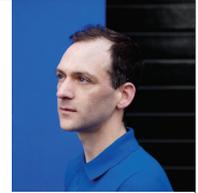


{COLUMNIST} DANIEL BARNES

Daniel Barnes has a day job as a philosopher and art critic, but his social life is a one-man mission to explore the depths and excesses of 21st-century gay life. This column offers a glimpse into his misadventures, such as **The Time I Was Locked in the Tower of London...**



It's just after nine on a Tuesday night when I find myself in a heavily-fortified room with Ainsley Harriott and a seemingly-endless supply of Champagne. I have been earnestly stalking a PR man who is of some undefined interest to me. There's a lot of people I should recognise and I have been drinking since around four, so – aside from being locked inside London's most famous fortress – everything is basically normal. But just at the moment when we all realise we are unable to leave, things take a strange and unexpected turn.

We are at the Tower of London because the royal sculptor, Frances Segelman, is staging a retrospective in aid of the Stroke Association. We are locked in because the Ceremony of the Keys must be performed, which has happened at exactly 9.53pm every single night for over 700 years. So for an hour from 9pm, while the ceremony takes place, we are held captive while the Tower is secured and the ravens do their work.

Just before the door's bolted, Lord Julian Fellowes, a billowing ball of posh and creator of *Downton Abbey*, makes a meandering speech. I am standing at the back, having positioned myself in the path of a blond Polish waiter, who is gliding back and forth between the bar and the crowd, filling my glass every time he passes. And each time he does so, he looks me up and down and winks or smiles or touches my hand. It reminds me of the good old days of human contact, the days before Grindr or whenever it was that I used to talk to boys IRL.

At one point, as he's filling my glass, he tries to engage me in conversation. I don't know what he's saying because I am imagining what he looks like naked, which, judging by the way his shirt hugs

his arms and pecs, I reckon is pretty good. He knows what I'm thinking, and I don't care. He flashes a cheeky grin, which has "It's yours if you want it" written all over it and then disappears into the crowd.

At exactly this moment, I decide that I am drunk rather than just tipsy, and I want to go home – but I can't leave, because we're locked in the Tower. The PR gent, whose devilishly-mischievous air had caught my attention earlier, is suddenly introducing himself to me, but before he gets to his name it all clicks into place. "Wharton!" I shout. "You're James Wharton." I take a deep breath and wait for him to recognise me. Nothing happens. "I'm Daniel Barnes!" I shout, pointing to myself to illustrate. He looks blank. I explain that we're column neighbours and then we explode in a jubilant fit of pleased-to-meet-yous.

We prance around the party taking selfies and imploring everyone to

recognise this hilarious coincidence. He says some deliciously-obscene things that cannot be printed, and we establish that I am the funny one while he is the serious-issues man. Indeed, if you turn the page, you'll see James ranting about AIDS or death or Brexit, while I am blathering on about how drunk I am on free Champagne. It's a match made in heaven, which is duly recorded on Twitter and sends a ripple through the social media stratosphere.

James, for a 'serious' columnist, is nothing but unbridled fun, but his greatest coup comes when we are finally released into the fresh air. Having gossiped about everything else, we get round to the topic of boys, specifically the Polish waiter, who, James salaciously reveals, has already propositioned him while we were locked in. I denounce James' good fortune as Stockholm syndrome, and off we go into the night, preparing to wake up to hangovers and Twitter meltdown. ■



Illustration: Paul Tuller