

Two man double act

A play for reading

Peter Fox



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Friends are fun
Real imaginary friends are evil
Imaginary imaginary friends are bizarre
Girlfriends are unknowably dangerous

A few weeks in the lives of two well educated but 'drifting' men in their early twenties reveals hidden pasts and troublesome relationships with women that they attempt to sort out with the good humour of good friendship. We see them discover things about themselves and mature in response to the unexpected.

The entertaining story is told by conversation between just the two characters themselves at their frequent meetings. Chuckle at bizarre situations and reflect on deeper relationships.

What is the currency of friendship?



Preview

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Two Man Double Act

A play for reading

by

Merlin Smallbone

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Preface

This started as a couple of comic sketches for a friend's double-act with anonymous characters, but then I wanted to get to know them better. So I wrote and watched what happened. Very few episodes turned out as expected, but it was very enjoyable seeing them cope with the unexpected and discovering patterns in lives.

This was originally conceived as a script for performance so there are some background explanations and suggestions for presentation that have been removed from the body of the text and put into footnotes. You can imagine whatever setting and context you like.

Two slashes, trupts, "/" are used to indicate interruption. Either on separate lines where one character interrupts another or together when someone interrupts themselves as in "... I was going to say//but here is a different thought..."

All of the characters and situations are completely fictional except for a strange episode when I was accosted in a pub by 'Tracy and her sister' desperate for me to do clairvoyanting. I prevaricated but thinking about it later, I think I may have fathomed their background as portrayed here.

Episode 1

Two friends known as Nick and Paul are in their early twenties.

Paul: Hello Nick

Nick: Hello Paul

[Nick opens a sketchpad and starts sketching Paul. Paul is surprised. Nick continues sketching through the dialogue.]

Paul: What are you doing?

Nick: Sketching

Paul: Sketching me?

Nick: Yes

Paul: I didn't know you were an artist

Nick: Its my new thing

Paul: Thing?

Nick: Yes - Keep still!

Paul: How do you mean thing?

Nick: Portraits - That sort of thing

Paul: And you're going to do a picture of me?

Nick: [pause] Yes.

[Paul straightens up and strikes a pose. Nick continues sketching]

Paul: Who'd want my picture?

Nick: You'd be surprised

Paul: Surprise me

Nick: Oh, once people know you they want to buy it

Paul: [Slow realisation that 'you' is ambiguous. Cautiously...] But not many people know me.

Nick: No not [emphasis] you. [More emphasis] Me! ¹ Us [Emphasis] Bohemians soon build up a devoted following. Now please keep still.

Paul: But you're a furniture shifter for the Co-op. Do you hold seances in the lower basement during your tea breaks?

Nick: 'Soirees' actually. A seance is where you try to contact the dead. And yes, there are some very cultured people in the Co-op. Driver Jim writes gritty poetry – a bit proletarian for me obviously – but you have to have to encourage that sort of thing. Then 'Amazing auntie Ada' from accounts has dyed her hair even more red and taken up guerilla drumming.

Paul: What's guerilla drumming?

Nick: Drumming with anything anywhere - Shopping trolleys are her latest thing.

Paul: In Tesco?

Nick: I'm afraid so. [Looks hard at Paul.] Do you think you could you be a bit more iconic?

Paul: Iconic?

Nick: Oh sorry – shorthand you know – powerful, noble.

¹ strikes artistic pose, undoes shirt, tousles hair

Paul: [Paul wriggles and grimaces etc.] How about that

Nick: Oh yes! Hold it. That's perfect.

Paul: So that's all there is to being a Bohemian – a few loonies at the Co-op?

Nick: No of course not.

Paul: Can anyone join?

Nick: Errm. You have to be overflowing with natural talent and be inspired by the inner beauty of things.

Paul: Now we're getting to it. You fancy that Cynthia in the sandwich shop. I've seen you in there using long words and pretending to read "Das capital".

Nick: [Long pause] Very good at quilting.

Paul: Quilting? Who Cynthia?

