

# Pitchforks & Pina Coladas

by  
G K Kingsley

## Chapter One

When Derek Fitzumbleton sat down for breakfast with his wife that November Monday morning, he had no reason to believe he'd be dining with a transvestite by the end of the week. He also had no reason to believe he'd be staring at a stripper's buttocks by elevenses; but then that was an understandable assumption for a headmaster to make. So what Derek focused on, whilst he buttered his toast, were the more pressing issues that could occupy an ambitious man.

"I think I'll have to back down on the scarecrows," he announced, as he jabbed at his scrambled eggs. "Sandra Lovelock has a point when she says The Call could come from Ofsted any day now. We need to be prepared."

Miranda stood up as he said it, her chair scraping across the mock-tiled floor, and walked surprisingly gracefully for a woman of her generous size over to the sink. As she left the table, a waft of perfume sauntered up Derek's nose and he found himself distracted by the novelty of the smell; but it was only for a split second. After that he discarded the thought. Things like perfume were mere fripperies to occupy the minds of the underwhelmed and he really did have more important things to deal with.

She began to wash up.

"That flasher struck again outside M&S this weekend you know, Derek," she muttered. "Pippa Nelson was there. She said it made her day."

Derek frowned. A wistful tone had crept into her voice which was beginning to seep through to a deeper level in his consciousness. But fifteen years of marriage were not to be sniffed at, so he concluded that a wistful tone could also be ignored and picked up the pupil progress figures by his side instead.

None of this was unusual, of course. Miranda and Derek had ignored each other's conversations for so long it had reached a point where it might have appeared rude if one of them had suddenly taken an interest. It would certainly have destroyed the status quo.

However, Miranda then began to hum.

As Derek surveyed the peaks and troughs of his graphs, his wife's tuneless melody writhed its way across the hills and dales of a song and ate into his psyche like a maggot. Squirm, squirm, squirm, it went, wriggling like a nagging doubt, gnawing and biting, until finally... the moment arrived.

Something, he realised at last, required his consideration. He gave his balding head a good scratch.

First off, Miranda never wore perfume unless it was an important occasion. He'd always been relieved that deodorant was included within her daily routine, but perfume had seemed an unnecessary expense; he had also appreciated her thrift.

Secondly, she never talked about flashers. However this was so beyond the blueprint of their normal conversations that Derek decided it should be put to the side for the time being.

Which still left the third yet most notable item; namely that she absolutely never, ever hummed.

He put his report down on the table and cleared his throat.

"You're looking all dressed up today, darling. Women's Institute? Or have I forgotten something important?"

Miranda turned to look at him and frowned. "I've put your clean underpants in the airing cupboard," she replied, and then dropped her marigolds into the bin and hummed her way out of the room.

By eight o'clock Derek had left the civilised sanctuary of Cockerby Town, bracing himself for another working day in the rural backwater of Lower Bushey, blissfully unaware of what was yet to come.

By ten to nine, the playground was packed with screaming children.

From their lofty location five feet three inches above the ground Derek's eyes surveyed his financially famished domain, and he prepared himself for another week.

*Fuck 'em! Fuck 'em all!* he thought in quick succession, and then waited for the calming wash of indifference to soothe his soul. It was a daily ritual he had carried out ever since he'd been appointed and it had served him well for seven years. Some might think it to be a disturbing strategy for an educationalist, but in truth it had nothing to do with a troubled mind yet to be ensnared by the CRB checking system. No, in fact Derek had a lot of time for fastidious record keeping, and he therefore wholly approved of the spending of millions of

pounds each year to verify that nobody was a problem. That sort of thing meant that a box could be ticked and he liked ticking boxes very much. He also liked percentages, pie charts, and graphs that went up on the right hand side... But all that was by the by. For what Derek had really struggled with as soon as he'd started at the school – aside from the mildew and peeling paint – was a frustration that knew no bounds. Despite all that he had scrutinised, measured and tracked, the young buggers within had pursued a passion for mediocrity that had fought his efforts at every turn. And so, as with seven years' worth of previous Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, he felt that this Monday was no exception.

