

The Grass-Eater

By Alexander King

CHARACTERS:

CHARLES - mid-twenties, quiet, kind and gentle.

(Throughout, CHARLES is addressing a male and female audience member, preferably a couple)

Oh yes! No, honestly - that's why I wanted to talk to you. Sarah said you were worried. I wanted to explain.

But firstly... firstly - and you have to believe me here - I am happy.

I know you're concerned and that's why I invited you 'round, but I really am happy.

Tea?

(pause)

Yes! Milk, one sugar isn't it. I remember.

You're still on sweeteners, though, aren't you?

(pause)

Perhaps if I explain? Now... where to start. *(A deep breath)*

Okay, maybe five years ago I realised I was feeling - I don't know, unfulfilled? Like I wasn't really fitting in. I mean, my job - you know, I work at the accountancy firm, low-level, no stress - my job, where I work there are obviously other men.

Blokes, I guess they'd call themselves.

It's not like, I don't know - like a mechanic's workshop. There's not Pirelli calendars hanging everywhere, but still, it's the men. They're THE men, you know? They talk about man things, they tread on each other, they do - what is it called - ah, 'banter'. That horrible way of

talking, where you're cruel and awful to someone and then you say "ah it's just banter" and that somehow makes everything alright.

It's not alright.

They used to try to do banter to me. Used to. Don't anymore.

(Beat)

So anyway, there I am at work surrounded by blokes, and they're all clouds of aftershave and body odour and sweat patches under their arms. I just felt... I feel... like another species, does that make sense?

I can't relate to them.

(pause)

Oh, yes of course there are women there too. But it's the modern age, these women can take care of themselves, they certainly don't need me to defend their honour or what have you. No. I wouldn't feel qualified anyway, if they did. I'd have to politely decline.

Refer them to their line manager I suppose.

No, no. The women - I get on with them. I have a good relationship with almost all the women. I don't think they see me as a threat, you see. They can tell that I'm different and I think they respect that. I hope they do. Not that I'm looking for approval, you understand? We get on.

Well, apart from one. A receptionist. Last year, she... made her interest known. She was quite... aggressive.

I didn't like it.

I dress well, you know, I'm well-groomed. I keep my hair short. I'm always clean shaven. I make a point of it. It's important to take pride in your appearance.

So this girl - this woman - she made her advances and I - um - I kind of rebuffed her, in a nice way, I was... kind.

She didn't take it as well as I would have liked.

She got upset, quite offended. I don't think she was used to being refused by men. And I say that in a respectful way - she's very pretty.

(pause)

No! No, look I knew this would come up. It's not a gay thing. I'm not gay, not at all. I have no interest in men either.

Of course, the lady - the receptionist - she started spreading those rumours. She was hurt. I don't blame her. But it did make work more difficult. Because it's a very hard thing not to prove, you know? How do you prove you're not gay?

(pause)

Well, yes, I suppose so. But that's not an option for me, you see.

So everyone at my workplace thinks I'm gay. I don't have a problem with that. Actually, it helps me because the women know I'm not available - so to speak, and the blokes don't talk to me. Certainly, they don't talk to me about women.

That's good.

(pause)

What do I want? I don't want anything. That's the point.

In Japan, they have a name for us.

Herbivore Men.

We just want to get on with life.

We don't have an interest in pursuing females.

But we care, and we're respectful. Life is hard enough.

It's all to do with risk and reward isn't it? I mean, why risk all that effort, the rejection, the heartache? And the reward is just a good friend of the opposite sex at the end of the day, once the brief fire of passion has burnt out.

(pause)

Well, yes - but it was different for your generation. You don't know what it's like out there nowadays, being single. Online dating, smartphone apps, social media. Social networking! Ha! Networking, I hardly think so... They'd have you believe it's easier than ever to find a life partner, but all they've done is made the marketplace bigger. More accessible. Swipe left, swipe right. The level of competition is so high. Men, sweating and crawling over each other fighting for the prime females.

Disgusting.

And so much... pressure. Pressure to perform. Yes, like that. But also - in work, seeking the next promotion. Playing politics. Screwing over your fellow man for a new job title and a bigger office. Killing yourself to climb the corporate ladder and for what? More anxiety, slowly dying in a fake leather chair, pushing numbers around a spreadsheet.

No.

I'm happy how I am.

(pause)

Well, obviously! I'm human after all. We all need... that. But you know, with the internet...

(laughs) Oh come on! You brought it up! Don't act all coy now! Yes, the internet, the... services for... entertainment shall we say? I am... fulfilled in that regard.

I don't feel I'm missing out.

(pause)

No, I haven't. Why would I need to go to the doctor? I'm not unwell. I'm not depressed. This is a rational decision to live this way.

Look.

In Japan, they did a survey. There, two-thirds of men in their twenties are like me. Herbivore Men. Can you imagine? They say that's why Japan's birth rate is so low nowadays. But is that such a bad thing? If anything, overpopulation is a problem that's everyone's responsibility, what with the planet's resources running out and all that.

(pause)

Hmm? Jessica. Her name was Jessica. Yes, we were in a relationship for a while. She had her things here, pink things and powder that drifted over my dresser and onto my pillow.

Two toothbrushes.

I never let the bristles touch.

That was years ago. I don't really know, to be honest. I think - I really think I wasn't her type of man. She seemed like she wanted someone more... assertive perhaps? I don't know. It wasn't me anyway.

We broke up on good terms.

No, she's not been in touch since. I did hear she got engaged, though. He's a plumber, I think, a bit older than her. I wish her well, obviously.

Everyone deserves to be happy.

(pause)

But that's what I've been telling you! I am! How can it be so hard to believe that I can just be happy on my own, without getting drunk, chasing women around nightclubs and swinging my fists in kebab shops?

(pause)

(Exasperated) But that's what you're implying! That those things are 'normal' behaviour for a man my age. Well, maybe they're common but that doesn't mean I don't have a choice.

We all have a choice! We all have a choice in how we behave!

I... just don't like hurting people, that's all.

I don't like causing hurt.

If I'm happy, and I'm not hurting anyone else, what's the problem?

(pause)

(Angry) Ahhh! So that's what this is all about. Don't you think that's a bit selfish? Is that all you're concerned about? Not having grandchildren? You have Sarah for that. She'll happily

give you babies to bounce on your knee. Her and Darren. Darren! There's a 'normal' man for you! With his... temper... his bloody... rages. Yellow cigarette fingers, broken tooth, can of lager in the back garden Darren. A role model! A REAL man, eh?

(CHARLES breathes, takes stock)

Sorry. Sorry. That's not me. I just... it's hard sometimes. Not inside, not for me, but being different.

I don't think I'm better than anyone else. I don't! It's not piety, it's not... a moral thing. I just want to be left alone. I have different interests.

It just doesn't drive me. Women. Dating. Sex. Career.

I'm comfortable. I have no dependents. I don't want for anything.

(pause)

No.

(pause)

Well.

Maybe I do want for something.

I want you to accept me for what I am.

I want you to accept me, accept US!

There will be more Herbivore Men, year after year.

And we are happy.

We are.

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