

Must Have Own Canoe

by Lou Godbold

Peter shifts the newspaper off the small dining table. Right! No good putting off the evil hour. He opens the laptop, catching his reflection in the screen. Not bad, really, for fifty-seven. His wife had hated the cropped hair — said it made him look like a thug — but the woman had run off with a bloody property developer who dresses in open-neck shirts and loafers: So much for her taste!

He angles the computer screen to get rid of irritating reflections. Nothing really feels right in this flat. He keeps banging his head on kitchen cupboards and striking his elbow on the shower walls. But no use moping around. Better get down to business.

“Seeking woman not afraid to get her hair wet,” he writes.

Clarissa never understood his wanderlust, was more the sort of hotel-with-a-beach kind of girl, whereas he wanted to trek the Himalayas. Nothing to stop him now! He types energetically, trying to put the image out of his head of Clarissa and her tanned Lothario sipping gin and tonics on a sun-baked terrace. After paying off a mortgage and putting the kids through uni Peter couldn't compete with a villa in Ibiza and a thirty-foot yacht.

“Someone for the weekends — a ‘cupboard girlfriend’,” he writes, wondering if that looks odd. It's what he said to Gemma when there was that unfortunate business with the married man. Clarissa was all for having a first grandchild but, “You can't just put a child in the cupboard when you're tired of it,” he warned Gemma. Turns out Nature knew best in that instance; not that Clarissa didn't get her grandchildren eventually. He smiles remembering the holiday cottage in Cornwall, all three grandchildren jumping on their bed in the morning. He doesn't realize it, but a tear is rolling down his cheek. How do you fit a girlfriend into that scenario? How do you repair a life torn down the middle? “Buck up, old chap!” he says aloud. Getting maudlin. Life's an adventure, *carpe diem!*

Weekdays he doesn't have much use for company. When he finally looks up from his accounting clients there's usually only time to rush

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down to the little Thai place before they close and order something from the sweet-smiling waitress. Other chaps might ask her out, but Peter would say an English girl is more reliable. "Decent and loyal," he types. Someone with blond hair called 'Ginny' or 'Sarah,' who reads the Guardian and knows how to fix a Pimm's.

Trouble is, even with a weekend-only partner it's going to be difficult bringing anyone back to the flat. The sitting room's all right, furnished with a few odds and ends from the house, and Emily came to help her dad hang curtains, but the bedroom's a bloody disaster. "I suppose he's got his canoe in there with him," Clarissa is reported to have said, which is a typical exaggeration but the limited space around the bed is jammed with a sleeping bag, rolled-up tent and two backpacks.

He uploads a picture of himself in a furry hat among a group of smiling Sherpas. That should give a girl the right idea. He hears his wife's brittle laughter. "I could be better at expressing my emotions and saying what I am feeling," he adds, in the interest of full disclosure; "Can worry about unimportant stuff." Like the roses he'd tended for twenty-five years. Would the new owners of the house know to cut them back before winter? "Divorced eighteen months ago," he finishes up. "Hurt very much at the time, but over it now."

