

Lentil Loaf and Spinach Salad

3692 words

Friday. Guess who suggested it. Brendan of course. We sat in a circle on stale-smelling beanbags. He said, ‘Okay, ground rules: we go round in turn, no interruptions, no advertising, no breast-beating. No snide comments. It’s about support, right? We share our thoughts about fucking and wanking. Who’ll start?’

Ninian (what a name!), an American with a red beard and three earrings in one ear, said, ‘It would help if I knew what wanking is.’

Which got a few laughs. He’s been in Britain a while dodging the draft, so he ought to know.

Crop-headed Pete from Cornwall said, ‘It’s what you guys call jerking off.’

Ninian grinned, ‘All right!’

After which a heavy silence.

This commune in the wilds of Scotland has a problem. The women have a regular support group, the men don’t. They sit on their problems. Get angry. Go off in the woods alone and sulk. So Brendan said it’s time for a men’s group. Using the visitors (I’m one) to help break a pattern. (*Break a pattern* is a catchphrase in this place. I’m tired of hearing it.)

But these men couldn’t open up. There were twelve of us in the circle, mostly looking down. Maybe checking their dicks. I studied the faces in turn. I might have had a bit of a sneer, because Brendan caught my eye and frowned.

Then he said, ‘Okay, I’ll start. Fucking. I want to know if we all share that feeling when we come, right? Your body’s in a tremor all over, building and building till at last you climax and

you think, shit, man, that really *burned*, and you feel like your balls are emptied out. Anyone feel that?’

Ninian nodded slowly with his eyes half closed and said sleepily, ‘Ye-e-ah.’ The prat. Then we went round in turn. What the hell was *I* going to say? I was thinking so hard I hardly listened to the others. When it was my turn I just muttered, ‘Well, the thing is . . .’

Silence. Brendan stared at me. ‘The thing about fucking is what, Dean?’

I dried.

Ninian said, ‘You can say what you like, Dean, there are no ladies present.’

I said, ‘All right, yes, I’d like to do it.’

Cornish Pete said, ‘We all like to do it.’

I snarled, ‘I said I *would* like to do it.’

That shut them up, the buggers.

Alan the Scots beanpole who’s here with his wife and two kids (so must have done it at least twice) looked worried. ‘What, ye’ve never done it, Dean?’

‘Watch my lips, Alan. No.’

‘Och well, ye will. Nae hurry.’

I switched off after that. We never got round to discussing wanking. Maybe if we had I’d feel better doing it after seeing the women sunbathe in just their knickers. I don’t want to be me, a spotty geek. I want to be Brendan, former lover of Jojo, current lover of Rochelle of the beautiful breasts. Just now I overheard someone say Jojo told the women’s group she always came with Brendan, whereas Rochelle doesn’t. I try to imagine a woman coming but I can’t, and the effort of imagining exhausts me. When will I be someone different?

Saturday. We walked around with bits of card pinned on our backs. Everyone had a marker pen and wrote their feelings about the person. You weren't supposed to look who wrote on you. I wrote on Rochelle's *I'm sorry you don't 'come' with Brendan*, and on Brendan's *Your dick must be very happy*. Everyone else was writing stuff like *You are a beautiful person; I like your smile; Hope things work out for you; You deserve a lot of love*. Yuk.

On the Greek I wrote *You think you're something special but you're ugly*. Well it's true. Her eyebrows are thick and she has a faint moustache. Doesn't shave under her arms either, but none of them do. Maybe I shouldn't have written that but it annoys me the way she swans around full of herself, and last night when we paired off to introduce ourselves she took care to avoid me.

When we read our cards I only had two comments. Brendan and Jojo and some of the others had seven! One of mine was *I think of you with kindness*. (What?) The other *Stop acting like a weirdo Dean—said with love and positiveness*. The Greek was staring at me and I guessed she knew who wrote that. I wasn't about to ask her. I tore the card up. She picked up the piece with *positiveness* on it and said, 'Maybe this is the bit you need.'

