

SINGLED OUT

Jane: What on earth am I doing here? I could still back out, couldn't I? Nobody would know or care if I just turned over the engine, pulled out of the car park and went home. To think I'm missing 'Spooks' on the telly for this – unspeakable torture.

I must have watched 50 people go up those stairs in the last half-hour. None of them seemed nervous or shy at all, not even the one or two hovering outside for a last cigarette – they're chatting to each other. They make it look so easy. It's alright for you.

Why are there more women than men? Are women more adventurous? Or braver? If only that were true of me. Or are they more desperate? Almost shocking, how some get dressed for an event like this – a man knows just where he stands with a girl who walks in wearing a spray-on micro-skirt and 5-inch killer heels, doesn't he? I could never do it. I prefer to be less.... conspicuous. Denim seems to be a more popular choice tonight though. There's just the one guy in a suit. That's nice – it looks like he made an effort; or maybe he just wants people to know how busy and important he is – no time to go home and change..... Oh, come on, just get it over with. Get yourself in there and up those stairs.

Barry: This is ridiculous, cowering in the corner, clutching my pint so tightly, my knuckles are white. I want to be invisible. I want a hole to open up in the floor and swallow me. Why didn't I go home and change first? Who comes to a social night in a suit?! What a mortally embarrassing, stupid schoolboy error. I look like a pompous ass.

How does this work anyway? There must be 3 girls to every guy here and they're circling like sharks around a shipwreck. They all seem to know each other. They scurry off to the loo in gangs, shrieking and laughing, to talk about you behind your back. I'm a grown man, I'm supposed to be able to handle myself. So why is this nightmare so utterly, horrifyingly intimidating? I wish I'd gone home instead – it's 'Spooks' on TV tonight.

Jane: Heart pounding. One step at a time. Slowly. Breathe... breathe deeply.... Ladies room on the landing – brilliant. Stop and do the exercise, like the book said. Right.... I'm visualising a calmer, more confident me, poised and elegant, entering the bar as if I'm the guest of honour; smiling warmly, making eye contact, shaking hands if they're offered, exchanging friendly greetings, mingling and chatting; breathing slowly and silently. I'm supposed to let the feeling of quiet, calm confidence wash over me, then sail into the room on a warm and gentle wave of self-assurance.

It's not working.

I'm a bundle of twitching nerves, my throat so tight I'm almost choking. Clammy hands. Hyperventilating. A rush of panic. Hot and cold, all at once. Let go the basin – you won't fall over. Will you? Two girls crashing through the door, falling over each other, giggling and joking about some poor bloke. At least they're having fun.

Don't put it off any longer. Just do it. How bad can it be? It's singles night in the local bar. It's hardly Judgement Day.

Barry: What was I thinking of, coming here – me, the ultimate nerdy geek? The sad dope whose idea of a good night out is... a good night in: 'The Matrix' trilogy on DVD and a takeaway. What would these girls see in me? It cripples me to make eye contact and when I do, they look away, as if they don't want to be noticed, *by me*; they don't want to be engaged in conversation, *by me*; It's not as if chatting with me would be deeply engaging anyway. I'd love to be witty, urbane, charming; instead my mouth goes dry and the self-conscious squeak I manage usually stops the conversation dead in its tracks and sends the girl running off to "powder her nose". Can I look after her drink for her? No thanks, she'll take it with her. Right.

Hello, there's a girl I haven't seen before. She's pretty. Blonde curls, soft eyes, feminine, quiet, even a little... refined. Not the slightest hint of a blood-sucking vamp about her. No flirty hair-flicking, no over-confident hooting and bouncing around, like the others. But her hands are shaking! She made for the bar a bit smartly, perhaps she's a bit of a drinker, gone too long since her last glass of red, or... maybe she's finding the evening as crushingly uncomfortable as I am.

Oh. Well she's clearly not here for the booze – that's a fizzy water she's ordered. I'd smile at her, if only she'd look round. Darn, now there's somebody in the way.

Jane: I made it. I got a drink, now at least I've got something to do with my hands – they won't stop shaking. Oh heavens! Some guy's coming over. Don't panic, stay calm.

