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Rachel's Holiday

Written by Marian Keyes

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Rachel's Holiday

MARIAN KEYES

For Tony

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They said I was a drug addict. I found that hard to come to terms with – I was a middle-class, convent-educated girl whose drug use was strictly recreational. And surely drug addicts were thinner? It was true that I *took* drugs, but what no one seemed to understand was that my drug use wasn't any different from their having a drink or two on a Friday night after work. They might have a few vodkas and tonic and let off a bit of steam. I had a couple of lines of cocaine and did likewise. As I said to my father and my sister and sister's husband and eventually the therapists of the Cloisters 'If cocaine was sold in liquid form, in a bottle, would you complain about me taking it? Well, would you? No, I bet you wouldn't!'

I was offended by the drug-addict allegation, because I was nothing like one. Apart from the track marks on their arms, they had dirty hair, constantly seemed cold, did a lot of shoulder-hunching, wore plastic trainers, hung around blocks of flats and were, as I've already mentioned, *thin*.

I wasn't thin.

Although it wasn't for the want of trying. I spent plenty of time on the stairmaster at the gym. But no matter how much I stairmastered, genetics had the final say. If my father had married a dainty little woman, I might have had a very different life. Very different things, certainly.

Instead, I was doomed for people always to describe me by saying, 'She's a big girl.' Then they always added really quickly 'Now, I'm not saying she's *fat*.'

The implication being that if I was fat, I could at least do something about it.

'No,' they would continue, 'she's a fine, big, tall girl. You know, *strong*.'

I was often described as strong.

It really pissed me off.

My boyfriend, Luke, sometimes described me as magnificent. (When the light was behind me and he'd had several pints.) At least that was what he said to *me*. Then he probably went back to his friends and said, 'Now, I'm not saying she's *fat* . . . ?'

The whole drug-addict allegation came about one February morning when I was living in New York.

It wasn't the first time I felt as if I was on *Cosmic Candid Camera*. My life was prone to veering out of control and I had long stopped believing that the God who had been assigned to me was a benign old lad with long hair and a beard. He was more like a

celestial Jeremy Beadle, and my life was the showcase he used to amuse the other Gods.

‘Wa-atch,’ he laughingly invites, ‘as Rachel thinks she’s got a new job and that it’s safe to hand in her notice on the old. Little does she know that her new firm is just about to go bankrupt!’

Roars of laughter from all the other gods.

‘Now, wa-atch,’ he chuckles. ‘As Rachel hurries to meet her new boyfriend. See how she catches the heel of her shoe in a grating? See how it comes clean off? Little did Rachel know that we had tampered with it. See how she limps the rest of the way?’ More sniggers from the assembled gods.

‘But the best bit of all, laughs Jeremy, ‘is that the man she was meeting never turns up!’ He only asked her out for a bet. Watch as Rachel squirms with embarrassment in the stylish bar. See the looks of pity the other women give her? See how the waiter gives her the extortionate bill for a glass of wine, and best of all, see how Rachel discovers she’s *left her purse at home?*

Uncontrollable guffaws.

The events that led to me being called a drug addict had the same element of celestial farce that the rest of my life had. What happened was, one night I’d sort of overdone it on the enlivening drugs and I couldn’t get to sleep. (I hadn’t meant to overdo it, I had simply underestimated the quality of the cocaine that I had taken.) I knew I had to get up for work the

following morning, so I took a couple of sleeping tablets. After about ten minutes, they hadn't worked, so I took a couple more. And still my head was buzzing, so in desperation, thinking of how badly I needed my sleep, thinking of how alert I had to be at work, I took a few more.

I eventually got to sleep. A lovely deep sleep. So lovely and deep that when the morning came, and my alarm clock went off, I neglected to wake up.

Brigit, my flatmate, knocked on my door, then came into my room and shouted at me, then shook me, then, at her wit's end, slapped me. (I didn't really buy the wit's end bit. She must have known that slapping wouldn't wake me, but no one is in good form on a Monday morning.)

But then Brigit stumbled across a piece of paper that I'd been attempting to write on just before I fell asleep. It was just the usual maudlin, mawkish, self-indulgent poetry-type rubbish I often wrote when I was under the influence. Stuff that seemed really profound at the time, where I thought I'd discovered the secret of the universe, but that caused me to blush with shame when I read it in the cold light of day, the bits that I *could* read, that is.

The poem went something like 'Mumble, mumble, life . . .' something indecipherable, 'bowl of cherries, mumble, all I get is the pits . . .' Then – and I vaguely remembered writing this bit – I thought of a really good title for a poem about a shoplifter who had

suddenly discovered her conscience. It was called *I can't take anymore*.

