

THE UNRELIABLE PLACEBO

by

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This sophisticated rom-com, originally published in 2016 and since revised a little, is available on Amazon as an ebook and a paperback and under the Kindle Unlimited program.

Solicitor Anna Duke's clumsy attempts to re-join the couples club after the Arsehole – sorry, her husband Alfie – has left her for a younger version of herself whom Anna has nicknamed ‘The Backside’, result in various embarrassing events, and lead her to some strange places and into some weird situations.

Anna speculates that prior information about a man she's going to meet might affect the success or otherwise of the date, in the same way that a medicinal placebo can affect physical symptoms. Do expectations affect outcomes in the dating game? Anna's theory doesn't always work out in practice and many wires get crossed.

This extract from Chapter 7 follows a date arranged through a dating website with a guy called Jeremy who was a patent attorney, during the course of which an old schoolmate from years ago called Simmsey chanced to enter the bar. Anna got very drunk with Simmsey who now has a successful software company called ‘Le Tourney’ writing online games. Jeremy was rather left out of the ribaldry between Anna and Simmsey and in due course he left the bar. Later, Simmsey fed Anna into a taxi home.

Some days later, Anna is at home thinking about probability when the doorbell rings.

CHAPTER 7

PLACEBO EFFECT AND PROBABILITY – THE ARSEHOLE WANTS A DIVORCE

AS WELL as thinking about cause and effect and specifically the placebo effect, I've also been thinking about chance and probability. From what little maths actually sank in while I was wilfully wasting my education with the likes of Simmsey, I seem to recall that no matter how many times you toss a coin and it comes up heads, there is always the same probability of turning up a tails the next time. You'd think after, say, five hundred heads, that the probability of it being tails next time would be overwhelming but it's just the same chance as on the first throw.

This always seemed to me to be incomprehensible. I mean before the Arsehole and I moved to the village I'm in now, I'd spent years driving along the same stretch of dual carriageway witnessing other people's accidents and thinking to myself that my chances of having one myself must be increasing each time I got in the car every morning and evening, but perhaps it remained the same, like the chance of flipping a tails. Certainly the number of accidents one saw seemed to be increasing, yet I suppose that's an extraneous factor you'd have to eliminate if you were to make a proper calculation. Though maybe not, since the quantity of traffic had also increased over the years and I was just one of the traffic. I don't know. As I've indicated I was never any good at maths.

So what about one's marriage? The longer it lasts, does it get more likely that the jerk you go to bed with every night would decide to jump ship, infiltrate other parts and make a mockery of the marriage? To make an accurate calculation, would you have to eliminate factors such as lack of money or parental interference or trying too hard to get pregnant as in our case?

Perhaps if I decide to look up Simmsey again, maybe he'd help me out here. He's a software writer; aren't they good at maths? To the best of my memory, he did maths at A-level, while I opted for the softer history, English Lit and biology. Curious mix. I could have told Jeremy, had it occurred to me, that I had a biology A-level. Should have stuck with it. Instead, I was led to believe that a career in the law would be a good thing, that lawyers earned a lot of money without having to make much effort. It wasn't true then and it isn't true now but curiously that's still the perception, despite cuts in legal aid, cut-throat competition, a proliferation of competing claims and conveyancing factories and people expecting cheaper prices along with twenty-four-seven opening hours.

So was my marriage, having lasted eight whole years, already into injury time when the Arsehole met the Backside? Was it bound, anyway, to flounder soon regardless of temptation? Or is it just as likely that the

Arsehole would have left me in Year One as in Year Eight? If so, I wish he *had* buggered off then and saved us all a lot of trouble. Or even better in Year Minus One. Best of all would have been Year Minus Two, then I'd never have met the lying, cheating bastard at all! Beat that for a conundrum!

AS I'M checking the website of Le Tourney and pondering if I should make contact with Simmsey to pick his brains over the probabilities of marriage breakdown or otherwise, the doorbell suddenly rings and I wonder who it may be. It's a Thursday evening and I'm not expecting anyone. Now I'm living on my own, I'm a bit leery of opening the door to unexpected callers. I ought to get one of those spyhole things you see in TV dramas and films, though they don't seem to do any good. The fictional householders still get brutally murdered at some point. Or if they're really lucky, the maniac high on drugs loitering outside merely puts his fist through the door and smashes their nose in.

