

Chapter One

Okay, I thought. Okay. She's aiming for fashionably late. On a first date, girls do. It's accepted practice. Expected almost, like the spot on the side of your nose that arrives the day before, so large that it's in danger of closing the eye above it. I didn't have one of these. This made me nervous. Something else would go wrong then...

No...I shut this thought out. I pinned myself to the mental door marked 'upbeat' and tried to pick the lock.

I lit another cigarette and glanced at my watch. It was only nine-twenty-three. She'd got held up that was all, or was re-touching her nails, changing her outfit, checking her bum in the mirror – doing things only girls do.

To get my nerve up, I drank. First dates...they're not easy, are they? They're like learning to swim. You dive in and get on with it, splash about for the first couple of minutes, then break into a tentative doggy-paddle. Months later you hope to be doing a fluent crawl, or better yet a gentle breaststroke. If not, you sink without trace.

I refused to go under this time. The booze was going to doggy-paddle me through.

The waitress clip-clopped over. She was cute, chubby and heavily made-up. She looked like she worked behind the counter at The Perfume Palace.

“Do you want to order?” she said brightly. Her voice was clipped. She was destined for better than this. She could already have been dating a Coxwell Rogers, Peters-Farquhar or Slight Campbell. She was probably driving home in a Range Rover.

I asked for a pint.

“Your friend hasn’t showed up then.”

“Unless she’s hiding under another table,” I said, immediately regretting it. It was *so* hard to be funny when the nerves were jangling like sleigh-bells. It was taking all my concentration to make sure my voice didn’t warble.

The girl laughed, presumably out of politeness.

“She’d be silly to stand you up.”

“Why?” I was intrigued. This wasn’t the common consensus.

“It’s silly to stand anyone up. If you don’t want to go out with someone, you should just say no when they ask.”

I nodded without looking up. This was cold comfort. A frozen Hessian rug of it, brittle against my soft skin.

“I’m sure she’ll come,” she said, walking away. “She’s just making you wait. Doesn’t want to appear too keen.”

“Yeah. Don’t bet on it.”

She’d stood me up once already. This was the second time of asking. Her way of making it up to me.

So, a first date, second time of asking. Was this therefore a second date? Had all the romance gone with the first no-show? Perhaps for her, but for me the stubble-field fire of passion was raging all the stronger, almost out of control.

I lent back in my chair. Blimey, I thought (I’d recently given up the word ‘fuck’). Not content with blowing me out once, she was going for the double. And this time it was going to hurt twice as much, the inverse of the second stamp in the bollocks (which, if you’re a girl, by the way, doesn’t hurt nearly as much as the first).

I looked around the restaurant. Every table was full. Couples chatted and tasted each other’s food. Parents guided their dribbling children through the menus. Waitresses went about their

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work with bored efficiency. And then there was me, the figure depicted in popular fiction as the saddest of all social ‘groups’: the lone drinker.

Only one table caused concern. The one behind me. Take a quiet night out, invert and magnify, and this was it. Behind me were kids who your mother might call ‘trouble’. In short: a table of rigger lads.

I was doing my best to appear invisible but they were bound to spot me.

“Hey mate,” a voice sounded over my shoulder.

I lit a cigarette from the one I’d only half-smoked. I kept my cool. The light was dim but I wished it was dimmer.

“Hey mate.” The voice was deep, confident, no stranger to calling line outs and scrum tactics.

Reluctantly, I turned.

“How good looking is she?” said the voice. The face it came from was broad with a heavy chin and blue eyes.

I drew on my cigarette, acting casual.

“She’s better looking than you.”

The table rippled with laughter. Seven or eight throaty, super-masculine guffaws.

“Wouldn’t be difficult. What’s her name? Maybe we know her.”

I pulled on my cigarette.

“Come on. You can tell us her name.”

“Why do you want to know?”

“I told you. Maybe I know her.”

“He’s shagged most of the talent round here,” said a fat, drunk friend. The flesh of his neck hung over the collar of his rugby shirt like a series of miniature beer bellies hanging over jeans. The table laughed again. “He might be able to give you some advice.”

“Oh cool,” I said, sitting back. “Has he ever given you any? I mean, has he? Given you advice on chicks?” (I wasn’t sure if this is what rigger lads called girls these days, but no one raised

an eyebrow.) “Have you got lucky this year? This decade? This century?”

“Yeah, you drunk virgin,” said a voice from the end of the table, appropriately Northern accented. “Poof!”

The following happened in slo-mo: the fat one, lunging forward to grab the guy’s throat, missed and cartwheeled his pint. It bucked and sprayed like a kicked cat. The friend sitting opposite gaped at the advancing tidal wave for a second before scooting back on his chair, torpedoing into me. I went down (like many a political career) without dignity.

As I writhed and wept on the beer-wet wood, all I could hear was laughter and swearing. I grabbed my chair with unsteady hands and clenched my teeth. Pulling myself up, I came face to face with her. The girl of my dreams.

“Hi, Guy,” she said, with an amused smile. “Don’t get up.”

The sport monkeys roared as one.

“Hi,” I croaked, slumping back. “Pleased you could make it, finally...”

“Ben,” I’d said, some months previously. “Ben. I’m not joking. I’ve met the girl of my dreams.”

