

Margo

by Julia Weetman

Sunday morning is the graveyard shift for dating, thinks Margo. She is sitting in a café halfway up Portobello Road opposite a man called Greg who she met online. He has jogged here, he says, which explains why he is wearing an aerated vest and tiny fluorescent shorts to their first date. She hadn't expected to see his underarm hair so soon and wonders if he had another date last night.

Margo has spent the past month auditing a Belgian cheese manufacturer and has eaten many breakfasts alone in her hotel, toggling between dating websites on her phone. She was eating a Danish on Monday when Greg messaged her the first time. She remembers uncoiling the pastry to reach the sticky cinnamon paste and plump raisins. Greg said he liked her photo, that he had a window on Sunday morning if she'd like to meet.

Greg throws first his right arm then his left across his chest to stretch his triceps as he orders breakfast. 'I'll get a dry skinny cappuccino, three poached eggs and bacon, hold the toast.' He turns to Margo. 'I'm doing The Protein Revolution. Have you read it? No? Oh you really should. You'd love it.'

Margo forces her eyes towards the 'Healthy Treats' section of the menu, which boasts all manner of green things on rye toast. She remembers the café on Place Brugmann where she watched thin Belgian women eat not just one but two croissants with their coffee. She smooths down her black sundress and smiles at the waiter: 'I'll have the pancakes please.'

The waiter nods. When he repeats the order she notices the whiteness of his teeth against his dark beard. She has never kissed a man with a beard and wonders how it would feel against her skin.

‘So,’ she says to Greg. ‘Five years in London. I guess you like it here?’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ he nods. ‘Well, pockets of it.’

‘Pockets?’

‘Yeah, you know. Notting Hill’s great obviously. And Chelsea, Knightsbridge, parts of the West End. I don’t really see the point of anywhere else. I’d rather get on a plane and go to another city.’

He scrapes his chair to the left a couple of inches and smiles. Margo realises that he has moved to better see his reflection in the mirror behind her head.

Beside them an elderly couple is drinking coffee from mugs the size of soup bowls. The woman is all curves with fairytale rosy cheeks and she leans towards the man, says something Margo can’t make out. As her hand touches his, the man’s head snaps back and he guffaws a great laugh, shoulders bouncing and chest heaving. The woman laughs too and smiles at Margo as if to say ‘Life is good. You know it too.’

The waiter returns with their food, and as he places Margo’s plate his fingers brush against hers. She startles at the touch, hides her hand beneath the table as if to chastise it.

Greg is staring at Margo’s tower of pancakes with his head cocked to one side. ‘So, the Protein Revolution,’ he says. ‘Groundbreaking. Do you have any idea of the damage carbs do to your body?’

Margo shakes her head and pours maple syrup onto the top pancake. It cascades down the sides and pools in a toffee mess on the plate.

Greg exhales in a puff. ‘Major! Good news is that three weeks in I’ve nearly reached 100% carb elimination.’

‘OK.’ She tastes the first pancake and it is the fluffiest thing she has ever eaten. Seared on the outside by the griddle, the buttermilk bubbles trapped inside melt on her tongue.

‘You don’t seem excited,’ says Greg.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘It’s ok,’ he says with a shrug. ‘I guess you need to read the book.’

He makes a show of enjoying his food. He cuts the bacon and eats with big meaty chews. He borrows a pepper mill from a neighbouring table and cracks a drift of black flakes onto his egg. The yolk bursts at a touch from his knife and floods the plate, and Margo thinks she would like a hunk of bread, sourdough probably, to mop it up.

They eat quickly and split the bill, then Greg says he has an appointment at Runners Need to have his gait analysed, so he really must dash. But it’s been terrific, so maybe they could play squash next week? Or go to that raw food demo? Before Margo can protest, he plants a fleeting kiss on her cheek and bounds out the door. She watches his electric blue trainers as he jogs away down Portobello, darting between the weekend tourists and antiques shoppers.

She smells cigarette smoke and turns idly towards its source, wondering how to fill the rest of her day. It has been so long since she has smoked a cigarette, she thinks. She wonders how her life has become so devoid of vice that a pancake feels like an act of rebellion. The smoke is coming from the alley beside the café and she sees that it is the waiter. He half-smiles at her, extends an arm to invite her into his alleyway kingdom.

Margo pushes back her shoulders then walks towards him across the cobbles. He looks taller out here, his frame fills the alleyway. Without speaking he offers her a cigarette and lights it for her. She inhales, savouring the long-forgotten jolt of tar and nicotine as the smoke snakes down. He touches her hair and she laughs self-consciously. He is smiling, then she is. They draw closer to each other and she holds his gaze until their lips touch and she shuts her eyes and thinks that this kiss tastes of all the good forbidden things she needs.

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