

## **The Pinkish Herring**

As Jerome speeds into work, he is far more apprehensive than usual. Not surprising, considering what day it is. He cringes, thinking about what happened on this day last year. It took *months* to get the smell of dog excrement out of his sandals. And the previous year was even worse; that naked lorry driver was frighteningly close to punching Jerome. But that's just the price of having Stefan as a friend, he figures.

Of course, Jerome is oblivious to the rotting pinkish herring, in the bottom drawer of his desk. It lies there, limp and slippery. With shimmering scales. With an incredulous expression. Bulging eyes and a gaping mouth. Its odour permeates his office.

Hurtling through the empty city streets, Jerome catches sight of the reflections of his car in a large shop window. It is filthy, he knows. Luxurious, but still filthy. Weeks of dirt have dulled its theoretical metallic blue sheen. Stefan always has little digs at him. "Why bother getting a Jaguar F-type if you don't wash it?" he says. "Might as well buy a Saville Row suit and go jogging in it." Or "might as well go to a Michelin star restaurant and order a burger and fries". Or "might as well take a handful of Viagra and go to a funfair." Jerome doesn't quite understand the last quip, but it makes him chuckle, nonetheless. Oh yes, Stefan is quite the joker.

Jerome's wife also makes sarcastic remarks about the state of his car, but in a manner far less light hearted. More in keeping with her general vibe of moaning and vexation. A state she seemed to have been inflicted with, immediately after their honey-moon. A state, which seems to intensify exponentially with each child she bears him. Every time she gets into the car, she picks up empty crisp packets and cans of Dr Pepper and theatrically holds them out at arm's length, as if handling nuclear waste, before throwing them in the back seat, to join their peers. Every time, Jerome sees her haughty expression of disgust, it reminds him of a cartoon villainess from his childhood and he has to combat the urge to giggle.

Jerome slowly creeps into his reserved parking spot and stares up at the colossal skyscraper. A shimmering beast that reflects the landscape of the metropolis. Like a gargantuan mirror from the gods, right in the heart of the city. He knows that to others, it is an intimidating figure, that dominates the landscape. But to him, it is home.

He gets out of his car and glances around trepidatiously. He flinches at a dog bark in the distance and shudders at a twittering sparrow. It is hard to know what to expect from Stefan. It could be anything. His deviousness knows no bounds.

Jerome is usually the first into the office. He gains a minute pleasure in turning on the lights. There is something spectacular in watching a row of strip lights jump into action sequentially, illuminating the vast floor of the office cubicles, where the worker bees toil. Like his own exclusive miniature fireworks show, every morning. And he is always the guest of honour.

Today, the door to the reception area is open, which is odd.

Jerome's olfactory senses detect a subtle hint of fishiness. But he is immediately distracted by the large black shape on the window ledge, which catches the corner of his eye. His caffeine-depleted brain mocks its own initial ridiculous thought. *Don't be silly. Batman isn't real!* He shakes his head and walks over to the wide-open window.

The man standing on the window ledge is middle aged and tubby. His crimson face is almost the exact same hue as his shirt, which strains to contain his huge paunch. His dark suit and gaudy tie flap frenetically around him. It takes several moments for Jerome to recognise his face, distorted by anguish and the relentless wind. His knuckles are dots of white in the middle of his pink chubby hands. He grips on to the window frame, with outstretched arms, as if on a crucifix.

Jerome undoes the buttons of his own suit, and leans out of the window.

“Dunnilard right?”

The man lets out an effeminate yelp, surprised by the unexpected presence of Jerome’s face, and also by its appearance; totally void of emotion or alarm or even a modicum of concern.

“Y-Yes sir, K-Karl Dunnilard. I’m a junior analyst from the acquisitions team.”

“Tummy-lard. That’s what they should call you. From now on, that’s your nickname.”

The man turns his head towards Jerome, as petulant winds whistle around him.

“W-What?”

“So tell me Tummy-lard, are you going to jump or waste both of our times?”

