.

“Look, the way it’s going to bash me around the ring, it ought to be called a Joe Frazier,” laughed Wayne, clearly very pleased with himself.

John looked across the table at him, “What?” said Wayne.

“That would have been really funny, if,” John held up three fingers, “the waiter had ever heard of Joe Frazier,” one finger down, “it was 1985,” two fingers down, “and you hadn’t said it at least five hundred times before.”

Wayne, unaffected and still smiling said, “It will always be funny, always.”

John ordered a chicken tikka balti, Geoff, a lamb rogan josh, and Frank, a chicken madras. They also asked for a keema nan, a vegetable nan, bombay aloo, and two pilau rice. The young waiter read back the order then scurried off to the kitchen.

“He shot off,” said Wayne, “I was going to order some chips.”

“He’s obviously desperate to share the Joe Frazier joke with the chef,” said John, rolling his eyes again at Frank and Geoff.

John sipped his sparkling wine, he tried not to pull a face as the true horror of what he had just tasted dawned on him, Wayne had picked up on John’s tasting.

“It’s got a kick to it,” he said.

“It also cleans chrome, unblocks drains, and gets tar off the carpet,” said John, tipping the rest of his wine into the ice bucket.

“Suit yourself, more for us then,” said Wayne.

“You’re welcome to that shit,” said Frank.

“I don’t like it much either,” said Geoff.

John beckoned to Jagjit, “Four pints of Tiger please Jagjit, and could you re-cork the wine, we’ll take it home, we don’t want to mix our drinks.” Beatle patted his tummy lightly.

Wayne looked across the table at John, he was looking at either side of his face, “What’s that on your ears Beatle?” asked Wayne, “Can you see it Geoff?”

Geoff who was sitting next to John had a look at his ear, John rubbed his ears and looked at his fingers, nothing.

“What do you think it is Wayne?” said Frank.

“I know what it is, it’s Janet’s lipstick, she got it on both ears with one kiss,” said Wayne with hoots of laughter.

John smiled, nodded his head and slumped back in his chair.

“She must have got his entire face in her mouth, look she’s even pushed his fringe back,” said Frank, “it’s like he’s gelled it.”

“I thought I’d need a couple of tyre irons to get her off him,” said Wayne now almost unable to breath.

“She’s a passionate woman alright,” said Geoff.

John who was still smiling said, “She had a tongue like a flannel.”

At this point the entire restaurant was all focused on the three red faced old men who may soon need medical help if they didn’t control their laughter. Even John was laughing now, although he was the butt of the joke.

Frank started pointing at John but just couldn’t get his words out for laughing, “She’s even brushed his eyebrows the wrong way.”

John licked the tip of his middle finger and elaborately groomed his eyebrows.

“We all have birthdays don’t forget, and those girls don’t need much encouragement.” John nodded a knowing nod.

Frank and Wayne looked at each other, both breathing hard.

“I’ll have to send the wife away for my birthday then,” said Frank, this started the laughing off again.

The lager arrived, the four of them all took a deep breath, then took a sip of the Indian lager in unison.

“Oh dear,” said Wayne, “there’s nothing like a good laugh is there?”

“That Sue’s a beast isn’t she?” said Frank with a shudder.

“Don’t start me off again Frank, whatever you do,” said Wayne.

“I think April’s nice,” said Geoff.

“So does Beatle,” said Wayne with a knowing wink.

“I don’t know what you’re on about,” said John, “I only ever spoke to her tonight, she does seem to be nice lady though. Why she goes out with those three nutters I don’t know?”

“Well, you ask Geoff why he knocks about with us?” said Wayne.

“Yeah Geoff, why do you knock about with us?” asked Frank.

“Because you make me feel like I’m more intelligent than I am,” said Geoff.

“Good for you Geoff,” said John.

At which point their meals arrived on a chrome trolley, all insults and mickey takes were instantly forgotten, in unison again they all took another sip of beer as their meals were served.

“Good health and a happy birthday Beatle,” said Wayne.

“Happy birthday Beatle,” said Geoff and Frank.

“Thanks chaps, it’s been a good ‘un,” said John.

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John picked at a scrap of Nan bread, as Jag and the young waiter started to clear away the aftermath of their Asian feast. The restaurant was nearly empty, a young couple held hands across the table in the opposite corner and next to them a middle aged man and woman sat in silence, as they had done all evening. Jag presented the bill on a chrome saucer with four chocolate mints, the young waiter, who they now knew was called Rakesh, brought out a plastic imitation wicker basket containing four very hot lemon scented hand towels wrapped in an impossible to open plastic film.

“Well that was a cracking meal Jagjit, but I’m finished now,” said Wayne.

“I’ll never eat this towel,” said John with a smile.

“I’m stuffed too,” said Geoff.

“No night cap then lads?” said Wayne.

“I’m up for that,” said Frank. “Its been a great night so it’s my treat, what we havin’?”

“Let’s go back to the pub, we haven’t had a lock in for ages,” said Wayne, suddenly full of vigour.

”How ‘bout it Frank?”

Frank looked unsure, “The wife will be in bed by now.”

“Good, just us lads then,” said Wayne.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea,” said Frank.

“Who wears the trousers in your pub?” asked Wayne.

“I don’t know, I’ll have to ask the wife,” said Frank with a big smile, they all laughed. “Jagjit, four brandies for us and a couple for yourselves.”

“Not for me,” said John, “I’m an old bloke now you know.”

“Nor me, I’ve got to get back to the missus,” said Geoff.

The brandy arrived anyway and despite the protests, everyone drained their glasses.

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It was half past two in the morning when they finally left the Balti house, John and Wayne strolled slowly back towards the flats, Geoff had said goodnight and scurried off back to the endless task of caring for his wife. Frank would be in his bedroom by now, being told off by Maureen, his formidable wife.

“It’s been a great night ain’t it Beatle,” said Wayne, for the fourth time since leaving the restaurant.

“It has Mr Kerr, it has.”