

YESTERDAY'S NEWS

By Alex Davies

ANTONIO

He's bound to get himself killed, sooner or later. He's the type – the kind of guy who drapes an arm around his girlfriend whilst flirting with her best friend, who leers at another guy's girl whilst he's stood right next to her. The first time I lay eyes on him – swaggering into my cafeteria, letting the door bang loudly behind him – I know he will be trouble. The baseball cap, the white t-shirt too tight at the upper arms, the stone-washed blue jeans, the big ugly trainers. I hate him on sight.

'Ola amigos,' he calls out as the door rattles on its hinges. 'Como estas.'

It surprises me he knows a bit of Spanish. Most tourists don't even know hello and say 'gracias' after everything, hoping to impress with one measly word. But his is pretty good, he even has a passable accent. Maria normally ignores all the tourists, treats them with disdain – it's one of the things that I love about her – but her ears prick up when he orders a proper Spanish cortado, rather than a huge café con leche like most who visit this tiny rest stop in the arse end of nowhere. When he downs it in one and orders another, she perches two Segafredo biscuits on his saucer. That's when I know.

He's a photographer, he says. Unremarkable. You can't drive from one town to the next around here without coming upon a dozen campervans parked up on the hairpin bends, their awestruck occupants taking filtered photos of the valley below. We're surrounded by vineyards, through which runs a fast-flowing ravine; dilapidated and picturesque stone houses nestle in the hills alongside a few small family-owned bodegas. It's beautiful, it's eminently photographable, but just because you have a fancy digital camera slung casually around your neck doesn't make you anything special.

He comes in each morning. Asks Maria her name. Doesn't bother with mine. After he leaves, Maria dreamily wipes the counter, taking his coffee cup to the sink and washing it by hand rather than placing it in the dishwasher.

'I wonder if he would take my picture,' she simpers.

I snort. 'Not if he doesn't want to break his lens.'

I don't know why I do that. Why I offend the girls I like and make them despise me. Maria is beautiful, easily the prettiest girl round here. And the more I fall in love, the stupider

I become around her, and the more she stares at me with those hard hazel eyes, her contempt for me as strong as her coffee.

He doesn't bring his camera the first few days. But one morning Maria reveals over his sugary cortado that her dream is to be an actress, that she's saving up for a portfolio of photos – something she's never told me in the six months we've worked together – and today he waltzes in wearing a bulky Olympus like a medal around his neck. I have to duck my head behind the counter to hide my mirth.

He wears the same clothes every day – white t-shirt and blue jeans – like it's some kind of statement.

'I like the simple life – clothes that I feel good in and a few choice accessories,' he says, pointing to his cap. Maria laughs and I wonder if I've missed a joke. Maria's laugh is a tinkly bell of a giggle that sounds like the cash register. I tried to tell her that one day, but it came out wrong and she took offence. She takes everything I say the wrong way.

My name is Antonio – some people call me Tony – and I've lived in this backwater all my life. Never destined for great things I followed type and got my first job on the day I left school in a bakery, followed by a restaurant, followed by here, this cafeteria. Never had much choice to do anything else – the youngest of five I was barely out of short trousers before my older siblings all left home for the wider world, leaving me as the insurance policy I'd been born for, looking after my mother. I don't mind. Ambition is for suckers. I've been at this cafeteria twelve years now, a quarter of my life. My colleagues come and go – all straight out of school, and all temporary, on their way to what they hope will be bigger and better things. The café is a stopgap for them to earn enough cash to afford the bus to the city and a month's rent. They all return, usually within a few months, some after just a few weeks, their eyes slightly wider, their shoulders slightly stooped. I'd slide a coffee over the counter and the conversation would go something like this:

'All your dreams come true in the big city then, kid?'

'Vete a la mierda, Tony.' And then after a pause, 'Can I get my job back?'

'Fuck you too,' I'd laugh, point to my latest staff member and charge them for the coffee.

‘Cafeteria’ is perhaps a bit of a stretch. We basically serve coffee, bought-in pastries and cigarettes – next door’s Repsol does everything else. We’re here to scald the mouths of the farmers, the delivery drivers, the tradesmen, as they call in for a biting-hot shot of espresso and a moan about their wives, girlfriends, bosses or all three. The few tourists who accidentally stumble inside look around, confused, searching for a menu or a helpful member of staff – they get neither – before finally understanding that this place isn’t for them.

Not him though. Not ‘Rick’. Acts like he owns the place, declaring our distinctly average pastries the best in the whole of Spain, his pondy-green eyes twinkling at Maria as he bites into a day-old croissant, scattering crumbs all over the counter.