As the phrase formed in his head for a second time, a pair of enormous four year old eyes frowned back. With an awkward flush, Derek realised that he had unwittingly mouthed his thoughts. In an effort to cover his tracks, he said out loud, "Fun, fun, fun," making a big play of shaping the word carefully with his lips, and then waved to the Reception teacher who was on duty. She shot him an unforgiving glare and looked at her watch. Only ten minutes playtime left, the gesture said; why don't you focus on your paperwork, Mr Fitzumbleton, and leave the kids' stuff to us? Derek nodded. Perhaps she was right. A coffee would put him back on track and he could show his face again in a few minutes for the sake of a bit of PR.

His decision took him back inside, past his secretary's office, and on towards the musty hub of the school. As the front door clunked shut somewhere far behind, Derek hoped without conviction to find the staff room empty and was amply rewarded for his realism to find it wasn't. Sandra Lovelock's sloping hanger-like shoulders came into view and he stopped in his tracks with a shudder.

Her beady eye froze him to the spot.

"Ah, Mr Fitzumbleton, I was hoping you were in. There is something I need to discuss with you."

Derek cringed under the withering stare and braced himself. What Miss Lovelock's bony middle-aged exterior hid was not to be underestimated. It was said that she could sniff a lie from forty metres, could spot an articulated dodge several seconds before it occurred, and had inclinations that only the most unlikely looking people could have – which she also pursued.

For two whole seconds he withstood the severity of her glower, dying a little inside as each one ticked by, but finally its power became too strong. His eyes darted south and landed squarely on her chest. Despite his years of training, Derek did a double take.

"Well...quite," slipped from his lips. There was little of note to the frilly shirt, but the same could not have been said of the leather clad 'A' cup covertly poking through an

unbuttoned gap underneath. If its nose had been any pointier, he'd have sworn it was giving him a sniff.

Horrified, he diverted his gaze to a set of instructions on how to unblock the photocopier and cleared his throat.

"I'll get us a drink, shall I?" he mumbled, and watched from the corner of his eye as she looked down at her chest and flushed. It took a while for Sandra to nod and Derek gave his chin a thoughtful rub; this was not an opportunity to miss. "Not sure if I've got time for a chat though, Miss Lovelock," he added slyly, striking whilst her confusion was hot. And then felt himself relax a little further as she continued to try to reacquaint one side of her shirt with the other. He let one more second tick by for the sake of good manners, and turned, relieved, to do battle with the drinks machine instead.

The options presented were predictable, but this was as far as the contraption ever allowed one to take things for granted. He cast his eye down the list, giving it some careful thought. Two days of unbroken peace across the space of a weekend tended to make this purveyor of refreshment a flamboyant but unreliable affair. Derek made his selection and crossed his fingers for good luck.

A disconcerting gurgle erupted from the appliance, and he gingerly reached in and pulled out a steaming brown plastic cup. He looked at the contents with consternation.

It had to be said that the liquid inside was not what he was expecting. True, it was hot and wet, but at that point depiction and reality then diverged. Concern for customer satisfaction clearly stopped at mouth watering descriptions and depended, thereafter, on some sort of warped equivalent of the placebo effect. Derek risked a sniff from a distance and grimaced. Well, he knew nothing about consumer rights, but the Geneva Convention would surely have condemned the stuff as a breach of human rights.

It was a sobering notion, and one that also then made him wonder just how many people it took for a conflict to be termed a war; for Miss Lovelock's furious stare had begun to burn a sizeable hole in his back. What had felt like a minor conquest the week before, when he'd boldly refused to let her remove the infants' scarecrow exhibits, was now mutating into a foolish attempt at bravado.

