



What's Not to Like?

It all started when Stevo fell in love. We were in the middle of an *X-Files* marathon weekend. It was about four o'clock on Sunday morning and we'd got halfway through season three. We'd paused the DVD player so that Digger could put some waffles in the toaster and Jim and I could chip away at our long-standing argument about which episodes were better. Jim liked the 'monster-of-the-week' stand-alone episodes; I preferred the continuing story about the government/extraterrestrial conspiracy.

'It's the show's *whole point*, it's what ties the *whole world* together,' I said, sitting forward in my comfy flowered chair so that my feet touched the ground, and waving my hands in emphasis. 'You need a central mythology, something to believe in, otherwise there's no continuity. Without the conspiracy the show wouldn't have lasted two seasons. Look at *Girl from Mars*—'

'Don't bring your work into this, Fil. A comic book is different from a TV show.' Jim tossed his long hair behind his shoulder and had that suppressed grin that meant he

knew he was winding me up. 'Only losers and nerds read comic books.'

'Losers and nerds!' I exploded, loving every minute of it. I looked to Stevo for his customary support in this argument. He was sitting on one end of the couch, staring at the paused TV and biting one of his fingernails.

Digger came into the room and plunked a plateful of waffles on to the already crowded coffee table. He squeezed honey from a plastic bear on to two of them, put them together to make a waffle sandwich, and settled himself on the couch. Digger always sat in the middle, and his weight made the ancient cushions tilt up a little bit at either end. I'd drawn a caricature of this – big bearded Digger in the middle of the bowed couch, with slim Jim and slight Stevo perched on either side, dangling in the air. It hung, framed, behind the couch.

I plucked a waffle from the pile and took a joyful bite from the corner of it. 'Look, all I'm saying is that people like continuity and consistency, even in fiction. Look at you and me, for example – we've been having this same argument since we were in school.'

'Popular, were you?' asked Digger, reaching for the honey bear again.

'There are more important things than popularity,' Jim told him. 'Particularly being right. Look, Fil, even you have to admit that it's a hell of a lot more exciting to see, say, a human-eating Flukeman bred in nuclear waste than to catch yet another half-glimpse of some dead aliens.'

'I've got something to tell you guys,' said Stevo suddenly. Something about his voice made me put down my waffle.

I'd had a funny feeling about Stevo all night. He'd been off, withdrawn, even quieter than usual.

I looked at him. He was biting his lip and his compact body was perched stiffly on the couch, as if he were preparing himself for some sort of blow.

‘What?’ Jim asked. ‘Don’t tell me you’re going to take my side instead of Fil’s in this for once.’

A long pause followed. If it were a comic, it would be drawn as four still panels – no words, just close-ups of our faces. Jim framed in long brown hair, smiling and in his element. Digger the opposite physical type, chosen for contrast, with sharp eyes and waffle crumbs in his beard. Stevo, the focus of the scene, his high cheekbones casting dramatic shadows, his black eyes narrowed in an advance wince. And me, the character who reflected the dawning understanding of the reader, my eyes widening, my brows shooting up, my hair electric blue and the knowledge clear on my face.

Nothing was going to be the same ever again.

‘I can’t stay for series four,’ Stevo said.

Digger frowned.

‘Wimping out, are ya?’ Jim, the only one who hadn’t started to twig, reached for the remote.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Stevo. ‘It’s just that I need to get home because I’ve got . . . er, to meet someone later.’

‘Work?’ I asked.

‘Uh, no.’

‘Plumber?’ asked Jim.

‘No.’

‘Your mum coming over from Hong Kong?’ Digger asked, and I knew him well enough to hear through his nonchalance.

‘No, it’s not my mum. It’s, er, for lunch. A date.’

It had been quiet before. It was twenty past four in the morning, after all. But now it was Quiet, capital Q, the

kind evoked in art by vast landscapes, huge skies muffled with clouds, everything dark and unmoving.

‘You what?’ said Jim.

‘I’ve got a lunch date. We’ll probably go for a walk afterwards. Fly some kites, if it’s not raining.’

More Quiet.

‘You have a date?’ I asked.

‘Yes.’

Stevo looked as if he wanted to flee or, barring that, to dive under the couch and hide there with the lost crisps and forlorn fuzz balls. Shy Stevo. I felt a wave of affection for him, strong enough to make me suppress my dismay.

‘Stevo, you sly dog, we never even suspected,’ I said, and I smiled. A big, crazy, I-am-so-so-ecstatic caricature of a smile, which normally wouldn’t fool anyone, let alone Stevo, but I saw him seize on it.

‘It’s – we met on the plane back from San Francisco when I went to see my brother and we’ve sort of been seeing each other since, and I wanted to introduce you guys but, you know, I didn’t want to jump the gun. It’s early days.’ His relief was palpable. I wondered how long he’d been keeping this a secret.

