

Date Night Wednesdays

By Dante Harker

'A city institution!' Caden mouthed as he walked into the old pub. He entered alone and only gave the merest breath to his words, so as not to draw attention.

It was certainly in the city, the glorious city of Cardiff, in fact, with its impressive castle right at the heart of the Welsh capital. The institute, as Caden looked around, felt like one you might get locked up in back in the 1960s.

Morbidly obese men almost enveloped the bar stools struggling under the weight. Three men in a row had plaid shirts on, so similar that Caden wondered if they had ordered in bulk.

'This is too weird,' Caden said, louder this time, but as it was barely 8pm on a Wednesday, the few inside hardly noticed, nor did they notice when he rushed back outside.

Outside in the fresh spring air, the 100year-old pub with its green and brown Edwardian tiles stood apart from the modernity of Cardiff. On the corner of a busy junction, even

in the fading light, Caden could see the streets were empty. Well, not entirely empty, just no one who matched Caden's date's description headed his way.

'Not sure why we have to get here so early,' Caden said to himself. He whispered, but not quiet enough as he caught the eye of a smoker in the entrance of the pub.

Not a fan of smoking, more a fan of kissing, Caden took a few steps away, purposeful ones to give the impression he wasn't interested.

It didn't work of course, not that Caden expected it to, he had found over the years that most men he met struggled to take a hint. 'And right now,' he thought, 'I bet if I wear a t-shirt that said "please fuck off, your house is on fire" the man would still be sidling up to me'.

'Not going in?' the man asked as he moved towards Caden.

'Just waiting on someone thanks,' Caden said as he took out his phone to indicate he didn't want to chat.

'Oh, that's a pity, I wouldn't keep you waiting!'

Highly-strung might be a touch of an understatement for Caden. Even at 31, he had yet to mature enough to not let

many random words upset him. Things just bugged him: words, sayings, people; in fact, most of life.

So much so that he had moved to Cardiff for his ideal job. At least, nearly his ideal job, as his ideal job would not have required him to leave his sleepy little northern town. However, back then, he worked in his office and spent his days plotting the gruesome deaths of his work colleagues.

Turning 30 came as a wake-up call; he either found a new job, shook up his life and found at least a hint of happiness, or started working through his 'murder list'. The former seemed the most sensible, if least fun.

'Well, not a pity for me, and I'm sure he'll turn up,' Caden said, 'pity' along with 'that's a shame' being his most triggering words.

After taking another couple of steps away and making it very clear he was looking at his phone, the smoker lumbered away, leaving a trail of stale smoke, sweat and lager so strong that even a nose-less dog could follow the scent.

'I got here a little early, are you nearby? I'm waiting outside, it's a little quiet inside for me right now,' Caden typed into his phone and watched the message change to two ticks indicating that the message had made it through to his

date's phone. Though the ticks had not yet gone blue, meaning it had not yet been seen.

The stale smoker blew his last grey cloud in Caden's direction and went back inside. As a technical writer, with incredible research skills, Caden spent his days listening to music or background viewing a little 'Homes Under the Hammer' and writing. He authored instruction books, how-to leaflets and general dumbed down gubbins that government agencies had to provide despite the fact no one read beyond the titles. On the plus side, this did give him a rather high-level government clearance, which allowed him to imagine he was a spy.

The smoker reminded him of a recent 'Stop Smoking!' leaflet he had put together. He erred against just writing 'OMG how many times do you need telling, you lump, SMOKING KILLS – YES YOU!!!'

But that did seem a little blunt.

He did submit his idea of a picture of a wrinkled, limp penis smoking a cigarette, with stench marks coming off it. His editor thought that, though it was proven that smokers' cocks did smell of rotten tobacco, the health agency couldn't be seen to be mean.

'Caden?'

'Yes'.

'Wow, you're here so early,' Pete, his date, said as he strode towards Caden. The steps, though enthusiastic, were not those of someone who claimed on his profile to be 6'4.

'Well, 15 minutes, I was always taught it was rude to be late,' Caden said.