Derek heaved a very deep and heartfelt sigh, and resigned himself to his lot. There was only one way to move forward; to assume that accepted rules of engagement were in play – the Geneva Convention being, after all, a well respected *modus operandi*. It was time to wave the white flag.

“Do you have milk in your coffee?” he asked, turning round to face Sandra properly, aware that she would have recovered from her embarrassment by now. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think to ask if you preferred black or white.” He glanced briefly again at the strange fluid purporting to be Costa Rica’s finest and scowled.

“I don’t drink coffee, I drink tea,” she replied, her clothing all ship shape and Bristol fashion once more. “But you never thought to ask that either, did you?”

Her eyes challenged him and then broke away, flicking with derisory disdain towards the ceiling. Derek looked for a third time at the contents of his cup and finally realised with abstract relief that he must have chosen chicken soup by mistake. Well, at least the floating green bits now made sense.

About to offer her a tea instead, he bent over to read the instructions more carefully just as the sound of sensible shoes squelched on the hall linoleum. Mrs McFreece, the school secretary – a.k.a. The Fridge, to those in the know, which didn’t include Mrs McFreece – appeared at the doorway and even Sandra seemed to sink into the background.

“Ashley Milner’s mother has just called. They are running late,” she announced, the Scottish tone of disapproval unmistakably evident.

Mrs Milner had not endeared herself to the daunting secretary when Ashley had arrived three weeks before. And with Mrs McFreece now looking with such disdain upon the poor child, Derek had not yet plucked up the courage to ask to see the previous school’s pupil notes. He sighed and allowed divine inspiration to descend.

“Well, we’ll have to mark Ashley down as late, Mrs M. I don’t like the effect it will have on our statistics any more than you do, but honesty is the best policy. The data must be accurate, otherwise what point is there in collecting it in the first place?”

He knew it was the right thing to say. There weren’t many similarities between him and Mrs McFreece, but a love of all things measurable was at least one. The Fridge issued a curt nod of approval and then turned and swayed her ample hips back to her office.

“Well... quite,” Derek sighed for the second time, taking advantage of the lull in Miss Lovelock’s headlong attack, and sidestepped his way to the door. “Perhaps a swing around the playground in the name of public relations before the day starts will help things along, eh?”

Sandra’s eyes narrowed. She had clearly recovered her momentum now that the secretary had disappeared and it was a look that shouted, ‘You lily-livered coward, I’ve asked for a couple of minutes of your time and you’re dodging me.’

It was a fair appraisal of the situation and Derek felt it should be granted recognition... but only once he'd escaped out of the room.

Taking a deep breath, Derek stepped outside for the second time that day and felt the chill sting his cheeks.

He looked around. It was a scene he'd seen more times than he cared to acknowledge and his eyes bounced over the patchy tarmac and decaying basketball net and spotted instead that only a few children were wearing outside clothes. He made a mental note to send a letter home. It never hurt to remind the parents that coats, hats and gloves were recommended. Actions like that provided excellent evidence to the powers that be – a.k.a. Ofsted – that he regularly communicated with his flock. They also reinforced the notion that the school sat at the heart of the community. It would be another tick in a box.

“Mr Fitzumbleton!” the caustic cry of The Fridge broke his train of thought.

As one, the groups of chattering mothers instantly huddled together, sympathetic looks darting in his direction. Mrs McFreece never graced the playground with her presence unless it was absolutely necessary; something was afoot.

“There's a phone call for you!” she added, and Derek, having now spotted the fierce anticipation glowing in her eyes, realised that the playground empathy was misplaced.

Oh... my... God... he thought to himself. This is it. This is the call. *The Call!* The glint of suppressed excitement shining across at him – a glint so clearly out of place on such an unenthusiastic face – was surely proof enough. He raised an eyebrow and Mrs McFreece nodded back. Derek's heart skipped a beat. At last! His chance to show the rest of the world how much he had achieved was finally at hand.

Barely aware of the skip in his step, he trotted across, thanking The Fridge for holding the door open for him, and darted into his office.