I employ a far better security system. I go upstairs and look out of a first floor window to see who it is. Thereby, I'm not in danger of getting my face rearranged and also, if I don't want to meet the person, I can lie on the bed reading and pretending I'm not in until they go away. So this is what I do.

Would you believe it? It's the Arsehole. He's got the cheek to come here and ... and ... whatever it is he's here for. I suppose he could have walked straight in though. He must still have his keys and I haven't changed the locks. Still, I might yet. However, he *is* consorting with a lawyer. If they're anything of a proper couple he'll have told her he was coming here and she'll have instructed him how to behave. Therefore, I shouldn't necessarily give him points for acting properly.

In my matrimonial lawyer days, I had frequently to put it to the non-matrimonial-home-occupying spouse, usually the miserable wanker who's departed (though of course, quite often, also the poor soul who's been given their marching orders), that once you've vacated the home, you can't just expect to barge back in at any time. The person left, abandoned or otherwise, in the house gets used to living alone. Your noisy devil-may-care unexpected entrance could frighten the occupier. Especially in the evening. While you're blundering about looking for that CD or paperback you're certain you left behind, or loading up a Tesco carrier bag with all the family photos you suddenly feel you can't do without, you could be mistaken for an intruder.

In the remoter more outlying regions of Suffolk and Norfolk you might

even be gunned down, including while your back's turned as you've realised your mistake and you're trying to get away. I would say a more fitting response by an abandoned spouse would be to blow the balls off the faithless wretch before they have a chance to turn around, and then say the gun went off accidentally because you were so frightened.

But I have no means of gunning him down, more's the pity. I imagine he's safe enough to let in and accordingly I scuttle back downstairs and open the door.

"Yeeees?" I say.

"Hello, Anna," he smiles. "Could I come in for a moment?" How can I refuse? It's his ruddy house too! I open the door wider, which is invitation enough for him and he's in the hall like a shot. He accepts the offer of a cup of tea (he's getting nothing stronger – I don't want any alcohol induced tantrums – and as I've cut down my own intake and for the time being I'm trying not to imbibe on weekday evenings, I don't see why he should be able to get merry when I can't) and goes and settles himself on one of the settees in the sitting room.

To demonstrate that I still do have some standards and that I don't need *him* to bring form and order to my life, I bring the tea in on a tray with pot, cosy and everything.

I haven't the least idea what to say to him. I haven't seen him for three or so months and I'd still seriously like to throttle him. I decide I won't make it easy for him by doling out conventional pleasantries, so I pour the tea and silently wait for whatever it is he's come to say. He looks uncomfortable which I'm very pleased indeed to see. Therefore, I sit and enjoy my tea. I wish I'd used de-caff as it's already gone seven-thirty. I feel sure that, once he's gone, I'll fret about whatever it is he's come for and stay awake until the small hours, buoyed up by unaccustomed evening infusions of caffeine.

At last the Arsehole speaks. "It's been four months now," he says. "I think it's about time we thought about a divorce and sorting out the finances."

"Do you?" I say. I refuse to commit myself or make it easy for him, though this was to be expected at some point.

"Come on, Anna! You're a solicitor for God's sake. You know how it goes. People want closure. They want to move on."

"Do they?"

"Don't act the numbskull with me! You're a trained mediator for God's sake. You know people need to finalise things."

"Please, just tell me what you want."

“I would have thought it was obvious!”

“Just tell me will you.”

“I’ve already told you.”

“No you haven't. You haven't said how this divorce would come about or what the sorting out of finances would mean in practice. From your point of view.”

“Well, obviously you’d divorce me.”

“Would I?”

“Stop doing that!”

“Doing what?”

“Issuing these short sharp questions.”

“It would be monumentally much easier if, as I’ve expressed a few sentences ago, you would say exactly how this divorce would come about and what you want financially.” I’m not going to do his work for him. I see no reason why I should.

“As I said, obviously you’d divorce me.”

“On what grounds? Humping another woman?”