‘Does this mean that you have also been having sex?’ Digger asked.

I’d never seen Stevo blush so hard. ‘Might have been.’

Digger punched Stevo on the shoulder. ‘Nice one, Stephen.’

Jim was staring at Stevo as if he were Flukeman. I dug an HB pencil out from behind my chair cushion and threw it at him. It left a faint black mark on his forehead and when I had his attention I gave him a pointed look through my manic smile.

‘Oh,’ he said. I watched him rearrange his features

into a more socially acceptable configuration. 'So, er, well, what's her name?'

I caught my breath.

'Um . . . Brian.'

Jim went back to staring.

'He's great,' Stevo said. 'Such an amazing guy. He used to do voiceovers for cereal ads but now he's a – um – a mortgage broker. You'll – I'm sure you'll like him.'

'That's cool,' I said, despite the heaviness settling in my chest.

'You went to San Francisco two months ago,' said Digger. He exchanged glances with me. I spent more time with Stevo than any of the rest of us; we both drew for Union Publishing Corporation comics, though on different titles. And yet he'd never once mentioned Brian.

It must be serious.

'Anyway,' Stevo said, 'I won't be able to make our gaming session on Thursday night. It's Brian's dad's birthday. I'm really sorry.'

'Right,' said Jim. 'Right. Well, okay.'

Stevo stood. 'Okay, well, I should go home now and get some sleep. Thanks for being so happy for me, guys.'

'Are you kidding?' I said. 'We're thrilled for you, Stevo. You wanna rub some of that luck off on the rest of us?'

He laughed his usual hesitant chuckle. 'Later, dudes. See you Wednesday for the pub quiz.'

We waited until we'd heard the front door close before we said anything else.

'Shit,' said Digger.

'You can say that again,' Jim said. 'What's all this Brian crap?'

'You didn't know Stevo was gay?' I asked.

‘I never really thought about it.’

‘Men,’ I said. ‘You’re so unobservant.’

‘Hey, you never knew he preferred *Babylon 5* to *Deep Space Nine*,’ Jim pointed out.

‘At least I noticed him sitting up straighter every time Jean-Luc Picard came in shot,’ I countered.

‘I thought he was girding his loins in case you did your Borg impression.’

‘Jim! Fil!’ Digger broke in. ‘You seem to have missed the big point here. Stevo. Has got. A *boyfriend*.’

That shut us up.

‘And he’s having sex with him,’ Digger added.

One of the side effects of being an artist is that you have far too visual an imagination. I quickly looked at the pattern on my chair.

Stevo’s sexuality didn’t bother me. I’d always known he was gay, though I’d considered him more of a theoretical than a practising homosexual. Sort of like how Digger, Jim and I were theoretical heterosexuals. If we were to have sex, it would be with a member of the opposite sex, but in real life, the topic was moot as we never got the opportunity anyway.

In any case, these guys were my friends. I loved them, but I didn’t want to picture their sex lives, whomever they might be with, theoretical or otherwise.

‘Well, that’s it,’ Digger said at last. ‘We’ve lost him.’

‘Come on, Digger,’ I said. ‘He’s only got a boyfriend; it’s not like he’s dropped off the side of the earth.’

Digger shook his head. ‘No, this is only the beginning. I’ve seen it before. First he drops out of an *X-Files* marathon and the occasional Thursday night. Then weekends are out, because weekends are when couples do all their couply things together. He meets Brian’s

friends, he meets Brian's family, maybe they go to Hong Kong for a week or two to meet Stevo's family. Gradually we see less and less of him. Then they move in together, and wham! Digger clapped his huge hands together. 'We get a card at Christmas if we're lucky.'

'You're overreacting. He said we'd like each other.'

'Ah, and that's where you're wrong, Fil,' said Jim. 'You've just disproven your "women are more observant than men" theory because what Stevo actually said was that we would like Brian. Nothing about Brian liking us.'

'Of course Brian would like us,' I said, though my heart was sinking as I said it.

I looked around the living room of the house Jim and I shared, the scene of most of our quartet's gatherings over the years. The ratty tartan couch, bowed with Digger's weight; the coffee table littered with plates, mugs, empty beer tins and *Star Wars* action figures; my 'girl's chair', so called because it was upholstered in something that had once been flowery chintz and all the boys refused to sit in it; the elaborate, empty shrine on the mantelpiece, decorated with candles and sparkly bits, with the naked plinth labelled FIL'S FIRST PEREGRINE, waiting in hope that one day I might win a Peregrine award for best comics artist; one entire wall taken up by shelves of *Star Trek* and other science fiction DVDs; two pairs of Digger's spare boots; and an iguana called The Baz.

'What's not to like?'