

Short story: "The Love Machine."

It had been an episode of "Midsomer Murders" that had done it. Sitting in her tiny flat on a Friday night with her meal-for-one offer on the coffee table before her. A risotto, a nice salad, a wedge of cheesecake and a bottle of red and Chief Inspector Barnaby investigating the murder of a lonely single woman in her early forties eating her tea in front of the telly. Close to the bone? John Nettles might as well have stopped, pointed at the body and said "That's you, Susan."

Being alone had sort of crept up on Susan. She'd become an accountant and was now one of the middle-ranking people in a middle-sized business.

She did her job and went home.

She hadn't had a boyfriend in seven years. When she went to visit her mother or (married) sister she'd dread THE conversation. Was she seeing anyone? She'd shake her head and her mother would tilt her head to one side and squeeze her hand, as if to reassure Susan.

It made her feel six years old again.

The last couple of relationships had been a mixture of bastard, petering out and one guy she'd returned home early to find him wearing her underwear. Truth be told, she could even have even put up with that but he couldn't put up with her seeing him in her really fancy knickers she'd bought in Victoria's Secret in New York some years back.

He'd got very shouty and then he was gone. Even as he shouted at her it felt like he was suggesting that his wearing her knickers was somehow her fault. She was also disappointed that he looked better in them than she did.

The ad appeared just after Barnaby discovered the woman with a chocolate éclair lodged in her throat.

Susan already knew about the service. Everybody did.

But she, like many, had decided it was for other people, not people like her.

Yet Susan didn't want to be on her own anymore. She didn't like holidaying on her own. She wanted to do New York at Christmas or the beautiful Cornish coast or a cruise of the Greek islands, but was afraid to do something she regarded as romantic like that, because it might confirm to her that she was permanently on her own.

Friends had suggested online dating, or blind dates with friends of friends, but that had been pretty disastrous too. The only thing blind dates had convinced her of was how unfussy her friends were in terms of criteria for suitable partners for her. The presence of a pulse seemed to be the major factor.

"Yes, alright Susan, he is a serial killer, but you can't afford to have notions at your time of life!"

She looked up the service on her tablet and filled in the application.

Eight weeks later, she sat in the restaurant, and twisted her napkin again. A voice in her head screamed at her just to get up and leave.

Nobody would try to stop her, at least, she was pretty sure nobody would.

She looked over at another table, and a woman of similar age was also sitting alone at her table. Susan could see she'd made a big effort, got her hair done, and the clothes looked new, as were Susan's.

She had been in work when the email from the service had arrived, and had been shocked to see it, as she hadn't remembered filling it in, which she put down to the bottle of red. Her first reaction had been to reply and cancel, as the email informed her she had every right to

do. The service was well-used, she suspected, to lonely people with too much sauce onboard making rash decisions and even had a big button on the email to cancel your application.

But it also reminded her that she could cancel at any time during the process, and so she had hovered over the big button, then closed her email.

She sat in the assessment waiting room, looking at her shoes, as did so many others waiting.

All with the same looks of shame and guilt and embarrassment that they had signed up.

"You have nothing to be ashamed of," the ad running on the flatscreen told them all.

"Everybody is entitled to a chance at love. It's your constitutional right."

She remembered the referendum. The turnout had been low. No cheering crowds in Dublin Castle this time. But the vote had gone through.

The young woman who took her through the process was very understanding, and explained that sometimes people weren't sure themselves what they thought about what they wanted.

Susan had read about people who had done the test and discovered that they were gay or lesbian or even just not really interested in a relationship. Some of the tabloids had gone hysterical about that, suggesting that the service was turning people gay to meet some politically correct quota.

One man had sued the service, but dropped the claim when his lawyer pointed out that the service would enter into evidence that great window into the 21st century human soul, his internet browsing history.

Indeed, the NRS had been subject to a lot of court cases. To control supply of limited resources, people were only allowed avail of the NRS service once, which came as a shock to people who wanted to change partners regularly. There was also a lot of bitterness from many people already married that they been denied the opportunity of a scientifically chosen partner and were stuck with their current partner.

"I mean look at him! Look what I'm stuck with. I could be married to Brad Pitt!" one remarkably optimistic mother of six famously said on a TV interview as she tucked into her KFC mega-bucket.

The NRS advised caution.

The anti-NRS people were convinced the NRS inserted microchips into its clients to make them fall in love with communists.

"Just how many microchips do these nutters think can fit in the human body?" an NRS spokesperson asked.

What if that happened to her, she wondered.

What happened if she had turned out to be a lesbian. She'd nothing against lesbians, but she didn't want to be one.

"I don't want to be a lesbian," she blurted out to the service agent.

"Good for you," the agent replied, with a smile, completely unfazed.

"I'm not homophobic, I just..."

"Don't worry, I understand. People have a funny idea about the service. We don't turn people into anything. We just help people find out what they really want. Looking at your data, I can tell you you're a typical heterosexual woman."

