

Facebook Friend

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Jane was sure she knew Charlie and that she knew him well. After all, she and he had been friends on Facebook for several months now. Thanks to Mark Zuckerberg's ingenuity and generosity, they'd been able to chat and discourse for hours on end without once having actually met one another. And tonight was the evening when, at long last, Jane would actually meet Charlie in the flesh.

Jane was also sure she knew what Charlie looked like. She viewed his profile picture every time she visited Facebook where the privilege of bona fide friendship allowed her to browse through his photos and, indeed, those of his several hundred other Facebook friends. Charlie was a man (of this Jane was sure) about the same age as her with much the same interests, political and religious views, and taste in music and films. He was most often photographed alone or with his dog, Chester, but there were just a few photographs of him with his elderly parents (he was the happy outcome of a late romance) and his somewhat overweight younger sister, Kate.

Jane never questioned why the pictures all showed Charlie sat down and only the left side of his face. But if she didn't, what of it? Jane was also careful to post on Facebook or Twitter or Instagram or anywhere else she frequented only those photos that showed her to her best advantage. Not that Jane had anything to hide, of course, but she was past that age when most women who'd wanted to settle down had already done so, and, although she wasn't fat exactly, she was no longer as slim as she'd like to be. And Charlie was clearly also someone for whom much of life had somehow passed him by, but not so much that he'd never been to a party, never got drunk or had never got kissed. And just as Jane had her real-life friends, Jacquie and Karen most notably, so Charlie had his, even though he seemed to spend more time with his

family than Jane ever did hers.

They both avidly followed *Game of Thrones* and *House of Cards*, guiltily admitted to watching *Strictly Come Dancing* and *Britain's Got Talent*, both bought records by Gregory Porter, Adele and, more surprisingly, James Blake. They both weren't sure who they'd ever vote for in an election, preferred pizzas to pasta, beef to chicken and neither of them much liked Mareite.

Surely things could only go well for them.

Jane arrived at the Starbucks where she and Charlie had decided to meet: it was one that stayed open late, was neither very crowded nor desolately empty. She knew she'd arrived too early, but it wasn't as if there was anything more important to delay her. And, in any case, given the dreadful traffic congestion, she didn't want to risk being late. She bought her Café Latte Grande from the barista and sat by the window where she could watch people come and go, while nibbling on a chocolate brownie whose calories were doing her absolutely no good at all.

But it was while she was distracted when rummaging in her handbag for a tissue to wipe her glasses that she was greeted by Charlie.

"Good evening," he said, in a voice that was pitched slightly higher and more hesitantly than she'd imagined. "I think it might be me that you're waiting for." When there was hesitation, he added: "You *are* Jane, aren't you? Jane Osbourne."

"And you must be Charlie," said Jane automatically, proffering a limp hand towards him. "I'm pleased to finally meet you."

"Likewise, Jane," said Charlie. "May I sit down?"

"Of course," said Jane, who with the pleasantries concluded could now assess

Charlie Kingswood in the flesh for the first time.

And what a shock and disappointment it was!

It wasn't that Charlie dressed badly or was poorly groomed. His hair had been cut recently, his smart casual clothes wouldn't look out of place in a West End theatre, and there were many of those little tell-tale signs to show that Charlie took care of his appearance: his nails were neatly cut, he wore cuff-links and his jacket hung well on his shoulders. Even his shoes—smart brown brogues with a shine on them—indicated to Jane that, despite everything, Charlie knew what it meant to dress well.

But none of that could compensate for the fact that Charlie was not only shorter than Jane was expecting—only just five feet tall—but half of his face (the half never displayed in his Facebook photos) was smudged by a huge birthmark. No way could Jane look at Charlie without being uncomfortably aware of the purplish, brownish excrescence that spread from his chin over his cheek, around his eye and across his brow where it tried to hide under his otherwise neat and tidy hair.

This wasn't what Jane had been hoping for. Nor was she expert in hiding what she really thought.

“Would you like another coffee, Jane?” Charlie asked.

This was an occasion when Jane could have made her excuses and left. It wouldn't be a kind thing to do, of course. In fact, after all those months of Facebook friendship, it would be downright rude and would forever burden Jane's conscience. But it was still perhaps the best thing to do.

“Er, yes,” said Jane. “Perhaps not a coffee, though. Too much caffeine, you know...”

“I remember what you said you liked,” said Charlie considerately. “It’s on your Facebook page. A White Cranberry juice.”

“Erm... Yes, that’s it. That’s exactly what I’d like.”

And as Charlie walked off to the counter, to wait in queue behind a hassled mother and her unruly child, Jane deliberated the options open to her. She couldn’t just walk off while Charlie was buying her a drink and then block him from her Facebook page. There were many girls who’d probably do that, but Jane wasn’t one of them. But diplomacy and tact were not skills that Jane had acquired to the extent that this was a situation she could easily wriggle out of. How *do* you tell someone that, well, what you wanted in a man was someone, you know, a bit taller and, let’s be frank, not so horribly disfigured?