“I think the technical term is adultery. Yes. A divorce based on adultery.”

“And what about finances?”

“Well, we’re both young,” he shrugs. “We both have careers. We have no children. I would suggest a sale of the house and a straight split of the assets. Or if you want to keep the house, you could buy me out.”

“Why now? Why so soon?”

“It isn't soon. We can go to mediation if you want.”

“OK.”

“What?”

“Yes. Let’s try mediation.” This is the last thing on earth I’d actually want to do but neither do I want to make any decisions right now on the spur of the moment without any time to consider. I like this house. I’ve got used to my village lifestyle and position. It’s not much but people think if you’re a solicitor you must be worth something. I might in time get asked to serve on committees, become involved in village affairs and so on. I rather like the thought of that.

I think what I could buy with half the net proceeds of sale of this place. After paying off our mortgage and even with the minuscule mortgage I could get on my income alone, I’d get some chicken coop on one of the estates in the town where I work. I want to stay in the village. I like this house. I chose it myself as we had agreed, or I thought we had, that a place in the country would be good to bring up children.

“Come on. You know what’s what,” says the Arsehole. “We don't need to go to mediation. A straight split of everything is all that’s required.”

“*You* mentioned mediation. It’s the obvious solution.”

“I’m not paying some crummy mediator over a thousand pounds to sit there while we agree the blindingly obvious.”

“Why did you say we could go to mediation then?”

“Anna. Stop being so awkward. We just split everything and that’s that.”

“No. Why did you say we could go to mediation? You always used to do that! Make offers and suggestions and then backtrack. It doesn't make others feel confident about you and your motives or what you say. It makes people think you can't be trusted. Though fairly obviously you can't be trusted.” I want to add “you arsehole” but I don't.

“Well at least I thought one of us should bring up the subject of divorce and moving on. We can't just drift. I should think you as much as me need to reach some resolution. It’s good for people to get some solution.”

I sigh. “I’ll have to think about it,” I say. There’s a pause.

“So how are you getting on? I mean generally,” he says.

“Not too bad I suppose.”

“Have you met anyone yet?”

“I’ve met lots of people. Actually it’s part of my job to meet people.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Are you talking about romantic interest?”

“Well, yes. Have you ... you know!”

“No I don't know!”

“You know what I’m talking about. Anyone serious?”

“You mean has any male *member* of the species crossed my threshold yet?”

“Why do you have to put it like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like some sort of sordid joke. You always do that. Like nothing is serious. Everything has to be a joke with you doesn't it?” He sits there looking sulky.

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Oh come on! Your silly little quips. You almost never say anything serious. Even when we were slogging away trying to have a baby for God’s sake, you made a joke of everything. You kept coming out with all these daft innuendoes and plays on words and stuff that goes on in your mind. All the bloody time!”

“No I didn't.”

“Yes you did! I was screwing for England for the last two years and you cheapened it with all the dross you come out with.”

“So anyway, why do you care? You weren’t interested in me getting pregnant. Not one little bit.”

“I don't know how you can sit there and say that. I did want a baby. I had to perform to order every bloody night.”

“Yeah right. How terrible for you! All you were interested in was having your end away. End-Away-Arsehole. Sorry, End-Away-Alfie.”

“What d’you mean asshole. Did you just call me an asshole? Is that another one of your little word-play mind-game things?”

I try to avoid explaining about that. “Look, you wouldn't try any means of assisting the process. Like getting tested or in vitro or anything like that.”

“What, just so that you could make a big joke out of every single stage. Me having to produce the goods by wanking off on a regular basis to a background of tittering and lewd comments! No thanks. I felt bad enough as it was, with it not working for us.”

“Actually I don't think you have to keep on doing it over and over again. Isn't there enough sperm in one teaspoonful to populate the whole of the Western bloody world!”

“There you go again! Flippant remarks. All the effing time!” I’ll give the Arsehole that. He doesn't like to use the F word on a regular basis as some men do.

“Of course I wouldn't have made a joke of it. I was desperate to get pregnant! I don't know how you can say that.” I stop there. I feel terribly emotional. I don't know what he’s going on about. I start to cry actually.