Susan thought about her choice. After hundreds of personal questions, all with some sort of attached lie detector type device, they had shown her hundreds of pictures of people,

asking her to identify what she found attractive. Half the images had been of women, but the agent had assured her not to read anything into that.

“That’s just part of the standard testing. People often click a picture of someone not because they find them sexually attractive but because they find them aspirational. You’d be amazed how many straight men tap George Clooney or Robert Downey Jr.”

After more tests and questions, Susan had left with a promise that the service would be in touch.

The system, which everybody knew was called Aphrodite, applied its fiendishly complicated algorithms to its database, and presented its selection of suitable candidates.

This was where the National Relationship Service was on a scale way different from a mere online dating service. From its inception, the NRS was state sanctioned, more MI5 than Tinder. It used its huge computing power not just to identify its client’s requirements, but searched the country for a compatible match, accessing state records and social media. The whole country, thanks to a GDPR exception agreed on a pilot scheme with Brussels, was its database. The system was legally barred from suggesting candidates that were already in relationships, but even that had exceptions: any citizen could tick a box permitting the service to include them in their search despite the fact they were currently in a relationship. This had led to questions in the Dail, with the minister being accused of running a taxpayer-funded homewrecking service. But the advice had been adamant: the more people in the service the better, and if adults in relationships chose to leave themselves open to better options, so be it.

Susan remembered the TV ad explaining how Aphrodite worked.

“What are the chances of you meeting your life partner in a pub or nightclub? Pretty slim. But supposing we took all the other single people out but you? And all the people of different sexual preferences. And all the people who didn’t like things you liked, or lived too far, or 100 other variables? What would your chances be then?”

After Aphrodite had made its selection, the choices were then passed to a human team for review. Although Aphrodite was an AI system and was learning all the time, that didn’t make it infallible, and so the human team, made up of psychologists and former intelligence officers still made the final sign off.

Seven candidates had been sent to her, on the strict understanding that they were not being “offered”, merely that she could offer an opinion. She was aware that as she was looking at these candidates, they would all be looking at her profile too, and the service would only proceed with candidates that showed an equal compatibility.

She was struck how ugly the photos were. It wasn’t that the men were ugly, just that the photos were the opposite of regular dating photos.

The NRS had told her that was their policy: no surprises.

They operated a “reverse passport photo” policy where the photo tended to be worse than how the person looked in real life, so that when candidates met they were if anything pleasantly surprised. They also came with full body shape shots, something which had initially almost made her quit the programme when they went to take hers. But they convinced her. No surprises. Candidates must know exactly what they’re getting.

A day after she sent back her submission, her email pinged:

“The NRS is delighted to inform you...”

“Hi there: I hope I haven’t kept you long,” Henry said, as the waiter led him to the table.

Susan stood up. He looked a little slimmer than in his photo, and his hair wasn’t as thin, but his eyes looked just as they did in the file. They looked kind.

They shook hands, as the NRS advised them to on the first date, and both sat down. It was only after ordering that Susan felt comfortable enough to relax.

“Strange, isn’t it?” he said, gesturing around. The whole restaurant had been hired by the NRS. Their every move and word was being recorded and analysed.

She nodded.

“I never thought I’d do this, to be honest,” she said.

“Oh God, me neither. But you get lonely...” he said, then stopped, blushing slightly, suddenly embarrassed that he was coming across clingy.

Susan reached out and squeezed his hand to reassure him, then pulled back awkwardly.

“We’re not very good at this, are we?” he said with a smile.

She shook her head, put another spoonful of beef medallion in her mouth. She went to swallow. But it didn’t.

She took a sip of water, but the lump of meat stayed lodged in her throat. A wave of panic mixed with mortification came over her.

Here? Now? Here, of all places?

Henry looked over at her with a quizzical look.

“Are you OK?”

She couldn’t say a word, as full panic swept over her as her oxygen supply lessened, and blackness started to creep in. There was a shout as two people in white and red NRS uniforms burst from a door and ran to the table.

“She’s choking!” the young man said, then stood there staring, almost paralysed.

Henry stood up, swept around behind, and pulled her up by her arms, He then wrapped his arms around her, applied a clenched fist to just under her rib cage, and pumped rapidly. On the third pump a piece of meat fired from her mouth and hit the table. Air rushed into her lungs and her legs buckled. Henry lowered her back into her seat.

“Do you want an ambulance?” he asked.

She shook her head vigorously. She wanted the Earth to swallow her, not more drama.

Henry discreetly folded the ejected piece of beef into a napkin as she cleaned her mouth and dabbed her eyes.

“Thank you so much. I’m so sorry, I’ve made a fool of myself. If you want to go...” she said.

“Actually, this counts as one of my better dates so far,” he replied.

In the NRS control truck parked discreetly behind the restaurant, Aphrodite was already calculating what impact a near-death experience had on a first date, whether it helped, and whether it could be simulated.

It also recommended mandatory Heimlich training for frontline NRS personnel.

The End.

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