But then, Jane reminded herself, Charlie was a Facebook friend. It wasn’t as if they’d met through a Dating website (especially not one of those that promised innumerable available men, but provided instead only those interested in the tiny minority of signed-up women who were under twenty-five). It was friendship that Facebook promised. Nothing more (although that had always seemed a possibility). Couldn’t Jane be satisfied with just that? But, at the moment, her aversion to Charlie’s regrettable disfigurement made even that rather unlikely.

Charlie returned with a Grande Filter Coffee (Fairtrade, of course) for himself and a glass and a plastic bottle of White Cranberry juice for Jane. He sat down opposite Jane and gingerly sipped from his still-too-hot cup of coffee while regarding her with evident apprehension. How should their conversation proceed? After all their long Facebook chats would it make sense just to make the kind of embarrassing small

talk that had blighted the few dates Jane had arranged online? But, thankfully, Charlie circumvented a bland conversation about the weather or the traffic or the quality of Starbucks' coffee by launching into a subject of much more interest to Jane.

“Did you see that idiot on *The Apprentice* last night? What do you think he was on?”

“Which one?” asked Jane, who tried hard to address the unblemished half of Charlie's face and ignore his small stature. “The Greek guy with the MBA or the woman with the prominent chest?”

“Both, I suppose,” said Charlie. “But especially the Greek guy. What was he on? Did he have *no* idea what a pillock he was making of himself?”

As they chatted with one another, Jane's thoughts moved away from her original intention to make a polite farewell after just one drink with a vague excuse and an unfulfilled promise to stay in touch towards a more complete engagement with the lives of reality television personalities and minor celebrities whose lives she followed (despite herself) and about which she paid more attention in the newspapers and magazines than she ever did to economic statistics and politics. Charlie and she shared the same passion in following the lives of other people and the more ordinary and fallible the better. And if these were actors who'd appeared in *Game of Thrones* or *Coronation Street* then so much more satisfying: to know the personalities not only as they pretended to be but as they really were (even if so many soap stars were uncovered as paedophiles, adulterers and alcoholics).

In fact, Jane's conversation was going so well that she'd finished her White Cranberry juice and Charlie his Fairtrade coffee and continued nattering about the ins

and outs of the minor celebrities on not just *The Apprentice*, but also *The Voice*, *Poldark* and even *Wolf Hall*.

“I watched a couple of episodes but I couldn’t get into it,” confessed Charlie.

“I couldn’t tell who were the good guys and who were the bad guys,” admitted Jane.

“You just like your historical heroes to be handsome and brooding like Ross Poldark,” Charlie teased her.

This was true but the comment served to remind Jane that the man sitting opposite was anything but handsome or brooding. This was a man who if he’d appeared in a period drama, would be more likely to play Joseph Merrick or Richard Harrow. Now the thought was in her mind, Jane didn’t know how to dismiss it especially as the two of them were staring at empty cups in a now mostly empty Starbucks with the streets outside lit only by car headlights and eco-friendly street lamps.

“I know a nice little pub just round the corner,” said Charlie, who must have sensed that Jane’s thoughts were elsewhere. “It’s usually crowded at lunch-time, but it should be fairly empty by now. Would you like a drink? I know you like a sweet white wine.”

This was another opportunity for Jane. There was a bus to catch. She didn’t want to be out late. She was recovering from a bad cold. There were so many excuses: she just had to think of the best one to employ.

Instead, she said: “Oh, alright then. But just the one. I don’t want a headache in the morning.”

“Me, neither. I’m not much of a drinker. I like the odd pint of beer, but I don’t know a lager from a bitter. Or a Schnapps from a Pils.”

“I hope they sell crisps as well. Or nuts.”

“I’m sure they do. In fact, I think the New Inn does a very nice pie and chips, though I don’t know what they do at this time of night.”

However, neither pie and chips nor quiche and green salad were on Jane’s mind by the time they’d crossed a few roads and entered the warmth of a pub clearly designed to accommodate many times the number of people now sitting in it, with James Blunt on the loudspeakers competing for attention with Hillary Clinton on the television screens. However, Jane didn’t have to wait for long while watching the garbled subtitles below Hillary Clinton’s chin until Charlie came back over to her inexpertly balancing a pint of lager, a glass of white wine and a selection of organic crisps. It was just long enough for Jane to register the reaction of other people in the pub as they watched Charlie stand (almost on tiptoe) at the bar. Most of them, like Jane, were alternately fascinated and horrified by Charlie’s disfigurement. And also—although she should have noticed it when they had been walking from the coffee shop to the pub—along with his stature and facial disfigurement, Charlie had something of a limp that made it even more difficult for him to carry the drinks and snacks.

Were there any other nasty surprises?

But curiously the mixed reactions from the other pub-goers somehow made Jane that much more appreciative of Charlie. She was siding with those who took note of Charlie and expressed with a slightly uncomfortable grimace or even a nod to their partners their sympathy for Charlie’s plight. And she very much sided against those

whose faces and even leering expressions betrayed that Charlie was, to them, someone who deserved only to be mocked. Fortunately for Charlie, the barman was definitely in the first camp and was, if anything, perhaps a little too solicitous in his attention. Jane now saw in Charlie not just a man who also thought David Tennant was the better Dr Who and that Chris Evans was now a better disc jockey than when he'd been as a younger man, but also that there was something heroic, even noble, about him.