But Brigit, who'd recently gone all weird and uptight, didn't treat it as the load of cringe-making rubbish it so clearly was. Instead, when she saw the empty jar of sleeping tablets rolling around on my pillow, she decided it was a suicide note. And before I knew it, and it really *was* before I knew it because I was still asleep – well, asleep or unconscious, depending on whose version of the story you believe – she had rung for an ambulance and I was in Mount Solomon having my stomach pumped. That was unpleasant enough, but there was worse to come. Brigit had obviously turned into one of those New York abstention fascists, the kind who if you wash your hair with Linco beer shampoo more than twice a week, say that you're an alcoholic and that you should be on a twelve-step programme. So she rang my parents in Dublin and told them that I had a serious drug problem and that I'd just tried to kill myself. And before I could intervene and explain that it had all been an embarrassing misunderstanding, my parents had rung my painfully well-behaved older sister, Margaret. Who arrived on the first available flight from Chicago with her equally painful husband, Paul.

Margaret was only a year older than me but it felt more like forty. She was intent on ferrying me to Ireland to the bosom of my family. Where I would

stay briefly before being admitted to some Betty Ford type place to sort me out 'For good and for all', as my father said when he rang me.

Of course, I had no intention of going anywhere but by then I was really frightened. And not just by the talk of going home to Ireland and into a clinic, but because my father had *rung* me. *He* had rung *me*. That had never happened in the whole of my twenty-seven years. It was hard enough to get him to say hello whenever I rang home and it was one of those rare occasions when he answered the phone. The most he ever managed was 'Which one of you is that? Oh Rachel? Hold on till I get your mother.' Then there was nothing except banging and bashing as he dropped the phone and ran to get Mum.

And if Mum wasn't there he was terrified. 'Your mother's not here,' he always said, his voice high with alarm. The subtext being, 'Please, *please* don't let me have to talk to you.'

Not because he didn't like me or was a cold unapproachable father or anything like that.

He was a lovely man.

That I could grudgingly admit by the time I was twenty- seven and had lived away from home for eight years. That he wasn't the Great Withholder of Money For New Jeans that my sisters and I loved to hate during our teenage years. But despite Dad's lovely manness he wasn't big on conversation. Not unless I wanted to talk about golf. So the fact that he

had rung me must have meant that I'd really messed up this time. Fearfully, I tried to set things right.

'There's nothing wrong with me,' I told Dad. 'It's all been a mistake and I'm fine.'

But he was having none of it. 'You're to come home,' he ordered.

I was having none of it either. 'Dad, behave yourself. Be . . . be . . . *realistic* here, I can't just walk out on my life.'

'What can't you walk out on?' he asked.

'My job, for example,' I said. 'I can't just abandon my job.'

'I've already spoken to them at your work and they agree with me that you should come home,' he said.

Suddenly, I found myself staring into the abyss.

'You did WHAT?' I could hardly speak I was so afraid. What had they told Dad about me?

'I spoke to them at your work,' repeated Dad in the same level tone of voice.

'You big stupid eejit.' I swallowed. 'To who?'

'A chap called Eric,' said Dad. 'He said he was your boss.'

'Oh God,' I said.

OK, so I was a 27-year-old woman and it shouldn't matter if my father knew I was sometimes late for work. But it *did* matter. I felt the way I had twenty years earlier when he and Mum were called up to the school to account for my on-going dearth of completed homework.

‘This is awful,’ I said to Dad. ‘What did you have to go ringing work for? I’m so embarrassed! What’ll they think? They’ll sack me for this, you know.’

‘Rachel, from what I can gather I think they were just about to anyway,’ said Dad’s voice from across the Atlantic.

Oh no, the game was up. Dad knew! Eric must have really gone to town on my shortcomings.

‘I don’t believe you,’ I protested. ‘You’re only saying that to make me come home.’

‘I’m not,’ said Dad. ‘Let me tell you what this Eric said . . .’

No chance! I could hardly bear to think about what Eric said, never mind *hear* it.

‘Everything was fine at work until you rang them,’ I lied frantically. ‘You’ve caused nothing but trouble. I’m going to ring Eric and tell him that you’re a lunatic, that you escaped from a bin and not to believe a word you said.’

‘Rachel.’ Dad sighed heavily. ‘I barely said a thing to this Eric chap, he did all the talking and he seemed delighted to let you go.’

‘Let me go?’ I said faintly. ‘As in, fire me? You mean I’ve got no job?’

‘That’s right.’ Dad sounded very matter-of-fact.

‘Well, great,’ I said tearfully. ‘Thanks for ruining my life.’

