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Woman Walks into a Bar

Rowan Coleman

CHAPTER ONE

'YOU ARE JOKING,' I said, straight-faced. 'You had better be bloody joking.'

Joy and Marie exchanged looks over the canteen table.

'Why would we be joking?' Joy said, leaning back in her chair and patting the pocket of her jacket in search of her fags. She winked at Marie. 'Do I look like I'm joking?'

'No!' Marie replied, even though she was laughing. 'We're not joking Sam - we really have set you up on a blind date! In the White Horse - tonight at seven. Are you excited or what?' She sort of squealed and bounced up and down in her chair as she spoke. Marie is the kind of person who gets very excited over nothing much at all. I put it down to her not having any kids. If she had kids she'd be too knackered to get excited about anything. I was pissed off.

'You have not set me up on a blind date,' I said firmly, looking at Joy. I was trying to show her how angry I was. But in all the years I've known her I've never seen Joy afraid, least of all of me. She tipped her chin back as far as it would go and blew smoke into the air above the table because she knew that too much smoke in the air would make me need my blue inhaler. She seemed to have forgotten that stress makes me need it too.

'It'll be great,' she said, as she leant forward over the table and stubbed the butt of her fag out in a tinfoil ashtray. 'When have I ever let you down?'

I had to admit she was right. Joy had always been there for me from the first day we'd met at school until now. She was my best friend through thick and thin. Mostly thick as it turned out. Which is why she should know not to set me up on a blind date. She should know how much I'll hate it.

Joy looked at the clock on the canteen wall. 'Come on, break's nearly up and I've got to get back. Sulky Sandra wants me to re-stock feminine hygiene before dinner. Lucky me. A whole morning of stacking tampons.' She and Marie started to get up but I didn't. I just sat there and stared at her. She sat down again. 'Look,' she said, starting to latch onto the idea that I was

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not very happy. 'It'll be a laugh! You turn up looking sexy. He'll buy you all the drinks you want and if you don't like him you can leave. OK?'

'But it's Friday night,' I said. 'It's our night out. Our girls' night.' I thought of our usual routine at the end of the week. Me, Joy and Marie down the White Horse every Friday night at seven. A few Bacardi Breezers to warm us up before the disco started and then we'd dance the rest of the night away. It was a stupid disco, really cheesy. But we always had a good laugh, just the three of us. It was a girls' night out. Just girls. Marie didn't bring her husband and Joy didn't go on the pull. And we always, always dressed up to the nines like we were going to some West End hot spot, not the local pub. Marie, tall and skinny, with her blonde curls piled high on her head so she'd tower over any man that dared to chat her up. Joy, in her latest slinky dress with all the right curves in all the right places. And me with a lot of the wrong curves in a lot of the wrong places, and hair that's just brown and eyes that are just grey, but who still - even if I say it myself - scrubs up pretty well compared to some. But now Joy had put a man right in the middle of it. It made me feel hurt, like she was trying to get rid of me. It was a stupid thought, but I get stupid thoughts like that. I have done since I was a kid. And I haven't always been wrong.

'We'll be there too,' Marie said. 'To keep an eye on you.'

'Piss yourselves laughing at me you mean,' I said, starting to feel anxious. I put my hand in my jeans pocket to check that my inhaler was there if I needed it. I didn't find my inhaler, just a small square of folded up paper. I wrapped my fingers round it and held it. 'Anyway, Joy, I know all the blokes you know. You wouldn't go out with any of them - what makes you think I would?'

Joy leant over the table and put her hand on mine. It was cold. Joy always had cold hands. 'Cold hands, warm heart,' she always said. And most of the time it was true.

'We'll be there to keep an eye on you, idiot,' she said, smiling at me. 'We don't want you to get in any more trouble do we? Think of Marie and me as your bodyguards. Hanging about in the background. You won't know we're there unless you need us. And then we'll be like Pow! Pow!' Joy chopped her hand through the air as she spoke but I shook my head.

'No,' I said. 'Look, you'll have to phone this bloke up and tell him no. All right? I'm not going on a blind date!' I leant back in the chair and crossed my arms. 'Blind dates are for sad bastards who can't meet people in a normal way.'

Joy and Marie laughed. I knew why they were laughing and I supposed it was pretty funny. I felt the corners of my mouth twitch but I made them stay down. I didn't want to stop being angry until this whole thing was cleared up.

'So Internet dating isn't like a blind date then?' Marie said, her mouth curled into a smile.

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'No,' I said, rolling my eyes like my daughter Beth would have. 'You know a lot about the person before you meet them and they know a lot about you. And you've seen a photo.'

'Yeah, but whose photo!' Joy cried, slapping the palm of her hand down on the table as she spoke. She and Marie were laughing again.

'You know what?' I said, only half angry now. 'Everyone thinks my love life is such a joke. And I reckon I must be the punch line because I tell you what, everyone else but me thinks it's funny!'

'What was his name again, the one who sent someone else's photo?' Joy asked me, between laughs.

'Bill, and it wasn't someone else's photo - it was his photo,' I said, feeling the corners of my mouth start to twitch again. 'Just one he'd had taken twenty years before, that's all.'

And then we were all laughing.

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