

My Famous Friend

Michael Botur

My sister introduced me to her famous friend under a heat lamp in the beer garden where the cobblestoned street had all these Shakespeare-themed pubs, which I thought was awesome, 'cause all my papers were literature. She said her friend's name was Dagger and he had a reputation as a hilarious party guy around campus and that was about all she knew. It was winter, 11 at night, and you froze if you weren't talking or walking. Dagger seemed to need a fresh table to sit at and keep the frost from settling on him. He did sideways glances around the beer garden before he gave up hope of

finding cooler students to sit with and gave us some eye contact and a reluctant smile. A stench of aftershave rose as he sat down. Dagger seized my hand and shook it without looking at me properly. His hand was more muscular than mine, and he was wearing a brand-new surf t-shirt even though it was so cold we could see our breath when we spoke. He busted out this joke about how the wintry breaths looked like speech bubbles in a Garfield cartoon strip and we all cracked up. Dag had said just two lines, and 50% of the lines were hilarious jokes. The dude had a one in two strike rate. The cool jokiness compensated for his age a little bit. I could see wrinkles around his eyes and these thin lines separating his cheeks from his lips, and his throat was just that little bit saggier than it should've been, but he wore his cap backwards, taking a couple years off, pinning him at about 35 years old, maybe. I was, like, over ten years younger but I didn't have any friends apart from my sister. I got by with one friend and assumed she'd always be around. I'd take an old, famous dude as a friend without a second thought.

I couldn't stop checking out Dag's sculpted arms and I tried to make banter about the gym but ended up blurting out this story about having a panic attack at the gym earlier in the week and Dag interrupted with a tale about a few celebrities he'd personally met who had "weak nerves" as he called it.

'You know celebs?'

'Obviously,' he snorted. He got out his phone, scrolled through the contacts list, named 10 news reporters and actors and rappers on his 10 fingers and asked me if I wanted him to carry on counting on his toes. I cracked up laughing and grabbed my sister's sleeve. 'Where did you find this guy?!'

I offered him a smoke and he said Nah, can't, I'm a part time dance teacher, popping a pill from a brownish bottle. He looked like a dancer, yeah – slim, dark, strong, agile, vaguely

Asian. I tugged my black beanie down over my Mohawk and felt ugly and unremarkable.

I was busting my arse lugging rolled-up carpets around a factory for 25 hours a week inbetween lectures and pasting pictures into my zines at night, so I didn't have tonnes of money but I bought enough rounds of beer to keep Dagger talking. He got onto this tangent about TMO and those weeks when you poon so much pussy that you lose count.

'What's TMO?'

'Too many orgasms.' He scolded my beer and winked at me.

My sister ran out of money and said Goodnight, loverboys, and I drunkenly followed Dagger to the converted warehouse he lived in, watching his toned gym legs sashay in the silky basketball shorts he had on, easy synthetic fabric, no constrictive denim, no leather.

We flopped onto a couple couches and Dag found some porn and we watched it with the volume on mute. Dagger talked about what he'd studied in the past tense. It seemed like he'd finished his degree but didn't wanna leave campus. If he stayed around uni, there would be pussy and unlimited student money to borrow. Dagger was like a comforting reminder: this can be your future, long as you don't sell out.

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We traded CDs and DVDs and a few babysitter pornos. Dag was the best dude to trade porns with, he didn't make it awkward like with most of my other bros. He said he had about a hundred more I could borrow any time. 'Just don't jizz on the cases,' he went, and it was hilarious, but there was like this level of trust to his comment, too. I told him to come to a few of my film lectures, seeing as he didn't have a job, and next day he sat down beside me during a Kurosawa

screening, saying he was epic hungry, and ate a few of my McDonalds chips. He borrowed my Subway sandwich, too, and it seemed cool, relaxed, natural. True friends don't keep a tab or worry about owesies. I gave him lunch; he gave me street cred. He sat in the back of some of my workshops on haiku and creative writing, reading stuff on his phone, and made me feel less embarrassed about those. He gave me advice to harden up my doughy stomach. He let me sniff his fingers when they had fresh pussy juice on them.