Not that Pete appeared to care, he replied with, 'well, some of us like to take the time to make sure we look good.' Pete, in his 30s, had one of those faces Caden's mum had warned him about.

'I've told you before son, if you pull faces like that and the wind changes, you'll stay like it.'

Perhaps Pete had snarled too long in the wind, Caden wondered.

Inside they found a table.

'There's drag bingo on later, so we should get a seat up front,' Pete said.

'Oh, right, are we staying for that?' Caden asked as he took a sip from his gin and tonic. He had asked for a light beer, but Pete just ordered him the gin as it would 'make the bingo more fun.'

'A small explosive device right in the centre of the stage might be more fun', Caden thought, but, of course, in these woke times, it's much better to keep such thoughts to oneself.

'Tell me you like drag. What kind of gay are you who doesn't like drag?'

Again, Caden had so many answers that sadly wouldn't get past the 'Cancel Police'.

He went with the rather bland 'just not really my thing, mate'. Nor, he thought, was Pete. He certainly looked very little like his photo. Though thinking back now, all of Pete's photos were taken classic selfie-style, hand raised above his head, neck extended, which in this case hid a collection of chins and no view of his body.

'I don't have a recent shot of my body, but I'm in great shape, but to make up for it, here's my dick,' Pete had sent in a text.

And as much as Caden preferred a nice smile, a sense of humour and legs that were no stranger to the squat rack, it never hurt to have a dick pic, given how so many are just vile. And you are expected to put it in your mouth, and no one wants the shock of something that looks like a sausage in a sock beaten with a hammer coming towards their face.

'How can they not be your thing? They are drag queens, just the funniest thing ever!' Pete replied, then downed three-quarters of his drink.

'I'm just not huge fan of someone miming Dolly Parton songs in between bullying the audience. Just not my thing.'

'Oh, I loves a bit of Dolly, me,' Pete said in the strongest Welsh accent. 'And, chill out, mate, it's just a bit of banter.'

Another trigger word, 'banter', to Caden; banter was a way of excusing bullying for men who had a weak sense of humour. He let it go, but as he felt under attack he defended with, 'so, your profile says you're 6'4, I'm 6'2, so I think one of us is out a few inches.' Pete was right about one thing; the warmth of the gin was making the situation that little more bearable.

'Thing is, mate, I'm totally 6'4, you must be that bit taller,' Pete said after downing his drink.

'Not to be picky, but I'd have to be 7ft tall. An average door frame height is just over 6'6 and I didn't have to duck to get in,' Caden replied, trying his hardest to keep his tone friendly.

'Wow, you know some right crap, don't you, mate. Anyway, want another drink?'

Caden didn't, he wanted to glass Pete. At that thought he realised that was the old Caden, the new Caden, didn't want to kill people, he wanted a quiet life. Explaining why Pete was picking shards of broken glass out of his face to the police, wouldn't be quiet.

So, instead, he agreed, as that at least gave him time to think without interruption from the snarling monster sitting opposite him.

From the doorway came a rush of laughter, the odd screech and bellowing enthusiasm from a hen party that barged into the bar.

The twenty-strong contingent made for the bar. The group moved as one mass for support, this clearly wasn't their first drink of the evening.

In the middle of the ruckus, easy to see as he towered above the pack, the obligatory gay smiled and laughed as he moved. Until he caught Caden's eye. Then his smile calmed, though never left his face.

The hazel eyes of the tall newcomer shone in the overhead light, revealing flecks of striking green.

Then the smile dropped.

'I got you a double this time, seems for the best,' Pete said as he scraped his chair against the floor sitting down.

'Strange night for a hen do?' Caden said trying not to show the disappointment on his face as the tall guy had gone back to laughing with his pack.

'Wow, you're a bit of a misery, aren't you? You don't like drag, you hate hen do's. What's up with you?' Pete said and again downed more than half his gin.

'What's wrong with me? You're a lying cunt who looks nothing like his picture with the personality of a traffic warden – mid divorce!' is what Caden wanted to say, but he went with, 'seems a strange night to get that plastered, that's all.'