“He's on line three,” she puffed, following closely behind, and then bent down to put the call through before adding in a rare moment of solidarity, “I'll go and get us a coffee, shall I?”

Under normal circumstances such an offer would have thrown Derek off the mark, but nothing was going to distract him now. He managed an almost casual nod, straightened his jacket out unnecessarily, and then leant across to pick the handset up.

It was a short call, abrupt and perhaps intended to intimidate, but to Derek it meant the answer to all his prayers. They, a Mr Barnaby de Ravel and a Ms Diana Bonniface, would

be arriving on Thursday. It would be a full two day inspection. No stone would be left unturned.

To all but the most foolhardy it was a call that would have spelled impending doom, but to Derek Fitzumbleton it meant redemption. On paper – well, more on screen and particularly in multicoloured graphs – the school looked in reasonable shape. The bar charts and scatter diagrams for the recently completed academic year were all sloping upwards, past national norms and up into the cloud topped peaks of pretty good.

Derek had watched with patient but mounting excitement as this astonishing performance had shone through despite the pupils' best efforts. He had spotted the statistical aberration early on. And, not daring to question openly what had happened in Lower Bushey eleven years before, had wondered if a nomadic group of geniuses had somehow affected the gene pool. However, he was also aware that a travelling circus boasting a bearded woman and some reject clowns must have followed closely behind. The figures he'd been looking at only that morning had made it clear that all would be counterbalanced when the following July arrived. Next summer's school leavers were going to be the worst there'd ever been. With the official statistics looking fantastic for only another eight months, the time for an inspection was now or not at all.

He replaced the handset and breathed in, almost smelling promotion and the overpopulated corridors of a thriving urban school.

"Mrs M.!" he called, the lift of his voice unnecessary as she was already hovering by the door. "Rally the troops. Our time has finally come."

Like Rumpelstiltskin, The Fridge did a little jig and scrunched her fists up with glee.

"Shall I call your wife to let her know you will be late tonight?" she asked.

Derek nodded. Monday nights were WI nights, she wouldn't mind a bit... Although, he then pondered, feeling the glow of success beginning to warm his belly, it might be nice to give her the news himself...

"Actually, Mrs M.," he mused, pausing only briefly before making up his mind, "ask Miranda to call me back. I'd like to tell her the news myself after I've spoken to the staff."

If nothing else, he thought with satisfaction, it would give her a decent reason to hum.

Having briefed the teachers, fielded their horror-struck questions, and once again congratulated himself on being so well prepared, Derek decided to give his head some air.

All was going to plan so far.

John Bentwick, the school's Chair of Governors, had been bumbling but supportive. "Don't worry," he'd said. "Yer yields 'ave been good; yer tracking yer productivity; and yer don't get involved in the teaching." Derek had wondered what he'd meant by the last comment, but consoled himself by acknowledging that the man had never been one for words. Teachers teach, he thought, leaders lead, and governors around here tend to farm.

And now, with a petrified hubbub buzzing within the school, a bit of calm was what was needed to prepare his thoughts for the next leg of his career.

He stepped back into the chilly morning, his breath puffing great billows of warm air into the ether, and cast a disparaging eye across his current realm. This may be my domain for now, he contemplated, but it won't be for much longer.

"Fuck 'em, fuck 'em all," he muttered to himself, smiling; and for once the words were coated with a smug sheen.

A wood pigeon sounded from the other side of the playground, but Derek ignored it and continued to revel in his projected success. Now was not the time to worry about a lurking dive-bomber. The little sod may have bombarded him all summer but that sort of rural stuff would soon be at an end. For a couple of minutes, he could allow himself to dwell on the exciting things ahead; things that had nothing to do with country life; things that meant he could once again be proud of his career. Things like concrete and lots of classrooms. That was what he was looking forward to. Pupils by the hundred; parents by the score; respect and admiration by the...

