

Title: Oops, I Did It Again

Word Count: 2999

I was done with men, literally. Totally over them, and determined to identify as asexual, even going so far as to join an online support group that organised parties where the members all turned up at each other's houses with homemade baked goods and bored games like Scrabble, along with their dogs. But then Nate the film-maker - who had the DVD stall next to my Books-n-Vinyl one at our inner-city Saturday market - gave a hungover yawn, stretched, and his too short T-shirt (all his T-shirts were too short) rode up over his stomach.

It occurred to me I could run my finger tips, or my tongue, over that tum - my fascination with men alive and unwell, after all, and my resolution to shake it off crashing faster than the Taylor Swift ticket site the morning it opened.

Ah the stomach! Flatt-ish with a sheen of silky down. Not ripping a six-pack, he didn't do gyms. Neither did I. (We both agreed that life had enough treadmills already.) If only I could steal my hand across its forbidden curve then further south towards... a spanner in the works - of my overall plan. Not where I thought I'd been heading at all.

How boringly heteronormative! At least if I was going to be overcome with insatiable lust, couldn't it be for a woman? I was super cynical of males after the last three boyfriends, and when I was still on Tinder, I'd added *show me females* to my profile, displaying it proudly to my mate Misty one midnight when she turned up at mine, clutching a goon of Merlot.

'So, you think a woman won't disappoint, do you? She sneered. 'Good luck with that.' Her partner, Kat, had just flown off with a femme tatt artist who'd covered her shoulders and boobs with an exuberant cloud of rainbow butterflies.

Every Saturday I took my vintage record player to the markets. I put on 'Oops!.... I Did It Again' (Britney Spears in re-issue purple vinyl), my gaze straying in Nate's direction. A sweaty boomer, deep in my 'Rare 60s' tub in search of the holy grail, surfaced and enquired, 'Whoa, is that Britney?', then bought it for his daughter. At least that's what he told me.

I dragged my focus back to the phone and the cake recipes saved in Favourites for the next asexual support group meetup, lingering on pictures of zucchinis and carrots and the cook's

ramblings about where to source the firmest ones, her annoying reminiscences of cooking marathons with Nanna, FAQs, reviews. FFS, where was the actual recipe, the method?

I've always had trouble finding the method, the right one at least, for cooking a cake or finding a suitable partner or job or share house. Anything really, except finding the best-ever rescue dog. Bella, my greyhound, was a winner - just not on the racetrack. My love life, especially, had been so problematic I'd convinced myself I could make Post Relationship Stress Disorder synonymous with a low sex drive, which gave me a bit of a breather, for a while. Joining the asexual support group helped too, and upping my dose of mood stabilisers (my psychiatrist didn't need to know) until I ran out of them. And being a serious rom-com tragic, I donated my DVD collection to Nate to put on his stall. But then the T-shirt went up. At which point my brain - for some unknown reason, which it seemed I had absolutely no control over at all - decided to give me the delusion I needed to rip Nate's clothes off there and then and... In-con-venient!

It be like... a key turning slowly in my brain I didn't even know was there, that got me jiggling around like some tinny, unhinged toy that couldn't be wound back. After going cold turkey on boys I was now discovering to my horror that the bad-choice virus had been lying there dormant under my frozen surface, just waiting for a bit of heat to liberate it, so it could wreak havoc on my carefully rewired emotional state. I read about Zombie Viruses on my phone. Fun fact - the supposedly eradicated 75 year old Anthrax one has started reanimating as the Siberian permafrost melts with global warming, killing those poor little reindeer. Oh, and a human or two.

If I could just get my hands on more meds, instead of that luscious tum, maybe I could mood stabilise him out of my brain. But my psychiatrist was away and I'd neglected to get a new script before she left; I'd done so much work with her, as well as my psychologist, on self-destructive behaviour patterns and avoiding inappropriate choices. And here I was teetering on making yet another one.

Yup, I was possessed by him, but he wasn't by me, not as far as I could see. And even if I could cast my spell, he identified as a film maker - so he'd be a legend in his own lunchtime, for sure, like the last three creative types. Despite my mentally healthy intensions, I'd become infatuated with another one - of course I had. I seem to be drawn to them - not gunna lie - like a zombie lurching towards a raging fire. Nate seemed sweet as, but I'd never perused his social media pages to find out who he really was, so I checked my phone to get the lowdown on him. A director, a producer, a sound guy, an actor. An all-you-can-eat buffet of media creativity!

With hundreds of followers and about a thousand facebook friends. Which usually means you have heaps of actual friends, or hardly any - one of the two. Quite the auteur director in those chunky glasses, gazing intensely at the camera like Jean-Luc Goddard or Jane Campion. I'd never seen him wearing glasses at the markets. Not sure how you can be an auteur when all you've made are a handful of shorts on your iPhone. The most liked one was *Zombies in Pyjamas - The Sleepwalking Dead*. He seemed to spend more of his time selling arthouse DVDs here at the markets than making them himself.

