

# The Long Game

By Pete Malicki

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Paul: An everyday office worker and family man. Dressed in a suit.

I wouldn't say I'm *boring*. Forty, married, two kids, accounts receivable at an investment firm. Like to watch the cricket. Fond of mustards and chutneys. Huge fan of a good relish. My wife loves me because I'm quote unquote "stable and reliable." I'm a thrill a minute.

So a person like me isn't the type you'd expect to find hanging out in a gay bar, but there I was. I was checking my phone and sipping a light beer at the bar when a man appears beside me. "Excuse me, is this yours?"

He's holding my wallet. "Yes. Thanks so much for handing it back. You could have drunk all night for free."

"Can I drink for ten minutes for free?"

How rude of me. I buy him a thank-you whiskey and he asks what a guy like me is doing in a place like this. I tell him I was supposed to meet my friend Darren, but he's stood me up. We chat about my job and family and passion for early twentieth century jazz, and he tells me he's some kind of art dealer.

He gives me his card and says we should do this again sometime. Ian Roberts. I stay for a few minutes after he's left and finish my third light beer. It's only then that I notice the only female here is behind the bar.

Bloody Darren!

Gabby's asleep so I do a crossword. Six letters. R something something G something D. Manly men and mountains. Manly men and mountains. My mind wanders over to Ian's Armani suit, velvet radio voice and unplaceable cologne. That man was so... Rugged! (*awkward realisation*) I put the crossword down and go to bed.

A few days later I'm handling an account for an Ian Somebody and it makes me think of him. Allowing my reflexes to take over, I pull out his card and call the number. "Ian? It's Paul, from the bar. I have a free evening. Want to do dinner?"

At six I call my wife and tell her I'm stuck at work. At six oh two I ask myself what the hell I'm doing and at six oh two and a half I get up to leave just as Ian enters. His face lights up and he steers me to a seat.

A bucktoothed teenaged waitress approaches to take our order and Ian puts a hand lightly on her arm. "We'll take the fillet mignon and a pumpkin quiche, darling. Shall I fix you up now?"

The girl falls in love with him right there. "It's all good, mister. You can pay when yer done eatin'."

Ian asks a million questions about me, never once breaking eye contact. I ask about him too but he gives quick answers and turns it back to me. The women in the room can't stop glancing over at us. Neither can half the men. I'm making them jealous. I mask a smile.

My phone rings and I glance at the screen. I panic for a second. "Something wrong?" Ian asks?

"No, it's just my wife." I don't answer. We go back to our dinner and conversation.

When we're done, Ian leaves a few coins on the table as a tip and we leave. "Paul, what are you doing Saturday?"

Saturdays are a nightmare. Kids sport, shopping, taking Gabby to see her father, my turn to cook. "Nothing. What time?"

What am I thinking? Gabby's going to kill me.

I put out my hand when we say goodbye and he pulls me into a brotherly embrace. I watch him for a full minute as he strides away, almost fainting with embarrassment when he looks back at me.

A few days later my wife pins me down and tells me to go easy at work. "Honey, I've started a critical new project," I say. "I'm going to be working extra hard for the next month or so. I'll be on the case on Saturday, too."

Our talk dissolves into an argument and it ends with me telling her she undervalues what I do and her telling me I undervalue the family. Saturday can't come round soon enough. I hardly sleep on Friday night.

We meet in the city. "Paul! Good to see you. I have something you're going to love."

Ian, looking devilishly handsome in jeans and a leather jacket, hands me a gift bag. I pull out a jar of Lizzy's homemade mango chutney. "Amazing! I love this stuff!"

I reach my hand out to shake his and he pulls me into a hug. It goes on just a little bit too long.

"Paul, do you want to do something fun?"

I try to cover the growing awkwardness. "But I'm a married man!"

He laughs resonantly. "Come with me."

I follow him all the way to a department store. Of all things, Ian starts looking through the *bins*. He fishes something out and says, "Perfect. Follow me."

We go into the store and wind our way to the electronics section. He picks up a Blu-ray player and we head straight to the front counter. "I'm so sorry, but I have to return this. Apparently it's a 'waste of our hard earned money.'"