There was this girl Sartre who had put a few things in the poetry zine I spent most of my nights gluing together; this other girl, Chrissie, put a couple poems in, too. They were pretty much the only girls who spoke to me. When the zine seemed perfect, I'd make 200 copies, occupying a corner of the university library until 10pm each night. I'd walk home with my headphones blasting, wondering what Dagger was up to, stopping every 15 minutes to light up a Marlboro, then thinking, Bro, Dag doesn't smoke, so why should you?

I was buying him sushi one day in exchange for some snowboarding stories when I noticed Sartre sidling through the doors of the student common. She stood out because she had immaculate blonde curls in a big bouff, plus she always carried a huge scrapbook under one arm, stuffed with leaflets and band posters and handwritten poems. She almost walked past, stopped, exchanged awkward words with me, avoided looking at Dag and blushed as we talked English stuff. I said I was keen to proofread this novella she'd completed and we swapped email addresses and promised to talk. When she was out of earshot, Dagger shrugged. 'Been there, done that. What's your action plan?'

'What's my what?'

'Like, the next thing you're gonna do to her, y'know.' He pretended to yawn while he pinched a pill and slipped it under his tongue.

She was finally out of sight, so I returned to my seat.
‘What’s with the pills, dude?’

‘Stay on track, son. Listen: Nibble her ears, it’ll make her gag.’

‘What if she’s not into that?’

‘Trust me, she is.’ He rolled his eyes, checked the messages on his phone. ‘Obviously I’ve fucked her.’

‘Right,’ I said, and seized a campus newsletter and scrolled the pages impatiently, avoiding eye contact. ‘Obviously.’

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Dag stepped inside through my kitchen window one night, stinking of cologne, apologising for breaking my drainpipe while he crawled up it. I told him it was the landlord’s drainpipe, didn’t matter. Rock ’n roll, yo.

Dagger ate a bowl of this nutty muesli he found in my larder behind all the tinned military rations I was trying to live off. He talked about his mum and how, at 55, she was still getting tattoos, still smoking and driving a convertible. He said he couldn’t tell if his mum was an alcoholic addicted to work or a hard worker who drank to recover, ha ha. She owned rental properties up and down the country and made 20 grand some months, he said, and she knew everyone in The Biz. It wasn’t showbiz he was talking about – it was real estate. Anyone on TV, in newspapers ads with a famous real estate photo, she’d fucked or at least done coke with. Dag’s mum didn’t just party with famous property developers, she partied with Dag and his friends, too, in the family spa pool up in the mountains, he told me, back when his mum was like 49 and still vaguely fuckable, and she got everyone wasted on Absinthe that Dag was never allowed to touch and she ended pashing one of Dag’s mates and Dag punched his mum and broke her Gucci leopard print sunglasses and they clawed each

other on the lawn, dripping and pink and covered in goosebumps and prickles. He told me the story and even re-enacted the punch and I laughed so hard my abs scraped my ribs, and Dag smirked wearily. I thought that was the end of the story but he kept going, talking through dripping mouthfuls of cereal. He said the deal with his mum is he studies the odd business paper and his Olds give him an allowance. His parents basically pay him to give them hope, he reckoned. Dag wasn't smirking any more. In a way, Dagger said, he was basically paying his mum, because of the satisfaction she derived from him getting the occasional pass on an assignment. She was well into her 50s now, he said, and the closer she got to retirement, the more money she'd throw at her son to get him to study something that would make her and his question mark of a dad rich.

There was a catch, Dag said – he was often called home to hang with his mum and watch TV for weeks at a time, sipping Bacardi. He had to keep her company, had to have the water bed and the massages and the Saturday tennis.

'Your life's fuckin awesome,' I laughed, and we clinked bottles of this rare stout that my sis had given me three years back that I thought I would never share with anyone. 'You got more stories?'

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I concentrated on essays and exams real hard for a five-week period and when I raised my head I realised I hadn't had any texts from Dag in ages. His status updates and Tweets didn't say where he was. Sartre bumped into me at McDonalds and asked me why I had two chicken salads. 'I suppose one's for you, now,' I told her. Soon as she sat down, sliding her handbag across the table and into my personal space, I asked her if she knew where Dag was.

‘Who cares?’ she shrugged, and reached for my Fanta and bent the straw to her lips and put her saliva on mine.

