**Encounters for the Lonely Hearted: Daniele**

The man walking up to me with his arms wide open is smiling and smoke is rising upwards from   
his mouth. He is large and at first glance smartly dressed in light trousers and a suit jacket, a white cravat poking out from the breast pocket.

Coming to a stop in front of me, withdrawing the vape from his mouth, he smiles, **‘Hi I’m Daniele, I hope you were not waiting long.’** he says, as he bends forward placing his hands on my shoulders and a kiss on each of my cheeks. The accent attached to the extroverted greeting creates the impression of a larger than life comedy Italian uncle,   
or mafia boss about to embrace a member of his family.

Not so tall, with a broad barrelled chest and shoulders which expand upward and sideways with every inhale from his vape. The exhale of vapour causing a white screen to rise up from his mouth, it passes in front of his face and up towards the brickwork of Tate Modern. On closer appraisal it is clear that the version of himself he has chosen to portray in his photo selection is a slightly younger, slimmer, more cared for, a more stylishly curated prior version of his current self. His black and white profile pictures present a very well put together Italian man. One who clearly likes suits and nice clothes; punched brogue shoes, Burberry Macks, black almost brill creamed hair and by his own self-description **‘looks a little mafia but is actually as sweet as gelato’.**

The version of Daniele that stands in front of me now is slightly dishevelled. Collar length dark hair, with hints of curls on top that have flecks of grey in them, as does his closely cropped beard. He has heavy lidded light brown eyes and the type of nose that reminds me of Rembrandt’s self-portraits as an older man. He is wearing an old brown suit jacket with a thin grey stripe running through it. Fine flakes of dandruff dusting the shoulders. He wears this over a white shirt which he has tucked into a pair of baggy beige linen trousers, heavily creased, and a bit dirty and tattered at the bottoms where he has walked on the back of them   
in his black Stan Smiths. From the condition of his hair I suspect that he has not bothered to shower between getting out of bed and travelling to meet me this afternoon.

**‘Well it is good to finally meet you’** he says. **‘I think maybe we should go up to the bar, have a drink, get a bit tipsy before   
we go and look at the show? What do you think? Now, I looked   
and there are two shows on, one I think you will like better than the other, it looks very intelligent.’** he says with a grin.

He leads the way into Tate Modern, past the security bag search, walking confidently he guides the way to the lifts where we awkwardly shuffle into the small space with several other people. Standing tightly packed together we ascend up to the floor where the members bar is located. Still leading the way, he walks us out of the lift presents his Tate card to the woman at the members bar reception desk and heads straight for the bar.

He turns to me **‘They have their own gin here. Would you like a gin and tonic?’** he asks me.

‘Yes, that would be great.’ I say.

The barman enquires as to if that will be singles or doubles and I quickly interject with ‘Singles please.’ Daniele turns to look at me and with a raise of his eyebrows and comments with **‘Ok then.’** and a smile. I’ve clearly amused him, but I have not eaten much lunch and am not quite prepared for an afternoon of downing double G&T’s. I’ll be drunk and over talkative after two.

**‘Where would you like to sit? Shall we go around here and see... ah yes there are some seats in front of the window. After you.’** He politely ushers me round to the seating area. We settle on a high table and two tools in front of the glass wall of the bar which provides an impressive panoramic view of the Thames and St Paul’s. The bar is nicely busy, people are enjoying the warm weather and cocktails out on the sun filled terrace.

**‘Cheers.’** Daniele raises his glass to mine. He is visibly more relaxed now that he is settled in a seat with a drink. **‘I like it here, it is calm and quiet.   
I don’t like busy places with lots of people – they make me quite anxious.’** I realise then that the drinks are a way to calm his nerves and lower   
his anxiety levels.

We begin to chat quite easily about what we both do for a living the fact that he has an assistant at work and sharing strategies for continuing to have a personal creative practice when your day job is also creative. Then he asks about my experience of internet dating.   
In my vast experience of internet dating I now know that this subject only arises when the other person has decided that they are not romantically or sexually interested in you. People want to bond through the exchange of stories and shared experience. Daniele, has in a very short space of time, already placed me firmly in the friend zone, a place I am content to be.

Through our dating stories swap we discover we have both been catfished and both of us have actually met the people who catfished us. My story ends pretty abruptly with my dash from a café on Tooley Street into the safety of London Bridge Station. Michele’s story however, takes the unexpected path of him dating the person who had tried to dupe him online and subsequently thereafter, finding himself travelling to Bristol on a bi-weekly basis to the girl’s university halls in order to have what he describes as **‘punishment sex’**, for trying to trick him into thinking she was someone else. This arrangement apparently continued for some time due   
to the level of attraction between them. **‘Even talking was a sensual activity.’** he informs me.

