

## She Reminds Me

**A**ny enthusiasm I might have had for this evening is dwindling fast. Toby, a guy I work with at the local council offices, has persuaded me to get back into the game. We were never great mates or anything, but we got to chatting at the coffee machine this morning and for some crazy reason, I agreed to go out and be his wing man. So here I stand, hands in pockets, scraping my feet along curbstones and kicking at imaginary stones, feeling like a spare part. He said to meet him outside the pub at eight; it's now twenty past. To add to a situation that I can only think of as bizarre, the pub's called Old Bangers & Losers – and it's a singles bar! The name alone should drive people away in their hoards, but no, it's probably the most popular pub on the east side of the city. Don't ask, I have no idea. The longer I wait, the more the acid reflux works its way up into my chest and the dragon within has already begun clawing at my throat.

“You're not going to meet anyone out here,” a voice, upbeat and full of expectation, rings out behind me.

I turn and see two girls. One is smiling. She's linked up into a girlfriend's arm and gazing up at me from a slightly doubled-over position. I'm guessing it's her who spoke; she's the one acknowledging my existence. The other one is staring off into space, probably thinking there's got to be something better than him around. The one who spoke has large, twinkling, blue eyes that are full of mischievous curiosity. Pretty girl, too, probably around twenty, a couple of years younger than me. Long, full, flaxen hair, and now she's standing upright I would say she's a little taller than average, whatever average might be. And even in a winter coat, I can see she's slim, which is right up my street. Hmm, do I know her? She looks ... no, I've never set eyes on her. But there's something familiar. I'm just not ... Ah, stupid me, of course ... she's a bit like Pam.

Who's Pam? you ask. My ex and, boy, is she a beauty. Too beautiful really, or at least too beautiful for me. Most of my mates told me I was punching well above my weight when we started going out. Whether that's true or not, I don't know, but I can tell you she was absolutely dotty about me. I could do no wrong in her eyes and because I believed that, and because I probably *was* punching above my weight, I tested my power over her to the limit. Huh, if only it had been just inside the limit. Truth is, I took it too far and paid the price by being unceremoniously dumped. Me, the little big shot who reigned over women like I was Don Juan or something, only to have my heart broken by the girl of my dreams. And she had every right. I'd been a pillock from day one. After a month of trying anything and everything I could think of to get her back, I came to the conclusion that I'd well and truly blown it. The complete adoration she once had had turned to utter contempt. In fact, she probably wondered what she ever saw in me in the first place. So here I am, trying to rebuild a shattered confidence.

“No,” I’m saying to the girl. “I’m waiting for a bloke I work with, but I think he’s blown me out.”

She laughs and pouts sympathetically, and her face crinkles exactly the way Pam’s does. I always loved the way Pam’s face did that, but on this girl – well, something new and more than a little exciting. But now I’m feeling defensive; no way do I want to feel that hurt again.

Her friend unhooks her arm, gives me a weak smile and turns towards the pub.

“I’ll see you inside, Dotti,” she says and leaves us standing.

“Dotty?” I laugh, and Dotti’s face does not look appreciative. And worse, the interest she’d shown me is gone and she’s turning away towards her friend. “No, don’t go, I ... I’ve not long broken up with a girlfriend and she’d been ... doesn’t matter. Sounds lame.”

She’s stopped, but her face is full of thunder. “No, go on, finish the putdown. I suppose she had been dotty, too. Not original, believe me.”

Not what I meant, but what could I say? Anyway, her cuteness, crinkles, angry face, even the way she holds herself, everything about her is a reminder of Pam and I didn’t come out tonight for a walk down memory lane – too painful. I shrug my shoulders and she hurries after her friend into the pub.

“I come here every week and have tried it on a hundred times with that girl. She hasn’t even acknowledged me and here’s you at first base before I get here.”

Toby’s turned up.

“Wrong! If I ever had a chance with her, what I just said with my super-cool approach’s blown me out the water. In fact, I’ve landed so far into dry land, I might never get my feet wet again.”