Ben shrugged nonchalantly, something he often does in my company. I don’t know if he does it in the company of others, but with me he does it plenty.

“Again?”

“Forget the others. This is it. This is...the one.”

He put his head down and laughed into his pint. His double chin has turned into a tripler this year. Too many burgers. Too much take-out. He says he goes to the gym. He probably does and lies on the mats for an hour-long snooze, rousing only to view an attractive newcomer, her gym kit as yet unstained by sweaty workouts.

“I know I’ve said it before. But I was younger then. It was all

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about libido.”

“And now?” he said, arching an eyebrow. “And now you’re all grown up. You’re looking for commitment, right?”

His tone was laced with sarcasm.

“You said it,” I replied. And meant it. I wanted my days of bouncing Tiggerish from bed to bed to be over. They’d practically stopped as it was.

“So where is she?” he asked, looking around the pub. We were in The Old Bell. A lifeless, smoke-filled boozier. Always devoid of talent. Average age: sixty in the shade.

But it was my local. Like a nervous tick, or an odour problem – *it was mine*. It had a dart-board and a pool table and...it was the kind of pub where you could have a drink with a mate without the other punters conjecturing if you were queer.

“You’re kidding, aren’t you?” I said. “I don’t move that quickly.”

“If at all.”

“What does that mean?”

Ben sighed. He’s known me since school and therefore he knows me.

“Half the time I come down here, you’ve got some girl lined up. It’s always, ‘next time you’ll meet her, next time’. And she never shows up.”

I lit a cigarette and offered Ben one. He refused. Currently given up. It won’t last. It never does.

“Once or twice,” I said, getting back to the conversation. “That may have happened once or twice.”

Ben laughed. His big, friendly face creased, his eyes crinkled. “I can’t remember the last time I came down here and you had a date.”

“I’ve had dates in-between. You don’t have to meet every girl I go out with.”

But Ben was right. I’d been in Cirencester two years and never had a girlfriend. Oh.

Three or four times, I’d woken dry-mouthed and dazed to

find someone in bed next to me. Someone I'd had to rush out the back door without breakfast, very early, to avoid panicking the jumpy milkman. But I hadn't had a girlfriend. I hadn't related to anyone. I hadn't committed. Not for a long time.

"Go on then," Ben said. "Tell me."

So I told him. I found it difficult to describe her impressively enough. But I tried.

Ben sat back in his chair.

"So let me get this straight. The times you've seen her, she's had her hair tied back, she's been wearing jeans covered in paint..."

"Yeah."

"She's a bit Sloaney. Slim, but she's got boobs. You think. And her mouth might be dodgy."

"No, she's got big lips."

"What colour are her eyes?"

"Don't know."

"Hair?"

"Brown...ish. Mousy. Streaky. I don't know. Look, it's not all this that matters. It's the feeling I get when she walks in the door."

"Which is like what? A hard-on?"

"Like I'm going to pass out."

"That big a hard-on?"

"No. She takes my breath away. My heart hammers. You know what I mean, don't you? I feel sweaty."

Ben shook his head. "Sounds like flu. Or badly cut Speed. Do you think she fancies you?"

"Who can say? I think so."

"Why would she fancy you?"

"Why not?"

"Err...you work in a travel agent's."

"I'm practically the boss."

"You work in a travel agent's. You drive a piece of shit. You earn less than a student."

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“I’ve just had a pay rise.”

“You earn the same as a student. Are you a catch?”

“I’m not fat.”

“Girls like fat. Makes them feel thin.”

“I’m in trouble then. Unless she likes my personality.”

“What – gibbering, obsessive wreck with no mates?”

“One mate. One fat mate who sells computers in London, supposedly earns a fortune, and has loads of sex.”

“I *do* earn a fortune,” he said, “and I do have loads of sex. Talking of which, how’s that Filipino hooker?”

“Filipina,” I said, stressing the ‘a’. “She was a girl.”

“What do you mean ‘was’?”

“I mean she’s moved out.”

“So what happened to her?”

“How should I know? She moved out, okay. I never even spoke to her. Her life story as far as I know is: she lived in the flat below mine, she got shagged out and left.”

“So who’s moved in?”

“A weirdo who looks just like a goblin.”

“A goblin?”

“Well,” I said, feeling the doubt in his gaze, “yeah. He does.”

“So where did he come from?”

“Somewhere else. I have no idea. He only moved in yesterday.”

“What does he look like? I mean, what does a goblin look like?”

“Like this bloke. Small, crazy looking.”

Ben smiled.

“You’re so full of shit,” he said. “Come on. Let’s go to The Crown. There’ll be some talent in there tonight. Maybe we’ll pull.”

“Maybe *I’ll* pull.”

I stubbed out my cigarette and we left.

At the Crown we got very, very drunk. Ben smoked. We didn’t pull.

Luke Bitmead

And when we got home, I swear my neighbour was prancing around a roaring bonfire, poking and waving a stick at the lawn.

“Yikes,” said Ben, who was also attempting to launder his language. “He does look like a goblin. It’s *Lord of the Rings*.”

“Good versus evil,” I replied wistfully, “it surrounds our lives.”

“Yeah, like debt and death.”

I shrugged and watched the man dance. He wasn’t bad. I wondered idly if he was a heavy drinker.