‘I’m here for ten days,’ he tells her that first morning. ‘I’ll be sure to come in every day for pastries and your smile.’ She giggles delightedly. Even I’ll admit it’s a good line. I just wonder how many girls he’s said it to.

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1: LAURA

‘Best. Holiday. Ever.’

I smile tipsily as I type these three words as my Facebook status, stretching out in my cosy sleeping bag, stealing glances at the handsome man opposite me, zipped into his own matching bag, his reading glasses sliding adorably down his nose.

We’ve swum, we’ve paddle-boarded, we’ve hiked – at least as far as we needed to get the right angle for my photo – and, most excitingly, my Likes have grown exponentially (Twitter: up 10 percent, Facebook: up 15 percent, Instagram: up 19 percent) as the week has worn on, developing my profile as surely as the beating sun turns my skin the colour of the buttery pasteles Rick brings to the tent each day.

Rick. My gorgeous guy. It had been his idea, this holiday – a chance for us to really get to know one another, to relax in an idyllic location away from everyone and the perfect opportunity to work on my profile. Creating the best shots for maximum exposure and increasing the engagement with my followers that I so desperately need.

I’m an influencer. Don’t roll your eyes, you look like my mother. It’s a proper job and a damn hard one at that. My niche is wearable fashion – showing people how they can layer and match fabrics and colours and textures to make the most of what they have. Whether you’re on a budget or a blowout, my Insta feed shows how to choose pieces that will boost your confidence – and your natural assets ladies! – and help you feel good in your skin. I try to use as many of those phrases as possible in my daily vlogs to boost my SEO. I don’t care if you think it’s dumb – have *you* got seven thousand followers?

Instantly, the post gets a Like. I love that – the endorphin rush of feeling appreciated, of external validation for your actions. I click on it – it’s from Rick.

‘Hey, silly,’ I tease, nudging him with my foot. ‘You’re not supposed to like my Facebook status. At least, not until lots of other people have.’ He smiles and blows me a kiss. I look back down at my phone. He’s changed the Like to a Love.

Rick is basically my biggest fan. Most of my male friends, and a good deal of my girls, think my desired career is superficial and shallow, a race to the bottom in terms of culture and ambition. ‘Likes aren’t love Laura,’ a friend had helpfully alliterated one evening when I’d

allowed the ice in my mojito to melt whilst setting up the perfect shot. (Condensation blurring the mint leaves, straw and swizzle stick at opposing angles, a delicate dusky-pink lip print kissed on the rim of the glass. Three hundred likes.)

But Rick loves my pictures. He encourages me, suggests locations, coming up with themes, improvising costumes and backdrops all the while complimenting me on my beauty, my style, my taste. I've got to admit, I'm hugely flattered that this older man – handsome and clever and funny – finds me interesting, thinks my ideas worth listening to, my dreams worth pursuing. We spend hours scrolling through the photos he takes, adding little hearts to the best ones, whittling them down to that one magical shot. Choosing a filter, cropping the image just right so that I'm the central focus but the viewer can still see the sunlight reflecting on the water, the pile of pebbles in the foreground. Suggesting funny hashtags, playfully coming up with ones far too rude to use.

'Babe,' I'd said firmly when he'd suggested a particularly indecent caption yesterday, 'not all my followers just look at my arse.' We'd nearly had a row after that, as I got paranoid that perhaps the reason he was dating a woman half his age was purely for the way I filled out the shorts he'd picked.

Tonight – the last night of the holiday – we're drinking up the last of the wine we bought from the bodega down the road, a delicious jammy red that stains my lips and threatens to spill from the plastic glass balanced on the rucked-up groundsheet. I don't normally drink red wine – I'm more of a Tito and Coke kinda girl – but this one is really yummy. Spread between our two sleeping bags is a local newspaper, opened to the back page where we're doing the crossword. I'll read out a clue and Rick will guess the answer, both giggling like children at the futility of the exercise, neither of us knowing any Spanish. Instead of the actual answers we're writing nonsense words, cute loving phrases, a saucy flirtation before we'll zip our sleeping bags together one final time and keep the other occupants of this sleepy campsite awake.

'Get off the social media and read me another,' Rick drawls sleepily.

'Vaquero,' I say, reading the clue. 'Five letters.'

'Boobs,' he says, up-ending the paper and grabbing my sleeping bag, pulling me towards him. The plastic glass wobbles but he catches it, necks the wine and throws it outside the tent. 'Time for bed.'

‘Wait,’ I say. ‘Let me get a photo of you, doing the crossword.’

‘Waste of a pic. You’re the star.’