'Gees, mate, don't be a lightweight! Finish your drink!' He did finish his drink, though only his first, and Caden only finished it to give him time to decide if he could follow the tall guy who was heading to the loo, or was that just too creepy?

After downing the rest of his second drink, Pete slurred, 'so, come on then, what's your biggest turn-on?'

After vomiting slightly in his mouth, Caden excused himself and headed for the loo.

He wasn't sure of the plan, these weren't the pre-Grindr days where every men's loo you went in at least one guy would be stood at the urinal waving his erection about.

And meeting a guy at the urinal was hardly the story he wanted to tell his friends when they asked. Not that he had many, just enough diehard ones who dealt with all his annoying idiosyncrasies and passed his social selection criteria.

'You need more friends, Caden'

'I don't mum. I'm not antisocial, I'm socially selective.'

The repeated conversation he'd had with his mum popped into his head. He wondered what she would make of him

following a man into the loo.

'Well, at least you didn't glass the muppet at the table, that's progress,' he imagined the reply.

'Well, this is insanely uncomfortable,' Caden thought as walked into the tiny space that passed as a loo.

A sink, on the left, and in front of him, to the right a single urinal and, to the left, a cubicle in use.

Excellent, well you've outdone yourself here, what are you going to do now, you dick?' Caden thought as he stood watching the tall man's back. His broad shoulders amply filled the space between the cubicle and the wall and in his fitted black trousers which went perfectly with the equally fitted, sapphire blue shirt.

Once finished, the tall man turned, he turned so quickly in fact that it was abundantly clear Caden was staring.

He saw no other option than to smile brightly and hope the ground opened up and swallowed him whole.

When it didn't, Caden said, 'hey, how's it going?' The tall man moved to make way for Caden at the urinal now behind him. To which Caden pointed to indicate he was waiting for

the cubicle. The man smiled back. It was a bright, disarming smile that reached up to his sparkling eyes.

'I'm good thanks, though not to seem weird, I think I'm doing much better than you with that guy falling about at your table. Please tell me he's drowning his woes for some reason, and you're not on a date,' the tall guy's voice had a rich velvety tone to it, the kind of Welsh accent Caden hoped he would find.

'To be honest, mate...'

'Dylan,' the tall guy said, and was about to offer his hand, but looked at it fresh from the sink and just smiled.

Caden smiled back and said, 'to be honest, Dylan, it's at times like this I wish it were legal to drown people.' Realising how dark his reply must have sounded, Caden went to apologise but before he could speak Dylan said,

'Or, at very least put the annoying ones out of their misery. Sadly, though, mate, I'm pretty sure he won't leave enough drink in his glass for us to try.'

With a big smile, and an internal sigh of relief, Caden offered up his name. '

'Oh, what a lovely name,' Dylan replied and again his smile reached and lit up his enticing hazel eyes.

'Thank you, my mother was a big reader, she loved unusual names,' Caden replied, then with reluctance, added 'I best let you get back to your friends, and I'll... well I'm not sure... brave going back? Rush out the back door? Kill myself?'

'Well, none of those sound fun,' Dylan said, if his eyes were blue, Caden would have thought they were perfect for the deepest of swims. But as they were all types of shades of brown, he wondered if they could perhaps be used for wood to build a cabin, they could hide away in. All happy and warm.

He quietly realised that he was staring and eyes for wood was a totally silly idea, though no worse than eyes for swimming in, so he let himself off and said, 'I'm a little stuck for options.'

They both jumped as they heard the toilet flush and remembered they were standing in the tiny loo.

Dylan looked in the direction of the cubicle as if to ask if Caden needed to go.

'I think the urge has passed, mate, should we leave?' Caden replied to the unasked question.

Outside, one of the plaid shirt men followed them out and gave them a 'knowing' look before going back to abuse the bar stool.

'So, yes, mate, I'm really not sure what to do,' Caden repeated.

Inside he wondered if Dylan could hear him screaming, 'SAVE ME, DEAR LORD, WILL YOU PLEASE JUST SAVE ME!'