Ching! The sound of the school gate clinked in his ears.

Derek dragged himself from his reverie and took in the attractive, heavily made up blonde now strutting his way. His eyes widened in surprise. The loincloth length skirt was one thing; the flouncy, fly away material acting suspiciously like a blouse certainly another. But the tuning knobs pointing out were what really proved this woman was in touch with nature on a chilly autumn day. Inexperienced in such sophisticated ways, Derek did the only thing a man could do; he stared.

"And who is this handsome devil, Ashley?" she cooed to the child scuttling by her side. The overly emphasised aitches landed in his ears and, to his chagrin, Derek felt his face turn pink. The pair of long tanned legs came to a halt in front of him.

“I’m Derek,” Derek managed, but only just. For as he said it, he found he had to look up and quickly realised just how tall this corker was.

Her lipstick-laden lips spread into a wide smile.

“Well, hello, Derek. I’m delighted to make your acquaintance. My name is Mabel Milner.”

“Mum...” Ashley whispered, frowning with embarrassment, “this is Mr FitzTumbleton... He’s our head teacher...”

Dazzled by the wanton sexuality now pointing directly at him, Derek barely registered the introduction.

Mabel Milner now lifted an eyebrow. “Ooooh,” she groaned. “I like a good ‘ead, meself. Makes all the difference, don’t you think?...”

It took a second for the complimentary nature of the words to sink in but Derek had already found his blush deepening to a crimson glow. Desperate to regain his composure, he dragged his eyes away from the bewitching sight and looked instead at the clean black trousers, sensible shoes and androgynously laid out features of the youngster he’d been ignoring. An unexpected panic ballooned.

Oh my God! he thought. Was this a boy or a girl? So unisex was the clothing these days he realised he had no idea. Cursing his cowardice for not reading the pupil notes earlier, Derek armed himself with what he hoped would elicit a gender specific response.

“So, Ashley,” he muttered, praying, “are you involved in the training tonight?”

Football training always took place on a Monday and for a second Derek was sure that, despite the politically incorrect assumption, the youngster’s reply would tell him all he needed to know. Unfortunately, the dismissive shrug that came back didn’t even give him a clue.

“Not into footie, then,” he struggled on, but Mrs Milner’s hand had already begun to reach across to grasp the child’s fingers and guide them both towards the front door. Two innocent eyes stared back and to his despair Derek realised that he had little choice but to give up. “Well, do take yourselves inside. Mrs McFreece will register you in,” he muttered, regretfully aware that it would mark the end of this extraordinary exchange.

As the words slipped out, a vision of Miranda appeared in his mind, her bountiful proportions and regal hairstyle the antithesis of what was before him now. There was no doubt, he conceded, that both women had their strengths. But the devoted nature of his wife was not to be overlooked. She needed him. And although it felt an onerous duty at times for one who had so many other responsibilities, he liked being needed... Yes, he rallied

internally, whilst one eye continued to linger on the toned brown thighs walking off, he should be grateful for the angel fluttering in his conscience. It was an appropriate reminder to have. And despite his wife's inexplicable humming earlier, he was struck by a tiny tinge of guilt.

“On second thoughts,” he mumbled, pulling himself together and suddenly becoming aware of the weightier implications of what he'd just said; The Fridge was going to need to be kept under control for the next few days. “Let me see you in...”

But as this magnanimous offer reached its audience, a series of not entirely unpredictable but still unfortunate events then occurred.

Mrs McFreece opened the front door. A gust of wind eddied across the playground. A piece of loose material fluttered upwards. And Derek's last thought, before The Fridge condemned a rare pleasure to the annals of never-to-be-mentioned-joys, was: Good Lord! Buttocks before break...

End of Chapter 1

Thank you so much for taking the time the first chapter of *Pitchforks & Pina Coladas*. Please feel free to provide a review or feedback via my website: [www.gkkingsley.com](http://www.gkkingsley.com).



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