

Team Spirit

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Oliver Kilroy strides through Dream Café offering token nods of acknowledgement to tennis club members, aware that civility might prove invaluable when the vote is taken. He reaches the toilets, now unisex of course, urinals having been removed. Entering a cubicle, he closes the seat lid and slumps down. At last, a moment of peace and quiet. He takes out his hip flask and swigs some more whisky.

He knows that he has a drink problem. His working life is centred on the acquisition of proof and there is plenty of it to verify this fact. Blue recycling bins are full to the brim ahead of each fortnightly collection. If he is at home when the refuse van arrives, he can hear the crash as wine and spirit bottles tumble into the container. Of course, some will be from his wife Stephanie, but most are his. Then there are the intimidating entries on his credit card statements, the soaring upward expenditure for purchases from the high-priced wine merchant just off Muswell Hill Broadway.

There is little doubt that his performance is suffering of late – impatience with clients, poor decision-making in court. There have been slip-ups at home too; he used to be such a good liar. Often he's exhausted which has never been the case in the past.

Kilroy the Killer is his nickname at the Old Bailey criminal law courts, with a reputation for twisting and turning evidence until the jury are ready to dismiss every truth a witness utters. Over the years he's received adulation for the way he destroys his victims, but lately he's picked up murmurings about having lost the plot.

Oliver lifts the hip flask to his lips again and takes a drink, savouring the warmth and the kick as the liquid slides down his throat. This flask is the single remaining memento of his father's existence, kept because it must be worth a bit rather than for sentimental reasons. There was no love lost between him and his father. The flask is a work of art, solid silver with fine inlay, crafted in the 1820s and verified with a hallmark. A bonus is that it's perfect to conceal in the inside pocket of his jacket for surreptitious use when seeking Dutch courage during a tricky court appearance. Increasingly he's needing a drink or two or more to steady his nerves.

There's no need for nerves tonight though, a doddle compared to the challenge of standing up in court to fight a case. It's merely the tennis club annual general meeting and he is bound to be voted in as Chairman for a fourth year. However, it will be the first time during his tenure that there is a contest and the need for an election, the rival candidate being Stephanie. He anticipates a furious onslaught from his wife because of what happened and her quest for revenge. She will be a determined adversary, but her skill set is rather limited and he's well-prepared to counter any claim she might make. Yes, no need for nerves, he'll put her in her place, to be followed by a landslide victory.

He is about to make his way to the meeting when a couple of women enter the facility. There are two clicks as cubicle doors are closed and the women start shouting across to each other.

‘Tonight is going to be so much fun; I can't wait.’

‘You bet. There'll be fireworks alright, hopefully with Oliver being humiliated. The arrogant shit.’

‘Too right. He thinks he’s Adonis but he should take a look at himself in the mirror. I will be voting for Stephanie but I don’t think much of her either.’

‘Agreed, it’ll be a vote for the lesser of two evils.’

Two cisterns are flushed and two cubicle doors are opened. For obvious reasons, Oliver will stay put until they have left. But they’re lingering, chatting away.

‘I haven’t seen either of them yet.’

‘No worry, they’ll be here.’

‘Do you think most people are on Stephanie’s side?’

‘We’ll soon find out; Oliver will have some supporters. How’s your little one getting on?’

‘Do you mean Charlie or the baby?’

‘Very funny!’

How much longer, Oliver is thinking. He takes out his phone to check on the time. He needs to be out there soon but the women are still gossiping. He can’t bear being idle so googles to kill the time.

Adonis. In Greek mythology the god of beauty and desire.

He already knows that; he did Classics at school.

Present-day usage: a very handsome young man.

Fair enough, he might not be young, but plenty of women would testify to his good looks. The women are rabbiting on.

‘God, look at my new hairdo, Abi. I hate it. I might go back tomorrow and kill the stylist.’

‘It’s nice, Jas. Though why so heavy on the blusher tonight?’

‘Men’s team captains. Male coaches. They’ll all be here.’

‘Sometimes I think you only play tennis so you can get near them.’

‘Sometimes I think you’re right!’

‘Here, give me some of that, I’m not going to let you have all the fun. Take a spray of this if you’d like.’

‘Ta, darling.’

There is laughter.

Oliver is googling on.

Dutch courage. Foolish courage and misplaced confidence as a result of intoxication.

Origin: the British mocking Dutch sailors by accusing them of only being willing to fight when they were drunk.

‘I reckon there’s more chance of finding someone at the club than through online dating.’

‘Still no luck with that then?’

‘Hopeless.’

‘Come on, let’s go. The meeting’s starting in a couple of minutes.’

The door opens and shuts and there is silence.

Oliver has recognised one of the voices, Abigail, or Abi as she likes to call herself. He’s played with her during social tennis mornings. She’s a pretty young thing and it’s a struggle to concentrate on the game when she’s crouching down by the net. When they chat between points she laughs at his jokes, so wildly that he’s even wondered whether she fancies him. So what’s going on between her and her friend with their nasty comments?

He lifts the hip flask to his lips to discover that it’s empty. He’d swigged once or twice on the short walk from home to the café, the whisky chasing a few glasses of red wine he’d had with dinner.

Leaving the cubicle, he glances at the mirror above the washbasin. OK, perhaps no longer an Adonis but he’s still got a lot going for him for a man in his mid-fifties. A nicely balanced face with everything exactly in the right place and the right proportions. Best features? Definitely his enticing ice-blue eyes that can heighten an impish grin at the drop of a hat. Possibly his hair too, peppered with grey but mostly as jet black as when he was a youngster.

He fails to note that the face in the mirror looking back at him is a tired one with a sallow complexion. Folds of skin hang from his cheeks and there are serious bags under his eyes. A bald patch runs from his forehead up to his crown. Eyebrow, nose and ear hair could all do with a good trim.

Only one of these versions enters the room to chair the annual general meeting of the tennis club and it isn't the one with the face he has admired when looking in the mirror.

Stephanie Kilroy looks at her watch. Nine minutes to go. She is still sitting in her BMW having decided on a last minute entrance to avoid socialising ahead of her involvement in the first item on the agenda. She peers down at her phone, flicking through the text at speed. Her notes are meticulous, a skill developed while working as a barrister at the Old Bailey. It's an unnecessary check though because she's fully prepared to present the evidence – a long list of misdemeanours her husband has been guilty of over the past year of his chairmanship of the tennis club.

Only once have she and Ollie been on opposite sides in the courtroom. This was soon after they had started dating and she was ruthlessly defeated by her future husband. No, more than that, humiliated, with Ollie having manipulated witnesses' accounts and twisted evidence to sway the jury. Stephanie had laughed it off, admiring and allured by the man's power. However, a deep down subliminal resentment must have lingered for all these years because she is out for revenge this evening. If necessary, if it gets nasty, her assault will include reference to her husband's marital indiscretions.

Six minutes to go.

She picks up the thermos flask on the passenger's seat, purchased long ago in the children's department at Selfridges. It is lime green, patterned with dinosaurs, and whenever she takes it into the courtroom it brings smiles to the faces of the jurors. No bad thing in the battle to win them over. Is it filled with water they could well be wondering? Or maybe tea. Or even coffee. Wrong, wrong and wrong again because it's vodka mixed with tonic water and a teaspoonful of lime juice.

Stephanie pours a sizeable quantity into the beaker and gulps it down as if it were lemonade. Still thirsty, at least this is what she tells herself, she pours out another cupful and drinks.

That's helped quell nerves and she is raring to go.

Four minutes.

Time to enter the café.