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I Never Fancied Him Anyway

Claudia Carroll

OK. To begin at the beginning . . .

Dublin, 1985

Our Dining Room

'He claims that he loves me, he's just not in love with me, which makes me think he's put me into the sister category and that I'm just completely and utterly wasting my time with this guy. We've been going out with each other for nearly three years and do you know what he gave me for my birthday? A foot spa. I ask you. A foot spa. That's the kind of gift you give to an elderly infirm relative that you don't even like.'

'Aunt Lizzie?' I tried my best to interrupt her but she was still in full rant-mode.

'All I want to know is this. When am I ever going to have what your mother has? A beautiful daughter, this beautiful home and a husband who actually wants to spend the time of day with her. So is there something fundamentally unmarriageable about me? Why are the men I go out with such complete and utter wasters? Or am I the problem? Could it just be possible that I'M the problem?'

'Is it my go yet?' asked Aunt Lizzie's friend, Mary, keeping her voice deliberately low so that my mother wouldn't overhear in the kitchen. Mom didn't approve of her pals pestering me for free psychic advice. At least not during homework time.

'No, don't even answer her,' snapped Aunt Lizzie. 'If I talk fast enough then you can't interrupt me. OK, here's the question. Is George the man I'm going to spend the rest of my life with? Because if he isn't, then I might as well cut my losses and get out now. So come on, Cassie, break it to me gently.'

'It's your perfume,' I said simply.

'My what?'

'He hates the smell of your perfume.'

'Are you kidding me? I'll have you know I wear Elizabeth Taylor's Passion, only one of the priciest ones around. Cost me a packet.'

'Stop wearing it and within six months you'll be married.'

Aunt Lizzie looked at me, stunned. 'Are you serious?' she asked, eventually.

'Yup.'

'Can you see it?'

I closed my eyes and screwed up my face. Yes, there it was. Clear as crystal. Easy.

I'm in Donnybrook church, standing beside the altar, trying not to trip over Aunt Lizzie's big meringue of a dress. I look up and there's George, sweating nervously and fixing his buttonhole. I can hear an organist playing the Ave Maria and I'm smelling – what is it? – something strong, pungent, a bit yucky . . . lilies. Yes, definitely lilies.

Then I look down and see what I'm wearing.

Oh rats. Serves me right for thinking all of this was too good to be true . . .

'I'm certain,' I said firmly. Aunt Lizzie beamed. She pushed aside my homework where it was carelessly spread out all over our dining-room table and hugged me tightly.

'You're a very special girl, Cassie, I hope you know that.'

'Mmm,' I said, pulling away from her. The stench of perfume was getting to me too.

'And if there's anything you want,' she said, dropping her voice so that my mother wouldn't overhear through the half-open kitchen door, 'you know, a treat, or money – well, anything, really, just let me know.'

'There is,' I said.

'Name it.'

'Please, please, please don't make me bridesmaid. You'll only put me in lemon-yellow chiffon.'

'Done,' she said, all aglow, suddenly delighted with life again.

'Right, you've had your turn, over to me,' said her friend Mary, plonking herself down on the dining chair beside me and sounding like an even bossier version of Penelope Keith from *The Good Life*. If that was possible.

'Aren't you going to say congratulations?' Aunt Lizzie tossed at her, a bit smugly.
'You know, bride-to-be and all that?'

'Yes, congratulations, whatever,' snapped Mary, sounding about as far from delighted as you could possibly get.

'Sorry, didn't quite catch that?'

'Don't make me say it again, it hurt my teeth the first time.'

Now, at the time, I thought Mary was an ancient, wizened old crone, who always wore heavy, paperweight glasses with her hair scraped back into a bun, almost a caricature of the prematurely ageing schoolteacher, who'd remained a lifelong spinster, completely devoted to her students. In actual fact, though, she was probably only in her late thirties, tall, imperious and, as my mother used to say, 'a bit highly strung'.

Put it this way, you sure as hell wouldn't have wanted to go into her class without your maths homework done.

'So, he's called James,' she said to me, cutting directly to the chase. 'But that's pretty much all I have to go on, for now at least. He's the new art teacher in the school and we shared a moment in the staffroom yesterday.'

'What kind of moment?' asked Aunt Lizzie.

'Eye contact,' replied Mary defensively.

'Eye contact? That's it? You only ever looked at him? You mean you haven't even spoken to him yet?'

'No, and I'd appreciate it if you'd stop pressurizing me, Lizzie, thank you very much. I'm slowly building my way up to a conversation. My way.'

'So, you didn't talk to him, you didn't exchange numbers and he didn't ask you out?'

'Yes,' said Mary. 'A classic case of girl doesn't meet boy.'

'Shh,' I interrupted the pair of them. I was getting another flash and they were distracting me.

'What do you see?' asked Mary.

I couldn't bring myself to tell her, but oh boy, this was when I really hated my gift.

I can see Mary in the staff toilets, bawling crying in front of the sinks. Her mascara is dribbling down her cheeks and then . . . yes, there's another woman there, holding Mary's hand and telling her not to worry, that it's his wife they should all be feeling sorry for . . .

'What is it?' Mary demanded, clocking my fallen face.

'I . . . I don't think he's the man for you,' I said slowly, 'but —'

'Oh, that is so UNFAIR!' snarled Mary.

'Yeah, well, so's my cellulite,' said Aunt Lizzie breezily.

'Shh, gimme a sec,' I whispered, waving at them to keep it down.

'What? What are you seeing?' the pair of them hissed at me.

Another flash . . .

It's Mary, but this time she's looking an awful lot happier. She's wearing a pretty summer dress and is . . . definitely abroad, somewhere hot and sunny, sitting at a pavement café drinking funny-looking pink stuff, with a very tanned, swarthy-looking guy holding her hand and saying words I don't understand . . .

'Eres la mujer de mis sueños.'

'What did you say?' asked Aunt Lizzie.

'Sounded like Spanish,' said Mary in her bossy schoolmarm voice. 'Repeat clearly, please?'

'Eres la mujer de mis sueños,' I said slowly, not having the first clue of what I was actually saying. It could have been something rude for all I knew. 'There's a man in a flowery shirt holding your hand and saying it to you, and I don't think you're in Ireland somehow. It's hot and sticky and your nose is all red and peeling. All I'm sure of is that you're very, very happy.'

Mary looked at both of us, like someone having an epiphany. 'You are the woman of my dreams,' she said, stunned. 'That's what it means. You are the woman of my dreams.'

'Oh please, there isn't a man alive who would come out with that drivel,' snapped Aunt Lizzie, a bit put out at all her new-found bridal thunder being stolen from under her. 'Have you been confiscating Jackie magazines from first-years again?'

'I think . . . ' I said, not quite sure how to articulate this overwhelming feeling I was getting.

'What?' both Mary and Aunt Lizzie demanded in unison.

'Well, the man I'm seeing is definitely single now, but he . . . well, he might have been married before.'

‘Ha! A divorcee,’ sneered Aunt Lizzie triumphantly. ‘Isn’t that a bit like drinking out of someone else’s wine glass? Or shopping in the “reduced to clear” rack?’

‘He must be Spanish,’ said Mary, totally ignoring her. ‘He has to be. And there was me only thinking about spending the long summer holiday in Catalonia —’

‘Will you pair stop pestering Cassie and let her get on with her homework!’ my mother screeched from the kitchen, as Mary and Aunt Lizzie scarpered quicker than teenagers caught smoking, leaving me quietly to get back to learning my spelling.

I should point out that, when all of the above happened, I was seven years old.