“What?” Confusion lurks into the man’s already distressed, pudgy face.

“Well?”

“What?” Dunnilard yells again.

“That’s quite the vocabulary you have there, Tummy-lard.”

“Don’t try and stop me,” he says. It sounds more like a question than an order.

“Stop you?” Let’s not be too hasty. You’re an analyst right? Let’s analyse. Why are you contemplating suicide?”

Dunnilard screws his eyes shut, as he processes the question. “My wife, she’s having an affair. Maybe several.”

“Several, really? Do tell.” Jerome sits down on the inside ledge with his hands on his knees, in a regal position.

“Her phone. She’s got a Tinder account.”

“Ah, Tinder. I’ve heard so much about it, but before my time unfortunately. Shame, sounds absolutely perfect. Sex at the press of a button. But I’m happ-, well, I’m married, you see, and my wife isn’t a slut like yours.”

“W-What?” Dunnilard opens his eyes, blinks excessively and then shuts them again.

“Apologies, I interrupted you. How many men has she slept with?”

“Eh, well three. I mean, I think she has definitely met up with three, but she’s been messaging at least five more. I mean, I suppose, deep down, I – I knew. You can just sometimes feel when something is-”

Jerome yawns loudly. “I get the picture. No need for your life story. Now, listen to me, this is important.”

Dunnilard opens his eyes again and turns his head towards Jerome.

“You can’t jump.” Jerome covers his mouth with a hand. His body shudders as he stifles a determined laughter. “...until you give me her number!” He sniggers, despite himself.

“What? How- How can you be so...?” Tears trickle down Dunnilard’s face.

A seed of doubt slips into Jerome's mind, before he forces it away. He grins and claps deliberately. "Bravo, Tumm-lard. The tears are a nice touch. I'm impressed. Really."

Dunnilard tries to speak, but only manages an indecipherable blubber.

"Wow. You're really going for it," Jerome says. He sticks his head out further and looks around. "All these years. Gosh, I've never realised how windy it is up here. It's actually quite refreshing. I best not lean out too far, might mess up my hair."

"What?"

"You know, the wind actually *improves* your hairstyle. Looks slightly less pubey."

"What?"

Dunnilard's tie flaps up and rummages around his face. A chunk flops into his wide-open, mouth.

"You know, that tie does look *better*, across your ugly face."

"Whadd?" Dunnilard says with a mouthful of material.

"I didn't even know Poundland sold ties."

Dunnilard shakes his head and lets out a long, high-pitched whimper.

"So, I'm going to grab a coffee. I would offer you one but I wouldn't want to add volume to your bloodstream. The emergency services will already be burdened enough with the mess you're gonna leave."

Dunnilard stares back at Jerome as if considering whether he is hallucinating.

“Anywhoo, have a nice death, Tummy-lard.”

Jerome leaps up, re-fastens his suit buttons and skips down the corridor. He feels a warm relief. At least it’s out of the way. He can continue with his day.

Approaching his office, the fishy stink is powerful. As he processes the smell, he sees Stefan arrive at his own office and trots over.

Jerome loves Stefan like a brother. He is also frequently irritated and exasperated by him, like a brother. Stefan remains the only man he has ever cried in front of, 20 years ago when he had bailed Jerome out of a Thai prison, following a debauched drunken night. Stefan had also once saved his life, at least possibly. Everybody had loved Jerome’s admittedly stunning, if not slightly unhinged, former fiancée, Janice. Around 15 years ago, at their engagement party no less, Stefan pulled Jerome aside and expressed his reservations. Based only on an intuition. “There’s something off about her, my friend. Something perturbing.” For reasons Jerome himself couldn’t quite fathom at the time, he dumped Janice, against the desperate pleas of his whole family, his friends and her slightly eccentric entourage, which included a frankly overfamiliar heavily-tattooed psychotic uncle. After a wild argument and sustaining and a deep gash on his forehead,

courtesy of a pot plant thrown by Janice, she was out of his life. Years later, Jerome saw on the news that she had been given a fifteen-year sentence for killing her new husband, with the assistance of her secret lover, the aforementioned uncle. They got caught, as the uncle tried to dispose of the body at the local rubbish dump. Having opted for the cheaper, thinner plastic rubbish bags, he had watched in horror as the victim's decapitated head rolled across a busy Ikea car park.

