

GOD WILL BRING LOVE

It had been six long months since Sandra left. She couldn't put up with me any longer. Hardly surprising as I'd been a poor husband to her. During our four years of marriage, I had foolishly gambled and drank our income. I couldn't control myself. For years I enjoyed life to the full. I drank, gambled and slept around. When I lived with my parents, I could get away with paying just £20 a week for my bed and board and the rest was spent on living the high life. I couldn't save. Money burned a hole in my pocket. I had no ties or responsibility, just a nice big wage that I foolishly wasted every week.

Friday night I got paid and I was straight to the pubs in Manchester. After ten pints and £20 in the Fruit Machine, I would hit the clubs and I would have picked up a girl to take back home to my parents' house where she would sleep with me. Failing that I would pick up a prostitute from the seedy back streets and pay her for sex. That was me, John Alton, living life to the full.

It was November 2015 when I met Sandra. We got chatting in my local whilst I was pouring yet another pile of coins into the Fruit Machine. We got on quite well and I was sad when she said she had to go and meet her friend. For the rest of the night, I couldn't stop thinking about her. She was beautiful. She had long blond hair, a nice slim figure, blue eyes and a cheery smile. I shook my head and began my seventh pint. What was I thinking? As far as I was concerned women were put on this earth to satisfy the sexual desires of men. The idea of love and relationships was a joke and only for sad people. But yet, the image of that cheery smile stuck in my mind and I couldn't get rid of it. I had suddenly gone off the idea of my usual night out routine and hailed a taxi home.

The next Friday night I found myself standing in front of the mirror constantly checking on my appearance. My wage was in my wallet and I was ready for a night on the town. I wouldn't usually make such an effort to get ready. But I had decided that tonight if I saw Sandra then I would ask her out on a date. All week she had been on my mind. I hadn't been to work this week; I couldn't concentrate on it. I could only think of Sandra. I hoped and prayed she would be out tonight so I could speak to her. I sat in an empty corner. The Fruit Machine stood before me but I felt no urge to use it. Sandra was the only thing on my mind at that moment. I just sat there holding my pint. Watching and waiting for Sandra to walk in.

I was halfway through my sixth pint when the barman called for the last orders. I looked out of the window. There had been no sign of Sandra tonight. I left the remainder of my beer on the table and set off to the Taxi Rank. As I sat in the cold waiting area of the Taxi Rank, I gazed across the road. There was Sandra. In the arms of another man! The shock hit me like a punch in the chest. My heart throbbed with pain and I ran out into the streets in tears. I banged on the walls of the Taxi Rank and cried as I saw Sandra and her lover embrace and kiss passionately. I fell to the pavement and with my back to the wall, I held my head in my hands and wept.

The weekend passed quietly and I stayed in my room. Come Monday morning I was still upset so I rang work to say I was still ill and I couldn't come in. There was only one thing I was going to do today. I was going to go to the off-license for a large bottle of whiskey. Then I was going to take it to bed with me where I was going to spend the rest of the day. It had just gone 9 am when I emerged from the off-license clutching my bottle of whiskey. As I went to cross the road, I noticed a weeping figure sat on a

garden wall. A young lady with long blond hair. As she raised her head slightly to wipe her eyes with a tissue, I recognized her. It was Sandra.

I sat next to her and we started talking. It seemed that on that Friday night her boyfriend of three years had decided to finish with her. He had dropped the bombshell when they had got to her front door. She had been to see him at work that morning hoping he had changed his mind but he hadn't. He made it clear it was over and even humiliated her in front of his workmates. I offered her a shoulder to cry on and she accepted. This led to several meetings in cafes and pubs and we found ourselves growing closer together. Shortly after that, we started dating. And after a year we decided to get married. Our son Josh came along and we were happy.

However, our happiness was short-lived. I lost my job due to getting into a fight with the foreman and I took to drink again. Money got tight and we struggled to make ends meet. A year passed and I found myself reliving my old life. I was depressed. Sandra and I often argued as my drinking and gambling became impossible to control. Then there was my violent temper. I would stagger in drunk and slap Sandra for the slightest reason. After two years of marriage, she'd had enough and I came home one night to find a note saying she had left me.

