

Wise Follies

Grace Wynne-Jones

Chapter 1

MY NAME IS ALICE Evans. I'm thirty-eight, single, and very keen on art and gardening. I'm also growing increasingly fond of my cat and watch far more television than I used to. I've been celibate for over a year and occasionally find small spiky hairs on my chin. I don't think these two things are necessarily connected. I think my not having sex has more to do with my being rather disillusioned with men in general. Get me on the subject of men on a chin-hair day and I can sound as knowledgeably resigned as any political pundit. This is because I've been waiting to meet my Mr Wonderful for years now, but he still hasn't swooped me off on his white charger. In fact, I think by this stage he's probably married or become bisexual or a Buddhist.

In my more realistic romantic moments I remind myself that men are not the answer anyway. They are just another question...and a very puzzling one at that. There's even a book called *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. Certainly many of my romantic entanglements have a fairly inter-galactic feel about them. I wish I could summon Captain Jean-Luc Picard from Star Trek to help me sort them out.

'Love yourself' – that's what the self-help books scream at me. And I've been trying to, I really have. But the sex isn't great and when I give myself a hug my arms only reach my shoulders. I know so many lovely women, I dearly wish I could become a lesbian. The thing is, I'm just not that way inclined.

As you may have guessed, I didn't expect to be single at this stage in my life. Neither did my housemate Mira. We were under the impression that our Mr Wonderful would just inevitably turn up, as he usually seems to in films. As time passed and the biological clock started ticking, we attempted to speed up the screening process. In an effort to be businesslike we even drew up a long list of men we would not countenance:

'No men who go on and on about themselves on the first date and don't even get your name right.'

'Indeed.'

'No men who wear sunglasses in midwinter without good reason.'

'Agreed.'

'Or fanatical golfers.'

'Certainly not.'

'Or men with mobile phones perpetually stuck to their ears.'

'Absolutely.'

'Or limp hand-shakers. Or men who say they'll call and then don't.'

'Or the really really difficult ones.'

'Ah yes – Alice's specialist subject.'

'Not any more.'

I suppose you could say we'd got rather picky. We realized this when we saw the list had grown to cover almost everyone, and therefore couldn't be right.

I think one of the reasons I'm still alone is that for ages and ages I only went out with the 'specialist subject' Mira referred to: difficult men. They seemed to draw me to them like magnets. If there was a difficult man in the room I'd find him. Obsessive meditators, alcoholics, workaholics, arrested developers, brilliant nerdy types with unfashionable sweaters – I sensed their misty

sadness and frayed longings before we even spoke. I looked into their big bewildered eyes and saw my own. They were different. Broken in some way. They wouldn't drag me blithely to their bonny beaming mothers and announce, 'Here's Alice. You'll love her. She's just like us.' There was no 'Us' they could refer to. Unless, of course, they were married. I think what I hoped was that we could be mixed up together and this would be somehow comforting. The thing is, it wasn't. We got our love ingredients all jumbled up. It was like trying to make chocolate sponge pudding with tomato sauce.

I think I've got past my 'difficult men' phase now. What I want these days is a more adjusted man who'll stay around. Preferably someone who's as sexy as Daniel Day-Lewis and almost as wise as the Dalai Lama. A man who's warm and kind and funny and sees straight into my soul. The thing is by the time you're in your late thirties many of the desirable men you meet are someone else's and it's a right pain in the ass. You glance at their left hand and – ah, yes – there's another glint of gold. Of course, some stinkers don't tell you they're unavailable until you're hooked, but the more responsible ones do – over and over again – by being rather liberal with their 'we's'. Their blatant plurality is almost offensive. I think they do it to remind themselves of their 'we-ness' as much as you. And even if they don't say the 'we' word themselves someone else eventually does for them. 'Yes – he's a lovely person and his wife/live-in partner/girlfriend is lovely too.' They say it so quickly that you feel like they're part of 'Neighbourhood Watch' and you've been caught skulking. It really pisses me off. It's just the kind of thing that has greatly increased my enthusiasm for painting and gardening.

I love gardening. It's so sane and straightforward. Once you've read one book about it you'll have grasped the basics. It's a predictable pleasure. There's no 'we-ness' about it. After months of tender care your geranium will not, for example, announce that it has another owner or 'isn't ready for this kind of commitment'. If it needs more space, you simply replant it. The nutrients it requires are well documented and not subject to random alteration. You can indulge your broodiness for, say, camellias, way past menopause. Plants also bring you close to nature and remind you of the transience of things in the nicest way. Sometimes, standing in my garden on a moonlit night, I feel such comfort in my smallness. In the part I play in the grand scheme of things. Only as crucial as a wave is to the ocean. Part of something so huge that, for a moment or two of deep bliss, I even forget my dreams. At such moments finding Mr Wonderful does not matter one whit, but as soon as I go inside it does again. 'Transcendence is a hard thing to hang on to,' as my friend Annie says.