And it was with this generous thought that Jane took the glass of wine from Charlie and dipped her fingers into one of the packets of exotically flavoured crisps that Charlie ripped open onto the table.

“Have you been to this pub often?” Jane asked.

“Just a couple of times,” said Charlie suddenly quite sheepishly. “With Bob and Sam.”—Charlie’s friends that he so often namechecked on Facebook—“Sam works near here. He’s a cashier at the Santander Bank on the high street.”

“And you, Charlie?” asked Jane, as she sipped from her glass. “Where do you work?”

“Erm,” he said. “I’m a back room kind of guy. I work in accounts. I’m a clerk for a small accounting firm. Bradshaw & Wilkins. You won’t have heard of them.”

“Back room...?”

“Yes,” said Charlie, who avoided Jane’s eyes. “I’m not what you would call a customer-facing kind of guy...”

This was the first time that either of them had alluded to the very obvious aspect of Charlie that was so difficult to discuss and which must have been at least as uppermost in Charlie’s mind as it was in Jane’s.

Nevertheless, Jane's currently generous, even magnanimous, nature dominated over her more selfish, reflexive revulsion. So what if Charlie wasn't perfect! Who was? Few of her male colleagues at the office would pass muster as a television heart-throb and she'd never been bothered by that before. And Jane wasn't so young and beautiful herself these days: more's the pity. In any case, she was enjoying herself in the New Inn with Charlie as they discussed whether *Holby* was better than *ER*, whether *She's Got Mail* was a better film than *Sleepless in Seattle*, and whether Heart or Magic FM were better than BBC Radio 2 despite the adverts.

"I used to listen to Radio One when I was a teenager," Jane admitted as she sipped the last of her white wine. "I couldn't listen to it now. What do teenagers think when they hear, what's his name, Dizzee Rascal? And how can anyone dance to that so-called electronic dance music? It's just like a quarrel between a pair of road-drills..."

"...Or like a motor-bike revving up," said Charlie who had finished the last dregs of his lager several minutes earlier; not that he was a fast drinker. In fact, neither of them consumed their drinks with any enthusiasm, but it had loosened their tongues and made the evening that much more convivial.

"If we were younger, we'd probably be heading off to a night club now," remarked Jane. "Perhaps if we took whatever it is that young people take we'd enjoy that sort of music more..."

"I don't think so," admitted Charlie. "Even when I was younger, I preferred a good song with a good tune and a good singer; not this techno or hip hop stuff. Besides I never could dance that well..."

“Neither could I,” returned Jane, thereby neutralising the confessional aspect of Charlie’s admission.

“It’s quite late now,” said Charlie sadly. “I suppose we ought to be getting home.”

“We should,” said Jane.

“Unless you want another drink?”

“One’s enough for me.”

And so it was that Charlie and Jane parted on good terms that evening. He escorted her to the bus stop and waited until she’d got on the bus. And after the bus had driven off, he sent her a private Facebook message to tell her how much he’d enjoyed their evening together.

And that’s what probably did it for her.

Unlike the fanciful romance fiction that Jane sometimes read, it wasn’t love at first sight for her. Nor even, in truth, second, third or fourth sight. But she and Charlie continued to see one another, which added more than a little spice to their Facebook friendship.

It was several months later that the ultimate Facebook announcement came: perhaps the most significant of all. And this, of course, was the mutual amendment of their relationship status on the left hand side of the Facebook page. This was proof that Charlie and Jane were now rather more than just Facebook friends.

But for this to be so, Jane had to find out for sure how much more than a friend Charlie could be.

She was undoubtedly nervous and not only because she was anxious whether

Charlie had more surprises hidden beneath his clothes. Perhaps a disfiguring scar. Maybe a skin ailment. Perhaps (and this really worried her) a defect of the most important physical organ of all. Jane was also worried about what Charlie would make of her. The bosom that was no longer so perky. The waistline that flopped over her belt. The large mole on her inner thigh. The scruffiness of her crotch.

Not to mention the actual physical effort and the long anticipated pleasure.

But she needn't have worried. All went well on the night.

Charlie was an appreciative and considerate lover. His thrusts were varied and lasted for longer than they needed to. While Jane soon forgot about her lover's shortness (so irrelevant in a horizontal position), about the side of his face that she preferred never to spend much time thinking about, or about any of the other aspects of Charlie that might poison the affections of a lesser woman. And the final orgasm came with a shuddering jolt that almost shocked Jane and certainly startled Charlie, who, most considerately, did not withdraw too soon.

And as Charlie collapsed on top of Jane, his birthmark on her bosom and his legs tangled in hers, Jane reflected that although Charlie was definitely no Ross Poldark, he was more than enough of a man for her.

Charlie was now no longer just her Facebook Friend.

He was Jane's Facebook Boyfriend.