

## PROJECT XX

Jane was bored. Mark infatuated with his secretary. Their new stories started with a phone call from a friend, two months before their 20<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. Neither was looking forward to the false smiles and cheesy words on their supposed big day. Their early romantic bliss had progressed through the friendship years to empty-nesters' arguments and silences.

Sally, Jane's closest university buddy, called from the Home Office where she managed society initiatives. After the pleasantries, Sally made her pitch.

"Jane, I hope you don't mind me raising this, but you told me you and Mark are going through a difficult time. Well, I am working on an exciting relationship pilot, code named Project XX, aimed at couples who might separate. We want to help them move on easily and quickly and if possible marry again and enjoy new adventures. I wondered if you might be interested in hearing more details.

"Why do you want them to remarry?" Jane asked.

"The birth rate's flat-lined so we want to stimulate more breeding. Obviously, we will be encouraging the young to have babies but we also want to target divorcees who have already proved to be good parents."

"That sounds rather a Fascist initiative, Sally. I seem to remember the Nazis forced young women to marry German men with blond hair to have Aryan babies.."

"Sorry, it's not easy to explain all the details over the phone. There's nothing Fascist or forced about this, everything is totally optional, including re-marrying or having more babies. We just want to make them feasible options for young couples like you and Mark, who might be thinking of separating but delay because you think it's difficult. We will be offering large financial incentives to help you move on. Discuss it with Mark if you can and if you want to know more give me a call and we can arrange to meet. It's a secret project at the moment so keep the information to yourselves."

Jane was prompted to consider her situation, like many, she knew long marriages only offered more of the same. That wasn't for her and she guessed it was so for Mark. She kept wondering of the best way to raise the topic with him. Eventually, she decided to be direct and over dinner the next evening she asked the difficult question.

"Do you think we'll make it to our Silver Wedding anniversary?"

John was non-committal, and bounced the question back. "What do you think?"

"I'm not sure myself, Sally said. "I ask because if we did want to move on in the near future, according to Sally, my friend, the Government have a plan to make it easy. Obviously, a

key issue would be the effect on the children, but now they are both at university they are already growing away from us.”

She told Mark about Sally’s call and the promise of financial support.

“We need to know a lot more about the money offer. That’s would be my biggest concern.” John said.

After their longest discussion for some time, they agreed to meet up with Sally, and also to make the best of their 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, after all, there had been happy years together worth celebrating

And so, in time, Jane and Mark became early participants in Project XX and both found a revived zest in their lives with new partners. Mark married the secretary he'd long fancied and Jane was helped with AI Profiling to make a very compatible match with a caring local farmer. The government provided affordable housing, a lump sum for legal and other expenses and offered adjustment therapy to all the affected children. Their story became part of the promotional campaign when Project XX was released to the public as The Renewal with the slogan – *Variety is the spice of life*.

Over the next few years, many more couples experienced the spirit of adventure in new relationships without the usual traumas of separations. Of course, the divorce rate soared in the 25-39 age group but for good reasons including the extra births the country needed.

680 words