‘But you... and him...?’

‘Dude, what about YOU and him?’

I tried to fuck her that night, on my single mattress, pressed against the wall covered in Sabbath posters. She laughed hysterically. ‘My dear boy, it doesn’t work that way,’ she said, buttoning her cardigan and packing more weed into the cone.

‘Worked for Dagger, didn’t it?’ I pouted, folding my arms.

Before she turned up the volume on my computer, she said loudly and plainly, ‘You’re. Not. *Him*.’

She stayed, though, and we talked nonstop until brunch.

I got offered a scholarship to do Honours in postmodern poetry at the university up in Showbiz City, the Big Smoke, where Sartre was going to be doing advanced design. We talked one night about our plans for the coming year. We had a couple more dates, then when I had a real bad night, outmanned by some guys at this party up in the hills, she stayed the night at mine and didn’t leave in the morning and, after I went out and brought back bagels and cream cheese, she crawled on top of me and wrapped my body up inside hers. ‘You need someone to look after you, boy-o.’

He texted me one night while I was trying to make crêpes for Sartre and asked me to call him ’cause he didn’t have any money on his phone, as usual. He answered the phone with a ‘Dag here,’ like he always did, not sorry or anxious that he hadn’t been in touch. He told me he’d been scripting radio adverts in GOD DAMN SYDNEY AUSTRALIA and he’d been getting pretty gnarly at writing jokes and was looking to step on the next rung up. Forget dance, he said: stand-up comedy’s the only option for a man to get himself ahead. There was more of it in the big city, where he was calling from, now. I could actually hear the traffic behind him.

Sartre headed up to the Big Smoke first; I drove up after. She told me she was still deciding if she wanted a relationship. We got a flat together, though. One afternoon, after we went jogging together and got caught in the rain, and sheltered under a tropical tree, she pressed her wet tits against my chest and put her nose against mine. 'I changed my relationship status,' she said, and stroked the side of my face.

'But you sucked Dagger's cock.' I shrugged her off, walked away, waiting for her to chase me.

'Least I don't do it on a regular basis,' she yelled. 'OI! You don't walk away from me. Where the fuck are you going?'

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Dagger booked all these comedy gigs in town and I blew off CrossFit and book launches and appointments with Sartre to watch him perform. He'd stay out all night, come back to our flat at breakfast, sleep all day on the couch, watch stand-up comedy on our surround-sound system. It was a treat when I had the luck to bump into him in the hallway outside the bathroom. I had a sort-of famous dude on my couch. I would go straight from work to lurk in the back of his comedy gigs. I watched him take this girl into the toilets one night, this tall, skinny unobtainable red-haired Israeli girl who no one had the guts to talk to, just grab her hand, pull her up from the table and lead her away. I looked around the room of girls, realised the last piece of pussy I'd ever get in my life was waiting for me at home, painting canvases and rubbing the little hump in her belly. I got drunk and ate burgers and milkshakes in my car on the motorway. I woke Sartre up for sex and while I was thrusting into her, I asked her what she thought about getting married – not, like, a firm offer. Just something to think about.

I travelled 80 minutes to the office, worked nine hours. I stayed late, ate in the city centre, went to Dagger's gigs. He said Sydney paid him to fly over but I'm sure it was his mum paying. Years passed instead of seasons, here in the scorching city of celebrities and road rage and coiled highways, where all the heavy news stories happened right outside. My stomach got fat and rubbery. I was in meetings all day, working as a buyer inside CarpetQual's corporate office. When Dagger came to town I watched pub landlords hand him tightly curled banknotes, even though he'd showed up late and 30 people had left during his comedy set. His jokes were mostly advice for guys on how to get a girl to suck your dick. After each show I saw girls pull down the brim of his cap and nibble the diamond in his ear. I went home to my wife and nudged the laptop off her belly. The sex to make our second child was purely business. I watched a lot of *Suicide Girls*, looking for faces who looked like chicks from my first-year undergrad poetry classes. I made blog posts at 4am, wrote a couple of nasty rumours about a certain up-and-coming comedian, then felt sick and deleted them. Then I got up at 5.30 and ate cereal and watched the weather report and drove to work, wishing it was night, wishing I was in a club. On stage or in the audience blogging critical reviews, either way.