‘Just for me. I won’t share it.’

‘Go on then.’

Hamming it up for the camera, he opens the paper wide, peeping out over the top, waggling his eyebrows. He’s so funny.

After we make love, I look up at the stars through the mosquito-netted window, thinking how lucky I am. Swiping my phone, I set the photo as my wallpaper, admiring how Rick’s azure-green eyes sparkle above the newspaper. I’d like to share it on my feed, but Rick doesn’t really like that. Also, it’s a tiny bit blurry. I keep it just for me.

The next morning, we pack up the tent and pile our things into the hire car.

‘How do we have more stuff now than when we arrived?’ puzzles Rick, marvelling at the bags and cases I’m stuffing into the boot. ‘Good job I packed light.’ He throws his solitary case on the back seat, following it with the tent.

‘I’m amazed you even need a case,’ I retort. ‘All I’ve ever seen you in is that t-shirt and jeans.’

‘When a look works, it works,’ he says, flexing his abs. Good God, I hope he can’t see the thrill of excitement that runs down my spine as I look at him. Embarrassing. And actually, we *do* have more stuff. People are generous when you tell them you’re an influencer. They throw in little extras – some hand soap here, a floral silk scarf there – and before you know it, you’re going to have to pay for another bag at check-in. I hope Rick doesn’t mind. He can be... moody. With everything finally packed I take a final snap of the campsite, and a selfie of me grinning next to the small oblong of flattened grass where our tent was pitched, the only sign we’d ever been there. That one won’t make it to my feed either – as far as my followers are concerned we’ve been staying at the fancy hotel up the road. Rick says I have an image to maintain, and no one’s gonna be impressed by a two-man tent.

As the car struggles up the gravelly drive out of the campsite, my stomach rumbles. Rick hasn’t been for our customary pastries this morning and I’m missing their buttery taste. I’ll be

straight back on my strict 800-diet tomorrow morning, and twice-daily yoga, but I want one final indulgence.

‘Let’s stop at the pastry place,’ I say as we turn on to the main road. Looking at his bleary eyes, I add, ‘You could clearly do with a coffee.’

‘We’ll get one at the airport,’ he replies.

I pout. He doesn’t normally dismiss my demands so readily. ‘But I’m hungry,’ I moan, adding a little petulance to my voice. ‘It’ll only take a sec.’

I’m scared for a moment that my little-girl-lost routine hasn’t worked, that I’ve pissed him off, but his face contorts out of its rictus position, his eyelid twitches and he smiles.

‘Alright babe.’

He pulls the car into the forecourt of the tiny petrol station we stopped at on our first afternoon, next to which is a small cafeteria the type you see around here. Grabbing his wallet and phone, he stops me from undoing my seatbelt with a ‘Stay here. I’ll be quick.’ He cracks a cheeky wink and is gone.

I smile to myself. Rick might be older than most of the men I’ve dated (no, *all* the men I’ve dated, even a couple added together) but he’s no wiser. I don’t have nearly a thousand YouTube subscribers for nothing (915, but it’s growing by the day) – it just seems that people will do what I want them to. I flip the passenger side visor down and peer at my face. Definitely a few shades more golden, the girls will be so jealous. I’d kept my face covered during the heat of the day but had let it soak the sun’s rays in the late afternoon, giving me a great healthy glow. In the visor mirror I spy something. Away from the dusty car park, leading toward the dense black woods, is a tiny stream and the dribblings of a waterfall. Just like that – a perfect little beauty spot, almost hidden from view. It would make an awesome backdrop, and if I’m quick I could grab my magenta cashmere, which would contrast perfectly with the dark green leaves, and take an amazing selfie. Maybe even do a super-speedy reel.

I jump out the car and go to open the boot – locked. Stupid hire cars with no central locking. Rick must have taken the keys with him as they’re not in the ignition. I can’t really leave the car unlocked to follow him inside, so I rummage around the back seat and find an alternate outfit – a deep crimson scarf with matching sunglasses. Problem solved.

Skipping over to the waterfall and hoping Rick won't suddenly barge out and demand we get going, I wrap the scarf round my neck, position the glasses on my head and search for the right angle. I know, I know. People look like idiots when they take selfies. Self-absorbed, vain idiots. Tripping over their own feet, getting squished by passing cars – you hear about these poor kids who fall down cliff faces because they didn't realise how close they were to the edge. I don't care. This is my job – my career – and if someone wants to laugh at me as I pose, let them. Perhaps one day they'll remember this dumb bitch prattling about in a crimson scarf at the edge of a car park and say, 'Oh my god but now she's that top model!' Well, you have to dream, right?

