

The Barbeque

By Gavin Baldwin

The smell of roasting meat was everywhere. Like a collection of television Bisto kids, the assembled throng lifted their noses one by one as the delicious odours wafted about the garden, carried on a gentle Spring breeze. The digital outdoor thermometer, bought in a fit of ungrounded enthusiasm from Argos, read 13 degrees but standing by the barbeque, out of the wind, it felt a lot warmer.

“Blimey Gregster you’re cooking up a little storm there mate.”

Carl Horton from across the road. A right royal pain in the backside but his wife, Caroline, was absolutely delightful and well worth stomaching Carl for, any day of the week.

“What’ll it be Carl? I can offer you a burger, a sausage or a bit of steak? The chicken’s not quite ready yet I’m afraid.”

“Give us a Sausage mate.”

I gave him two, with accompanying rolls, in the hope it would keep him busy and stop him returning for at least another half an hour. Poor old Dave Bradford from next door had been stuck with Carl for most of the morning, occasionally sending me pleading looks to come and join them. Unfortunately for Dave I’d been busy with the Barbeque and I certainly wasn’t about to relinquish it now.

I watched Carl move deftly through the collection of friends and neighbours, his umpteenth beer in one hand and my two cauterized hotdogs in the other. Dave had managed to infiltrate a small group of neighbours by the fence, but Carl had no trouble in finding him and duly moved in to setup his stall next to his new ‘best mate’.

“I love what you’ve done with the Garden Greg. I’ve been telling Duncan we need to do something like this for ages. “

Alison Pearson. Nice enough lady but I always got the impression she was slightly higher maintenance than Duncan ever let on. Duncan and I were at school together and, like many of those now standing on my newly erected hardwood decking, was approaching the long, dark, teatime of middle age.

However you dress it up, forty sounds old. Forget all that “life begins” nonsense, forty is just plain bloody old. It’s the exact point at which you cease relating to the characters in ‘Friends’ and start to feel a greater affinity and kinship with the cast of ‘One foot in the Grave’. You’re well into your mortgage years but without any of the thrill of being close to paying it off, and you carry around a myriad of aches and pains that, rather

than actually going away, only seem to have slightly better or worse days. You are an old sod. You know it and everyone else knows it and no amount of get-togethers, reunions or birthday parties are ever going to change that fact.

“Thanks Alison, can I get you anything – a nice piece of meat perhaps?”

She blushed as I knew she would, fully, past the underside of her slightly asymmetrical chin to the point where her patterned blouse gave way to her somewhat shallow cleavage. I enjoyed flirting shamelessly with all of my mate’s wives. They knew it was par for the course and in this particular case it was also a perk of being the host, not to mention the birthday boy. I would make a point of extracting the birthday kisses a little later on. For now, I was simply enjoying serving up the grub, with a little sauce.

Alison had soon composed herself.

“Perhaps some chicken if it’s ready. I’ve been helping myself to your wife’s salad Greg it’s fabulous.”

I found a small piece of chicken and skewered it to make sure it was cooked through. Then with dexterity, honed after years of living abroad, I flipped it over and tossed it onto her waiting plate.

“There you go, a nice small breast. Help yourself to garlic bread.”

I think I just caught the corner of her smile as she turned and made her way towards my old pasting table. Funny how, no matter how many barbeques I organise, I never seem to get around to buying any decent garden furniture. It’s always the same miss-matched collection of bric-a-brac from the garage and kitchen.

I looked over towards the lawn where a small splinter group were chatting noisily. Nearest to me, Pippa and John, were neighbours on the other side, a great couple if a perhaps a little dull. Next to them were Anita and Paul who lived about a ten minute walk away. They were the definitive goodtime couple. She drank like a fish despite, or perhaps it was in spite, of her rather claustrophobic upbringing. Paul did likewise, probably just to be sociable. They were the first couple we’d really got to know after moving back to the UK and I doubt I’d have lasted this long if it wasn’t for their wonderful hospitality and ‘Bon Vivant’. Then there was Veronica, or V as she like to be called. Thirty something, blonde bob, single and almost certainly gay. Not that that was an issue in anyway. If I’m honest I think I just found it a little exasperating. If she was gay I wish she’d just come on out of her bespoke, oak effect cupboard with brushed steel handles and get on with it. Of course she may be straight and in that case perhaps just too busy for relationships, but I didn’t think so.

“She’s not your type!”

I pulled my gaze round to where my wife, Georgina, stood smiling at me.

“What, blonde?”

“No smart and single.”

