



Uncle Colin

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'We'll go Dutch, shall we?'

'No, no. My treat.'

'Thank you. I'll do the wine then?'

'Absolutely not'

God, this is a first. He's changed his tune. Well, might as well just sit back and enjoy, I remember thinking to myself. Felt strange though. It must have been the first time in years, the first time ever, in fact, that I had been alone with my brother in law. I know that when he asked to cadge a bed for the night, it was just to save on expenses. That's fair enough. Suppose everyone does. Of course that's why he was treating me to a nice meal.

We sit down opposite each other at a little mosaic table. I'd quite like one of these for my balcony, I mused. He's looking very pleased with himself, beaming at me expansively. He's checking out the menu now. I hastily look down at mine. Oh my God. He's not going to chat me up or anything? He hasn't been nursing a fancy for me? Not one of those situations of having married the wrong sister? No, no. Don't be ridiculous. You've never had an inkling of that. Mind you, if as a woman you don't fancy the man, you wouldn't notice if he fancied you. Would you? Not unless he made it obvious. And he certainly has never done that. No. Put it out of your mind. Anyway, the only person he really fancies is himself.

'Can I get you a drink Sir?'

He looks across at me. 'We'll have a glass of red.' I look back at him.

'A bottle? We'll have a bottle of the House Red.'

She glides off. What a fantastic looking girl. A cut above the usual, although you get some good looking kids doing this these days, especially here. All actors I suppose. Cropped glossy dark hair, long red skirt slashed to the thigh. Plunging black, no it's not black, it's a sort of dark plum, plunging, velvet top. She comes back with the wine, leans in close to him to pour it out.

'That's fine thank you.'

She pours one for me. 'Ready to order Sir?'

'Not just yet thanks.'

Crikey. Why not? I'm starving. I smile quietly to myself. I know. He just wants to keep her coming back, how typically male. Rather endearing really. And I should think he loves being called 'Sir' like that. He puts his glass down. 'What are you going to have?' I can't remember what I had.

'I think I'll go for the anchovy pasta'

'I'm fond of anchovies.' I said.

'We can share.'

'Yes.'

'No point in our both having the same.' He orders.

Conversation. Better make some conversation. I know he never talks much. On the other hand, perhaps he's waiting for his moment, having a drink first. Lord, I hope everything's alright at home.

'Colin?'

'Mmm?'

Ought to start with a preamble about his work; what brings him here? Heavens, I haven't a clue what he does. Might as well just dive in. 'Had a good day?'

'Fine.'

'Is everything alright at home?' He sips his wine. I wait. Got myself in a sweat now. I'm convinced there's something wrong; Jackie, the girls? My flat is miles away from where he's working and he has generous expenses for an overnight stay, I would have thought.

'Everything's fine, going well. Jackie's really enjoying . . .'

Relieved, I drift off for a moment. He looks alright. No. It's not that.

Here it is at last. We tuck in. Mine's delicious. I knew this was a good idea. We had our Works Do here recently. Popular little place down some iron stairs in a basement beneath the pavement and the thrum of the city streets - with nice Italianate decor - but no dusty Chianti bottles on the ceiling, a bit more upmarket than that; cosy and very reasonable. He's not eating, just pushing it around his plate.

'What's wrong?'

'I can't find the anchovies.'

'Anchovies?'

I lean across the table with my fork to help him look, humouring him. What a pain. I thought it was too good to be true. I know how picky he can be. Oh, he's eating a bit. Good. He'll probably settle down now. I smile at him and pour us another drink. No need to prattle on. We can share an easy silence surely? He puts his fork down. 'Excuse me?' She drifts to his side and stands before him smiling benignly.

‘I can’t see any anchovies in this.’

Her face drops. ‘I’ll take it back to the kitchen.’ She picks up the plate without looking at him. I sit and gaze in to the distance. My mind goes blank and I struggle to keep it there. I turn back to him. He’s smiling. So that’s alright then. Take it easy. What does it matter in the whole scheme of things? Let him have his fun.

‘Chef says it’s anchovy flavour and there aren’t any actual anchovy fish in it. There aren’t supposed to be.’

‘Well! That’s very disappointing. Why put anchovy pasta on the menu if there aren’t any actual anchovies in it? I was looking forward to the anchovy, fish’ He pushes his plate away.