I'm sitting with Annie now at my distressed-pine kitchen table. She is one year older than me and has a smile that's as sweet as Winona Ryder's. She has honey-blond hair that frames her pretty, thoughtful face and has no shortage of male admirers. She is a puzzling exception to the 'we-ness' syndrome. It doesn't seem to affect her at all. Sometimes I suspect she's found an 'available men' EU stockpile and is keeping it all to herself.

'These are nice mugs, Alice,' Annie is commenting as I plug in the kettle. 'Are they new?'

'Yes, I got them free with my supermarket saver points,' I reply, reaching into a cupboard for the Bewley's Earl Grey tea bags.

‘You should have waited until you’d got five thousand points and applied for a Toy Boy,’ Annie chuckles, and I smile. It is one of her older jokes. Another is that I should practise being more adventurous by attempting to sneak nine items through the ‘Eight Items Only’ check-out.

‘Maybe you should find yourself a Toy Boy, Alice,’ Annie adds cheerfully. ‘They haven’t developed any nasty habits and are great in bed.’ She almost purrs as she says this and I know she’s remembering Serge, a French exchange student who could do incredible things with grapeseed oil.

‘It’s all very well for you to talk,’ I reply resignedly. ‘You’re not as insecure as I am. You don’t mind when your young men get sense and find someone their own age, but I would.’

‘I had to beg Serge to go back to the Sorbonne,’ Annie protests. ‘I persuaded him it was in his best interests, but he still cried and cried.’

‘Yes, but he was French,’ I reply as I look out the window at the May afternoon. I glance at the delphiniums, which seem a bit subdued, and then my gaze drifts to an upstairs window of the house that overlooks the garden. A handsome young man seems to be dancing on his own. He’s wearing a tight black T-shirt and denims. My interest is, of course, purely aesthetic. I went to life-drawing classes some years ago and know a good set of biceps when I see one. The young man is jumping around as if he’s in a disco. He’s holding what looks like a can of aftershave, pretending it’s a microphone. The song ‘Shiny Happy People’ is drifting bouncily through his open window. He’s obviously attempting to be R.E.M. The whole band. He must be that new chap. The one who’s just moved in. I saw a furniture truck outside his house the other day. A pretty

woman was struggling to wedge a huge framed poster of the Manhattan skyline through his front door. Oh dear – he’s sensed that I’m watching him. He’s glancing out the window at me. I turn away quickly and start to make the tea.

‘What were you looking at just then?’ Annie enquires. ‘You seemed deeply engrossed.’

‘Oh, I – I was just studying the delphiniums,’ I mutter. ‘I think they could do with a bit of that well-rotted organic manure I bought the other day.’ I don’t tell Annie about my new neighbour because I just know she’d insist that I ask him over for lunch or something. Immediately. Any suggestion that he might be far too young for me would be treated with an airy dismissal. She has no shame about that kind of thing.

‘Did you know that Mira is taking up windsurfing?’ Annie asks as I start to pour out the tea.

‘Yes, she did mention something about it,’ I sigh. The enthusiasms of Mira, my housemate, no longer surprise me.

‘I love to hear of people taking up new interests.’ Annie’s voice is slightly muffled by a chocolate-covered Polo biscuit.

‘Well, Mira is certainly developing lots of new interests lately,’ I reply, in as non-judgemental a manner as I can manage. ‘In fact, at this precise moment she’s at a motorcycle maintenance class.’

‘But she doesn’t have a motorbike.’

‘I know. It’s part of her training.’

‘What training?’

‘Her training to become an eccentric spinster. She’s getting very dedicated about it. She’s given up on romance completely. She says if she had a choice

between a man and a Mars bar, the Mars bar would win out every time.'

'Oh dear, what am I going to do about the pair of you?' Annie clucks maternally. 'You haven't been out with anyone for ages, Alice. Don't you miss the sex?'

I look at her forlornly. 'I'm deluged with sex, Annie, didn't I tell you? Sex, sex and more sex. It's driving me up the wall.'

'Gosh!' Annie leans forward excitedly. 'Have you been having orgies without telling me?'

'Of course not,' I groan thinking of the glossy woman's magazine I work for. 'Sarah keeps asking me to write about sex lately. You'd swear it had just been designed by Terence Conran.'

'Oh, I see.' Annie sits back in her chair and fiddles with a teaspoon. She was clearly hoping for a more exciting answer.

'Sometimes I wish I worked for the kind of magazine my mother used to read,' I continue dejectedly. 'You know, the ones full of knitting patterns and cake decorations and tips on stencilling...even if the women in the short stories were a bit like the Canadian Mounties.'

'How so?'

'They always got their man.'

