

Winking Frogs by Joy Gardiner

Most of my female acquaintances are overweight like me, but only one of them understands about the chocolate frogs in the fridge. “They wink at you, don’t they?” she says, “every time you open the door.”

I’ve been buying them for my grandchildren for over two years now. They come to see me after school every Wednesday, while their Mum visits someone in a nursing home. At first I was buying two frogs – one each – but by the time the kiddies got here the frogs were long gone, so I graduated to a twelve-pack. Even so, it’s a struggle to leave two untouched, and I’ve started filling up on other things. It’s got worse in the last ten months, since I’ve been on my own. Most of my clothes are far too tight. I make do with them for ordinary occasions, but they accentuate my spare tyre, the love handles on my hips, and the underarm flab that’s weighing down my triceps. Straight skirts ride up to reveal my shapeless fleshy knees, but if I wore flared or gathered ones I’d look like a walking marquee. Nothing dressy fits me any more, but after-five occasions are a thing of the past.

A few weeks ago, at the Bereavement Support Group, I was introduced to a woman who’s into the singles scene.

“Move on”, she said. “Get yourself a new hairdo, lose some weight. Update your makeup and score yourself a younger man”. She swears by the back pages of the local paper, and recommended I look in the ‘Men seeking women’ column if I’m not game to put out my own advert under ‘Women seeking men’.

I did glance at the paper when she shoved it under my nose, but I’d never answer a ‘Men seeking ...’ message. Some of them sounded really sincere, but you can’t pick the sleaze-bags from a code number. Anyway I’m too self-conscious, and I’m not ready for romance. So I scanned the ‘Friendship’ column instead, and that’s how I met Jack.

Jack’s no oil painting. His eyes bulge a bit behind his glasses, he walks with his feet splayed out, and his widest point of circumference is definitely not his chest. He’s eleven years younger than me, he’s courteous, and he speaks nicely, with a hint of French accent. I’ve never been to France so I didn’t know if it’s genuine, but I’m giving him the benefit of the doubt. He pronounces his name ‘Zhark’.

If he’s really French he must have been out here a long time. I think he must be telling the truth, because I’ve been to some of those outback places myself, and you couldn’t make up some of the details if you hadn’t seen the real thing.

We've been meeting once a week at a local coffee shop, going Dutch. We usually have the Cake of the Day with our coffee. Jack doesn't go much for chocolate. His weakness is whipped cream.

The first couple of times he was telling me one sob story after another. Some of them were really sad – opportunities lost through ill-health, failure to make friends in new places, a fatal attack by a Rottweiler on his pet dog.

I've resisted the urge to put my arm around him and give him a bosom to cry on. I don't mind him seeing my flab – in fact he seems to find it reassuring – but I don't want anyone handling it.

Maybe he's met other women who've laughed at him, or seen him as a no-hoper. But I'd never do that. I know that misery and grief can strike people in different ways. Nowadays he seems more relaxed and he talks about his travels. He hasn't said anything about his hopes for the future. He's probably got to catch up with the present first, just like me.

Jack never talks about the space he inhabits, except that it's in Carnegie, and I've no idea what he does for a living. I asked him once, the first time we met. He just laughed and answered "Zhark-of-all trades".

I haven't told him I used to be a supervisor in a factory. Not that there's any shame in that. I just say I'm 'retired'. And I haven't invited him to my little unit. So we meet in a sort of vacuum, and see each other as a pair of portraits on blank canvasses – if you call lurid wall-to-wall Riviera posters in the coffee shop 'blank'.

I don't know whether Jack regards me as a mother-figure. I could hardly have had him at eleven. Anyway I wore myself out being a mother the first time around, so I don't want to start again. He certainly hasn't started treating me like a girlfriend. He even wanted to call me Madame when we first met, till I pointed out that's not the Australian way. We shake hands every time we meet, and again when we say Au Revoir. Maybe it's that rare relationship : a true platonic friendship.

He's started teaching me bits of French. Nothing complicated, just little common phrases like 'c'est noir' for 'it's black', when I turned up wearing it.

Since I've been getting our more I haven't felt the same urge to raid the chocky frogs. Mostly, when I open the fridge, they just give me an impersonal stare of the blank little foil-printed eyes. There are four still left from the last multi-pack. I'd better check the use-by date.

I can't see myself ever becoming a sexy dresser, but last week I managed to zip up the black pin-striped slacks for the first time in ages, and do up the buttons of the matching jacket.

But it's a dilemma. If I got my figure back, Jack might dump me and advertise for another fat lady. Then I'd be back to square one, raiding the fridge again, with nothing to look forward to. Maybe if the weight doesn't drop off too quickly he won't notice.

This week he's suggested we meet at a local bistro instead of the coffee shop. They have a cheap mid-week lunch that includes coffee. I made sure I left home on time, but he was already at the table with a bottle of sparkling wine by his elbow when I arrived. As soon as I'd sat down he got the waiter to draw the cork. "What's the special occasion?" I asked. "Is it your birthday?" Jack shook his head, smiling. Maybe one of his 'all-trades' has turned a healthy profit. Or maybe he's just feeling happier. When my dear late husband was alive we ran a teetotal household, so alcohol's a new experience for me. What the heck? Chocolate-raiding wasn't good for me either. I gave the waiter a nod. Now I've never breathed a word to Jack about the frogs in the fridge, but as we raised our glasses he winked at me. Could this be the beginning of a new compulsion?