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I asked Dag if he'd do a comedy bit at our wedding reception and he said of course. He asked for the cash up front, 10 weeks before the wedding date. He previewed the jokes over the phone and after two minutes started talking about how he'd gone back to the mountains to crash at his mum's place, and to fuck snow bunnies, and I wasn't sure if he was still doing jokes or not. I almost asked him to tell me the story of his mum making out with the young snowboarder

from the X-Games in the steaming hot tub with the dirty sky above and the mountains frosted. I'd seen pics of Dag's mum's long legs on Facebook, seen her freckles. What her eyes and teeth looked like behind the sunglasses and cigarette was a mystery.

Sartre kneed me in the thigh, and I winced and held the phone away from my ear.

'Is that Dag on the phone?'

'Um... yes?'

'So is he doing some shit at our wedding or not?'

'I think so. I paid him a retainer.'

She tsked. 'He'd better get seriously famous seriously quick.'

My old poet friend Chrissie had moved to the Big Smoke with two guitar cases, one full of clothes. She stayed on our couch. Sartre said she wasn't worried about any woman letting me fuck them. Sartre said that would never happen even if I wanted it to. Chrissie, who ate one meal a day and lived mostly on herbal tea and gum, performed the national anthem of Bangladesh at Open Mic, at The Pub. Some kind of protest about the new governor of Dhaka, apparently. She was nervous about going on, and I stroked her back. Afterwards she asked me if she was good enough. 'I loved... all of it,' I told her.

When each comedian finished, they stepped a few inches down off the dais and mingled with the punters. People bought the comedians drinks. Dagger was there and I bought him a plate of wings 'cause although he didn't drive, he could get called on as an Uber driver at a moment's notice, and he had to be sober. He approached Chrissie and said, 'Your place sounds good.'

I tried sitting in the back of my car while Chrissie drove. She bumped another car at the traffic lights, so we swapped

and Dagger and Chrissie set up in the back seat. They were already squeezing each other's knees and thighs by the time we got back to my place.

'Sarch is sleeping, Chrissie. Don't get too worked up, now.'

Dagger opened another pill bottle. 'This is better than vodka,' he said in his low, raspy voice, licked his fingertip, dabbed a pill and pushed it onto Chrissie's hungry tongue. They flopped back on my couch and Dagger pulled the cap off his head, letting his bald spot show amongst the shoulder-length flowing black strands. 'Strap yourself in.'

I was fidgety. I topped up the cat's food and fluffed a couple of cushions and watered the pot plants and paced.

'Am I still picking you up for that appointment?' I said, sitting on the edge of my beer crate. 'And Dag, yo, you still doin that gig? At that hotel? The one on at the lake resort where my sister works? You gonna catch up with her?'

'Definitely, you have my full attention, lol,' Dag said, saying something about some restraint he supposedly learned when he was supposedly a bouncer, twisting Chrissie's arm behind her back like a pretzel, moving in, putting his lips on her neck. I checked the image gallery on my phone, to make sure I'd zoomed in correctly and taken a satisfactory photo of the pill being pushed onto the tongue. My phone cost almost a grand. It took amazing photos. In the picture I'd snapped you could read Dagger's name on the side of the pill bottle. I'd tag him on Instagram when I thought up a funny-enough caption. People only knew that I was great at subdividing my property and making some serious coin, and getting a second storey built on my house, but I could write great comedy too. Deadbeats aren't the only genius satirists on earth. People had to know.

My famous friend hung around in the big smoke, did some alright gigs, fucked some teenagers in cars, got some reviews. He would disappear to the mountains of Queenstown to sit in the hot tub with his mum once a season, but Sydney wouldn't have him back. I met my sister for a drink and on the pillar beside us was a poster for Dag's show *Talented and Humble*. 'That's my boy,' I told her, grinning and sucking beer.

My sister said she saw him at a party at Lorde's sister's 21st and he spent the night on a pool lounge wearing black shades, clicking his fingers at teen girls, ordering them to come over to him and let him whisper in their ear, apparently. I dunno. It sounded like Dag. I didn't want to side with my sister against him, though, 'cause those two I was sure had fucked back in the day, and she despised him, now, and thought it was funny I wrote negative reviews of his shows on *TheatreofUnease.com*. Someone had to give the dude negative reviews. Even the most successful comedians on earth have their critics. I was keeping him humble, that's what I was doing.