Nick: Oh yes. Shows what you know about the tectonic power of art. Don't underestimate the strength of passive resistance against the grey and the gutless. The vivid stitch-work of the 'Mothers of the 30th May revolution' is amazing.

[Nick demonstrates to Paul a certain stiffening of sinews and stony straight-ahead face. Particularly forearms horizontal, fists un-clenched, one forward one back.]

Paul: So did you get the lovely Cynthia in the sack then [sarcastic] 'Lenin'?

Nick: Yes actually! A very beautifully embroidered sack if I may say so. Could you look like you're whistling

Paul: Oh OK [Experiments with faces]

[Nick resumes sketching]

Paul: So this Bohemian business is all about getting the girls' knickers off then?

Nick: Umm. How to say this? ... And the boys'

Paul: BOYS! [Faces Nick straight ... remembers to un-pose]

Nick: You work for an Estate Agent. – You know what goes on?

Paul: Do I?

Nick: You know... "Saisir maset"

Paul: What?

Nick: "Tu ne comprend?" : "Must have. – Separate cottage" I thought you knew these things.

Paul: Speak English!

Nick: You are an intellectual pigmy. "Tout confort" – "well equipped" Are you?

Paul: Just because you speak in French doesn't mean you have to shag boys.

Nick: MEN

Paul: You've started painting and now you're shagging everything except Driver Jim

Nick: [Nothing - possibly a 'look']

Paul: Err. Really? Anyway how's your portrait getting on?

Nick: [Emphasis] Your portrait you mean. I think that's enough.

[Paul drops pose. Nick starts folding over sketch pad as if it's private.]

Paul: Let me see.

Nick: It's not very good

Paul: I know that but I'd still like to see.
[Slight struggle. Paul unfolds or grabs the sketch block. Flips forwards and backwards in a bit of confusion.]

Nick: What do you think?

Paul: These are all steam engines.

Nick: Exactly

Paul: Exactly?

Nick: Yes that's what I do - Steam engines.

Paul: You were supposed to be painting me!

Nick: Yes I did. Here it is. Very 'you'.

Paul: It's a steam engine!
[All the drawings in the sketch pad are steam engines.]

Nick: 2-6-0

Paul: 2-6-0 be blowed!

Nick: Now don't get cross. That is my oeuvre.

Paul: I can't believe that I've just stood there for 10 minutes so you could draw a steam engine.

Nick: Artists need models.

Paul: Well get a model steam engine then!

Nick: You don't understand.

Paul: No I don't. And that's shorthand for "Who do you think I am? Thomas the tank engine?"

Nick: Have I drawn you as an intellectual pigmy? [Shows the picture to the audience] Have I drawn you as broken down and short of steam? No. Proud. Powerful. Perfected for purpose.

Paul: [Paul looks closely] What you have drawn, and may your Fairy Godmother give you some decent crayons, is a dirty, unreliable machine that spewed sulfurous filth from every orifice. Is that meant to represent me?

Nick: Can't you see it's whistling?

Paul: Whistling Colonel Bogey I suppose?

Nick: Sorry, that's all I do. Steam engines. Very iconic.

Paul: Well I have to admit it beats making chains of paper clips at the estate agents. But I am writing a comedy double-act to keep the brain alive.

Nick: Good for you.

Paul: It's early days and I haven't really got any good material yet.

Nick: Keep at it. Must go now. Cheerio 'Tolstoy'.

Paul: Cheerio 'Picasso'.

Episode 2

Paul: Hello Nick

Nick: Hello Paul

Paul: How are the Co-op crochet communards getting on?

Nick: Up and down. Anyway it's quilting – and that's what Cynthia's mob do. We're more abstract happening and scything critiques of decay and discarded generations.

Paul: Avant-garde in tooth and claw.

Nick: Exactly. I see that despite being an estate agent's clerk you have an understanding of the vital force that is building a new world.

Paul: [Confused] If you say so.

Nick: I do. Don't be a wabbit!

Paul: Wabbit?!

