

"The crowning glory of this idiocy was a version of the William Tell party trick that led to Burroughs accidentally murdering his wife, but instead of a live handgun, we used a kid's bow and arrow"

{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 Preferred Old Friends...**

I started writing this column with the intention of documenting my efforts to form friendships with people I do not have sex with. As it turns out, I am shocking at making friends, but I did manage to get a boyfriend (who I do have sex with), so all is not lost. That boyfriend – the hairdresser, for those of you who have been following – has recently decided that we need friends, specifically a couple with whom we can do middle-aged, middle-class things like chortle at Radio 4, talk about property and have brunch with in Islington. But we disagree because I think I already have old friends whom I like a very great deal.

A classic example of my refusal to make friends occurred recently when I dragged him to the pub to watch England play Slovakia in the Euros. He doesn't like football, which I don't understand – what's not to love about watching fit lads run around in sportswear while you drink beer and shout good-natured abuse at them? I guess it's just one of the ways in which we differ, so when I chant "Jamie Vardy's having a party..." and he sneers "You're such a lad" in disgust, it warms my heart to know that our relationship is built on a delicious contradiction – he's *The Apprentice*, while I'm more *Geordie Shore*. And that's the spice of life.

We're in a pub on Old Compton Street, and while I'm attending to the serious business of England's Euro 2016 campaign, the hairdresser gets talking to a guy who looks considerably older than his alleged 36 years. He's talking about his husband and their three children and their positively-idyllic life in Putney. The hairdresser is completely taken by this and decides we are to make friends with this civilised couple so that we, too, may be civilised. I'm not having any of it and

refuse to be drawn into the conversation; I stare resolutely at the screen as England achieve a mediocre draw, and don't utter a single word to our new friend. Later, I admit that if the football wasn't on I would have at least been civil, but nonetheless make it clear that I have no interest in making boring friends.

As it happens, I have perfectly-interesting old friends, none of whom the hairdresser had met until Jayne came to visit recently. When we were postgrads in Nottingham, Jayne (who is from Wisconsin and sounds exactly like Frances McDormand in *Fargo*) and I were obsessed with William Burroughs. We inhabited an elaborate fantasy world in which I was the gun-toting, heroin-addicted gambler Burroughs and she was the all-American wife, Joan. At parties, out clubbing or even just in the pub, we would play our roles with abandon, introducing ourselves as husband and wife. The crowning glory of this idiocy was a version of the William Tell party trick that led to Burroughs accidentally murdering his wife, but instead of a live

handgun (dangerous by all accounts, you'll agree), we used a kid's bow and arrow: before a breathless crowd of revellers, Jayne would place a plastic cup on her head and I would knock it off with a single arrow.

We played this schtick for many years, and fall back into it effortlessly during an afternoon drinking and playing roulette at the Empire Casino. By the time the hairdresser arrives, we're reminiscing about our old friend Eric, a colossal Texan whose mantra was, "If you can't fuck it, burn it." The funny thing is that Eric, now an eminent physicist, to this day confuses me with Jayne's actual husband and often asks me how our kids are.

As we fall into bed that night, poorer from the roulette but rich in spirit, the hairdresser says he's never seen me so happy and that I should see my old friends more often. I'm too drunk to respond, but fall asleep thinking that surely means we don't need boring new friends after all. I may be getting old and cantankerous, but maybe I really have already met my best friends. ■



Illustration: Paul Tuller