

## Ultimatum

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Dear Babs,

You'd better settle down with a cuppa to read this. You know I said Terence had seemed rather distracted of late, and the way he kept looking at me and starting to speak then changing his mind made me think he might be heading towards a marriage proposal? Well I know now what was going through his mind and you won't believe how it all turned out...

Terence was very apologetic when he phoned earlier this evening, said he'd been unavoidably detained with a client who had flown in from Russia, but I should have a starter and he'd join me for the main course. He knows I'm never late for anything, you see, knew I'd already be at the restaurant and he is too much of a gentleman to just leave me there, twiddling my thumbs, wondering what was happening. After all, he was the one who'd been so insistent about meeting, that it had to be tonight; there was something he had to tell me and it couldn't wait until tomorrow, and it wasn't something he could discuss on the phone.

It felt very strange, I can tell you, sitting alone at the table, but it would have been much worse if I wasn't well-known there, and they always make a fuss of me. It's very comforting, having favourite places where you know you'll be welcomed, don't you think?

As you know, it's been nearly a year now, getting those frequent but irregular phone calls from Terence: 'Let's meet tonight in our restaurant,' he'd say, and we'd enjoy a delicious meal together and more often than not finish the night off making love in his huge, sumptuously comfortable bed, with the luxury en suite and thick, soft carpets under my feet and heavenly warmth, not a draft in the place. Not at all like my pub! Gawd, I bet even the Queen, bless her, doesn't have anything lushier than his bedroom. And that shower! The number of power jets it has, coming at you from all directions!! It would be delicious to make love in that, but I'm sure Terence would have thought me perverted if I'd suggested it.

No, he didn't like me taking the initiative - in anything. He's treated me to no end of meals, and shows, and concerts, and those two holidays, but it was always his decision what

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we did and when. I couldn't even phone him; he's the boss and all calls had to get past Miss Battle-Axe. She even monitored his mobile for him when he was busy, and all his emails!!

\*sigh\*

That's what they do on emails and texts, isn't it, the youngsters: the \*sigh\*, and lol, and OMG. I do try and keep up with all these changes; I just wish it would all slow down a bit so I could catch my breath. I'm OK with computers - I have to be, with the orders to the brewery being done online now (Dad would have had a fit!), and all the accounts and what-have-you to deal with, and I know it's all very efficient, but it's not very personal, is it? It's much nicer to actually speak to someone, don't you think? I'm not a fan of all this blogging and Facebook and Twitter nonsense to keep up to date with each other.

It's lovely, very special, to receive a long letter, but no one sends them any more, except you and me of course; I think we're probably the last people in England who take the time to sit down with pen and paper. But it's such a pleasure, isn't it? The way the good fountain pen that used to be Granddad's sucks up the Quink, then nestles between my fingers, heavy with words, and the way it glides over good quality paper... oooh, it sends a tingle down my spine. But now all that drops through the letter box are newspapers and useless bits of advertising, not even bills these days - they're all direct debits...

Where was I? Oh, yes, I remember - not senile yet, you know!

As Terence was the one who knew when it was a good time to phone, and he was the one who'd bought the tickets or whatever, it made sense that he was always the one to phone me. Anyway, I like surprises - good surprises, anyway.

I know, I know, it's very old-fashioned to condone what, on the face of it, seems a very patriarchal attitude - that's one of the words he taught me, 'patriarchal', always trying to improve my vocabulary he was; 'fulgent' is the newest word, we saw a 'fulgent moon' the other night - but you don't know him like I do. You see, he's really a very shy man.

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Underneath that assured persona the business world sees, he's just a sweet little boy who, truth be told, is still sort of trying to please his Mummy by being a good, clever boy who doesn't make the silly mistakes other boys do, someone worthy of being his father's son. He was an only child, see, and they were very close, him and his mum. He's been careful all his life, weighing up all the options, taking his time over every decision.

He told me not long after we'd started going out that the one and only time he'd acted impulsively he'd married a woman whose voice alone had removed all power to think clearly. Theirs had been a whirlwind romance, the sort he'd never believed himself capable of, and never mind she was twenty five years his junior she'd seemed to feel the same way about him as he felt for her. He wouldn't tell the full story, but I gathered she'd been rather secretive about having a business and what exactly that business was. He left me to draw my own conclusions about the details, but it wasn't an activity a husband would want his wife involved in, if you take my meaning. Inevitably it ended in divorce, or that's what I thought he'd implied...

