

FIRST IMPRESSION

“You’ll like Charlie,” my friend Susan insisted, “He’s cute and lots of fun, and he drives a red MG.”

“I don’t go on blind dates,” I protested, “and I don’t care about cars. Besides, he’s younger than I am.”

Susan gave me a look, “Two years, big deal. You’re just making up excuses now. Come on, what do you have to lose?”

She was right, of course. I was grasping for reasons not to go out with this guy I’d never met. The idea of a blind date terrified me; so much could go wrong, so many horror stories from friends. Then again, I trusted Susan. What she knew of Charlie she obviously liked, and the truth was, I needed more of a social life. I’d moved back to Pittsburgh a year earlier, after living in Baltimore for seven years, and was spending most of my weekends with my parents at their house in the country. While I enjoyed their company, I knew it was time for me to start making friends. Specifically male friends, according to Susan. Which meant dating.

Reluctantly, I agreed to have Charlie call me. In an awkward three-minute phone conversation, he suggested the following Saturday night for dinner at the Colony, a 4-star restaurant in the suburbs, and I gave him directions to my apartment for pickup at 7 PM. I hung up in a complete sweat cursing the day I’d met Susan.

Charlie was prompt and I was ready, though not without having tried on six outfits and settling on the first one: a simple black dress that fit really well. He actually was cute in a nice, clean-cut way,

dark hair, ready smile, sharply dressed, not very tall, but at least not shorter than me. As we introduced ourselves, he handed me a bottle of Johnny Walker Black Label tied with a red ribbon and suggested we share some of it back at my apartment after dinner. I decided to ignore his suggestion for the time being and to postpone telling him that I hated scotch.

The MG was impressive, though Charlie was more impressed with it than I was. While demonstrating how smoothly the car took curves at high speed, he talked about it in “she” terms, saying she was two years old, a 1964 MGB Roadster Custom and cost \$22,000. He said a lot more about her that I didn’t catch, though it didn't seem to matter. Charlie, I realized, was having a good time talking about the car and watching me slide back and forth on the custom leather seat, as I frantically clutched the safety handle above me with both hands.

At the restaurant, Charlie talked about his job in radio sales, his goal to be sales manager before he was 30 - he was currently 26 - and to own his own radio station at 40. When I mentioned that I was working at one of the local TV stations, he grew excited that I might know someone who could help him into management. By the time our food arrived, I’d pretty much decided Charlie and I didn’t have a future together. It was at that point, I began to notice the basket of garlic bread on the table. As Charlie talked, his left hand dipped into the basket at a steady clip while his right hand alternately lifted forkfuls of the pasta primavera to his mouth. I watched the rhythm of his two hands, like a maestros in the orchestra pit or a factory workers at the conveyor belt: Left hand bread, right hand pasta, chew, talk; bread, pasta, chew, talk. Fascinated, I began counting the pieces of bread as he ate them. At thirteen, he stopped, though I was certain he could have gone on if the basket hadn’t been empty. I passed on dessert, as did Charlie, surprisingly, and we headed for my apartment in the prized MGB.

At the door; I told Charlie I wasn't up for a nightcap. He stopped in mid-sentence as though I'd said I prefer Fords.

"Really?" he asked incredulously. "Well, in that case, I want my Black Label back."

Leaving him in the hallway, I stepped into my apartment, reached for the bottle and handed it to him, its red ribbon still intact. "Here she is," I said, and closed the door.

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