I said, 'It sounds like a battery. And there's no such word.'

'This is your problem, Dean,' she sighed, and stalked off, twitching her bum.

To hell with her if she thinks she's got power over me. I'm blushing now about what I wrote on people's cards. What happened? How could I do that? I disgust myself sometimes. Often.

Sunday. My turn to help with lunch. I sliced thirty carrots and twenty onions. Forgot everything concentrating on the knife. Pete was frying fish and singing *The Bonny Shoals o' Herring*. Alan's wife Sandra was talking to Rochelle and the Greek about being 'compromised.' I heard the term yesterday. It seems to mean losing your identity in a relationship, but all the feminism and sexual

politics gives me a headache. I'll be glad to get back to work and not have to talk to anyone, just get on with it. And when I'm qualified I won't be just an apprentice. So stick that thought up your arses, you lot, before you diss me.

The women spend most of their time sharing problems and 'being honest'. Jojo's honest about her feelings after losing Brendan, Rochelle's honest about not coming. Someone else had an abortion and hates herself. Someone's been released from the bin on condition she takes the meds she hates. I overhear all this because I have no presence. People talk as if I don't exist. Well believe me, people, I wish I fucking didn't.

I carried on and peeled potatoes. Then Jojo burst in like a flood and said, 'Plenary session at three, folks. A meditation on loving-kindness, followed by discussion.' I felt like puking all over the veg. And when the session started, I could have puked on the faded rug when she said, 'Wish everyone in the world, no matter who, well and happy.' After which they all looked smug and exchanged smiles. When a smile came my way I just blanked.

Then Sandra said, 'I think we should discuss yon exercise on Monday. The notes on folks' backs.'

Ninian nodded gravely. 'Yeah, there's unfinished business there.' (*Unfinished business*—another mind-numbing mantra.)

Brendan said, 'Let's establish a silence.'

So we did, and God didn't it go on. Till Jojo sighed and looked around and said, 'Who wants to speak?'

You might have known it would be the wretched Greek. 'There was a lot of negativity in some of those comments,' she intoned, without looking up from knitting a scarf for some refugee desperate enough to wear it.

Alan said, 'Aye, someone wrote ye were ugly. Well you're no ugly, Athene, you're beautiful.'

I saw Sandra give him a sharp look.

Ninian said slowly, 'Yeah. Yeah.' I could imagine him puffing on a pipe between words. 'Tell you what, right, a lot of the negative comments were in the same writing, purple marker.'

Pete said, 'Yeah, Ninian, but we don't want to start a witch hunt here.'

And Jojo, 'Hang on, Pete, by witch are you saying one of the women wrote them?'

'Hell no, it's just a turn of phrase.'

'Exactly. Prejudice built into the language. There's no word for a two-gender hunt.'

Another silence, everyone looking around to see who the witch was. The Greek caught my eye.

'What do you think, Dean?'

'About what, exactly?'

'What was just talked about.'

'Prejudice in the language, or who's the witch?'

'Both. Either.'

I got to my feet. Difficult and undignified off a beanbag. I said, 'The witch was me, so fuck off all of you, and fuck your loving-kindness,' and walked out. I went out in the rain and smoked a rollie under an ash tree. I said, 'Sod off' to the drops landing on my head. I smoked another but it didn't help. I wondered whether it was possible to feel any worse. I was taken aback when Brendan joined me.

'You have to come in now, Dean.'

'Why?'

'Group hug. No-one gets left out.'

I gave him a cold stare. Then the Greek appeared, short and busy, black hair flying, swishing through the long grass like a samurai holding her knitting.

‘Right Dean,’ she panted, ‘piss off indoors and get yourself hugged before I stab your skinny arse with my needles.’

‘No chance.’ So she stabbed me. ‘Ow! What about loving-kindness?’

‘That’s what *this* is.’