“You worry too much. Come on. Plenty of other fish to fry,” he said, but my hopes of a new start have already taken a nosedive and the acid has reached my throat and now wants into my mouth.

“Just a minute.” Luckily, I brought some of those capsules the doctor prescribes for my nervous stomach, or that’s what he calls it anyway.

Not sure I mentioned it, but Toby’s a bit of a ladies’ man and thinks women are there for his own gratification – one-night stands. Don’t ask. I have no idea why he would want me along for backup.

I don’t realize how chilly it is outside until I get through the door. The warmth of the pub hits me like I’ve stepped onto the rim of a live volcano. A shiver runs over my skin as I stop inside the threshold and look around. The space is decked out like an old, East End pub. The bar is long and made of polished, dark oak; the beer towels gracing the top look soaked through from the froth of overflowing beer – another odd thing about me, I’ve always liked that smell. The bottom half of the walls are wood paneling, same as those below the counter, and the upper half is covered in small, white, square tiles with squiggly, blue patterns; several slate blackboards are hanging here and there with chalked descriptions of draft beers and specials. The floor, what I can see of it, is wooden, boarded and dark.

Without aggression, Toby manages to force his way through to the bar. For me, I can only move slowly while doing an ‘excuse me’ as I go. Needless to say, the place is packed.

I run my fingers inside the collar of my white shirt and start feeling even more self-conscious than I had out on the street. The acid bubbles. Everybody, well, almost everybody,

is dressed in jeans and T-shirts or loose-fit, patterned shirts. Those in jackets are wearing hoodies, but they are also wearing jeans and T-shirts under them. Me? I'm in a black suit with skinny-fit trousers and a white shirt with a black, lace tie. I'm not saying the gear I'm wearing is no longer fashionable, it is; it just doesn't fit in the here and now. Why couldn't Toby, who fits in perfectly, have given me a heads-up? Tosser!

With a sigh, I tuck my head in, try not to faint at the strength of the perfume splashed on all the blokes around me without a care for other people's sinuses, and join Toby at the bar. Funny that, men stinking of perfume. It wasn't that long ago it was only the women.

"Two lagers, sweetie," he shouts in a condescending manner and although music is playing and voices drumming in the background, his vocals are loud enough to turn heads.

The previous lad ordered in a similar way, so something else is bothering the barmaid because she's giving him the mother of all looks while she'd smiled and chatted when pulling the other bloke's pint.

"That'll be halves, is it?" She's being intentionally demeaning, and I grin at her on seeing Toby blush and squirm.

"No, that'll be pints," he answers indignantly, as she follows up with an icy stare. "You vexed with me about something?"

"Don't tell me, it wasn't you who hooked up with me after work three weeks ago Friday."

His defense withers. "Three weeks ago? Oh yeah, sorry, all I can remember of that night is waking up with the mother of all hangovers."

"Okay, I forgive you; defo explains your sad bust-out when we got to my place."

I burst out laughing. She rolls her eyes and leaves to serve someone else. Toby swings his head about, maybe looking for a rabbit hole to hide in.

But no. He says, "Look, two over there giving us the eye. We'll decide who gets who after chatting to them. Come on."

I'm literally trailing my feet in pursuit. If this is being back in the action, you can keep it.

Dotti catches my eye. She's watching me from under hooded eyes. Pam used to give me that look after I'd made some kind of putdown remark, which so happened to be a constant in our relationship, me being a badass and all to show off in front of our friends. I give Dotti a weak smile and mouth 'sorry' and my heart jumps a gear; she's smiling back.

Toby's advance to the girls is slow and casual, so I slope off sideways, veering over towards Dotti. She makes a small turn from her friend, who is hot in conversation with some stud, and my heart rate is increasing that little bit more. Unfortunately, so is the acid, but, chin up, all is not yet lost.