After the divorce, I spend my days drinking in front of the telly. My appearance had gone to pot. My styled brown hair was now just a mess. I used to be slim but six months of junk food had caused me to balloon up to fifteen stone. My once sparkly eyes are now a dull shade of green. My face was covered in three-week-old stubble. I had lost interest in everything. Then one day something happened that would change my life.

The doorbell rang and I answered the door. It was Ethel. Ethel was my neighbour. I had only noticed her a month ago. She was a shy quiet type of lady, quite old, with a cheery smile. She was a born-again Christian who delighted in helping people. We sat down and over a pot of tea I began to pour out my troubles to her. When I mentioned Sandra, Ethel smiled. It seemed that she knew Sandra as a little girl. It seemed they both lived next door to each other fifteen years ago in Bolton and had spent many happy times together. But since Sandra had moved ten years ago, they had lost contact.

After we finished our tea Ethel left. Feeling much better after our little chat I put my coat on and went to Sandra's flat. Every week I go there to pick up Josh to take him downtown for a day out. Sandra's boyfriend opened the door and let me in. As I was waiting for Josh to get ready, I went to speak to Sandra in the kitchen where she was washing the dishes.

"An old friend of yours came to see me today," I told her.

"Huh," Sandra replied. "Who?"

"Ethel," I told her. "She said you used to live next door to each other in Bolton."

Sandra didn't say another word; she just fixed me with a weird stare.

"Are you feeling alright?" she asked. Before I could say anything, Josh yelled 'Dad' from the living room and told me he was ready to go.

The next day I had just come home when I bumped into Ethel. We started to chat and she told me she had just come from a Church Meeting. I stood there trying to look

interested as she told me how many people come to the meeting to ask Jesus into their lives and become Christians.

"You should come along sometime John," she said. "It could change your life."

I decided to dismiss the incident from my mind and go home. As the weeks went on, I went about my usual pastime of sitting in front of the telly drinking when suddenly I remembered Ethel's words about that Church Meeting.

It could change your life.

I went round to Ethel's house and knocked on the door. No Answer. I peeked through the window and got a shock. The house was bare. No furniture or anything. Just a few cobwebs and some layers of dust. I found her in the back garden. She was delighted when I told her about my decision. She gave me the details of the next meeting and I bade her farewell. As I walked away, she called out to me. "God will bring love".

The meeting was on Saturday morning at St Thomas's Church so I made myself look presentable and went there. I entered the church and removed my coat and got myself a cup of coffee. I was shown to a chair and the meeting began. A man carrying a guitar stood in front of everyone and started to play. Suddenly to my surprise everyone in the room stood up and started singing and dancing. The song was a Christian one and everyone was joyfully singing along with it. During the song, I experienced something amazing. All my sadness and feelings of depression lifted off me and I felt very happy. I stood up and sang with everyone else. It was a miracle.

I went to church every week after that but every time I mentioned Ethel people looked at me as if I was crazy. After a few weeks, I decided to make the commitment and become a born-again Christian myself. Since that day I became a changed person. I no longer drink or gamble, even my temper has gone and I have become a very peaceful person.

One day a new member arrived at the church. It was Sandra. I watched her as she sat on a chair weeping. So, as I did all those years ago, I sat next to her and we began to talk. It turned out that her new boyfriend behaved just the way I used to behave. He drank, gambled, got into violent tempers and slept around. She had left him because she couldn't take any more of his bullying.

As time passed, Sandra came to the meetings every week and I helped her to get over her ex. One day she became a Christian and, just like me, she discovered happiness and peace. One day after a meeting we stood outside in the sun and talked for ages. We decided to try again and rekindle our old love. As we walked back to my house, I told her about Ethel and what she said.

God Will Bring Love

And he did.

Sandra held my hands with a look of concern on her face.

"John," she said, "Ethel was a good kind woman who helped me when she was my neighbour. But she couldn't have helped you."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because," Sandra replied, "she died twelve years ago."

I couldn't believe it. I must have imagined the whole thing. All this time I thought I was talking to Ethel but I wasn't. No wonder people thought I was crazy.

As we walked to my front door, I was so happy that I didn't notice the smiling face of an old lady peeking through the curtains next door.