Nick: Rabbit to you. As a small wedge in the crumbling monolith that is suffocating our society we've decided to shine the spotlight of uncertainty on forces of reaction by changing names by adding double-us when they need a kick up the arse – Postewior.

Paul: I think you're nuts.

Nick: You've got to start somewhere. This is fun and easy for the err less advanced to grasp.

Paul: Wabbit! Makes you sound like a skinny upper class twit. "Gorsh how

tewible". [sarcastic] That'll make them twemble in their Wange Wovers.

Nick: Look Paul, the Co-op communards as you call them are just a start. They haven't had the benefit of a university education. Stirring their tea is a major intellectual exercise for some. I work with the raw materials at hand. Sandra from soft furnishings only comes because she treats the horoscope in the Daily Mail like the lottery: One day it will make everything golden – But she thinks I can make it happen specially for her.

Paul: [sympathetically] You are her personal mystic?

Nick: I'm afraid so. It's like ringing a bell with no clapper – "Nick" she says "look in the tea-leaves"

Paul: Tea-leaves?

Nick: Can you imagine what it would be like if I had a crystal or tarot cards - nightmare!

Paul: Scary

Nick: "Look in the tea-leaves" she says - Well what would you do? Extra difficulty: Tea bags. That's what we have in the Co-op.

Paul: Earl grey? Without milk?

Nick: Stop taking the piss I've got to deal with 'Miss stupid 2009'² who carries a tape measure with her in case any dark strangers appear who need to be checked for tallness.

² Feel free to alter specifics. 2007 is just a place-holder.

Paul: Does the lovely Cynthia know?

Nick: [Exasperated] Cynthia has nothing to do with this.

Paul: It's obvious. She has designs on your body. It's just a ploy to get see if Mr. clever clogs is clever in the naughty gymnastics department.

Nick: I resent that! I'm one of the few messengers dedicated to awakening the masses from their anaesthetic.

Paul: And how did you 'awaken' the lovely Sandra?

Nick: She's not the 'lovely' Sandra.

Paul: Plain. Flat chested. Cheesegrater – "Cheesewater" Sandra?

Nick: [Pause] A bimbo - Dimbo OK?

Paul: [Sarcastic] Awaken me Oh Master.

Nick: You don't understand. Somebody has to lead - Show an example - Be the oracle.

Paul: Admit it. You were just waiting for her to make a sacrifice on your altar.

Nick: If you'd stop interrupting I'd have told you that I got her to bring in her own tea leaves.

Paul: Then what?

Nick: Then told her what I saw – when I'd swilled round a saucer

Paul: Any old saucer?

Nick: What do you think? No of course not. A '1990 Co-op "ace-autumn"'.

Paul: And what did you see there - Oh Scryer of the saucer?

Nick: Tealeaves.

Paul: [Gipsy-rose-lee] “Beware of tea-leaves.” Scores a big round zero on the Tantric sex scale doesn’t it oh leader of the lame.

Nick: No stupid! I had a look. A careful look. Concentration is everything with the dim. They think it is magic from another spiritual world. They don’t expect Napoleon to turn up on the first date but a hint of Michael Jackson and they’ll be begging.

Paul: How did you learn this?

Nick: Very quickly – Hell hath no fury like... err .. you can’t fight gravity and believe me these girls have dense black holes for brains.

Paul: These?

Nick: Err yes. One bit of the ‘tall dark strangers’ to Sandra and they were all bringing their tea-leaves.

[pause]

Paul: [now contrite] Trapped like a err wabbit.

Nick: A bit like that. It’s unfair. All I wanted to do was educate a bit and suddenly my every word is gospel.

Paul: Why not tell the bimbos to get lost?

Nick: I tried making excuses but it didn’t work. It’s like trying to wipe off something sticky – it just spreads more widely.

Paul: So you made something up about unhappiness in the past and hints of joy in the future and she fell for it.

Nick: [Amazed] How did you know?

Paul: Oh we've all done that. – I do it every day.

Nick: What?!

Paul: Second nature old boy. That's what selling property is all about.

