

**Bourne**  
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## Dates

by Richard Wilding

“Instinct is a marvellous thing. It can neither be explained nor ignored.” I was told this by Andy Bulmore in the sixth form. He was explaining (while squeezing his black heads) why Louise Patterson felt unquenchable lust for him. I don’t hold with instinct being inexplicable. I am after all a scientist. Not a trained scientist, true; but does a deficiency in formal scientific education disqualify Aristotle?

I was pondering the nature of love and whether or not we have an instinct for it while reading “The Narrow Road To The Deep North”, a Booker prize winner. I have found – more science, more observation – that when I sit here on this battered green chesterfield with its ingrained stains and missing buttons and read a Booker winner, there is a higher likelihood that people will be happy to sit next to me.

The pub was manager-less, which was so far as I could tell the normal state of affairs (I only visit it infrequently; I do not wish to be a regular; to be recalled). The bored Latvian barmaids served as slowly as they could, pulling pints that were at least 25% froth and having no shame about it whatsoever. I don’t know when the pub last had anything resembling a clean but it was evidently in need of one.

Everywhere I looked I saw neglect – crisps crushed into the carpet, chipped woodwork, paint peeling, ripped wallpaper; altogether the lowest of standards. I am cursed by a strong sense of smell and the odour coming from the place was rank beyond almost tolerance. The Christmas decorations did little if anything to make the pub feel in any way like somewhere you would choose to linger. But that night, last Saturday – was it only last Saturday? – I was forced to tolerate it. Perhaps my standards are higher than most people’s. I suspect that they are.

The only thing she would regularly compliment me on was how clean I kept the flat. Before we left for work I would dust and when we came home, after dinner, I would ensure that the kitchen was spotless. I wasn't one of those obsessive compulsive types, but I do like the smell of Domestos and of other cleaning fluids.

My glass was nearly empty and I had reached the end of a chapter when I felt a cold breeze. I looked up to see that the door was open. A young woman with hair as black as a rook's feathers, styled in cascading ringlets, and with large eyes - as dark and sweet as dates - was standing on the threshold, staring. I had the impression that either she had come to the wrong pub or that the person she was due to meet had not turned up. Her shoulders slumped. She checked her watch, looked up and saw that the only spare seat in the pub was next to me on the sofa. I pretended not to look. I didn't need to. Sometimes, you just know.