

Shazia's week

Columnist of the Year



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The audacious behaviour of people these days is scaling new heights. A few nights ago, I was asked to comper an evening for charity. I walked into the exclusive venue, an old Victorian building with a floodlit car park that could have been a Bentley showroom. It promised to be a classy affair, with what looked like classy people to match. The event started at seven o'clock, and by quarter past, most of the 500 people there were totally inebriated.

It was a joy to watch. People in Britain really do love drinking – everywhere. Tubes, buses, charity functions – they'll go anywhere for a swig of Cobra. The staff at the venue were too frightened to tell the guests to curb their drinking, for fear of reprisals to the stained-glass windows, so they asked me to make an announcement: "The staff at this venue have advised that you keep drinking to a minimum." My words were met with dirty looks, sneering, and comments such as "Don't be such a miserable cow".

During the first interval I decided to take a break on one of the benches at the back. As I sat there, contemplating how I should be more selective in choosing what charities to support, a tall, handsome, black man strode up to me and, without saying a word, thrust a card into my lap; then he swiftly walked away. I picked up the card, which had all his details, and wondered what on earth I was meant to do with it. The card said he was a former West Indies

international cricketer. Did he think I looked like the type who'd want lessons? I was bewildered.

I continued compering the gig, and then, in the next interval, he walked up to me and said: "Well, make sure you call me." He then grabbed my hand and turned it over. "Good, no wedding rings. Call me and then we can arrange for you to come to Kingston Town. You will love it there, and you will love me, too."

"You're a bit forward," I said.

"English men are useless," he said. "They beat around the bush and nothing gets done"

"Yes, that's how it should be," he told me enthusiastically. "English men are useless. They beat around the bush and nothing gets done."

I thought: "You wait all year for one, then when it does come along, it's harassment gift-wrapped in seduction."

Of course, I didn't call him, and I certainly had no intention of eloping to Kingston Town with a former Windies international cricketer. I can't do things like that: my parents are still alive.

I was filming in Piccadilly Circus this week when I was approached by a man wearing a banana-coloured hat and a flamingo-coloured coat. He

grabbed my hand and whispered in my ear: "I really love what you do, but you must read Paul McKenna's *I Can Make You Rich*." He was immediately ushered away by the cameraman Tim, who doubles as a nutcase detector.

On Saturday night, I drove for five hours from London to Blackburn to perform at an awards ceremony in recognition of local achievement. It was like the Oscars of Blackburn but without the Botox. The ceremony was to celebrate the incredible work people do silently for each other within small communities, such as running a boxing club for kids who don't like playing Nintendo, or arranging keep-fit classes for women who never exercised because they were too embarrassed to join a gym.

I can often look at an audience and forecast just how the gig will go. I am often right. The people here were worthy and conservative and, for a lot of them, the last comedian they had seen was probably Charlie Chaplin. Older members of this small, close-knit northern community didn't take kindly to my jokes about funerals being a waste of money and how everyone should be cremated in a pot to save a few pence.

Consequently, I was marched out by a few members of the audience who suggested I go back to where I came from. Who said English men beat around the bush? ●

Shazia Mirza

PAYNE'S GREY BY CHRIS PRIESTLEY

Bere Regis was a good person to know when things were going badly.



He was so useless he would make anyone feel better about themselves.