And just like that, Dylan said, 'you know a much better option is to come with me and the girls. I'll tell them I'm rescuing you from a bad man, they'll like that, other than their glasses running dry they hate nothing worse.'

'Wow! Yes, please, yes, that sounds awesome. Though I do have to go to work in the morning, and it's the first time I'm meeting my new bosses. I'm new to Cardiff and I've been working from home until now.' Caden didn't want to sound apologetic, or that his most fairy-tale dreams weren't coming true at this moment. But a level of realism was probably for the best.

'Ah, no worries, mate, I have the same issue, work tomorrow. The girls are going crazy, they all took the full week off for the festivities. But you and I don't have to go so crazy,' Dylan replied.

'I guess the big question now is what to do about the drunk back at the table?' Caden asked though as he looked over towards the table Pete had stood and was heading their way.

In his head Caden envisaged the embarrassing conversation to come, it did not look pretty. But then, as if the fates were on his side, Pete stumbled and fell on his arse.

'I think that's our cue to leave.' Dylan said and ushered Caden over towards his pack.

'I made a new friend, girls. Say hello to Caden. He's new to Cardiff, why don't we show him around some of the highlights?'

The request was taken as an excuse to down their drinks. The group grabbed their belongings, bags, the man-sized inflatable penis and their 'Debbie's Last Fling Before the Ring' sashes and blustered out into the spring night.

'Just one more bar...', 'Just one more drink...' saw them through until the early hours of the morning. Cardiff is not short on bars and who has the energy to refuse a very enthusiastic hen party?

They saw the hens into their taxis; a time-consuming affair given how many could barely stand, let alone give directions. Many of the cab drivers refused, snapping, 'I'm not taking her; she's gonna puke' Caden and Dylan then found themselves alone.

'I'm pretty sure I planned to stop a good ten drinks ago,' Caden said, clinging onto a lamp post like it was his new best friend.

'I know, mate, but who can refuse Debbie?' Dylan replied, clinging onto Caden, super glad that they had found such a good friend in the lamppost.

'I really could do with a nightcap, but for the life of me I don't want to brave another bar,' Dylan said. 'How far away is your place?'

Okay reader, you now have three choices. There is a dark ending, a happy ending and of course the option to read both endings.

I would recommend you read both endings, starting with the dark as it works quite well to then read the light. But both endings are well, endings. Enjoy.

The dark ending, though not that dark because you know, I'm not a monster.

Caden no longer needed the lamppost for support after a huge burst of excitement rushed through him from head to toe. Well, headed somewhere, perhaps not as far as his toes. Caden stood tall and said, 'it's a 15-minute drive and I have... all the drinks.'

In the taxi, doing their best to look completely in control, and certainly not about to vomit, a fun challenge after countless multi-coloured drinks, Dylan said, 'I'm just going to shut my eyes till we get there, I think that might save us a cleaning bill.'

Caden smiled as the beautiful man with the cabin building eyes closed them, and slept.

Then he dropped his smile and panicked. At this point, he realised he had never met anyone in a bar, never once had he met a stranger where he hadn't read at least a basic profile.

He didn't know his role, top, bottom, both, neither. He hadn't seen his dick, what if as pretty as Dylan was, his cock looked like he had been attacked by a pack of hungry dogs?

'Leather, water sports, BDSM, something freaky with vegetables.'

'What's that, pal?' the taxi driver asked.

'Oh, shit, nothing, talking to myself,' Caden replied, not realising he had spoken out loud.

To himself now he said, 'just go with the flow, go with the flow, you can do this, go with the flow, other people go with the flow – what the fuck is the flow!?!'

Deciding he wasn't a 'go with the flow' kind of person, he went over the conversations of the evening. They were limited. The second bar involved shots, then more shots, a third round of shots, 'just because' and then some dancing. And the dancing involved a very messy round of shots.

All of this meant that, once the fresh air hit him after leaving that bar, the next hours were a blur.