There was silence while I tried to absorb the fact that I was once more without a job. Was God Beadle

rerunning old tapes up there?

‘OK, what about my flat?’ I challenged. ‘Seeing as you’re so good as messing things up for me?’

‘Margaret will sort that out with Brigit,’ said Dad.

‘Sort out?’ I had expected the question of my flat would totally stump Dad. I was shocked that he’d already addressed the matter. They were acting as if something really *was* wrong with me.

‘She’ll pay a couple of months’ rent to Brigit so that Brigit has breathing space to find someone new.’

‘Someone new?’ I shrieked. ‘But this is my home.’

‘From what I gather yourself and Brigit haven’t been getting on too well.’ Dad sounded awkward.

He was right. And we’d been getting along a whole lot worse since she’d made that phone call and brought the interference of my family tumbling down on top of me. I was furious with her and for some reason she seemed to be furious with me too. But Brigit was my best friend and we’d always shared a flat. It was out of the question for someone else to move in with her.

‘You’ve gathered a lot,’ I said drily.

He said nothing.

‘An awful bloody lot,’ I said, much more wetly.

I wasn’t defending myself as well as I normally would have. But, to tell the truth, my trip to the hospital had taken more out of me than just the contents of my stomach. I felt shaky and not inclined to fight with Dad, which wasn’t like me at all.

Disagreeing with my father was something I did as instinctively as refusing to sleep with moustachioed men.

‘So there’s nothing to stop you coming home and getting sorted out,’ said Dad.

‘But I have a cat,’ I lied.

‘You can get another one,’ he said.

‘But I have a boyfriend,’ I protested.

‘You can get another one of those too,’ said Dad.

Easy for him to say.

‘Put me back onto Margaret and I’ll see you tomorrow,’ said Dad.

‘You will in your arse,’ I muttered.

And that seemed to be that. Luckily I had taken a couple of Valium. Otherwise I might have been very upset *indeed*.

Margaret was sitting beside me. In fact, she seemed to be constantly by my side, once I thought about it.

After she finished talking to Dad, I decided to put a stop to all the nonsense. It was time for me to grab back control of the reins of my life. Because this wasn’t funny, it wasn’t entertaining, it wasn’t diverting. It was unpleasant, and above all it was unnecessary.

‘Margaret,’ I said briskly, ‘there’s nothing wrong with me. I’m sorry you’ve had a wasted journey, but please go away and take your husband with you. This is all a big, huge, terrible mistake.’

‘I don’t think it is,’ she said. ‘Brigit says . . .’

‘Never mind what Brigit says,’ I interrupted. ‘I’m

actually worried about Brigit because she's gone so weird. She used to be fun once.'

Margaret looked doubtful, then she said, 'But you do seem to take an awful lot of drugs.'

'It might seem an awful lot to you,' I explained gently. 'But you're a lickarse, so any amount would seem like lots.'

It was true that Margaret was a lickarse. I had four sisters, two older and two younger and Margaret was the only well-behaved one of the lot. My mother used to run her eye along us all and sadly say, 'Well, one out of five ain't bad.'

'I'm not a lickarse,' she complained. 'I'm just ordinary.'

'Yes, Rachel.' Paul had stepped forward to defend Margaret. 'She's not a lickarse. Just because she's not a, a . . . junkie who can't get a job and whose husband leaves her . . . Unlike some,' he finished darkly.

I spotted a flaw in his argument.

'My husband hasn't left me,' I protested in my defence.

'That's because you haven't got one,' said Paul.

Paul was obviously referring to my eldest sister, Claire, who managed to get ditched by her husband on the same day that she gave birth to their first child.

'And I have a job,' I reminded him.

'Not any more, you don't.' He smirked.

I hated him.

And he hated me. I didn't take it personally. He

hated my entire family. He had a hard job deciding which one of Margaret's sisters he hated the most. And well he might, there was stiff competition among us for the position of black sheep. There was Claire, thirty-one, the deserted wife. Me, twenty-seven, allegedly a junkie. Anna, twenty-four, who'd never had a proper job, and who sometimes sold hash to make ends meet. And there was Helen, twenty, and frankly, I wouldn't know where to begin.

We all hated Paul as much as he hated us.

Even Mum, though she wouldn't admit to it. She liked to pretend that she liked everyone, in the hope that it might help her jump the queue into Heaven.

Paul was such a pompous know-all. He wore the same kind of jumpers as Dad did and bought his first house when he was thirteen or some such ridiculous age by saving up his First Communion money.

'You'd better get back on the phone to Dad,' I told Margaret. 'Because I'm going nowhere.'

'How right you are,' agreed Paul nastily.