Nick: With tarot cards?

Paul: No stupid.

Nick: Tea-leaves?

Paul: [Exasperated] No. Imagine some lady comes in looking for a little cottage in the town and you haven't got any little cottages in the town. Do you say "This may distwess you but you'd better wemove yourself elsewhere"? Does the wabbit get fed if he does that?

Nick: So you lie.

Paul: No never. – Well not me - I like to [emphasis] educate my clientele. In the moments my computer is supposedly not working I ask them about themselves in my best 'met-you-at-the-garden-party' voice and before you know it they've agreed to have a look at something you've been trying to get rid of for ages.

Nick: And?

Paul: From there it's plain sailing if you can keep up the air of mystery. It doesn't work all the time but people buy houses because they have the urge - never underestimate 'the URGE'. Whatever you do make sure there's a chair in an empty property and sit the customer down and get them to start imagining all the friends they can have visiting and chatting and

complimenting on good sense in buying this err distinctive [quickly] but practical property.

Nick: But that's awful?

Paul: What's awful about that?

Nick: You're just conning these ladies into buying something unsuitable.

Paul: No I'm not. I'm giving them something to live for.

Nick: Foey

Paul: We'll I admit they may have to deal with the builders come to deal with the dry rot but who knows where it will lead?

Nick: You sound like a dating agency.

Paul: Yes that's what I like to do. Wouldn't you like to be a fairy Cupid instead of a squalid part-time Svengali?

Nick: Are you mad! It's dangerous enough as it is. "Can we dim the lights?" "Can we hold hands?" "Loose clothing helps me relax."

Paul: Don't do it then.

Nick: I can't just bring the axe down. They're fanatics. I could be lynched.

Paul: Maybe the estate agents isn't such a bad billet after all.

Nick: You have the Scylla of boredom and I have the Charybdis of dangerous excitement.

Paul: Let's hope there is something less extreme in store... [Mischievously] I tell you what. Perhaps it says something encouraging in your horoscope.

Nick: [pause] I know what it says in yours mate! Beware of friends dropping a box of anvils on you.

Paul: I wish they would. It might give me some ideas for my double-act. It's a desert so far I'm afraid.

Nick: We all have bare patches. I'm still stuck with steam engines.

Paul: I think I'll try a steam engine dialogue then.

Nick: Cheerio 'Stevenson'

Paul: Cheerio 'Madame Zara'

Episode 3

Nick: Hello Paul

Paul: Hello Nick. Done any more painting?

Nick: Not had any time.

Paul: I know the feeling.

Nick: Oh? What have you been up to that takes all your time?

Paul: I'm taking my first steps in show-business.

Nick: [*Hughie Green*] "And now ladies and gentleman a really wonderful act. A young man who has come all the way from Colchester to be with us tonight. What are you going to do for us Paul?"

Paul: Well/ ³

Nick: /Tonight ladies and gentleman, Paul who has come all of the way from Colchester is going to give us impressions of famous estate agents.

Paul: [Pause] Do you want to know or not?

Nick: [contrite] Alright - It's not singing is it?

Paul: No. But I'll have you know that actually I do have a good singing voice – Baritone

Nick: Baritone. Hmmn. That's posh.

Paul: I used to be with a, now don't laugh, a barbershop quartet.

³ / ... / indicates an interruption.

Nick: [Doesn't quite laugh but shows he finds it funny - possibly some miming]
Go on.

Paul: Well that's all there is.

Nick: What were you called?

Paul: Umm The 'Close shaves'

Nick: [Mimes singing with finger clicking and mouth 'woo woo's and head shaking as per OTT up-beat quartet singing.] When was this?

Paul: I suppose you could say it started in a restaurant where another table were being a bit noisy. You know the Rose?

Nick: Yes. Go on.

Paul: Well – my table was the Tabernacle teens – some of us were 20 – we were the subversives - going to the pub after the prayer meeting and that sort of thing. Every night out was unisex but you don't realise how green the grass is on the other side is when you're chained to the straight and narrow. It was high-octane entertainment in those days just going as a bunch of spotty youths to a pub on the other side of town.