He did remember telling Dylan about the study which showed that smokers have nasty smelling dicks. Then he

had asked Dylan 'but how do they know smokers had nasty smelling dicks? I mean, was it someone's job to go round and smell them?' That had gotten a laugh, which had to be a good sign, surely?

The taxi pulled into Penarth Marina, just outside the city. For the same price he could have rented a new apartment in the centre. But the new apartments reminded Caden of stacked hamster cages. Instead, for the price of a short drive, he got a cute house overlooking the water.

And rather than an apartment, no stairs, lift or doorman needed negotiation to make it to the sofa.

Once inside, and comfortable, Dylan slumped down, clearly worse for wear but able to sit up, remove his jacket and talk intelligibly. Or, at least, he was able to comment that this was a lovely place, and it sure would beat sleeping on the floor in one of the girls' rooms.

'I mean who only gets three hotel rooms between 20 women? Madness,' Dylan said as he took the whisky night cap from Caden's hand and helped him take the seat at his side.

'Well, this is it', thought Caden, after five minutes of random chatter and nothing else, 'time to be brave.'

At a suitable pause in the conversation, Caden leaned in to kiss Dylan.

'What the fuck, mate, what you doing? Dylan yelled and jumped up from his seat. 'What the fuck! I mean you're great, but I'm not gay or anything.'

'Shit, fuck, what? No... seriously, what?'

'I'm not gay. I didn't mean to give you that impression, but I'm not sure how I even did. We didn't talk about hooking up or anything.'

It felt like Caden's heart had left his body. The dark void created a flood of embarrassment and anger.

'But you met me in a gay bar, you knew I was on a date, you saved me from the date and asked to come home with me. I mean, fuck, mate, what is a man supposed to think?'

'Shit, I'm sorry if I gave off a gay vibe but that's not me. I just thought you'd have a drink and a spare bed, that'd beat sleeping on the floor with a bunch of handsy women.'

'You are fucking kidding me, right?' Caden yelled.

'I'm going to leave,' Dylan said, and without another word, he grabbed his jacket and stormed off into the night.

The next week passed in a haze. Even on a few hours' sleep, Caden just about managed the meeting with his new bosses, who were perfectly happy for him to carry on working from home and only pop into the office once a month if needed.

In the same, scary old-man bar, Caden sat over from a bright smiling younger guy. He couldn't face another crazy thirty-something with a lifetime's worth of baggage, most of which had scarred their faces so deeply. So, in front of him, an enthusiastic student, his smile taking over most of his face, eyes included.

He didn't have eyes that could build a cabin, but they looked friendly and kind. Even more so on the tonic and soda, he had ordered, and this time received.

'The thing is, I know it's not good practice to talk about previous dates when you're on a date, but it was such a freaky experience.'

'It sounds it,' the lad said, 'though to be honest, this is Cardiff, so it doesn't really surprise me.'

With a wry smile, Caden said:

'Of course, if he had accidentally left his wallet at my place, and I found his full name and address of his work. And then hired someone off Gumtree to stand outside his office wearing a sandwich board that says:

'Dylan you're probably gay and it's about time you came out!'

Or something much much much worse. I'm not saying I did that, that would only be if I had found his wallet.'

'Did you?' the lad asked.

And Caden smiled.

The ending for the lovers of love.

So, they are waiting at the cab rank and...

'I really could do with a nightcap, but for the life of me I don't want to brave another bar,' Dylan said. 'How far away is your place?'

A palpable tension now hung in the air. 'Oh, what a cabin those eyes would build,' Caden thought looking at Dylan and holding his gaze for a moment before he said, 'that would be the best thing in the history of things ever... but sadly it's 5am, and at 8am I'm due to meet my bosses for the first time. Would you hate me if I asked for your number, and we had that drink over a meal sometime very soon?' At his own words, he felt like someone had just punched him in the heart or, worse, his heart was so pissed off at his answer that it had just up and left.

Dylan took it much better than Caden's deflated heart.

'You know you have cursed me to a hotel room of handsy drunk women. I mean who only books three hotel rooms between 20 women? Madness.'

A taxi pulled up at the rank and an angry-looking driver who had clearly had a long night, snapped, 'are you getting in or what?'