When he got back into town, I caught up with Dag in a pretty large bar within the casino after he did a one hour set. Security gave me a pass. I was friends with a famous guy.

'I'm getting \$300 for my bit on Thursday,' he told me, and wiped the juices off his forehead and tossed something from his pill bottle down his throat and gulped loudly. 'Problem is I owe my mum fuckloads. Yo: you had dinner?'

There were three girls and two fanboys waiting for him just outside the exit doors.

'How are your boys?' he went.

'Well, they're both girls,' I told him, 'So not doing too well on the boy-front, ha ha.'

Dagger wrote something on his phone. 'I might turn that into a bit, how you don't see your friends' kids for ages and

then your friend develops an attitude problem. What d'you reckon?'

We ate at Burger King, then I paid for onion rings for some girls that came over and sat real close to Dag. I tried to ask them from the counter what kind of dipping sauce they wanted for their onion rings but they were too busy letting Dag squeeze their tits. This is Dagger Chiang the comedian speaking, I would say when I phoned the managers of all the clubs in the country. I'm just phoning to say you'd better hope your daughter's not in the audience. Maybe I'll fuck her. Maybe I won't.

It was probably true. The prick probably was a rapist. Even worse, he was a shitty friend.

I drove everyone home in my big station wagon with child seats in the back. Dag and his teenagers giggled and poked each other. I clenched the steering wheel.

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My oldest girl turned four and I helped blow up balloons and picked up a five litre tub of ice cream because 20 kids were coming around to our house. I was late to the cutting of her cake because I was making some edits to Dag's Wikipedia page. I invented a term of abuse with his first and last name in it and added it to Urban Dictionary. I asked questions about his methods and success rate for rapes on Ask.fm. Then I went through to the sisters-in-law and uncles who were 10 years younger than me and never asked about my work and I picked up my baby girl and kissed her. An aunty snatched her out of my arms. For a moment, I thought about my archery set, and how many family members I could take out before the cops shot me down. If they pushed me far enough, that is.

My nephews didn't ask me to play ball with them. My daughters almost opened my presents first, before they saw a

huge monster-truck wheel sticking out of a gift from Big Uncle Felix and opened that instead, and ran outside and put batteries in the remote control and drove the monster truck into the sunshine.

I stepped backwards into the darkness. Nothing was happening on any of my social media. I picked up my cellphone.

I texted Dag's mum. *Next time u r in town meet me*, I messaged her.

A text message came straight back.

Hi honey. Y u ask when im n twn?

Dnt knw how to say this but iv got to make luv 2u. im dags friend. We shd meet ;o)

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My phone went off within the hour. It wasn't Dagger's mum accepting the proposition. It was Dag, tweeting.

#That moment when ur BFF hits on your mum, Dag had written, and posted a frame from some old movie with a detective getting a knife in his back. The retweets had just passed 1000. I unfollowed him, then blocked him, then worried about what he was saying about me and unblocked him. Probably more backstabber memes he was posting, the prick.

He posted a photo of himself with his mum. Between them, they were holding a cellphone with my text. Anyone could easily read it. My phone number. My words. A steel bar was plunged into my chest. Children dripping pool water squeezed past me in the hallway. I had to sit down.

I locked the door of my office. Kids and aunties and Sartre knocked for half an hour then gave up on me. I would be on my computer all night, evening things up. I had a photograph. I beamed the photograph to my own Twitter.

The photo seemed to show Dagger placing a pill on the tongue of Chrissie.

Found this on a blog, I tweeted Dag. I think itz that comedian Dagger drugging a rape victim Cosby-styles. Will more victims cum 4th? #DaggerJustice

I aimed the threat at Dag, for now, but it would circulate. I wanted him to watch the retweets pull him apart and push me into prominence. The comedian community would first post it, then decide it's true, then the newspapers and finally police would get behind it and want to laud the whistleblower, all this would happen within 30 hours. 20,000 people would soon be hashtagging #DaggerJustice. Dag needed to know there was power in me.