"I'm sorry about the confusion outside," I tell her. "People used to say my ex was dotty about me and laughing at your name was more shook than vicious." Being a bit old-fashioned, I don't do shook or vicious, but I'd heard Toby talking and I'm trying to keep up here; shook means flustered if you're wondering and vicious is cool or awesome.

Dotti lifts her eyebrows, which looks funny because she doesn't do it quite right, you know, not vicious.

"You obviously don't talk like that, so ... well, just stop. Anyhow, if she was so keen, why did you finish with her?"

My brow is furrowed in puzzlement, but then the light switches on.

“Oh, no, I didn’t. I wasn’t a very good boyfriend and squandered all my Brownie points. She dumped me.”

Dotti pushes her bottom lip out and up. The cuteness of it pulls me to her that bit more.

“Never mind, as long as you learned something from it, and besides, maybe it wasn’t meant to be.”

Of course, it wasn’t, I think with annoyance. Or else I wouldn’t be here, would I? Whoa, where did that come from? Touchy. She isn’t against you. Behave. So I calm my childish thoughts and say, “Suppose not. Too noisy in here for me. If you’re not still annoyed, maybe you fancy a glass of wine with me? There’s a nice little wine bar around the next turning.”

I edge to the bar, lean my elbow on it, prop my head on my hand, pose my face upward to look cute, and fail, but I have succeeded in getting a certain kind of pose across –something like a total douche. Dotti is trying to hold a serious face, but she can’t. The laughter she’s bellowing is loud enough to draw attention and seems almost uncontrollable. I’m fighting acid and trying to work my way out of this embarrassment. Straightening, I’m running my fingers down, inside my jacket lapels, nodding my head several times to make myself look cool; damn! Vicious. My elbow is wet. Course, it would be; my sleeve has soaked up half the pub’s beer from a drenched beer towel. A sigh, I give a humble nod of defeat and, again, Dotti shows a line of perfect, straight, white teeth when she goes into fits. Her eyes are wide and dazzling. Her face open and pretty. She is a beautiful girl without doubt – and she reminds me of no one other than herself.

“You’re not very good at this, are you?”

I can’t even think of a get-out clause, so I might as well concede, “No, never was, never will be.”

Appreciating how much I’ve just crashed out, I smile at her and begin to draw away, but she’s keeping me there, saying, “Your friend has a reputation in here. If you’re like him and acting the clown is your way of getting through to me, you can forget it.”

For some strange reason, she hasn’t blown me out.

“He’s not my friend; we work in the same office, and I wish I had been acting the clown, but what you see is what you get with me, I’m afraid. I’m not like Toby. If something were to grow out of this evening then I would be the last one to walk away, I promise you that.”

Why am I saying that? Sounds like I’m offering a relationship and I only wanted to get out from under my parents’ feet for the evening. The last thing I need is to fall in love again, only to get burned.

Dotti touches her friend’s elbow.

“Are you okay?”

The girl turns from the stud she’s talking to, but puts a hand on his arm to make sure he doesn’t escape. She then gives Dotti her attention before looking at me. “Yeah, no worries. Off you go.”

And this time she’s giving me a genuine smile.

“Come on, then,” Dotti says.

I look over to Toby; he’s giving me two lots of thumbs-up and jiggling his shoulders, as if acknowledging I’m Jack the Lad. But I’m not. A slight shake of the head and I nod as I leave the pub. Out on the street, my stomach has calmed right down, Dotti’s linked up and is

leaning into me. Her body feels soft and warm. Again, I'm reminded of Pam. But this time in a good way. I've learned a great lesson from her, and that has to be worth something. I don't know why, I've hardly spoken to this girl, but despite not wanting to get into another relationship, I feel there could be something special between us, and if there is I have no intention of spoiling it by pretending to be something I'm not.

"You feel like the perfect fit, snuggled in against me," I tell her and nestle her arm that much firmer against my side, "like the final piece of a jigsaw."

And I hope she will be.

T h e E n d

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