What could I say? Fake smiles in my direction as we hugged in a ring, awkwardly I thought. They didn’t care about me, just wanted to stop themselves feeling shitty for dissing me.

Monday. Sawing wood with Ninian. We heard voices raised. Alan and Sandra. Stopped to listen.

‘Away on home and do something useful,’ she yelled. ‘Leave the car and hitch-hike, okay?’

He muttered something we didn’t hear.

‘Och, I get ye were tempted, Alan, but it’s no what being here is about.’

He muttered something else, then gave us an embarrassed glance and set off down the drive with his holdall. Sandra glared at us and snapped, ‘Satisfied?’ and stalked back to the house. Ninian and I carried on, building up a rhythm with the two-handed saw.

‘Beats the old chainsaw, Dean, huh? Yeah. Less noise, more collaboration.’

‘Like playing a double bass when you’re used to a fiddle.’

He didn’t ask me to explain that. But it was good to talk as if we’re equals. As if I’m normal. That *weirdo* comment still stings like hell.

I said, ‘What was that shouting all about?’

Ninian pulled a face, teeth very white in his beard. ‘Alan’s been fucking Athene.’

That gave me a shock, I don't know why. Hardly jealousy. Maybe surprise that he found the Greek attractive. Ninian grinned at me.

'Hey, you know who wrote that *stop being a weirdo* message?'

Another shock. 'No idea. Do you?'

I realised I'd blanked out the thought of a human agent, as if it was just a message from the ether.

He said, 'Athene.'

'What!'

'You should have guessed. She sometimes writes *s* like sigma.'

We sawed on while I took this in. My hand went limp and I let go the saw.

'What do you think she meant?'

Ninian straightened up, looked me in the eye, and sighed. 'Listen, Dean, I say this with affection, okay? Yeah. But that scratty beard doesn't help.'

'Not like yours, eh?'

He sighed again. 'This is said from kindness, Dean: you look like Colonel Sanders or Ho Chi Minh both gone wrong. Stepney Green ain't Kentucky or Hanoi. And by the way, why do you wear a belt *and* braces? That reads like insecurity.'

'Or just being a dork.'

He frowned. 'Dork is as dork does.'

Meaning? We sawed on in deep silence.

After a bit I said, 'Hey Ninian, is it true you're here dodging the draft?'

'That's my business, Dean.'

'I thought we came here to open up?'

That made him think. He said, 'To make a start on that. Yeah.'

‘Well, Vietnam fell four months ago. You could go home.’

‘And be forgiven? Ha.’

‘It’s a Christian country. “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God.”’

‘Hey man, you’re religious!’

‘Bollocks. I was force-fed with it till I puked.’

More sawing. I studied Ninian wondering how he’d look in army fatigues with a buzz cut and no beard. He’d feel like a totally different person. On the way back for lunch he clapped me twice on the back. Was I meant to feel encouraged, or what?

Tuesday. Obsessed with being called a weirdo. Why is it so annoying that it was the Greek? This evening we had dancing which I thought would help. Brendan played guitar, Pete brought out a bodhrán, Rochelle a tin whistle. In the interval Sandra did ‘mouth music’—very strange. The dancing was the usual writhing in front of someone. No-one seemed to mind dancing with me, probably because we kept moving on. I ended up with Sandra. She was wearing a cheesecloth top and her tits bounced in it.

She said, ‘What’s on *your* mind, partner?’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘Ye’re no very grun’it.’

Scots dialect? Meaning what exactly?

I said, ‘I could fuck you now Alan’s gone.’

She stared at me for a moment then walked away. I just stood making vague movements.

The Greek joined me.

‘What did you say to Sandra?’ she demanded.

‘Never mind.’

I went to the kitchen for a drink, and she followed.

‘You’re creating an atmosphere. Everyone noticed. And now you’re too scared to tell me what you said.’

She glared, thrusting her fat bottom lip. Twitching her head so her poncy earrings clattered. Sweat on the down above her upper lip. I hyperventilated, then told her. I thought she’d freak but she just looked down at our sandals. Then at me, looking sad.

