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RICHARD
OSMAN



The
IMPOSSIBLE
Fortune



PENGUIN
VIKING

They show you how to make bombs on the internet. If you know where to look.

What to buy, where to buy it from. How to fit the whole thing together. There are even videos. Men in balaclavas with screwdrivers. Soldering wires on tidy workbenches in breeze-block garages.

They don't really tell you about the risks. But the risks stand to reason. Be careful with explosives, that doesn't need to be spelled out to anyone, surely? No one needs to say, 'Don't try this at home,' do they?

There are instructions for big bombs, small bombs, nail bombs, chemical bombs, all the bombs you could ever want to make.

Small to medium was the right choice here. Stable enough to carry around, powerful enough to kill.

In the end the easiest thing to do was go to one of the websites that does all the work for you. Custom-make the bomb to your specifications, deliver it, even help you to place the thing if that's what you need. This particular company had received very good reviews. They even offered a money-back guarantee if the bomb failed to go off. They're called 'Boom or Bust'.

It's not cheap, when you add up the expertise, the manufacturing costs, the delivery and, most expensive of all, the secrecy of the whole thing. If you want to know the actual cost of a human life,

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it's somewhere around twenty-seven thousand pounds. But no tax or VAT. For the obvious reasons.

Worth the extra few quid though. When the bomb finally goes off, money is not going to be an issue, is it?

It's not all about money, of course. Quite the opposite in some ways.

Okay, then, no time to waste.

Time is ticking, and it's not the only thing.

Joyce

It's been a while since I wrote, I know that. I'm ever so sorry.

You must have been wondering where I'd got to? Run away to the Bahamas with a police dog handler perhaps? That is actually a dream I had the other night. Then I woke up because Alan was barking at a squirrel he'd seen out of the window.

It's just that I've been so busy with the wedding, I haven't had time to think. It's been a whirlwind.

There was the florist, there was the cake – how can a cake be that expensive? It's just eggs and sugar and a bit of marge, isn't it? I know it's decorated, but still. Then there was the dress, that was quite a fun bit, we all had a Buck's Fizz. I even went to a nail bar – I'd seen nail bars, of course, but I'd always been too shy to go in. They were very nice, and perhaps I'll go again if somebody else gets married.

Tomorrow is the day. A Thursday wedding? I know. What is it with us and Thursdays?

It's not every day your only child gets married, is it? Some people around here, they have grandchildren getting married, but not Joanna, she took her time, and I think that was probably for the best. Whatever I might have said to

the contrary over the years. To think this time last year she was still with the football chairman?

Before Paul.

Joanna and Paul met online. People – well, Ron – often tell me I should do online dating, but I worry that everyone would just be after my credit card details. Ibrahim told me I must never tell people Alan’s name in the park because they can use the information to steal your password. I said that I don’t use Alan’s name in any of my passwords, but he was insistent. So if people ask me Alan’s name I say he’s called Joyce. And if they then ask me my name, I bid them a polite goodbye.

I mentioned the florist and the cake and the dress and so on, but I didn’t mention that Joanna and I have *rowed* about all of them, and plenty of other things besides. For example, there are to be no hymns, just ‘Backstreet Boys’. It got to the point where I had to say, ‘If you don’t want me to help, just tell me,’ and Joanna said, ‘I don’t want you to help, Mum,’ and that set me off crying, and then that set Joanna off crying, and she said of course she wanted me to help, and I said I know I interfere, I know, and poor Ibrahim walked into the middle of this whole scene, and then backed slowly out of the room. I’ve said it before, Ibrahim is no fool, except when it comes to dogs and passwords.

Joanna and I have different ideas about weddings, that’s to be expected. If we have different ideas about gluten, we’re going to have different ideas about most things. There’s my way of doing things (honed over a long and happy lifetime) and then there’s Joanna’s way of doing things. What Ron calls ‘the London way’.

The very first row was about forty-five seconds after she and Paul told me they were getting married. I was thrilled. I mean, it was fairly soon after they'd met, and you hear all sorts of stories on Netflix, don't you, but I was thrilled nonetheless. Paul is lovely, not at all like the people Joanna usually dates, who seem to be, largely, millionaires or Americans. Now I have nothing against either millionaires or Americans, far from it, look at George Clooney, for example, but variety is the spice of life, and Paul is a professor at a university (only Middlesex, but even so). And being a professor is a job for life in the way that being a football chairman or a millionaire isn't.

So, the first row.

I'd given Joanna a hug, and I'd given Paul a hug, and I asked Joanna if it was going to be a big wedding, and she said absolutely not, no, she wanted a small, intimate wedding, and I said, I can't remember the words precisely, but something like, 'Oh, that's a shame, but never mind,' something very neutral, you know me, and she said, 'What's a shame?' She said that very politely, because Paul was there, but I could tell that trouble was brewing, so I thought, well, I'll just defuse this, and I said, 'Oh, don't listen to me, I just thought, as an older bride, there might be lots of people who would want to come,' and she said, again, keeping her cool, 'An older bride?' and I thought, you've done it now, Joyce, and I said, 'No, not older, it's just a lot of people, if they get married at your time of life, it's a second wedding, after a divorce,' and, again, I could tell that hadn't helped. Paul said something at this point, but neither of us was listening because we knew we were at a very delicate

stage in our argument, Joanna smiled (not with her eyes though, that's how you can tell, isn't it?) and said a small wedding suited her, and it was her wedding, so that's what was going to happen. I saw her point, but you know me, my head was full of bridesmaids, and handsome ushers, and bouquets, and dancing. Something like *Bridgerton*, if you've seen it. I could see a big crowd of happy friends, all wiping away tears and complimenting my hat. I could see Elizabeth, Ron and Ibrahim with me. I'd be on the front row; they could sit behind. They could lean forward and tell me how beautiful I looked. This was all going around my head, when I said, 'I'm sure you know best. You always do, don't you?' At this point Joanna asked Paul to go and make us all a cup of tea.