He then begins to tell me about another boozy date he has been on and which ends up with   
him going back to the woman’s place for more drinks and sex.

**‘Which was great until I woke up the next morning. You know,   
I found her stood at the top of a step ladder in her living room, naked, holding a drill? She said to me that seeing as   
I was there would I give her a hand hanging this mirror.   
She told me that she had bought it a while ago but couldn’t   
hang this thing by herself, as it was too heavy. I mean, the mirror was huge! I was hung over. I had drunk a lot, just had sex and had minimal sleep... I was just done... You know! Exhausted! And here she is looking down at me and asking me   
to help her hang this bloody mirror! I couldn’t believe it.   
Of course, I did it... And then I left.’**

While listening and laughing at this story, Daniele’s facial expressions convey genuine bewilderment at the scenario. I can’t help but think that perhaps this cunning woman’s primary aim for the date and successful seduction of Daniele was to indeed get her giant mirror hung   
on her living room wall.

Daniele’s immediate candour with me is endearing and warm. As he excuses himself for a smoke   
out on the terrace, I get up from the table to get us a second round of gin and tonics.   
**‘And if you don’t mind can I have a double this time? I like   
to taste my gin.’** he calls after me. I return to the table with the G&T’s a double for him and a single for me and observe him out on the sun drenched terrace, his broad jacketed back turned to me, legs apart, one hand in his trouser pocket his left hand moving his vape to and from his mouth in accentuated grandiose movements. Staring out at the London skyline as if an Italian duke or an earl surveying his spaghetti western estate. The only thing amiss in this picture are those black Stan Smiths.

Daniele returns to our table, adjusts his jacket and sits back down. I have the feeling he   
knows I’d been observing him out on the terrace. **‘You know Kelly, I am quite chill, a little eccentric, but very well mannered.’** He says all of   
this while nodding his head at different angles and raising his eyebrows every now and then, down turning the corners of his mouth as if weighing up the pros and cons of a business deal with a man of his own character. It is clear as he makes these statements that he enjoys thinking of himself as, or telling others that he is an eccentric personality. I am about   
to ask him a question about what he thinks makes him eccentric, when he voluntarily continues his monologue.

**‘You know Kelly a few years ago I had kind of a break down.   
At the time I had my own business and was working in my own design studio in a shared creative space in Clerkenwell.   
It was nice. We had our own shared kitchen, very communal.   
All different types of creatives with their own small businesses. Anyway. One day I was cooking lunch for a group   
of us who worked in the space. I love to cook. I was in the kitchen making the food and everyone else was in the communal space just next to the kitchen, having drinks and chatting   
to each other. While I was preparing the meal I was listening   
to these peoples’ conversations, they were talking about their achievements, projects that they were currently working on, their ambitions for the future and about their young families.   
I was stood there at the hob listening to all of this... and   
all of a sudden, this huge, heavy feeling of total inadequacy came over me. It was physical you know. I felt terrible. In that moment I believed that I was a total and complete failure.   
I don’t know how else to explain it, other than a physical feeling and I have absolutely no idea where the feeling came from... I couldn’t stay in the building, in that place with those people – I needed to be on my own, to hide. I made some flustered excuses and left. I got on the bus and tried to get home as fast as I could.**

**I spent the next two weeks in my room, in bed unable to move, apart from going to the bathroom.   
I wasn’t eating... Eventually, I reached out to my parents and they arranged a flight home for me. Over six months they took me to see doctors, psychiatrists and counsellors. I just didn’t care about anything. I stayed in bed. I grew my beard long.   
I looked like an old man Kelly. One day, my mum and dad, they brought home a little kitten for me. I named her Lisa. She saved me really... I began to train her, every day I looked after her, feeding her, playing with her and giving her affection.   
She was reliant on me and I suppose she gave me purpose. She was my responsibility you know, I had to care for her. And doing this, slowly I started to feel better.’**

‘Where is Lisa now?’ I ask.

**‘Oh, she is still back in Italy at my parents’ house.   
I recovered and I had to leave her and return to my life   
and business here.’**

Daniele picks up his glass and drains it of the last of his gin and tonic. He looks at me across the table and very gently says

**‘Hey you, finish your gin. Let’s go look at this intelligent exhibition.’**