'One sec,' Caden snapped back and took out his phone to take down Dylan's number. He jabbed at the buttons, though it seemed that 17 presses were no better than one, his phone had died.

Another expression he hated was, fuck my life, but right now, it felt like a spiteful deity on a chunky cloud was not fucking his life but taking a giant dump on it.

Then he realised he could just give Dylan his phone number.

'Wow how fucking stupid am I? My phone is a new work's phone. I couldn't be bothered to have two phones, so I dumped my own and took the new number. I don't know it, no, no, no.

At his drunken, rather loud expression of loss, Dylan came to the rescue once more and said, 'don't worry, I have my trusty, "if you get lost, this is the hotel's address", marker pen I brought out just in case anyone got lucky'. Dylan took Caden's arm and wrote down his name and number. And, at the end, he wrote two kisses before planting a kiss on Caden's cheek.

'Are you coming or what?' the taxi driver snapped again, at which, in his mind, Caden stabbed him in the eye with the marker pen.

'You best get off, I'm a direct kind of guy, text me the moment you open your eyes so I have your number and can bombard your hungover self with lots of random messages.'

Caden was desperate to push the 'fuck it' button but knew he couldn't risk losing his job for fear he might end up back in his village, actually killing rather than just plotting the deaths of those who annoyed him. He didn't and said his goodbyes and got in the taxi.

Two hours later, Caden pushed his eyelids against the screaming pain brought by the morning light. In his drunken haze, he hadn't managed to close the curtains and now the dawn light that hit his face felt like a rusty chainsaw cutting at his flesh.

'Am I dead?' He asked the room, and when, fortunately, no one replied, he said, 'ooh, Dylan, the handsome cabin guy!'

Then, after looking at his arm, he truly wished he were dead. In his fitful, sweaty sleep, the 'permanent' marker had rubbed off his arm. All that remained, mocking him, were the two kisses at the end – XX.

On autopilot, he dragged himself from his bed and threw himself in the shower.

'What a fucking idiot. You meet the most amazing man, he asked to come home with you, and you say no, because of work. I mean, what a fucking dick!'

'And you're a dick, too,' he yelled at the smiling man pictured on the label of his shower gel, who he was sure was laughing at his stupidity.

As he dressed for work, he carried on his rant. 'Could you have called in sick? Yes. Would they have fired you? No. Would it look bad? Yes, but then who really cares about looking bad when you could have had the man of your dreams.'

'He was probably evil,' Caden said to his coffee cup after booking an Uber to work.

Sadly, getting to work was a turbulent affair as the chatty taxi drivers' words felt like bullets to his migraine-filled brain.

He rationalised that it was surely fate. If they were meant to be together, it would have happened. He had probably been saved from a brutal death at the hands of a psychopath who would have left him buried under a cheap patio.

Secretly, he hoped that his boss would turn out to be Dylan. He would meet him at the door, his smile so bright now that the glare from it created enough space in the packed office for him to run into his arms.

And of course, at that point, there would be some kind of Dirty Dancing style lift and they would live happily ever after.

After the meeting with his actual, and rather rotund, boss, a persistent thought pushed and pushed and pushed its way into focus. 'So really, you gave up on the man of your dreams for a boring meeting that took less than five minutes and was effectively a chance to say hello in person. Well done!'

At his 'hot desk', a cost-saving idea that caused most workers emotional distress, Caden felt increasingly distressed.

The massive open plan office was grey, with grey walls, floor, ceiling... well everything. It drained him to the point where he too felt monochrome.

The office decor seemed like another measure to cause emotional distress, remove the colour from the world and make people more likely to comply.

Deciding it was not a good use of his time to ponder ways to kill himself, Caden got up to stare out of the window. The middle-distance was calling him. He wanted to stare blankly out into the void where he hoped downbeat music would drift in from somewhere.

Rather than seeing the middle distance, he saw in the office across the way a paper sign that read, 'you owe me a drink, handsome.'

And, with that, Caden's heart accompanied by a full brass band marched back into his chest.