But I found out differently in that half hour while I ate my starter, didn't I.

I'd just started in on my prawns - 'garides' they call them there, done in lemon and olive oil, ever so nice - when I heard a couple of women talking with the waiter as they sat at the table behind me. One of them had the sexiest voice I've ever heard, a real sultry, come-to-bed voice. That's what got me eavesdropping really, it was such a pleasure to listen, not so much to the words but just the sound of her voice, so smooth, like honeyed dark chocolate. But I definitely started listening to the words when I heard her say 'Terence'. How could I not? I mean, it's so unusual to hear the full name: not 'Terry', but 'Terence'. I'd call my Terence 'Terry' if he hadn't looked so pained when I shortened it that first time and he begged me not to do so again. His mum always insisted on his full name and, never mind he

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got grief at school for being the only boy without a shortened name or a nickname, he'd never go against his mum's wishes. Anyway, this is what I heard...

"Sorry about the short notice," Sultry-Voice said, "but I was so relieved when you said you'd join me. And what an excellent choice of restaurant; it's really quite convenient - only four stops on the Tube. I'll suggest to Terence that we come here again after... Afterwards."

"Yes, a friend recommended it to me," Other-Woman said. "It's only been under this new management about eighteen months."

"They've certainly made it very nice; it used to have a terrible reputation." There was a bit of shifting of chair legs as they settled down. "I'd have been on pins just sitting at home alone thinking about it. Terence promised me he'd tell her tonight and he never breaks his promises, but even so... I wonder where he's taken her to do the deed?"

My Terence doesn't break his promises either. It took a lot to get him to make one, always had to think every aspect of it through thoroughly, but I could always guarantee that once a promise was made he'd stick to what he said.

"I'm still surprised you want him back," Other-Woman said. "You've had nearly a year to open your eyes to all the other, much more interesting men out there. You're much younger than him so why not take this chance to start living a little? Do you really want to end up nursing a geriatric?"

There was a pause while the wine was tasted and poured and I'm thinking how strange, the coincidences that life throws up.

"I know your business doesn't keep you in the level of luxury Terence paid for," Other-Woman said, "but if you actually divorced him rather than this silly year's trial separation you could take him to the cleaners."

"I wouldn't do that," Sultry-Voice said, all sugar-sweet, butter-wouldn't-melt-in-her-mouth, but I could hear the lie there - you get an ear for it when you're in the licensed trade.

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“I love him, in my own way. He may be rather predictable, even boring at times, but he’s... not so much handsome as impressive as an escort. And the people he’s introduced me to... well, I’ve made some very useful contacts, I can tell you! Anyway, I rather liked the solidity of the life we had together. You always know exactly where you stand with Terence.”

There was another pause while they ordered. They couldn’t decide so went for the ‘meze’, lots of bits of everything, absolutely delicious; Terence and I had it the first time we dined there.

“And,” Sultry-Voice continued as if there hadn’t been a gap of at least five minutes, “Terence made me feel special; I was living a continuous birthday or Christmas. There wasn’t a single week when he didn’t bring me flowers, or jewellery, or take me to a show or the cinema or out to dine.”

“It’s not as if you could ever make a suggestion of your own, though, is it?” Other-Woman said. “My god, the aggrieved expression when he saw us looking at holiday brochures! He had a pet lip all evening. He turned that holiday into a nightmare for you, and all because he hadn’t chosen and booked it. I couldn’t bear to have a man running my life the way Terence has controlled yours.”

Well, Babs, I tell you my blood’s now starting to run hot and cold and I’m really glad my back’s to them and they can’t see my expression or the way my face must have been going from red to pale and back again. Anyone looking would have thought I was starting The Change, with hot flushes to contend with! Sometimes there are just coincidences and sometimes the evidence stacks up in a different direction. But still I didn’t really believe this could be happening.

“Ah, but he wasn’t, was he?” Sultry-Voice said.

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Then they both burst out laughing, one of those laughs that, every time you think you've got it under control, all you have to do is look at each other and it sets you off again until the tears are running down your cheeks and your sides ache.