[Nick has changed his tune and is a lot more sympathetic]

Nick: Paul, you know I was taking the piss earlier. I didn't realise that you were repressed.

Paul: [Thinks] 'Repressed' I'll have to think about that - There's some truth in that. Still we kept out of drugs and all that.

Nick: And only got to meet nice girls who played bridge

Paul: [Absolutely] Yes [realises this isn't fashionable] Umm yes some lovely girls ... but I'd have liked to tried out the deep end.

Nick: How did you get into this barber shop quartet?

Paul: Ah yes. We were having a meal at The Rose when one of the drunks on another table started singing. Herberts from the local constabulary. "Down by the old mill stream" and naturally I joined in the harmony and before you knew it we'd done it twice. It turns out that there are plenty of coppers who can't stand the infestation of [particular diction] 'soles. Anyway, from that we formed a barbershop quartet, a trio to start with but we learned. There were two coppers, an estate agent and me - I was working for my dad's firm then.

Nick: Sounds fantastic. I'm making notes old son.

Paul: Stop being sarcastic.

Nick: I'm not. Don't you see you were all escapees... .. rejecting your conventions.

[Long pause]

Paul: I see what you're getting at there but you've got it all wrong.

Nick: How?

Paul: Look, [emphasis] you're a revolutionary and political agitator – you won't understand – we were glad to get away from iron rations of life to um 'wooden' rations. Anyway we escaped, but only at weekends.

Nick: Throw off your chains.

Paul: You still don't understand! We didn't have chains we were just well trained. As soon as the chief constable said "heel" the coppers were panting waiting for a biccie.

Nick: And what about the estate agents. I assume that's how you joined the capitalist bourgeoisie.

Paul: No I was one of the bourgeois before I started. Brain dead as per the plan. Then I gradually realised that teens must tell their parents to fuck off.

Nick: "Fuck Off" That's the first time I've ever heard you swear.

Paul: Oh Yes – Look at stupid Paul who doesn't swear. Grow up mister leader of the revolution. I started as a sterile robot and then what happened?

Nick: [cowed] I don't know?

Paul: I'll tell you then sunshine. Pin back your ears.

Nick: [softly] Go on

Paul: So I started as a simple, honest, accounts clerk with no free time because my parents thought that free time meant devil's time. I was allowed to exchange pleasantries with suitable ladies of the opposite sex and occasionally flirt. You have no idea how erotic a glance - an ankle – yes I mean it -an ankle deliberately displayed could be.

Nick: Oppression can affect anybody.

Paul: Listen! So then I was corrupted?

Nick: [Suddenly interested] Corrupted?

Paul: Yes. Go to church on Sunday, prayer meeting on Tuesdays, community service on Fridays and you were OK. That's a horrible straightjacket - I realise it now. But then I was corrupted.

Nick: Yes?

Paul: The barbershop quartet was a stepping stone towards the abyss.[despair]

Nick: Calm down Paul. I'm your friend.

Paul: Dear Nick. Yes you are my friend. You are possibly my best friend – one with whom I can share things I wouldn't with anyone else ... like how you are a brilliant at burrowing when you should be building ... So I'm going to tell you about the abyss.

Nick: [long pause] OK

Paul: So there I am in the quartet and this Robert takes a liking to me. Well we are all good friends who understood each other. You have to be if you're going to rub along.[Very long pause of recollection]

Nick: Rubbing along. So there you were rubbing along with two coppers and an estate agent. Then what happened.

Paul: Would I like to join the estate agents?

Nick: How is that jumping into the abyss? "Read all about it! Man who has wears collar and tie in his sleep joins estate agents"

Paul: There are certain rules for estate agents. Wearing a collar and tie is one of course but that's not a problem for

me. I can have a nice haircut, be clean, polite, helpful and defer to my customers but it turns out there's a lot of grey areas where the grey men are at work scratching each other's backs. Planning applications nodded through, cover-ups, stitch-ups and convenient mistakes. The basic philosophy is get away with as much as you can. All Masons of course.