Georgina was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen. Jet black hair, green eyes and a smile that quite literally lit up every room she walked into. We’d met whilst I was on a lads camping trip in Galloway. She was a local girl making hay while the sun shone and I guess for that week we were the sun. She served me a Magnum, two Feasts and a Solero from a beach shop, and I knew without doubt she was the woman for me before I’d even got my change. She was eight years younger than me when we met and to her great delight and my continual annoyance, had managed to remain steadfastly so.

“Are you planning on serving up any of that food love?”

“Certainly madam, incinerated or just slightly charred?”

Georgina didn’t wait for me to dish it up, she simply helped herself to a piece of chicken and a burger before planting a kiss on the side of my mouth. She tasted of sweet melon and strawberries.

“I’m glad I got that before the burger.” I said.

George laughed and walked over to where Alison Pearson was standing. As I watched she emphasised the wiggle of her hips for a very brief moment. It was an in-joke between us and I smiled, she knew I’d be watching.

“You doing alright there mate?”

Mark Stewart was standing behind me with a buttered roll on his plate. He held out a bottle of beer and I took it gratefully.

“Never better chief.”

I chinked my beer against his and took two very long swallows. The bubbles hurt my throat but it was a good hurt and I didn’t lower the bottle until a third of it was gone. Then I lifted a couple of burgers from the grill and placed them on Mark’s open roll before closing the lid of the barbeque.

“Fantastic way to kill an afternoon Greg. You and George seem pretty settled.”

“Not too bad I suppose.” Then nodding in the general direction of the raised decking, “Don’t half miss you, Dunc’ and the rest of those idiots though.”

We chinked bottles again and went and stood by the kitchen door.

It’s probably fair to say that Mark is, was, has always been, my best mate. Like a lot of the friends here we were at school together, but I think there was always a slightly

stronger bond between the two of us. Growing up he was always the one I phoned first whenever something particularly cool happened. I'd recorded damn near all of his albums. I saw my first rock concert with him. We visited each other right the way through college, despite him living in some bloody awful houses, and he was my best man when I finally decided to get married – and then again when I got married for the second time.

Only eight months ago Mark had been the one I'd turned to midway through a job interview. The man interviewing me was clearly a 'died in the wall' Liverpool fan and so, wanting to make a good impression, I'd called Mark from the gents of the hotel bar where we were having lunch. Mark recited the names and nationalities of the entire Liverpool first eleven, together with a smattering of general points of footballing interest. The rest was plain sailing.

"I'm feeling old Mark."

"Oh don't be an idiot Greg. Besides, I've been forty for six weeks longer than you and I'm coping with it."

The kitchen door opened and Mark and I were instantly up close and personal with Sheila Harding from number 15.

"Thanks ever so much for the invite Greg. You must come to us next Sunday. Phill and I are having a little gathering."

I gave her one of my BAFTA winning smiles. "That would be lovely Sheila. I better check with H.Q first, but I'm pretty sure we're free."

"Oh you are don't worry, I cleared it with George first."

And with that she pulled the kitchen door to and slipped between myself and Mark with all the grace and effortlessness of professional dancer.

I raised my eyebrows in mock exasperation. "Why on earth would she bother asking me?" Sheila was now just out of ear-shot. "I mean she'd done the deal with George already so why bother asking me?"

Mark laughed. More than the comment warranted really but it was a natural, relaxed laugh and I joined in. The crow's feet beside his eyes were quite pronounced and the greying hair at his temples gave away his middle aged status, but the sound was pure St Margaret's Church of England High School, 1984. And in that one moment, the mists and storm clouds that had been gathering over the last two weeks suddenly cleared. It happened long enough for me to realise the real point of this whole thing. The big picture; the ten thousand foot view as my old boss used to call it, and the reason behind the life I was leading. Forty was old, yes. There was no getting away from that. But in one simple,

smiling, laughing gesture, Mark had made the last twenty five years seem as inconsequential as Carl Horton's view on the US election process, and I loved him for it.

It was gone eight o'clock when Anita and Paul finally left. I was glad they'd hung around, chatting and telling jokes until the Spring evening chill had pushed us all indoors. Anita must have worked her way through nearly a bottle and a half of Sauvignon Blanc during the course of the afternoon, but she was still able to recall the punch lines to an impressive stream of one-liners.

I pulled the kitchen door to for the last time that day, and turned the key.

"Do you think I'm old George?"

Georgina was washing glasses. She smiled and crossed three small steps to where I stood. Wrapping a soapy arm round my waist she planted a delicate kiss on my chin. It was more red wine and mayonnaise than summer fruits this time but not altogether unpleasant.

"Of course not love!" and she kissed me again.

Then she turned and led me out of the kitchen, nonchalantly flicking off the light as she went.

"After all Greg, you're only as old as the woman you feel."