"It's wicked of me to find it so amusing," Sultry-Voice said around her gasps for breath. "Terence was mortified when his colleague recognised my voice at that company dinner. What awful luck that he got me when he phoned the line that week, not one of my employees."

"It was wicked of that colleague to rub Terence's nose in it," Other-Woman said. "What harm is there in running a sex chat-line? You enjoyed doing it, and with the voice you've been gifted it would be criminal not to use it. Anyway, why was his colleague not the one they made fun of? He was, after all, the saddo who needed to pay for his sexual kicks."

Sultry-Voice sighed. "We both know that's not how life works," she said. There was a deep sadness in her voice and a long pause before she continued. "Anyway, I don't think those men are saddos; it's a harmless enough way of relieving their, er... feelings. The alternatives don't bear thinking about."

There was another gap in the conversation - I suppose they were eating.

"Of course, it was my voice that attracted Terence's notice in the first place," Sultry-Voice said around a mouthful of food; I heard her throaty chuckle as she wiped something off her lips. "He said courting and marrying me was the only time in his life he'd acted impulsively but he couldn't bear the thought of not hearing my voice every day. He said it was 'the music he wanted to hear every night'." There was a small pause and they both laughed at that too.

I'm now frantically trying to decide what to do. I mean, Terence would be arriving soon, and if I'd put two and two together and not made five, it was his wife sat there and Terence wasn't coming to propose marriage but to dump me, never mind she was a heartless

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bitch from the sound of it. Should I leave, and soon, or should I face him, or what? I mean, can you imagine the scene if I was still there when Terence arrived? His wife with the sexy voice and age on her side, and me, common as muck and quarter of a century older, at two adjoining tables... It just doesn't bear thinking about! So embarrassing... for all three of us.

I had to make sure so I got up and went to the lav. I didn't need more than one glance in passing; she didn't look as stunning as her voice, but quite an arresting, dark allure. It was definitely the woman I'd seen in a photo in Terence's study.

I sat in the cubicle and pondered for a while. Photos don't always tell the whole truth; they show the face we want the world to see. Terence's wife was not the woman she'd had the photographer portray her as, not the woman I'd imagined from seeing the photo, anyway. In the photo she had an open, friendly expression. The photo showed her public face but she definitely had at least two, as anyone who knew how to hear would realise, or anyone who got on the wrong side of her would find out. But there's no accounting for who we fall in love with, who we find necessary to our happiness. By the time I'd washed my hands I'd decided what to do. For Terence.

When I got back as far as their table I said, "Excuse me, this is going to sound terribly rude," and they both looked up at me, surprised but not unfriendly, "but I couldn't help overhearing some of your conversation." I indicated my table. "I was sitting just there, you see."

Sultry-Voice cocked her head. "Not at all," she murmured. "We weren't exactly whispering."

"I was wondering, you see," I carried on, "if you were by any chance talking about Terence Barlow, of Barlow Industries? If, indeed, you are Mrs Cheryl Barlow?"

"I am," she said, starting to look a bit uncertain where all this was heading. "Why do you ask?"

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“Terence has been a good friend to me for quite a while now. He might have mentioned me to you recently – Madge Perkins.”

“Oh! So you’re the one...” Her startled look was quickly replaced with a gleam of triumph, and then a disdainful sneer as she looked me up and down. “Yes, I can see why he chose to come back to me,” she said, so dismissive in her tone and the way she turned away back to her friend.

Now in the pub trade you survive with a quick tongue, and before I could stop myself I’d said, “Yes, men are always prepared to accept second best when they can’t have what they really want.” I’d planned to be nice to her, but there are limits!

Anyway, her head snaps back round to me, and I do enjoy a good verbal battle in the right place with a worthy foe, but I didn’t want a scene, not there and not with her. I really didn’t want to screw things up for Terence; he’d treated me very decently, when all’s said and done, and I didn’t want him to walk into a catfight.

“My apologies,” I says to her, “my Mum often said my tongue’s so sharp I’d cut myself. What I was going to say to you was I wish you both the best – really, I do,” (she didn’t look convinced) “and let you know Terence has just arrived.”

I was stood facing the door at the time, see, so I was the first to spot him. He stood in the entrance, frozen in place, mouth hanging open.