Nick: That's bad.

Paul: Too f-bloody right.

Nick: Are you in trouble?

Paul: No not as such. But the trap is closing on me.

Nick: What's the problem?

Paul: I could go with the flow. No doubt there would be some perks, but I know I'd always be one of the servants, never accepted by the real thieves.

Nick: So don't do it.

Paul: I used to be harmless now I'm propping up the evil empire of the respectable underworld.

Nick: We're all pawns in the rich-man's game.

Paul: I know the difference between right and wrong. This is wrong. I'll have to leave and get a job filling shelves for your Co-op.

Nick: No. Let's think this one out. There might be alternatives. [pause] Have you thought about turning queen's evidence - shopping the lot of them?

Paul: Yes/

Nick: /No. Too dangerous. Wouldn't work. ...
What about blackmail? Collect the
documentary evidence and get a
bonus?

Paul: No - You need to be a grunting gorilla
to take on these apes.

Nick: Aha! How about? No, I've got a
better idea. Get advice from your dad
– and you must have some good
chaplain, priest, rector or whatever at
your Church who you can discuss it
with.

Paul: Good try Nick. But I can't burden my
father with my temptations. And the
pastor is a flimsy fog-head who won't
offend anyone, let alone apply brain
cells. And before you know it he'll be
using me as a cause celebre - he'd be
so excited about a real problem that
he'd call meetings and stir pots that
haven't got anything in them.

Nick: OK then. Here is my first suggestion:
Have the courage of your position and
refuse to do anything shady and also
make it clear to your boss when you
spot something shady. Then the
problem is his. If he says it will be
OK just say it's against your principles
and refuse to budge.

Paul: That's fighting talk there Nick: You're
the first person that's come up with
anything positive.

Nick: But I'm the only person you've talked
to.

Paul: True, but I'll give you this: You may be
a idling agitator but you can listen for
long enough to reply sensibly. I'll
certainly think about that.

Nick: Thank you Paul. Brains!

Paul: Umm. Brains possibly - More like plenty of time to daydream.

Nick: And my second suggestion.[deliberate 'do you want to know' pause]

Paul: Yes?

Nick: Why don't you become a rector or priest or whatever? You've got the right from wrong bit, you've got the clean and wholesome bit, you come from the right sort of family, and you know you could do a better job than the present bod standing on your head.

Paul: Perhaps one day – Part time. But that's enough worrying about the future for now. Cheerio Nick.

Nick: Cheerio Paul.

Episode 4

- Paul: Hello Nick. Good to see you.
- Nick: Hello Paul. How are you getting on at the estate agents?
- Paul: Let's not talk about that now. If you like we can find out how your cross-stitching with the lovely Cynthia has been going.
- Nick: Well I have tried.
- Paul: Tried what?
- Nick: Cross stitch. I thought I'd show willing.
- Paul: And?
- Nick: [mugging] 'Mr. clumsy' had to give up
- Paul: What! I thought you were getting on well with her.
- Nick: No, I only failed at sewing. Otherwise my needle was all over her pin-cushion.
- Paul: Oh. I don't get much opportunity in the pin-cushion department.
- Nick: Just a little prick.
- Paul: [slow on the uptake] Ha ha. Just a little prick.
- Nick: Jolly good. Now may we continue?
- Paul: Ah yes. I'm pleased to see you as I'd like your opinion on my double act.
- Nick: Double act? [Looks around for 2nd person]

Then...

Charming and curious things happen.

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Merlin lives in Witham, Essex and writes when he's not programming computers. He is what they call a character, but whether it's a ! or ? remains a mystery. Most of his leading characters are strong and positive, although of course the interesting bits are their weaknesses and doubts. A glance at the catalogue shows a wide range of settings. Typically he writes interesting characters in interesting situations so that 'stuff happens' but there will be ideas and issues that hover in full view yet in the background until spotlighted when for many readers that's the moment they realise they've been reading a proper book not just a story.