‘And you’ve no idea why Sandra walked off?’

‘She doesn’t fancy me. Just like the rest.’

‘No, Dean. It’s the tone. The crudity. The *Taming of the Shrew*. Know what you remind me of, the way you stare at women’s boobs? The worst kind of Greek waiter. No, a panting dog with its dick out. You ooze desperation and it’s not attractive.’

I laughed bitterly. ‘Look who’s talking.’

‘So it *was* you who wrote that I’m ugly.’

‘Didn’t stop Alan though, did it?’

‘Dean. Dear. I want you to be sexy. To stop acting—and I *mean* acting—weird. It’s not you.’

‘It *is* me! It is!’

I hurried outside to hide my tears and caught my head on a low branch. It was too much. The end. I wanted to die. I sank to my knees on the muddy grass and howled like a dog abandoned.

The music played on and on, the lively voices rose and fell. After a long time it all went quiet. The lights in the house went dim. The dark was overwhelming. Then a torch flashed and there were voices. One was unmistakable: Coral the red-haired Geordie saying, ‘He’s here.’

Next moment she, Ninian, Jojo, and the Greek were standing around me. I knew because I recognised their shoes. I couldn't look up.

'I deserve your contempt,' I moaned. 'I deserve to be shat on.'

Ninian said, 'Hey, we all have a bad side. Give yours a holiday.'

And Jojo, 'We saved some supper. We can warm it in the Aga for you.'

One of them—probably not the Greek—stroked my head. Nicer than being shat on. I wolfed the supper. I hadn't realised how hungry I was. I couldn't stop thanking them. The Greek kept looking at me, probably thinking I couldn't sink any lower in her estimation.

Wednesday. Spent most of today cleaning the Aga. My God did it need it. The chrome rims of the hotplate covers were thick with burnt-on grease. I made them shine again. I cleaned years of cremated food scraps from the ovens. Most of the others were outside playing Frisbee. I think they thought I was doing penance. Well sod them, I wasn't, just needed to 'earth' myself (oh yeah, the psychobabble of this place has got to me). I thought of offering to fit new worktops. Properly jointed without those stupid metal strips. But then thought, Why should I?

Coral and Jojo came to plan dinner. I said, 'I'll finish so you can light the coal again.'

'No no,' says Jojo, 'you're doing a great job, carry on. We'll have something cold tonight . . . yeah, that lentil loaf with spinach salad.'

Oh yes, it's all veggie. Vegan even. I could kill for meat. 'Kill'—get it?

They made three cups of tea and I carried on cleaning between sips. Jojo and Coral sat at the table talking. The usual guff. I scrubbed harder so I wouldn't hear it but couldn't avoid it all.

'The way to act compassionately is to exchange oneself for the other,' Jojo declared.

'Yeah,' Coral said in her singsong voice, 'if you put yourself in someone else's shoes you know what they need.'

‘Yeah, right,’ said Jojo. ‘Athene says . . .’

I banged the oven doors shut on that.

After supper (at least the plum pudding with tahini cream was good) I sat on the big log outside and smoked a rollie. Pete joined me and scrounged one. He went on about how he’d re-plan the garden if he lived here. I made polite noises—no, even made a suggestion.

Pete nodded, ‘Yeah, yeah, rhododendrons, nice one, Dean. Yeah.’

Thursday. Saw Sandra packing to leave. She had one of those chewed-leather suitcases you see in charity shops. As she walked to her car it fell open. Well the catches never work on those things, do they? There was no-one else about, and I thought, Shit, I’m the last person she’ll want help from. Then the sun came out, that brilliant sun you often get between rain clouds, and nearly blinded me, and I thought, Hey, maybe a skilful action can erase the past. I remembered what I overheard while cleaning the Aga. If compassion meant exchanging myself for Sandra, who was I? No longer Weirdo Dean! All this went through my head in seconds and sounds clearer than the thought really was. But whatever, I ran.