“You haven't any idea what it’s like for a woman,” I wail. “We’re supposed to have these careers and be ultra-tough,” (like the Backside probably though I don't say this) “dump our deepest emotions and our most basic needs and earn lots of cash and progress up the career ladder and then at the drop of a hat, we’re supposed to open our legs and become mothers. Just like that. Pop! What goes in, must come out! Except we leave it too long and then an enormous backside comes along and steals the whole thing from under our noses.”

I sniff and get out my hanky. The Arsehole moves towards me, I think to comfort me, but I recoil.

“Stay away from me!” I say warningly. Men in this day and age know what that means. Transgress a certain point and it means an assault charge at the very least if he’s lucky. If he’s not, it’s a sexual assault charge, if not an attempted rape charge.

He backs off, sits down again and I calm down a bit.

“Why,” I ask him, “don't you impregnate the Backside then. She's a lot younger than me and the odds must be a hundred times better.” *And she certainly needs some ballast at the front to counter-balance her enormous rear quarters, but I don't say this.*

“Don't call her that.”

“What?”

“The Backside. It's horrible”

“Well you won't tell me her name.”

“I did tell you. It's Perdita.”

“Oh come on. It can't be! I thought you were making it up.”

“Well I wasn't.”

I'm still not sure I believe this. “OK, maybe. Anyway, why don't you try and knock up the Backside if you want one so much apparently?”

“I'm not prepared to discuss it with you,” he says primly. “You'll just make fun of it.”

This is quite probably true. “And yet,” I say, “you want to know what I'm getting up to in the bedroom department! Well it's none of your business. And I'm tired and I need to make a few phone calls and then probably go to bed early.” I decide to lie. “I've got a headache, so perhaps you'd like to leave.”

He starts to get belligerent. “This is still my house. I don't have to leave if I don't want to. I can move back in if I want to.”

“I'm sure the Backside would be interested to hear you say that,” I say, having of course no reliable means of communicating it to her.

He stands up. “I hope you'll think about what I said earlier.”

“Yes,” I say tersely. “I'll think about it.”

“And you're not looking after my plants properly.” He glances at the wilting, anaemic-looking specimens in the large bay window alcove. “I left them here so that when we sell, which we do have to, they'd make the house look good.”

And blessedly he leaves.

Actually, I've deliberately neglected the plants since the Arsehole left. It was his fault I reason. When going to fertilize them recently, I felt supremely irritated due to the Arsehole having labelled up the plant fertilizer according to its pH level. Though he's a scumbag London commodity broker now, his actual degree is in chemistry and he doesn't want anyone to forget it. It's so pathetic. I wasn't sure what container to use on which plants so I didn't fertilize any of them. Or water any of them. I hope they all die and have to be thrown out.

AS SOON as he's gone, I call my friend Sharon and ask her if she thinks I'm too flippant, don't take things seriously enough.

"I've never thought about it," she says. "I wouldn't say so really but odd things do sometimes seem to happen to you."

"Do they?"

"You know there was that thing just after Alfie left."

I realise what she's talking about. "Yes, but I wasn't to know he only had one testicle."

"Has any more come of that?" she asks.

"Not to my knowledge. I really couldn't take it any further in the circumstances."

"Anyway, I don't think it's so much that you're not a serious person," Sharon says, "but that non-serious things seem to happen to you. I'm sure you've got your antenna set to 'serious' but it veers off and the unusual and the unlikely just overtake you without you intending it."

I can hear screaming and splashing in the background and I realise that she's bathing the kids.

"You take your mobile into the bathroom?" I ask.

"Course. Trust me, when you have kids, you'll do the same. You cease to be a human being. You become a mother instead and that's totally different. So I cart my smartphone round with me the whole time so that I can retain some link with the real world, so that it won't slip away from me completely. Perhaps some kind person will call me when I'm in the middle of bathing the kids, or reading to the kids or cooking for the kids or taking the kids to school or collecting them or helping with homework, et cetera, et cetera, and for the short time the call lasts, I'll become a real human being again."

"Do you want to go out one evening?" I ask.

Of course she does and we discuss it and that's as far as I get trying to find out if I'm an air-head with no serious substance. I'll have to quiz her some more when we're out.