“Terence,” I called, waving him over.

He sort of gasped for air as his coat was taken then he stumbled towards us. I tell you, Babs, for one awful moment I thought he was going to have a heart attack.

I signalled to a waiter and said, loud enough for Terence to hear too, “Elisandro, a bottle of your very best champagne, please. Mr and Mrs Barlow are celebrating tonight and should do it in style.” I manoeuvred Terence towards a chair then said, “I’ll leave you to it; no doubt you have heaps to discuss. Goodnight.”

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And I kissed him on the cheek, picked up my bag and left, thinking Terence could pick up the last bill for me - I'd only had starters, after all, and the waiters all knew us, knew Terence never let me pay for anything.

I'd only just got to the pavement when I heard, "Madge!" and then his hand was on my shoulder. I turned to face him. Poor dear, he looked so agitated.

"Madge, you've got it all wrong," he said and grasped my upper arms, looking really quite desperate. "Yes, Cheryl wants us to get back together; she gave me an ultimatum, decide by tomorrow if I want a divorce or to try again. And I've been thinking it all over for weeks now, and never mind what a divorce will cost me - it's you I want. That's what I came to tell you tonight. Will you wait for my divorce to come through so we can get married?"

Oh dear! As you know that was the last thing I wanted to hear, but I'd dithered too long about how to tell him it was over as far as the sex was concerned, and now it seemed unlikely I'd be able to stay just friends, as I'd wanted. We had some good times, me and Terence, but... Well, it was nice to know he found me desirable, because, let's face it, the urges don't just disappear once you hit 60, do they? But he was so bloody boring in bed! Fair play, he's a dear, sweet man and always gave it full effort, you know - did his best to please me - but he's so predictable in that department, no sense of adventure at all. I'm old enough to appreciate being treated like royalty when I'm dressed, but still young enough to want to be treated like a courtesan in bed. I haven't enough years left in me to waste any in marriage to someone who can't give me both. I'd have taught him a few of the tricks we learned in our youth - oh, Babs, do you remember Frank? He was a lad, and no mistake! - but Terence wouldn't have stood for that, very old-fashioned that way. I reckon Cheryl needed that sex chat-line as much as the men who paid for it and that's why she didn't stick with the admin side of it once it had grown into a business rather than a hobby.

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Let's just say it started out as a difficult conversation with Terence, there on the pavement with a light autumn drizzle starting. I mean, I could hardly tell him I was ditching him because he's a control freak and a lousy lover, could I? Can you imagine what that would do the poor man's libido (what there was of it)? He'd been very decent to me, all in all, and deserved a bit of consideration. It went better when I used the excuse that there's no way I could leave the Cross Keys, not with me being the seventh generation to be born there – and one day I'll be the seventh generation to die there. He quailed at the thought of joining me there instead of me joining him I can tell you! Laugh? The tears are nearly rolling down my face imagining it – 'Darling, did you know there are mushrooms growing in the outside privy?' Haha!

He's such a dear he still hailed and paid for a cab for me, even though I'd just rejected his marriage proposal. He never did like the way I happily buzz around on the Tube and the buses at all times of the day and night. That was just one of the things he tried to change. I'll admit that for a while it had been rather nice to have someone else take charge, to feel protected and cosseted, but it's not really me, is it?

Anyway, he saw me off then went back in to his wife. I wish them well, I really do. And, let's face it, she has got age on her side; one day, and I don't think it will be as soon as she hopes, not with the men in his family living into their late 90s, she can be a very merry widow. She'll have earned it, I reckon!

The Bingo crowd will be here soon so I'd better go and change the best bitter (I let Jen get away to her kiddie, seeing as I wasn't going to be out all night after all). I hope Keith's with them; he does go on about the footie a bit (lifelong Arsenal supporter) but he makes me laugh and he's very light on his feet. We've partnered up a few times recently at the new dance school down the road - you remember, used to be the Palais. We're learning the Argentine Tango. Nudge, nudge, wink, wink, say no more!!

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I'll phone you soon as I'm agog to find out how you got on in the village Autumn Fayre. Did you win Heaviest Pumpkin this year? And how did you do in the Village Photo competition now you have that new camera? TTFN.

Lots of love

Madge