He took four hours to ring me. I lay back in my office chair and waited. I needed him to beg.

'C'you ring me back?' he said instead, 'I don't have much credit on my phone. I just wanted to say: Don't.'

'Please what?'

'I didn't say please.'

There was silence, then my phone beeped to indicate my credit was running low. 'Time's running out. Maybe you should say please.'

'Don't put that thing out there on the web, bro. I get bad enough anxiety as it is. Need my meds.'

'Bro? Bro?!'

'Hey, can you speak up a bit? Heaps of people at this X-Factor audition, real noisy. I'm a tiddly bit nervous, tell you the truth, bro.'

'AuDITION? You're auditioning at a time like this? Tell me who you're auditioning for. I'll tweet them, tell them everything they need to know. Don't you know I'm about to end you?'

Silence for 20 heartbeats. 'I'm confused, man. Did I do something to you, or... ?'

'You honestly don't... Dude, I'm hitting the tweet button and the world's gonna see that photo of you pushing pills on Chrissie. I'm about to end you. You got 30 seconds to tell me 10 nice things.'

I couldn't hear him breathe for a while. Finally he sighed and said, 'I can't think of ten. Can we make it five?'

'Is this a joke? Are you seriously doing a bit right now?'

'No, sorry, just trying to... My brain's not the best at remembering wholesome warm fuzzy stuff sometimes. Mostly I just remember my mates hitting on my old lady.'

I took the burning phone away from my ear for a moment. I looked at my locked door. I heard people having fun without me. 'You're a real bad friend, Dag.'

I heard his name called by the talent scouts. I heard his basketball shoes squeak across a white theatre. I heard the directors telling him to turn his phone off. I heard him say Sorry, he was catching up with an old mate.

'If I had a wife, she'd be my friend,' he said at last. 'Just something to think about.'

There was a red button on my screen. It said End.

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Saturday night I ate roast chicken, potatoes and ice cream. I ate continuously across three hours. I pulled the skin off the roast chicken, because it seemed fattening, and put it aside, and when an hour had passed, I dangled it over my mouth and ate it. There was a comedy roast on Comedy Central. I didn't have to leave the couch.

My two-year-old baby girl asked for her usual story about a spunky crane who delivers hugs to children away from their parents. She sat on my knee and I read to her. My home life was Lego, pillows, rubber ducks and foamy baths. I felt hollow and heavy at the same time. I put on Friday night TV.

Graham Norton had American comedians on his couch. I closed my eyes. That could be me, drenched in limelight, if I'd been a bit more strategic, a bit more patient, not so obsessed with repaying my student loan and getting a house and wedding rings. My body was getting pudgier. I had boobs, now, sort-of. I kissed my kids' eyes. I stretched my arms, told my girls I loved them thiiiis much. I went back to my couch. It creaked as I collapsed into it. *X-Factor* was on TV and they said a comedian was coming up, and it cost 20 cents to send in a text voting for or against every contestant. I knew that one kilometre away, our babysitter would be watching and playing on her phone. She was a Diet Mountain Dew-guzzling piglet with fat arms who worked in a butchery and never seemed unhappy. I'd showed her my American Express Diamond card last time, told her offhand that I had a habit of helping out people who were nice to me. I almost texted her but every time I picked up my phone, Twitter distracted me.

I dozed on the couch, squeezing the remote control, and watched people taking risks. There was some contestant with pigtails, a girl doing tricks with a hula-hoop. Pigtails are like handles for you to whip and lash the beast as you ride her from behind. Dagger taught me that. I unlocked my phone and found the babysitter's number. I'd tell her my wife and I had a date organised, could she babysit tomorrow night? I'd have *X-Factor* on the screen when she arrived at 6.30 to begin her shift. Come in, I'd say. Have a seat.

I'd plop down beside her, play with my American Express, twirling it, tossing it casually on the coffee table.

Is that *X-Factor*? she'd say.

Yeah. This is that comedian, I'd say. I know that guy, actually.

No way? she'd say, and shift along the couch an inch closer, putting her fingers on my knee.

Time to go, I'd say, getting up and taking my wife's coat off the coat hook, wrapping my wife up warm, leaving my famous friend trapped inside the telly.