Heart lurching, pounding on my ribs. Acid rising up my throat. "Hi," he says. His face is contorting into a huge, sleazy leer. "You can get your coat on, sweetheart, you've pulled!"
What?

Everybody else has backed away, smirking. So much for sisterhood – thank you, ladies. He's moved in much too close, groping across the bar for my hand. There's something rank on his breath. Lord, that's all I need – it's hard enough to be here, without the indignity of being cornered by the house leech. Help me, somebody! Suddenly they're all deep in conversation. Just one man on his own, the other side of the room. The one wearing a suit - he's probably alright. He looks quite... gentle... actually. Will you be my knight-in-shining-armour, rescue this

damsel in distress? I'm staring straight at you. I'm smiling. I'm *pleading* with you with my eyes. Come and rescue me, please!

At least I *think* that's what I'm doing. But you're not responding.

Barry: There's somebody talking to her now. He's right in her face and she's grinning – they're obviously getting on. She's looking over at me now – such a pretty smile. A little raise of the eyebrows in return, see how it plays out. Crisis. *Crash-and-burn, Barry!* Now she's staring at me as if I've just landed from another planet, her eyes are practically *bulging*, casting from left to right. So that's me being given the cold-shoulder again then. Hardly surprising. She's beautiful and I'm nobody's idea of a hot date. Who am I kidding? Why would she be interested in me? Her new friend is making himself at home, stroking her arm, whispering in her ear. I wish I could be that bold.

Jane: This is unbearable! The suit guy is totally ignoring my plea for help and the letch is *touching* me! It's giving me the shivers. Join him for a stroll along the tow-path? *Are you mad?* He whispers in my ear and I get another face-full of his rancid breath. I've got to escape! I know, it's lame, I know, but I'm going to hide in the toilets. He says he'll mind my drink, but this whole nightmare is giving me a headache. I want to take a pill, so the glass comes with me. Quick retreat, back to the landing and the safety of the Ladies room.

Barry: Oh, now that's a surprise. She's just dived into the loo, clutching her drink and pulling an awful face. Perhaps I was wrong and she didn't much like the guy. I'll try and catch her eye again when she comes out. I'll give her a little wave, maybe she'll come over. She's taking a while though. Why do girls always take so long in the loo?

Jane: It's cooler in here and deserted at last; time to calm down, pull myself together. I should try again, but I can't face it. If only the guy in the suit had been willing to bail me out when I needed him – that might have made a difference. He looked, well, almost handsome, I suppose, in an unassuming, restrained sort of way. I think I could have coped with talking to him, but he must have had his eye on a better catch - didn't want to get lumbered with me. That's hardly surprising – I'm plain and dull and too quiet and I can never think of anything to say – what would any decent bloke want with me?

I'll just stick my head out of the door, see what's happening. He's still there. He really is quite good-looking; well-dressed too, and still not talking to anybody else. What's he doing? I think that was a wave. Oh, he must think I'm leaving. I do want to leave, and I didn't exactly need an excuse, but thanks anyway. Nerves aside, it might have been fun meeting you, but the moment seems to have passed. I'll be away then.

Barry: She peeked out of the Ladies. I waved. She pushed the door shut again. Hardly a ringing endorsement of my attractiveness to the opposite sex, was it? Next thing I know, she's gone; disappeared down the stairs and out into the car park. Was it really so dreadful a prospect to contemplate, talking to me? Don't answer that. I can see her through the window, walking towards her car. Elegant and feminine, she looks utterly lovely. I wish I had the guts to speak to her. Wait a minute....

Jane: I can't help myself. Just a quick glance back up at the window, in case he's looking. Oh, gosh, he is! Smile, Jane. Just one smile – don't push it.

Barry: She's looking up, right at me. She's smiling – at me! Such a warm, gentle smile; kind eyes, soft and sweet. Don't make the same mistake again. Don't squander this moment. Take a risk! *Do something!*

Jane: Footsteps behind me. Turn around, slowly. It's him – a little out of breath. "Hi," he says, quietly. "Don't go."