Written down like this, I do see I might have handled it differently.

Joanna came in very close and told me she wasn't going to lose her temper, because Paul had never seen her really lose her temper, and she thought it was probably best to get eighteen months or so into the actual marriage before he saw her in full flight (it wasn't the time, but I wanted to say she was absolutely right about this. By the time Gerry first saw me really unleash, we were living in a three-bed in Haywards Heath, and I was pregnant, so it was far too late for him to get cold feet). Then she said she was having a small wedding, with no fuss but a lot of love, and I said, and I'm aware I shouldn't have said anything at all, that a big wedding isn't a fuss, and that perhaps she wasn't thinking straight, and Paul walked back in and asked where the milk was, and we both said, 'Fridge,' without taking our eyes off each other.

I knew she was right, by the way, I really did. But I've been excited about her wedding since before she was born, and I've played it through in my head so many times, and that's why I was being unreasonable. I see all that now, but I didn't see it then. When Gerry and I were married, we couldn't afford a big wedding. It was a lovely day, but it was small. Just our parents, our neighbours from Number 17 (but not from Number 13, due to an incident with a hedge trimmer), Gerry's best man from work, a few of my nurse friends and two cousins who wouldn't take no for an answer. We had sandwiches in the pub (private room) afterwards and we were both back at work the next day.

So, anyway, I told Joanna all this. I knew I was on the back foot, and thought that if I mentioned Gerry it might buy me some time. And then she leaned in and hugged me, and she said, 'I keep imagining Dad walking me down the aisle,' and, well, I didn't have to imagine that, because I've imagined it so many times it's become real to me, and I hugged her back, and I realized that life can't always be *Bridgerton*.

So Joanna was crying, thinking about her dad, and I was crying, thinking about him too, and Paul walked back in with two cups of tea and said, 'I couldn't find the sugar either, but I was too scared to ask,' which is just what Gerry would have said, and then I realized I didn't care about a big wedding or a small wedding, I only cared about my beautiful daughter and this lovely man. Though, small or not, Joanna couldn't stop me buying a new hat.

Paul gave us both our teas, and a tissue each, and I told Joanna I loved her, and she told me she loved me, and Paul

said, 'For future reference, where is the sugar?' and I said the cupboard above the microwave, and Joanna asked if there were any jewels or cocaine in my microwave, or a gun perhaps, and I said no. It's been a quiet year in that regard.

We still meet every Thursday, of course, Elizabeth, Ron, Ibrahim and I, and we're in and out of each other's flats on a daily basis (less so with Elizabeth – she still needs a bit of time), but we've managed to stay out of any real trouble for a while now.

I told Joanna that Elizabeth, Ron and Ibrahim would be so excited for her, and that they would understand it was a small wedding, so there wouldn't be invitations for them, and Joanna said that of course they were invited, and I said, 'That's too much, a small wedding is a small wedding, and there must be other people who should be invited first,' and then Joanna said, 'Mum, when you say you want a "big wedding", how many people do you mean?' and I said, 'Well, about two hundred, that's the number in my head,' and she laughed. She said that her friend Jessica (Jacinta? Jemima?) had eight hundred people at her wedding, in Morocco.

And so I asked Joanna what she thought a *small* wedding was and she said, 'About two hundred, Mum.'

And so there we have it. Joanna is having the small wedding she has always wanted, and I am having the big wedding I have always wanted. Sometimes it pays to be different from your children.

I then asked if Bogdan and Donna could come, or perhaps Chris and Patrice, and Joanna told me not to push my luck, and that they could come to the evening do, which

would be four hundred-odd. That's some small wedding, Joanna.

Anyway, my wedding clothes are ironed and laid out on the spare bed. I keep going in and looking at them. My new hat is in a box. Mark from Robertsbridge Taxis has got hold of a minibus to take us all to the venue tomorrow. It's not a church, which, again, in my dreams it had been, but a lovely house in the Sussex countryside, which is actually much more beautiful than a church would have been, and has taught me you mustn't always trust your dreams. Or that you must allow others to have their dreams instead.

So next time you hear from me I will be a mother-in-law. Also, Paul's dad, Archie, is a widower, early eighties, with a moustache and the air of someone who needs to be looked after. I can see from the table plan that I am sat next to him on the top table.

Because if trouble has been in short supply, so has love.

So here's to tomorrow, and here's to love, and to no trouble.

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THURSDAY

Elizabeth is starting to feel again. Precisely what she is starting to feel, she couldn't say. But there's something there, and it's not just the brandy. She's on alert, but, as yet, with no idea why.

To her left, Ron raises a pint to the Sussex sunset. 'I've been to a lot of weddings, mainly my own, but that was the best yet. To Joanna.'

'To Joanna,' says Ibrahim, raising a whisky. During the ceremony he had cried even more than Joyce.

'And to Paul,' says Joyce. 'Don't forget Paul.'

'Hell of a speech his best man made,' says Ron.

The best man. Elizabeth has been thinking about him.

'He was nervous,' says Joyce.

'Either way,' says Ron, 'you don't throw up. It's not your wedding, mate.'

'He pulled focus,' agrees Ibrahim.

Even before the unfortunate vomiting, there was something off about the man. Was that what Elizabeth has been feeling? She could have sworn he looked at her at one point. Just a glance but a deliberate one.

'What did you make of it all, Elizabeth?' Ibrahim asks.

Elizabeth thinks for a while, and musters a small smile. The smile is real, she knows that, and she knows that one