Oh, and he'd had the occasional commercial or bit part in a TV series or two. In one of them he got to utter one line before he was killed off in the first five minutes. So why was it so difficult for *me* to kill him off?

'Narcissistic Personality Disorder' was my diagnosis, as I scrolled through in search of more evidence. Lingered on some very appealing photos; he really should grow that Salvatore Dali moustache back and style his hair like that again. Narcissists could be sooo attractive. At first. But then, so could serial killers. I should have been turned off by now, and ceased my shameless stalking of him.

Unfortunately he wouldn't even realise he was a narcissist, or see it as something that ought to be managed. None of my ex-boyfriends had been aware of their psychopathologies or ever seen a therapist - hadn't thought they needed to - so I'd got on my phone and diagnosed them myself, though they didn't seem to appreciate my help with that. All narcissists - like most creative types - but each one had a nip of something else in the cocktail:

- Dylan the writer (ADHD) - flat out formulating his plot outline for the Great Australian Millennial Novel. Just hadn't put finger to laptop yet.

- Otis the horn player (bipolar) - riding the cutting edge of the avant-garde jazz world - when he wasn't hibernating under his doona. Right on the cusp of fame. (What a lot of young males there are in the music industry, all on the cusp of fame!)

- Ben the artist (crippling anxiety) - I went to view his graduation artwork, a pile of found objects - mostly crushed milk cartons and empty bottles - that the college cleaner inadvertently put in the bin on garbage night. The next morning Ben had a panic attack but I helped him find some more raw materials from the recycling bins down the back lane and set it all up again. He never bothered to thank me, but then, it was *his* concept, I'd just assisted with the sourcing and assembling of it. He suffered from OCD too, hadn't liked Bella sleeping under the doona with us; claimed she had fleas.

None of these guys seemed remotely interested in *my* life, or in reading my speculative fiction stories. (They might regret that when I'm as famous as Mary Shelley or J. K. Rowling.) All they wanted from me was a muse (He-llo! Where was *my* muse?) and a hot girlfriend to be spotted at parties with.

And they all claimed I hadn't supported them through their breakdowns, which was totally unfair, when what they really needed was some CBT and the right meds. I'd *had* to pull the plug, what else could I do? What about ME?!

I'd even tried dating a couple of normies before I ditched Tinder completely; went out with a podiatrist once, who at least gave me some useful advice re my plantar warts, and listened empathetically to my relationship travails. But zero chemistry there, unfortunately.

The date that finally seized up my Tinder swipe was Hugh the financial advisor. We met over a meal at an inner city pub; he ordered a gargantuan steak from a beast that must have farted enough methane into the earth's atmosphere during its pre-slaughtered existence to push the global warming index up an increment or two. I chose the mushroom burger. He kept sneaking a look at how his shares were performing on his phone. Just before he mauled his Wagyu Tomahawk I had a sudden urge to escape - like right there and then. OK it was wrong right, but how hurtful was it really to abandon someone you'd exchanged a flirty text or two and (unsuccessfully) attempted eye contact with, while competing with his phone for fifteen minutes. I can't stand guys conjoined with their phones so I decided to piss off. Sorry not sorry.

I told him I had to find a loo and went in search of an exit. It was one of those pubs with a labyrinth of passageways out the back that led to a beer garden with a trio thrashing out jazz standards. OMG, there was Otis, my former avant-garde jazz musician boyfriend (out from under his doona) riding the cutting edge on his horn. More like the cutting edge of obscurity in that dingy corner playing 'The Nearness of You'. I hid behind a convenient plant, hoped he hadn't seen me, and did a runner.

Despite the online evidence, Nate didn't *seem* narcissistic, not when we were together at the markets. We showed each other stuff on our phones; he adored my carrot cake. Was the way to his heart (as well as mine) via his stomach? We did some swaps from our stalls; I gave him a book by Roger Ebert called *Your Movie Sucks*. He gave me some DVDs from important, auteur directors - *Melancholia*, where a rogue planet's about to annihilate the earth, and *Requiem for a Dream*, an uplifting saga of four unrecovering drug addicts.

I smirked. 'Haven't you got something bleaker? A bit less feel-good?'

'Lol. Better try my 'Fantasy' box for that.'

Some customer must have misplaced *When Harry Met Sally* and *Friends with Benefits* in 'Fantasy' instead of 'Rom-Coms' without even realising it was actually the most appropriate place for them. Real life doesn't do happy endings. All those novels and plays and poems going back centuries - that found their way onto my uni reading lists - marketing the idea that passion was up there in the heights of human experience, not just an oxytocin excess.

If only Anna Karenina had had access to a reputable health professional, some Prozac and behavioural therapies, and had kept away from train stations, she might have got her life into some sort of chemically-balanced perspective.

And surely, if I could spend the past year having interesting conversations with Nate without imagining tearing his clothes off and covering him with passionate kisses, potentially I'd be able to use CBT to erase those imaginary kisses and revert to the breezy, convivial friendship we'd enjoyed previously. Right?

Yeah right.