The girl at the counter looks over at me. Thankfully, my uncomprehending blank face gives away nothing. “Do you have a receipt, sir?”

Ian hands her the thing he took out of the bin. She pushes a few buttons and hands him money from the register.

Just like that, we walk out of there eighty dollars richer. I’m a little speechless at the audacity of his scam, and when we part ways half an hour later I’m even more speechless when he slips the money into my trousers.

We start seeing each other twice a week. Ian seems to be on a mission to take me to every fine dining establishment in town. When we walk together he always has his arm over my shoulders and when we sit he stares deep into my eyes. The man has this incredible pull to him and when we’re together I forget that I have a job and a life and a... family.

After a few months we’re at a bar and I’m drinking full strength beers. Too many, clearly, because I end up drunk and back at his place. We laugh and watch a movie and next thing I know I’m in his *bed*. He’s wearing nothing but his jocks. “Paul. I want to show you something.”

Ian reaches across me, his naked chest pressing against my shirt. He picks up an envelope and opens it. “This is for Gabby.”

I reach into the envelope. It’s a voucher. For a day spa.

“Drop Gabby off there next Saturday after you take Ben and Sam to soccer, then come straight round here.”

I slur out a response. “What about right now? No time like the crescent.”

Ian smiles. “It’s two AM and your wife will kill you if you don’t get home right away. I’ve already called you a cab.”

I try to throw a bit of a tantrum but he doesn’t have a bar of it. He gives me two fifties from his wallet, which I can’t help but see has *hundreds* of dollars in it. “Where’d you get all that? You had nothing earlier.”

“Back of a truck, Paul. Go home. Let’s wait until Saturday and do it right.”

Drunk, confused and disoriented, I stumble outside and climb into a cab. Go home and pass out on the couch. Gabby is livid when she finds me and doesn’t talk to me for two days, but I don’t care one bit. All I think about is Ian. His charisma. His piercing gaze. His chest on my chest. Give my wife the voucher as a make-up gift and she cries and says she loves me and starts blabbering about... whatever.

Next three days pass in a blur and before I know it, I’ve dropped the kids at sport and Gabby at the day spa and I’m knocking on Ian’s front door. That boyish smile greets me as he ushers me in. There’s candles and wine out. “Brunch?” he asks.

We sit down and he tucks a napkin into my shirt. “Don’t get yourself dirty now, Paul.”

My heart is pounding. I know where this is all leading and I'm not afraid to admit I'm afraid. He serves salmon and a rocket, pear and parmesan salad.

Five minutes in, he swears. "Paul, I'm super sorry, but I need to go out and grab something. I'll just be ten minutes. Finish your meal and head into the bathroom, okay? I've run a nice relaxing bath."

"Okay."

"Can I borrow your car?"

"Sure."

I hand him my keys. He squeezes my shoulder and says he'll be right back.

I finish the brunch. Sit back for a few minutes. Look at my watch, then shrug and go to the bath. I undress and get in. Ian is gone for ages. I think I doze off.

I wake to my phone buzzing. I reach into my pants pocket and pull it out. Gabby. Shit!

"Hi honey."

She's hysterical. "We've been robbed! Laptops, camera, television, jewellery. Everything's gone! Where the hell are you?"

Now my heart is really pounding. I know exactly where everything is. It's with Ian, in the back of my BMW. And it's heading out of the city, never to return. The bastard was a playing the long game. Getting close to me so he could clean me out. The bastard is a con man.

"I'll sort it out."

I towel myself dry and dress quickly, passing a family portrait on the way out. Ian isn't pictured. This isn't even his house.

Step outside and make a phone call. "Jim. Have you got him?"

Jim says yes, they arrested him two suburbs away. (*pumps fist*) Yes!

"Is he there? Can you put him on?"

Jim says sure and ten seconds later Ian comes on the phone.

"That was a pretty impressive effort, Ian, but if you'll pardon the boast, not quite as impressive as mine."

"How'd you know where I was?"

"You're driving a stolen cop car and you really can't figure it out?"

Ian is silent for a long moment. "I genuinely liked you, Paul."

I laugh. “Oh please. Spare me. But listen mate, before I say ‘*catch* you later’ I wanted to let you in on a little secret.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“I fucking hate chutney.”