



A Short Story

By

Julia Roberts

A **ripped** Book

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A Recipe for Love

Balancing the bag of groceries on her left hip and switching her dripping wet umbrella into her left hand, Lily reached into the bag on her right shoulder for her keys. It was a tricky manoeuvre but she couldn't risk putting the brown paper bag down on the wet doorstep for fear of the bottom falling out of it when she picked it up again which, with her recent run of luck, was a distinct possibility. She fumbled around in the vast but over-crowded interior of her tote bag, seeking the serrated metallic edges, practically salivating at the thought of the recipe she had come across earlier in the day. It had instigated the impromptu stop at the supermarket on her way home from work and sounded heavenly. A smile toyed with the corner of her mouth as she recalled the withering look the dentist's receptionist had shot at her when she tried to tear the relevant page out of the magazine without attracting attention. Trust me to leave my phone at the office, she thought, it would have been so much less embarrassing to take a photo of the page.

Her fingers finally made contact with the bunch of keys, which had typically made their way down to the bottom of the bag and appeared to be stuck. She pulled hard to free them and was rewarded at the second attempt. Unfortunately, the action dislodged her make-up bag, causing it to fly into the air and land with a dull thud on the concrete step. Lily was fairly certain that the impact would have smashed the mirror inside her blusher compact. She inserted the key in the lock, pushed the front door open with her bottom and rested the grocery bag on the polished oak floorboards before retrieving the pink canvas bag with the words 'DON'T GO OUT WITHOUT ME' emblazoned on the side in gold lettering.

Do I unzip it now to discover the damage and put myself in a bad mood for the rest of the evening? she thought. No point, she decided, tossing it back into her handbag while kicking off her soaked court shoes and closing the door on the foul weather. Whatever the damage, it's too late to change it... a bit like my life really.

She padded across the open plan living space heading towards the kitchen area, her stockinged feet leaving damp footprints on the floor, and plonked the bag of groceries on the work surface next to the cooker.

'Sooty, I'm home,' she called. 'Where are you, girl?'

Moments later a petite, black cat appeared at the top of the stairs, eyes blinking in the light.

‘Have you been sleeping on my bed again?’ Lily said, trying to sound cross as she watched the cat daintily trot down the stairs. ‘My fault. I must have forgotten to close the bedroom door. I don’t know why I bothered to splash out on your cat bed, I haven’t seen you in it once.’

Sooty rubbed against Lily’s legs purring, her tail fluffed out like a toilet brush.

‘Have you missed me, girl? I’m glad somebody has. Let me change out of my work clothes and then I’ll get us some dinner. We’re having tuna tonight.’

Fifteen minutes later, Lily was back in the kitchen wearing comfy jogger bottoms and a T shirt, her face cleaned of make-up and her shoulder-length dark hair tied up in a ponytail.

‘Right,’ she said, unpacking the supermarket purchases and reaching in to a cupboard for the chopping board, ‘I’d better make a start or we won’t be eating until midnight.’

She finely chopped the garlic, chilli and ginger, humming as she worked. It had been a while since she had last had a ‘proper’ meal, opting instead for the convenience of ready meals heated through in the microwave. Mostly, they tasted of the plastic containers they came packaged in but, despite enjoying cooking, there seemed little point in labouring over a hot stove when the only person to please was herself.

‘Okay, what’s next?’ Lily muttered under her breath, her finger following the instructions on the magazine page. ‘Mix garlic, chilli and ginger with soy sauce and juice of half a lemon, and pour over the tuna steak. Cover and leave to marinate for twenty minutes.’

Lily cut the lemon in half and squeezed it into a glass bowl, then reached in to the cupboard for the soy sauce. She flipped the plastic lid and started shaking it into the bowl. Two drops came out, then nothing. It was empty. Lily glared at the bottle in her hand.

‘You’re kidding! Why put an empty bottle back in the cupboard? Who does that?’ she fumed.

