

Just prawns, John!

One dark November afternoon the clock ticked towards the hour when the inner man demanded he be fed.

'*Margherita, la mia cara principessa, (my dear little princess)*', John crooned softly across the room to his wife who, tapping dutifully at her iPad, was immersed in her personal parallel universe.

'What?' said with the slight edge of impatience of a person who does not want to be disturbed.

'*Che cosa mangiamo stasera?* (What thing shall we eat tonight?)

'John, remember this is Wednesday, so it's your turn to think of what to eat. Anyway, I'm out, meeting Morag and Cathy at that new Polish place. Cathy went last week with David and it was so good she booked us in on the spot.'

'Ah ... So, what shall I make?'

'Spicy stir fry? You always say it's your favourite.'

'Any prawns in the archive?'

'Not that I know of... But NO! Stop. Let me look. If you go raking about in that freezer it gets in a complete muddle ... Nope, but there's every kind of vegetable in the fridge, some of them desperate to be eaten. Why do you always buy them in such bulk when we're just around the corner from ASDA?'

'OK, I'll make another pot of soup tonight. Do we have stock granules?'

'Yes. Only seven tubs. And DO NOT buy any more packets of dried herbs. Look they're falling out every time I open this cupboard. And the garden is full of fresh herbs. I keep telling you that. And no more tuna, I counted them yesterday, twenty-three tins!'

'OK, I'll nip round to ASDA for prawns and some River Cobbler from Andrea.'

'NO. No more River Cobbler. We have eight packets in the outside freezer plus all your trout. And River Cobbler's from Vietnam. And it's a made-up name. For goodness sake, John, think about it. You know the only fish I eat comes from M&S. I don't eat supermarket fish. Surely that has sunk in after nearly forty-two years.'

'OK, just prawns and whatever ...'

'NO, John, absolutely no 'whatevers' either. Just prawns, John! The freezer and the fridge are bulging with your 'whatevers'. Just prawns, John! Are you listening? And hurry up, will you, I want to be here when you get back, to check up on you. MOVE! But get changed out of those shorts for goodness sake. Look at it out there; it's turned to sleet, just like the weather App said it would.'

'I'll be fine like this, Margherita, you know I never feel the cold in my legs, never. Just my head, that's my weak point.'

John grabbed his man-bag and anorak and headed for the front door, keen to get away from his 'controller' to the freedom of ASDA.

'*Ciao, ciao, principessa mia.*' (Bye-bye, my little princess.)

Just prawns, John!

On leaving the house he spotted his friend Arthur struggling up the incline, behind his large broolly. Head on into a strong easterly.

'Arturo, come stai, amico mio?' (Arthur, how goes it my friend)

'Hullo John. Look, I can't stop. I'm on a time budget, OK? For God's sake, man, do you not feel the cold on your legs?'

'Not a bit Arturo. As long as I keep my head warm I'm OK, that's my weak point. Anyway, how are you? What did you buy?'

'No idea, John, I work like Robbie the Robot now. Allison has me fully trained. I ONLY buy what is written on the list. Last week she sent me back with extra stuff I'd bought in 'care-free shopping mode', as she calls it. Most of it was food and they were really bolshie. Said they'd have to bin it, house rules, because of the Maryhill poisoner.'

'The Maryhill poisoner?'

'Never proved, not yet anyway. Joe in Electricals told me they've put extra hidden cameras in some bits, but that's a secret so don't mention it. And John, you'll be under suspicion you know, because of your shorts.'

'Why because of my shorts?'

'Well, I heard Jeana and Sharon talking at Customers' Services and the Management think it's that guy from Maryhill with the very short shorts? They say it was him that contaminated all those burgers. Apparently, he's a supporter of some horse charity.'

'But Arturo, I know him, that's Jonathan. He's one of us, *i fratelli dei pantaloni corti*. (the brothers of the short pants) There are quite a few of us all-year-round men in Bearsden, you know. And I'm a supporter too of "The Gambia Horse and Donkey Trust". Honestly, Arturo, Jonathan is a really nice guy, when you get to know him. It's just that he's just a bit shy. Do you know that he walks here to Bearsden every day to ASDA or out to TESCO in Milngavie?'

'He walks it? From Maryhill?'

'Yes, from Wyndford Barracks, rain, hail or shine, all year round. Do you know that they held Rudolph Hess there during the war? Jonathan's Dad was in charge of the prison, got to know Hess really well, so Hess gave him a package to keep for him, full of strange coded stuff. Jonathan's still got it, but he hid it, just in case. I bet you it's still classified. If they knew he had it, pure dynamite! There's a great story in that, you know, I'm working on it in with my other brain cell. Of course, in the story I'll disguise Johnathan, probably give him an Italian name, maybe call him Arturo, eh? Make him wear long trousers like you, eh? But, Arturo, don't tell anyone about the Hess package, OK? It seems like Jonathan is in enough trouble.'

'But they say the police checked him out, and well, you know...'

'And well what?'

'Sorry, John, that's all I know so far, but I'll keep listening and let you know.'

The red car peeped as it passed but John was oblivious to Margaret shaking her fist at him.

