

Bourne toWrite...

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Love at first sight?

by Richard Wilding

As she hands the book back to me I suddenly find myself wondering, is this it? Is this finally it, the moment when my planning, my trying to think through all the possible scenarios morphs out of speculation, some of it idle, some of it fanciful and into flesh? Did I ever, really, think this moment would come? I think this is that moment. It is, I am surprised to discover, a mildly arousing thought. Luckily, I don't find her sexually attractive which is a relief. However, I can't speak for her and this means that I can't rule out the possibility that she made a bee-line for me because she finds me in some way irresistible. It happens. People do fall instantly in love. They lay eyes on someone they have never seen, never even imagined. It's like in the Everything But The Girl Song: "I was alone thinking I was fine; I wasn't looking for anyone to be mine; I thought that love was just a fabrication; A train that wouldn't stop at my station; Home, alone, that was my consignment; Solitary, confinement; So when we met, I was getting around you; I didn't know I was looking for love until I found you." I think many people are looking for love. There is no telling when or to whom this can happen. It did not happen to me, but that's not to say it couldn't happen. It still could.

I am looking for love, but not in the usual way, not in the way most people would recognise.

Love at first sight is one of the many scenarios I had game played during the planning phase. I was careful to do my research at the library and not online because you never know these days, you never know who's tracking you online and what conclusions they might unfairly jump to. People are always so quick to judge. In one of the scenarios, the un-named 'her' fell for me, leaving me in something of an ethical Catch-22. My purpose – and we all need a purpose in life, or else what is the point of living it? – is to look for love inside a heart, to see how much love it contains. But what if the love that heart contains turns out to be a love for me? What do I do then? To discover her love, I have to ... well, I have to do the experiment.

Or I leave the love unmeasured. You can see the difficulty and if you in my position you would feel a slight uneasiness.

I take a quick look into her eyes. They are so dark and the lighting in the Smugglers' so dim, it is difficult to tell whether her pupils show the tell-tale sign of dilation which indicates heightened levels of sexual attraction.

"Don't answer me, then."

She has been talking to me and I must admit, my mind had wandered. "Sorry," I say. "I couldn't hear you."

"Don't answer me, then."

It is her. She has been talking to me and I must admit, my mind had wandered, as it has a habit of doing. "Sorry," I say. "I couldn't hear you."

"I said my name's Rose. What's yours?"

I tell her and she holds out her hand. We shake, the formality of which endears me to her. "I like your nail varnish," I say.

"Why, thank you kind sir," she says in a terrible American accent, and flutters them in front of her cheek bones. She is a little heavy-set. At a glance, I'd say she is ten stone. A lot to carry but not too much.

"Another gin?" I ask.

"Go on, then," she says. "I'm game."

Yes, I think. And I'm a hunter.

The Smuggler's was beginning to thin out and I had no desire to be the last to leave – something the landlord, even the indolent Smuggler's Landlord, with his equally indolent Latvian staff, might be able to call to mind.

I returned to the bar and ordered a pint of bitter for me (Sam Smith's) and her a large gin into which, with deft sleight of hand, I added four drops of trichloromethane from my set of six carefully labelled phials. I had mixed the trichloromethane myself, following extensive trial and error. You need surprisingly little by way of ingredients, and surprisingly much by way of skill and care. Here's what I did: I went to Boots (in Leeds) and bought a small bottle of nail varnish remover. You have to be careful, because not every nail varnish remover contains acetone, and that's the active ingredient. Some nail varnish removers contain as little as 15%. You have to be sure to get the right product. I also bought a small eyedrop applicator, with a little black rubber teat at the top which was enjoyably tactile. In fact, it turned out that I had to buy quite a number of them and because I couldn't buy them all from the same Boots for obvious reasons, it cost me rather a lot in petrol. The two other ingredients I needed were scarcely difficult to source: bleach and ice cubes.

The ratio is 50:1, bleach to acetone. Measuring 1ml acetone proved very difficult – too difficult in fact, so that I had to measure 5ml and 250 ml bleach to be certain. The first time I

tried it, I did so in my kitchen using a 1 litre measuring cup. I thought there was going to be an explosion! A single drop of acetone into the bleach and you wouldn't believe what happens: all hell breaks loose. It's similar to the tipping point of a bonfire - the temperature skyrockets. I just had time to notice the smoke and steam everywhere before being overwhelmed by the fumes and passing out. I came to a couple of hours later, a large and painful swelling on my left temple where I must have hit my head on the table en route to the kitchen floor.

Hence the ice. Second time, I took precautions. First, I opened all the windows in the kitchen along with the kitchen door. This was in the days when I had no next door neighbour on that side, so it was entirely away from prying eyes. Then I decanted 250 ml of bleach into a large black builder's bucket, into which I added a dozen ice cubes. Only then did I drop in the acetone. Success! I felt very like a medieval alchemist, a wizard indeed. It would not have been out of keeping had I worn a wizard's hat and gown and waved a wand; although it still would have looked odd had someone seen me. Wearing my marigolds, I stirred the concoction carefully with a long-handled metal spoon. The trick then was to leave the mixture to cool, and it's in the cooling that the magic (medieval) or the science (post-enlightenment) happens. My second mistake was to become too fascinated by the process. I stood over the bucket, watching. And of course in doing this I breathed in the fumes.

I came too the second time around with a large swelling at the back of my head.

For my third attempt I used a gas mask, bought from an army surplus store in Huddersfield from a man who looked that the one Bruce Willis has a contretemps with in Pulp Fiction. Gas masks are uncomfortable and I found that however much I adjusted the head straps I couldn't prevent the goggles steaming up. Nonetheless, my third attempt at making trichloromethane was a triumph. An hour after mixing the ingredients, the liquid began to bubble and then the looked-for white residue began to accumulate at the bottom of the bucket. I left it for a couple more hours and then, when no more appeared to be forming, I slowly poured the unwanted liquid away through a sieve lined with muslin. What was left was trichloromethane.

My next problem was to disguise the taste so that, when added to either a gin and tonic, a vodka and tonic, a beer, a lager, a glass of red or a glass of white (I reasoned these the six most likely choice of drink) the dettolous taste would not be evident. I found that a squeeze of lime was the best for the gin and vodka - it pretty much eradicated all taste. For the beer, 3ml of malt extract seemed to do the trick, and 5ml of malt vinegar was fine for the red wine and just about passable for the white; I reasoned that white wine in pubs always tasted nasty so no-one would question the taste. The lager was the hardest to disguise. I don't know what inspired me to choose Epsom Salts, but it did the trick.

The final hurdle was getting the correct amount and there was no option here but to subject myself to an exhausting routine of sipping each of the six drinks with varying quantities of trichloromethane to determine the best dosage to ensure first a woozy state followed by a state of catatonia sufficient to give me at least four hours in which to work unhindered.

I did not count the number of times I was sick – projectile – nor the number of times I passed out. But eventually, over trials lasting six weeks, I found that two drops in a large g&t/vodka & t were sufficient; five drops in beer and four in lager; and three drops in both red and white wine.

At the end of the experiment, I concluded that never again would I wear an army surplus gas mask.