‘I’ll just check with chef.’ She stoops to take his plate. He holds on to the other side. She stares him in the eye. ‘Sir.’

I give up. I don’t know what’s happening here. I’ll play dead just like my sister does. It’s coming back to me now. I look around. Is anybody watching? Earwiggling? I can hear voices, but there’s no one our side of the partition. The tables are empty, but it’s still quite early, just after work. I peep over at the other side through the potted plant. There are several tables pushed together for a party. Perhaps that’s why the waitress is so dressed up? And there are a couple of pretty boys drifting around.

‘Chef says; please do choose something else, on the house.’ She hands him the menu. He gives it a cursory glance. ‘I still don’t understand about the anchovy situation’ he says, pulling himself up to his full height in the chair.

‘It’s to do with Health and Safety, Sir. Fresh anchovies are used for the flavouring, then discarded. We’re not allowed to keep them on the shelf.’

‘On the shelf?’

‘In the fridge. Would you like an alternative? Chef says.’

This is getting quite amusing, I suppose, in a queer kind of way, might as well go with the flow. Can I see the attraction for my sister? I don’t know. He’s tall, blonde, fading now, smooth, but I don’t like that nasal whining Brummy voice he puts on when he wants something. And what a palaver over bloody anchovies, such bitter little fish.

‘It’s alright. I’ll stick with this.’

After all that he’s going to eat it anyway? I guess he’s hungry. He scoffs the lot. Thank Goodness that’s over.

‘We’ll have the bill. Thank you, Thank you!’ He calls. She comes and stands.

‘I wasn’t happy with my food. I shall pay for her’ - He looks pointedly at me – ‘meal,’ but not

for mine. And I think under the circumstances, the wine should be on the house.’

‘I’ll go and check with Chef.’

‘No. Don’t check with Chef.’ He puts his card on the plate, picks up the newspaper beside him and buries his head in it. She hurries away. I’m not standing for this. What a bloody insult; free bed with me for the night and so much for treating me to a nice meal. My sister’s not here. I’ve had enough of this. ‘What’s it all about Colin? He puts the paper down and smiles at me in that supercilious way of his. ‘Thanks for a lovely evening. You’ve got away without paying the bill.’

‘I’ve paid half of it.’

‘That’s even worse. What are you trying to prove?’

‘I can’t stand inefficiency.’

‘They’re not inefficient!’

‘Substandard food.’

‘You were offered an alternative.’

‘I didn’t want that.’

‘You ate it all!’

‘I had to eat something, didn’t I? I was hungry.’

She returns with his card. He clicks the numbers in looking down his nose, then gets up and goes to the loo. I look up in to her serene young face. She’s glamorous but not tarty, chic. I’m in awe.

‘Mine was delicious. I’ve been here before. Don’t mind him.’

‘It’s perfectly alright Madam. If Sir didn’t like his food we’re very sorry. Goodbye Madam and enjoy your evening.’

Well, I tried. I wondered how often Jackie had been in this situation. Oh Lord. You don’t think that they thought we were foodie critics or something? Of course. That must be it. That was his pose tonight.

I don’t know how we got home. I know he’s too tight to take a taxi. I suppose we struggled along on the tube like everyone else. We got a minicab from the station, I’m sure. I paid for that, I think. Yes, I did. Oh God. How long ‘til bedtime? I thought. I was worried about entertaining him, but I think he was accustomed to entertaining himself.

We got in. I showed him his room. He came out in his bedroom slippers; put his feet up on the couch. I’m used to this having sons – minus the bedroom slippers - He commandeered the remote.

‘We can catch the late news. You don’t mind!?’

‘Not at all.’ I said breezily. ‘I’m up early in the morning. I’m going to turn in. You can let yourself out? Give my love to Jackie and the girls.’ I left him in charge of the remote.

I'd just got in to bed. He peered round the door. 'Just wondering? Could you run me to the airport tomorrow?'

'Airport?'

'That's right.'

'I'm working.'

'It's Saturday.'

'I said I'm working, Colin.'

'No you're not. I just checked your diary.'

'My diary?'

'On the notice board in the kitchen. You've got a free day.'

I sat bolt upright.

'Where are you going?'

'Tenerife' he said.

'Tenerife?'

I have a second cousin, three times removed. We're going to check out the restaurants.'