She was standing pulling at her hair and hissing, ‘Fuck! Fuck!’ through gritted teeth. I ignored her glare and started putting stuff back—clothes mostly. I folded them neatly, one of the few skills I possess. All right, I’m obsessive. Sandra thrust a pair of knickers at me, blue with white dots, and sneered, ‘I ken ye’ll be wanting tae sniff these.’

‘Let’s just get it all packed before it rains again.’

Her washbag wasn’t zipped. The lid of some pills had come off and they’d spilled on the gravel, piebald red and blue. I started to rescue them.

‘Leave those!’ she yelled.

‘My hands are clean.’

‘Oh well, on ye go, Dean Wilson, away and tell the world Sandra’s a nutcase.’

‘I don’t follow.’

‘Ye’ve no read the label?’

I shook my head emphatically and carried on. When everything was back in I shut the suitcase and checked the catches. Hopeless. Neither would engage. Almost without thinking I unclipped my braces—God knows what Sandra was thinking—and wrapped them tight around the suitcase. I remembered the belt-and-braces taunt, and thought, My jeans are still up, ha ha.

I said, ‘Fit to travel, Sandra.’

She looked at me as if I’d just beamed down and someone else had got mixed in with my reassembly. Probably a good thing.

She said, ‘Ye’ll no . . . ?’

Another emphatic head shake. She walked away and I looked with longing at her long brown legs, her neat bum in thin green cotton shorts, but I thought, Okay, Dean, just allow the feeling, it’s only the universe unfolding. It poured with rain again. She drove off in a cloud of spray.

Friday. Time to leave tomorrow. A lot of the visitors have left already. I couldn’t face all the false bonhomie and went for a long walk in the woods. I thought, What the hell have I achieved, being here? I haven’t had sex. I’ve found out what a shitty nothing person I am. When I get back to London I’ll see how long I last before throwing myself in front of a Tube train.

Walking back, dawdling because I didn’t want to *be* back, I found the Greek. Sitting on the damp grass under the big oak, the one with a log-on-a-rope swing, staring at the purple hills on the horizon. Something made me stop and say, ‘I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.’

‘Fuck off,’ she said in a dreary tone.

I didn’t move. She looked up at me. Her face was red from crying, puffy around the eyes.

‘What’s wrong, Athene?’

‘Why tell you? All you want is to get into my knickers.’

I didn’t know what to say because it was true. I was staring at her smooth bare thighs and longing to slide my hand inside those soft towelling shorts. But then I hated myself and flopped down beside her and looked at the pines waving in the distance. She said nothing and I didn’t care, just listened to the call of a wood-pigeon.

Suddenly she said, ‘I’ve been let down.’

‘By Alan? By a boyfriend?’

‘See? Sex on the brain that’s you. I heard about the men’s meeting. Fucking and wanking—ha!’

I didn’t know what to say. She seemed to be taking the piss out of *all* the men in the group. Who all seemed obsessed with sex. Which is maybe only pathetic if you’re a spotty geek.

After another long pause Athene said, ‘Let down by a carpenter. He promised plinths for my exhibition. Now I’m fucked.’

I studied her face, her scowl, her dark eyes with a purple tinge. The firm I work for gets deliveries cancelled last minute, so I understood her frustration. All week I never imagined her having problems. Exhibitions. Ambitions. What’s wrong with me?

I said, ‘Where do you live, Athene?’

‘Why?’

I shrugged. Another long silence.

She said, ‘Camden fucking Town.’

'I'm in Bayswater. That's not far.'

'How fascinating.'

'I'm an apprentice.'

She took her gaze off the pines and purple horizon and put it on me, eyes hooded.

'Got a lot to learn, then, haven't you, Dean?'

'Apprentice shopfitter.'

I left it at that because I could smell cooking, and as I strode back the bell rang for dinner.