'Just tell Sarah you need a change. I'm sure she'll understand,' Annie says briskly. Annie knows Sarah, the magazine's features editor. She was one of our pals at college.

'Sarah's not as malleable as she used to be,' I reply. 'Sex sells, you see, Annie. People want it.'

'You don't seem to be too enthusiastic about it.'

'I think I would be enthusiastic about it again,' I sigh '...if I met the right person.'

‘Oh, you will, Alice.’ Annie regards me tenderly. ‘Of course you will.’

‘I can’t believe the last time I slept with someone was fourteen months ago,’ I continue morosely. ‘I was with Eamon – you know, that fellow I went out with for a while. We were in his house and he had the Ryder Cup on in the background. Ian Woosnam had a birdie.’

‘What’s a “birdie”?’ Annie frowns.

‘I dunno. He had one anyway. People cheered.’

Annie has begun to study me rather concernedly. I know by the way she’s pausing that she’s about to say something blunt. ‘Alice, you’re going to have to start being more proactive,’ she announces.

‘What do you mean?’

‘More proactive about men. You’re going to have to get out there and find one. There must be far less of this lounging around evening after evening watching *Emmerdale* and saying “Fancy a cuppa?” to Mira. It’s getting far too cosy.’

‘Oh, really,’ I reply, trying to really emphasize the irony. ‘And this from the woman who watches every soap opera on the schedules. Even the ones on cable.’

‘Yes,’ Annie agrees patiently. ‘But the difference is I sometimes go out afterwards. I’m sociable. I haven’t developed hermit tendencies like you have.’

I listen resignedly. Annie has always been more daring than me. When we were at university I was the one who bought an Afghan coat and burnt joss sticks and said I was going to India, but she was the one who went there.

‘What about joining a dating agency?’ Annie urges. She’s really getting into her stride now. ‘You could choose your dates yourself. They supply photos and personal details. Or you could put a personal ad in a

newspaper. Lots of people do that these days. There's no stigma to it.'

I grimace and start to pull at a loose button on my cardigan. As Annie starts to tell me about an 'acquaintance' of hers who met a 'very nice' chiroprapist through the personal columns of the *Buy & Sell* magazine, I begin to wonder why she and I are still close friends since we're obviously so different. I think it's mainly because we share the same background. We grew up in the same village and have known each other since we were kids. We know the naughty pleasure of testing half-dried cow-pats with our sandals, pressing on them until they released their thick green ooze. We know what it's like to scamper through fields of long tickling grass and sweet meadow smells. Of finding plump cream mushrooms on a dewy morning and rushing home with them to see if they were the ones that could be fried. Of testing our gumboots in that mucky place where the cows drank from the river. Of being free in a way few city children know and so unsophisticated that we regarded the Eurovision Song Contest as a crucial cultural event. We used to be so similar but somewhere along the line Annie became braver than me, more savvy and less prone to disenchantment. I don't know how this happened but it did.

'Alice! Alice! Come back from Wonderland, will you?' Annie is waving her hand in front of my face.

I stare at her, somewhat startled. I have a tendency to drift off in mid-conversation.

'You haven't been listening to me at all, have you?' she demands.

I regard her bashfully. 'I'm sorry.'

‘I was telling you about a singles dance that’s being held at the Island Hotel this weekend. Look – there’s a big ad about it in the paper.’

‘Oh, is there?’ I mumble cautiously, wondering how to sidetrack her. I glance at my watch. ‘Gosh, is that the time!’ I exclaim. ‘I really should be getting on with some work. I’m rather late with an article about masturbation.’

Annie doesn’t say anything. She’s looking rather exasperated.

‘There’s this place in New York where you can get orgasm lessons,’ I continue cheerfully. ‘They sit in a big room with vibrators. Eric McGrath would be fascinated.’

‘Who?’

‘You know, the boy I sat beside in primary school. He was the first person who told me where “men put their thing”. I thought he was making it up because I wouldn’t let him borrow my Monkees ruler.’

Annie’s exasperation lifts and she chuckles. ‘Eric McGrath...goodness, I’d almost forgotten about him. He kissed me behind the bicycle shed once. It was awful.’

‘Oh, yes, that’s right! You told me. Your braces got stuck together and you were sure it would lead to pregnancy.’

We’re both spluttering with mirth now like two gleefully naughty little girls. All the differences between us have gone, if only for a moment.

As Annie leaves I wonder if she’s right. Maybe I do need to become more proactive about men again. Go out more. Be less fastidious. The Gold Blend man is most unlikely to run out of coffee in my vicinity. Romance isn’t going to come to me out of the blue – that’s become painfully clear. Just as I’m thinking this the phone rings. I approach it wearily. Someone’s probably phoning Mira. Her friends tend to leave rather complicated messages. I

reach resignedly for a notepad as I pick up the receiver.
But the call is not for Mira.

It's from a man. And it's for me.