Lily knew the answer. Martin, her boyfriend before last, was always using the end of things and not throwing the containers away or putting them on a shopping list. It was one of the

reasons they had split up, that and the fact that she realised he wasn't 'the one' and didn't want to waste any more time trying to convince herself that he was. At twenty-nine, Lily was starting to feel 'left on the shelf', particularly as all her friends seemed to be getting married and having babies, although not necessarily in that order.

'Great. What am I supposed to do now?' she asked a bemused looking Sooty. 'It's alright for you, girl, I wasn't planning on marinating your tuna. Maybe I'll just chuck it all away and have scrambled eggs?'

Without warning, a big fat tear rolled off the end of Lily's nose and landed on the work surface, followed by a second and a third. She tore off a piece of kitchen towel and wiped her eyes. I've already cried too many tears over that idiot, she thought, I'm damned if he's going to spoil my dinner. Lily made sure that she had cleared up all traces of chilli, and put her dinner ingredients in the fridge to keep them away from Sooty. Then, keys and purse in hand, she slipped her feet into her trainers, zipped up her hoodie and grabbed her still soaking umbrella.

'I won't be long, Sooty,' she promised, slamming the door behind her.

The supermarket was only a five-minute walk away and even less if you jogged it as Lily did in the driving rain. She went straight to the aisle that had the soy sauce and headed for the basket-only checkout. There were half a dozen people in front of her in the queue, most of them with only one or two items, but the man in front of her had his basket filled to capacity. It's a wonder he can even hold it, Lily thought, tutting in exasperation. Surely there must be some kind of limit to the number of items you can have to qualify for the basket-only queue, she thought, looking around for a sign.

'You can go in front of me if that's all you've got.'

Shit, Lily thought, I wonder if he heard me tutting? Blushing, she looked up at the man in front of her in the queue and realised, to her horror, that she had probably just offended her new next-door neighbour, the hot guy she had watched move in the previous weekend from behind the privacy of her venetian blinds. She felt very exposed in the harsh light of the supermarket with no make-up to hide behind, acutely aware that she was wearing her 'slobbing around at home' clothes.

'Um, well, that's very kind of you, if you don't mind,' she said, flustered by the gaze from his cornflower blue eyes. 'It's just that I was going to make marinated tuna steaks for dinner and Martin used the last of the soy sauce without telling me.'

'That's a very annoying habit,' he said, stepping aside and allowing her to pass in front of him in the queue. 'It's one of the reasons I don't mind living on my own. There's no-one to blame but myself if I run out of stuff. I hope you don't mind me saying, but it's not very chivalrous of your boyfriend to send you out for a replacement in this pouring rain, particularly if you're making dinner.'

'Oh, we're not together anymore. He's my ex, well... my ex before last if truth be told.'

Lily noticed the slightly raised eyebrows. This was not how she had intended to introduce herself to her handsome new neighbour. She had planned on going around at some point this weekend, wearing something pretty and some carefully applied 'no make-up' make-up, with the bottle of wine and 'new home' card she had added to her basket of dinner ingredients on her earlier trip to the supermarket. No point in that now, she thought. He's seen me looking my absolute worst and probably thinks I'm a bit flighty when it comes to relationships. Maybe I should try and explain.

'My latest ex was allergic to cats. We only went on four dates before he asked me to choose between him and Sooty; no contest.'

'Sooty? Is Sooty a black cat by any chance?'

'A bit obvious, I guess, but it suits her.'

'Well, I like cats. In fact, I had a black cat myself until a few months ago.'

Lily waited for an explanation.

'It was a night like this and I guess the driver didn't see him until it was too late. At least they had the decency to move him to the side of the road before driving off.'

'On no, that's so sad. That's one of the reasons I don't let Sooty go out, that and I'm not keen on the idea of her bringing me furry or feathered presents. You know, I thought I saw you carrying a wicker cat basket into the house when you moved in.'

'What?'

'Next customer, please,' the cashier said, her voice a mix of bored and tired.

Lily handed over the soy sauce and paid for it, conscious that her handsome new neighbour was staring at the back of her head. Although she knew who he was, having watched him move in, he clearly had no idea that she was his new neighbour. This just gets better and better, she thought. As well as being unsuitable girlfriend material, he probably thinks I'm some kind of stalker. What am I supposed to do now? I can't just walk out without explaining how I came to be spying on him.