The lighting is just right – the mid-morning sun poking through the trees, glinting off the glasses, the tiny stream reflecting and refracting the sunshine. My tan looks boss. I climb back into the car, diligently put my seatbelt back on and start to swipe through the images. OK, blinking in that one. That one's a bit blurred. What the hell is my mouth doing in that one? Delete. I'm usually good at selfies – when you're looking back at yourself you can give a full smile, you don't have to feel self-conscious under someone else's gaze. Sometimes Rick holds the camera too long. But these are all off. The background looks too perfect, like it's staged. My face looks weird. My arm is too fat. I need Rick – he'll tell me which one to choose.

Where is he? Considering he wants to get to the airport in good time he's not exactly rushing. Perhaps there's a queue. But the car park is empty. What time did we arrive? I hadn't looked. What time had we left the campsite? No idea. I'll give him such a teasing when he gets back – I'm usually the one who holds us up. I swipe through the photos again but they're all unusable. I try to post at least three or four times a day – maybe there'll be something at the airport I can pose next to. The holiday has been the making of my portfolio, and I've gotten some great followers. Sure, there are some bots, and a whole bunch of follow-backs, but there are some proper bona fide people in there, including some new brands. Brands I will certainly be contacting as soon as we get home.

I check the time on my phone again. This is getting silly. How long does it take to get two pastries and a cup of coffee? I get out of the car, shut all the doors and make a pretence of locking it. Stupid I know, there's no one else there, but it makes me feel a bit better. Just as I'm getting close to the café, the door opens. Expecting it to be Rick, I smile – and the guy who comes out, after looking a little startled to see me, smiles right back.

‘Buenos dias,’ he says brightly. And then, in English, ‘Can I help you?’

‘Sorry,’ I say, a little louder than normal and with that strange European lilt the British use when speaking to anyone on the continent. ‘My boyfriend...’ I gesture inside the café. ‘He is in there.’

‘In here?’ the guy answers, surprised. ‘No, there is no one here.’

He keeps his hand on the door. I make to go towards it but he doesn’t budge.

‘Yes, he go in there,’ I say, wincing at the ridiculous way I’m talking. The guy’s English is better than mine. ‘He went in for pastries.’ I mime eating and want to kill myself.

‘Pastry? Yes, we have pastries. But we are closed now. For lunch.’

What kind of a cafeteria closes for lunch? At 11.30?

‘But my boyfriend... he went in there, for... pastries.’ Again, the miming. Now he’s doing it too.

‘Your boyfriend wants a pastry?’

Confusion. And then – like a light flashes in front of his eyes. ‘Oh, the pastry guy! Every day he comes. Baseball cap. White t-shirt.’

I could hug him. ‘Yes, that’s him! He came in... a while ago. Where is he?’

‘Oh, he left.’

‘When? I didn’t see him.’

‘Back door. Not so long ago. With Maria.’

A cold finger twinges my spine.

‘Maria? Who’s Maria?’

‘My colleague. He left with my colleague. They went down the hill. Towards the village.’

He points down the track, leading away from the woods down the hill to where we had come from that morning. I struggle to take it in. Rick left out the back without telling me – with some girl called Maria?

‘I no understand,’ I say miserably. ‘He left with... a girl?’

‘Yes,’ he smiles. And then frowns. As though joining some dots. ‘Er... you were waiting for him?’ He motions to the hire car. ‘You came by car? He normally walks here.’

‘Yes, well, we’re leaving. Airport.’ I just about manage to stop myself from sticking my arms out like a plane.

‘Oh. Ah, that would explain it.’

‘Explain what?’ I ask. ‘Explain what?’

The guy looks embarrassed. ‘Er, well er... Maria... she was crying. They were talking, and then... she got upset. So er... your boyfriend – Nick?’

‘Rick.’

‘Rick, he takes her outside, and they walk down the hill. Into the village.’

My mind is spinning. Rick – my Rick – who not half an hour before was driving me to the airport after ten days of holiday bliss, is now off with some crying girl in the middle of nowhere – without telling me?

‘Your colleague – Maria?’ I ask. ‘Is she Spanish?’

‘Si, of course,’ he smiles. ‘Your boyfriend has very good command of the language.’

He does?

He locks the door to the café and pockets the key.

‘Sorry, I must go home now. I will be back this afternoon. Look – you can use this path to get to the village. They weren’t going too fast, you will probably catch them up.’

He points to where the path leads from around the back of the building. Not far from where I took my photo. My stupid, dumb photo. I’m still wearing the scarf.

‘Gracias,’ I say. The only word I know in Spanish.