

## Brighton Belles

“Do you know what I fancy, Liz?” my friend Michael says.

“I thought you were on a diet?” I reply.

“A day trip to Brighton!”

“Does that come with whipped cream?”

I laugh, whoop out loud and clap my hands.

“Liz, please!” Michael stage whispers. “Remember where we are.”

“Oh sorry. I must have left my manners in that big plastic tomato over there, waving for help in a sea of radioactive ketchup. Oh, hold on. I’ve found them.

Underneath this piece of chewing gum stuck to my skirt.”

“You’re just being facetious.”

“Can you catch that off the napkins?”

We arrange to meet at the train station the following Saturday.

“I thought we said nine?” Michael sniffs. He’s got his Brighton gear on. Jeans that he can fit into now he’s lost a stone and this shirt that would make him disappear if he stood against the wall in an Indian takeaway. “We’ve missed a train already.

What’s that?”

“What’s what?” I ask him.

“That thing on your head.”

“Have I got something on my head? Help!” I yell to this young man passing by.

“It looks like it’s made of raffia.”

“Don’t worry it’s not an endangered species. A hat, Michael, is the sensible thing to wear when the sun’s shining.”

We both look up at the increasing cloud spread. Michael pulls shades down from on top of his head and scowls at a girl in flat shoes.

The next train comes in less than ten minutes and we find two seats opposite each other. Michael won’t sit next to me because he says my unnaturally high body temperature makes him hyper-ventilate.

“Well, what did you bring?” he asks.

“Two cans of diet Coke and some rice cakes.”

“Anyone would think there’s a war on,” he sighs, looking out of the window.

“What do you want to do when we get there?”

“How many points are fish and chips?”

“I think we’ll be OK,” I say. “I reckon you use up calories eating these rice cakes.”

By the time we pull in at Brighton station it’s almost eleven and Michael’s broken into the Mint Imperials.

“I’ve come over a bit funny,” I tell him picking a smooth round sweet from the bag. “Those rice cakes have gone right through me.”

“Liz! Not here please.”

“He’s been like that since his hamster died,” I say winking at the young man next to us, who grabs his back pack.

“Come on, Liz. Don’t forget your HAT,” Michael hisses at me in a whirlwind of mint.

As we exit the station, the sun peeps out from behind a cloud and lights everything up like a sweet shop.

“Lucky I bought my hat,” I say to Michael, who adjusts his sunglasses instead of raising his eyebrows, and saunters off ahead so he can discover everything first.

“Look at this, Liz!” he says, half way down the road, holding up a snow globe except it’s sand, falling down over Britany Spears sheltering under a beach umbrella.

“I love it!”

“Well buy it then!” I say, grinning at a lady coming out of the shop. “They might get a rush on!” I whoop and she looks at my hat.

Michael rushes inside and I wait in the sun, feeling my arms go stick of rock pink.

“Let’s get a coffee,” he says, coming out with a paper bag like it’s on this season’s waiting list.

“Sure you’ve got some money left?” I whoop.

“Liz, please!”

“Oh look out, it’s the sense of humour police.” I wink at this copper walking past, knowing Michael won’t admit to turning round at the sight of a man in uniform.

We get two skinny cappuccinos and sip them as we continue on toward the sea, glittering at the bottom of the hill. Michael’s eyes are everywhere behind his Peter Andre shades. I saunter along beside him, hoping the coffee will sort out the trapped wind I picked up from all those rice cakes.

“Where’s this pier then?” I ask him. “I hope you didn’t dream it up in one of your Shaper Hot Chocolate nightmares.” Michael stopped making up the sachets after he reckoned they were giving him bad dreams. I told him he should stop watching *How to Look Good Naked*.

“It’s down here, to the right a bit, I think.”

We carry on, my arms now turning A&E red and the sun finding Michael’s secret bald patch. We get to the seafront and walk along the esplanade.

“Look, there’s the Grand Hotel,” I point out.

“Oh good, I need the loo,” Michael says and rushes inside.

“Bad case of Burgess Hill belly,” I joke with the doorman who stares at me like I don’t speak Latvian.

Michael’s back in five, smelling of everything he could lay his hands on in the Gents.

“Is that it?” I ask.

“Is what what?” he says squinting.

“Take off those bloody sunglasses for a minute will you, Michael Jackson. The pier. Is that it?”

We stare at a pile of ruins, half in the water, half out, blackened to a crisp like a Benidorm pensioner, and cross the road.

“You bought me all the way for this?” I say. “It’s like someone’s taken a giant bite out of it.”

“How many points?” Michael says.

“That’s a good one!” I whoop at this old couple walking passed, holding on to my hat as the wind nearly takes it. “Call Calorie Counters!”

“Liz!” Michael says, as the old couple move closer together.

“Sorry!” I say, nudging him. “Forgot this was the five star hotel you said you’d booked us in to!”

He lifts his shades and stares at me like I’ve changed into a bikini.