Lily moved over to the huge expanse of windows and pretended to be looking out at the rain while actually watching her neighbour pack his shopping in to 'bags for life' through the reflection in the glass. As he stuffed his wallet in to the pocket of his jeans and lifted down his bags, Lily turned and plastered a hopeful smile on her face.

'I'm not some kind of weird stalker, I promise. I'm your new next-door neighbour and I just happened to spot the cat basket when you were moving in last weekend.'

'Oh, right,' he said, 'I didn't recognise you.'

It was Lily's turn to look puzzled.

'I've seen you leaving for work in the mornings but you look quite different without your smart suit and high heels.'

Not to mention the make-up and perfectly styled hair, Lily thought miserably.

'More approachable,' he added. 'I'm Joel, by the way.'

'Lily,' she replied, holding her hand out to shake his before realising that his hands were full. 'I was intending to pop round tomorrow to welcome you to the neighbourhood. I bought you a card and a bottle of wine too.'

'Wine,' he said. 'That's what I forgot. My memory is like a sieve. Now I'll have to go back and queue all over again.'

'You don't need to do that. I can just give you the wine I bought for you tonight instead of tomorrow.'

'Tempting. I don't suppose it's an Italian red is it? I'm making spag bol for dinner.'

'Chilean white, actually, but it's a nice one and would go perfectly with marinated tuna steaks.'

'Is that a dinner invitation?' Joel asked, his eyes twinkling mischievously.

'Um, I suppose it is, but don't feel you have to, you could just take the wine.'

'Dinner would be lovely and I'll get to meet Sooty. Do you mind if I share your umbrella?'

'Of course not, although it looks as though the rain is easing off a bit.'

At Lily's front door, Joel excused himself for a few minutes to put his shopping away. She rushed inside and finished making the marinade for the tuna steaks.

'I'm sorry, Sooty, I just gave your dinner away but I think you'll like our new neighbour and I'm pretty sure he'll love you. You can have a nice tray of Tender Morsels instead.'

With the tuna marinating, Lily released her hair from its elastic band and ran a brush through it, before reaching in to her make-up bag for her blusher compact, to add a bit of colour to her cheeks. The mirror she had feared broken was intact. Maybe my luck is changing, she dared to hope.

Moments later, there was a tap at the door.

'Come in,' she said, opening the front door after a quick glance in the mirror. 'Sooty, we have a visitor... one who likes cats.'

Without hesitation, the cat sauntered over to Joel and rubbed herself against his legs.

'You are a very pretty girl, Sooty. My Sweep would have loved you.'

'You're kidding! Sooty and Sweep. Was that really your cat's name?'

'Yep. A bit of a coincidence, I know. And what's even weirder is that I was planning on getting a new kitten, which is why I kept the cat basket, and I was thinking of calling it Sooty.'

'Are you just saying that to make conversation?'

'Not at all. I don't think we need any help in that department. We seem to be doing just fine.'

Lily turned away from Joel to continue the dinner preparations and to hide her happy smile. They had only just met and yet they were already so comfortable in each other's company.

'I'm only doing oven fries and peas with the tuna. I hope that's alright?'

'Perfect.'

'How long do you like your tuna cooking for? It says here, three to five minutes, according to taste.'

'Three should be fine. I think tuna is more tender slightly rare.'

'Okay. I bow to your better judgement. I've never cooked it before. I spotted the recipe in a magazine at lunchtime when I was waiting for my dentist appointment. You should have seen the receptionist's face as I was tearing the page out.'

'Couldn't you have saved yourself the glare and looked it up on line?'

'Why didn't I think of that?' Lily said, folding the page in half. She was about to put it in the kitchen drawer when she noticed what was on the reverse of the recipe. It was the horoscopes page. She glanced at Gemini :

The planets are aligned giving you the perfect ingredients for the recipe of love. If you're single prepare for a stranger to sweep you off your feet.

End