It might work, if I'd wanted it to work.

We enjoyed looking through social media together, Bella and Nate's chihuahua Butch curled up on their beds between our stalls. There was a swap group we both belonged to where people bartered stuff. Trades could be pretty random, lately sex toys had been sneaking in. One woman was looking to exchange her Lucifer full body harness for some fair-trade vegan chocolate because she'd started looking like a trussed turkey in it. A light up purple dildo could be yours - cleaned and sterilised (and of course you gave it a good soak in bleach when you got it home as well) - for a frangipani cutting. People's needs and priorities change and evolve.

Members also started seeking advice. 'Listen to this.' (Nate would have a laugh with me over this one.) 'This site's become a support group!.. "ISO a neuro-divergent/ADHD understanding podiatrist. Not fat-phobic. Social-anxiety-sensitive."' OMG, Is your average podiatrist really that incompetent dealing with diversity? And isn't that a lot to ask in addition to having to get down with people's gnarly old feet and coax out their ingrowing toenails?

'Show me that!' Nate clicked on the member's little ID picture. 'Oh, it's Jax, I know them from a film course. They're a sexual assault survivor who lost a brother to suicide.'

'Ri-ght' ... I felt ashamed and messaged Jax the name of the podiatrist I'd gone on that date with. She'd been a great listener, even if we hadn't ended up in bed together. What did it matter if the site became a support group where people traded a bit of compassion in a cruel world.

‘Social media,’ Nate shook his head, ‘too easy to pick up the wrong vibe.

I haven’t put anything on it myself, for a while.’

I hadn’t looked at the dates on his most recent posts - I’d been too busy scrolling back into his past.

*

In the weeks after the stomach reveal, it felt more and more awkward being next to Nate each Saturday.

He stepped over the dogs and stood next to me. ‘Hey Georgie, is everything ok with us?’

I spilled it, couldn’t stop myself. ‘I know we’re mates but I’m in... lust with you Nate. Soz. I didn’t mean, I wish - Oh shit, I can’t even...’ My phone pinged but I ignored it. ‘And I’m damaged, like Mila Kunis in *Friends With Benefits*.’ (*Maybe not as gorgeous as Mila... well, not quite.*) At that point I should have shut the fuck up, but fuck it, once you’ve already pulled the pin on the grenade... ‘And I’ve run out of my meds and my shrink won’t be back till next week.’

He took his time packing up his DVDs, sucking on his vape. ‘So what are you on then, if you don’t mind me asking.’

I told him.

‘Coincidence. So am I. I can give you some till your shrink gets back, as long as you pay me back when he does.’

‘What? So why are you-’

‘Couldn’t go on like I was, living in fantasyland. Had a bit of a, breakdown... or something similar. Dunno if I can get anywhere in the film world. Or if I want to, anymore. Starting to think making a good cake might be better than making a crap film.’

‘I’m starting to think the same thing about writing speculative fiction and I love baking cakes.’

‘Your carrot cake’s to die for but don’t stop writing. Please. I love your stories. The one about the zombie, flesh-eating financial adviser...’

Wait what?! He’d read them? None of my boyfriends ever had.

‘Might not be great literature,’ he said, ‘but you know what?...’

Not... Great... ? Who the fuck was he to be arbitrating-

‘...Libraries are full of great literature already. Do we really need any more? Your stuff’s quirky. Entertaining. Lol at times.’

‘Really?’

‘It’s no small thing to make people smile, in a blighted world. You should get it out there. It’s not so hard to set up a webpage. I could help. You’ll need a bio, links to your stories, social media. We can use mine as a template.’

I almost said - *Oh pur-lease, lose the the mansplaining darl. I know how to set up a webpage. I just want my work to be brilliant before I take the writing world by storm, not some lame trickle on a webpage* - then decided I’d better save those come-backs for a bit further down the track and flashed him a grin instead. ‘Ta. Don’t *you* be giving up on the filmmaking or your scriptwriting either. Maybe we could collaborate on a zombie movie. You could direct it, star in it. So could I - we’ll need an undead femme fatale. We could *win* Tropfest!’

‘Even just have fun with it. Sounds like a plan. What are you doing after the markets? We could watch a movie, a rom-com if you like, have a bite. I’m learning to cook decent vegan.’

I hesitated. ‘Are you able to give me those meds? Enough for the next week. Now?’

He took some out of his bag and I punched the first one swiftly from of the foil and swallowed it, then he pulled a DVD out of ‘Rom-Coms’. *Intolerable Cruelty*. ‘Want to give this a try?’

‘I think I’ve already-’

‘It’s a whacky rom-com. Both bleak *and* funny. A bit like life.’

‘I do like the Cohen Brothers. Guess I can give *Intolerable Cruelty* one more go.’

‘And Bella can come, she loves Butch. He’s a bit spoilt though. Sleeps in my bed.’

‘So does Bella.’ Where else would a dog sleep? I couldn’t stop smiling, feeling like we were on the same screen... at least for tonight.

As well as the same meds.