Stefan bursts into a huge dazzling smile. His gold canine twinkles.

“So you found it then?”

“Found *him*, yes.”

Stefan sniggers so deeply, he has to steady himself against the door of his office. “Aw mate, that smell!”

“Smell? Not sure about that, but hats off to him. He never once broke out of character. And the tears as well. He deserves an Oscar.”

Stefan rubs his chin and squints. “Character? He's a fish.”

Jerome shrugs. “Whatever you say, mate.” He turns and walks down the corridor towards his office. Stefan hollers back at him. “Have you forgiven me for last year's prank, yet?”

“Last year? I haven't forgiven you for my stag do, from *last decade*, yet. I think you actually gave me piles!” He limps with exaggeration for the next couple of steps and winks back at Stefan, who creases over with laughter.



Stefan eventually composes himself. Wiping his cheeks, he shouts “Hey, what did you mean by tears?”

Jerome dismisses him with a small wave.

“You cretin, Stefan!” Jerome yells down the phone. He holds out the pinkish herring, now wrapped in yesterday’s stock reports, at arm’s length, much like his wife does, with rubbish in his Jaguar F-type. “Is this the new precedent now? *Two* April fools tricks to look forward to, instead of one?” He can actually hear Stephan’s howls in stereo, from down the corridor and down the phone. “First, Dunnillard outside the ledge. Now this.”

“Who’s Dunnillard?”

“Yes, very funny. Well, I’ll give you credit for the fish. But I never actually believed the suicide attempt, so *I’m* claiming point for that.”

A long pause ensues. The wind howls outside the window. The herring gulps inside its paper tomb.

Stefan’s chuckles start to quieten down the phone briefly, before bursting back. “Ah, Jerome. A poor effort, my friend. I make your office stink for a week and all you think up, is some fake suicide nonsense. Pathetic.” Stefan slams down his phone and leans back in his chair. His jaw is sore.

Jerome hastily disposes of the pinkish herring, giving it to a cleaner, with a bashful shrug and some mumbling attempt of an explanation, which doesn't even make sense to him. He opens his windows and empties half a can of air freshener into his office. He sits down to his infinite emails.

The two men have shared the same private school. The same first joint. The same circle of friends. On two occasions, the same woman's affections. The same personal trainer. And, for the last couple of years, the same employer, despite disparate levels of seniority. Around two minutes and forty three seconds after the phone call, they share the exact same thought at the exact same time. As improbable as this might be, given the lightning quick actions of neurones, the thoughts crystallise at precisely the same second, millisecond, microsecond.

They spring up from their respective seats; Jerome's stationary, brown leather, with lumbar support; Stefan's smaller, rotating and wheeled. They bolt out of their respective offices; Jerome's more spacious and formal; Stefan's cluttered with humorous musings on posters on the walls.

They slam into each other in the corridor and intertwine into a bundle of limbs and tailored suit flaps. They scramble desperately to get up, inadvertently pushing each other down, in a somewhat slapstick affair.

They sprint, in almost perfect synchrony, down the corridor, towards the ledge. The men, who have shared so much, in that moment, wear identical gormless looks. All four of their eyes hold tiny explosions of horror inside them. Their mouths hang open like chasms of dismay. They look not unlike a rotting pinkish herring, which at this exact moment is being thrown into a rubbish chute, at the back of the colossal skyscraper. The shimmery beast, the gigantic mirror, the intimidating figure that it is. The fish, a shimmery beast itself, with its bulging eyes, gaping mouth, and permeating odour, hurtles towards the ground. Down, down, down. Seconds away from certain oblivion.