The sleet became heavier, and a strong gust of turned Arthur's broolly inside out.

Just prawns, John!

'Look, John this is madness, standing out in this bloody weather. I'm off. I've been out for ages, you know what it's like, I keep meeting people, same old stories, it's a nightmare. Allison phoned the police one time, reported me as missing, or, as she put it, "off the reservation". They 'captured' me in ASDA, so they did. Everyone thought I was a shoplifter. I had to give up ASDA and go all the way to TESCO for a few days until they forgot. The two policewomen were very nice about it. One of them, Charlene, used to be in my school too, so they gave me a run home. Said it made her day, 'arresting' her old heidie, (*head-teacher*).'

'Surely that sort of thing would make you a suspect, Arturo, eh? Criminal record, that sort of thing?'

'Aye, right! Look, I've got to get back for the shopping bag inspection before Allison goes out to her PT Teachers' Reunion. It's at some new Polish place they're all talking about. But she's left me a spicy curry, yummy, yummy. A rare treat, Allison hates spicy stuff. Bye John.'

'Ciao, ciao. Oh, Arturo, please ask Allison never to tell Margaret about the returning stuff thing, OK? I don't want her getting ideas. These people in ASDA are my friends. Could be embarrassing, eh?'

'Aye, Mum's the word, John. Cheerio.'

'Ciao, ciao, Arturo.'

ooOoo

John wheeled the trolley from the pavement up into the ASDA car park, heading for the Entrance. He had 'extracted' it from Jim and Jane's big double hedge, beside the bus stop. He regularly retrieved 'lost' trolleys and Scott, Head of Trolleys, was one of John's best informants. He looked everywhere for Scott but he was not to be found.

John checked for Joe in Electricals to be told he wasn't on duty. He tried James at the Developing and Printing counter. James knew nothing about the Maryhill poisoner so John brought him up to date. Sharon at Customer Services had a big queue of Lottery ticket people.

Jeana on Control was busy trying to sort out a problem with an elderly lady who had forgotten her PIN Number. While Jeana did her best, John hovered nearby then gave up and carried on with his shopping. In his basket were lots of things he had forgotten he needed including two tubs of Marigold vegetable stock granules, a three-pack of John West 'No-Drain' tuna chunks in sunflower oil, a tube of Gia garlic puree and assorted boxes of Schwarz dried herbs.

ooOoo

John stood with his nearly full trolley, waiting his turn in a short queue beside Andrea's Fish Counter. The girl approached from his left gliding on dark grey high-heeled furry ankle boots,

Just prawns, John!

walking beside an attractive woman wearing a Hijab, whom he took to be her mother. Mummy was talking rapidly in what might have been Punjabi.

Everything about the girl spoke of tallness. She was slim, athletic and brimming with energy. She did not wear make-up, nor she did she need it. Her skin was shining autumn gold, darkened to a purple brown around her eyes. Her lips, a dark plum colour, were frozen in a tiny smile as if she was only half listening. No jewellery distracted from her perfection.

Almost at once his glance skipped back to her eyes, her most striking feature. They were astonishing, extraordinary, entrancing. The inner ring was a deep purple black and her irises were anthracite flecked with dark red. Her gaze was haughty, imperious, and disdainful, on the edge of disinterest. Her slow blink announced her long black lashes.

She knows she is special, John thought: two hundred years ago, Maharajahs would have offered half their wealth to win her as a wife or concubine.

As they drew nearer the girl's eyes changed as she glanced at the short tubby man in shorts with weather-beaten hairy legs, Laughter lit her face with a captivating beauty, as her melodic soprano voice chuckled a comment to her mother.

His mouth ran ahead of his brain, and not for the first time.

'Hello, I'm John, and I hope you will excuse me but I am compelled to say this Mummy, your daughter has the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen.'

'Yes, Surina has been told this many, many times. Her father has exactly the very same eyes.'

'Your eyes are very nice too, Mummy, dark brown, almost black, but no red.'

'Thank you. Surina and her Dad are the only two in our family with these very special eyes.'

'So, Surina, are you a student?'

'I'm in first year at Glasgow University, doing Medicine.'

'Yes, Surina wants to be a surgeon, like her father.'

'Good for you, Surina, I'm sure you'll be a great surgeon.'

From behind the fish counter a voice interrupted their chat.

'Hi, John, what can I get you today?'

'Oops, excuse me, my turn. Hello Andrea, busy today, eh?'

'Tell me about it. The usual? How many pieces?'

'Yes Andrea, thanks. Eh, two pieces of smoked and two unsmoked, separate packets for each piece please. And a kilo pack of your wildest Atlantic frozen prawns, please.'

Just prawns, John!

John turned back to Surina and her mother: 'Surina's Mummy, you should try this River Cobbler, it's absolutely fantastic. And it's sustainable fished too. Such great value. Makes lovely tasty snacks. I could give you my recipe. Much better than crisps, really healthy, I buy it here all the time and ...'

The public-address system blared at full volume:

'Would Mister John Bonthron please listen carefully to this important telephone message from his wife:

"Only prawns, John! Remember, no more River Cobbler and absolutely no 'whatevers'!"