

## **A Gift for Annie (Runner-Up, WriteInvite, February 2015)**

He stood in the shop, biting his lip. Which scent would Annie like best? Rose? No, that would be too forward for a first date. Lavender? No, far too old fashioned. How about Lily of the Valley? Yes, that would be perfect. His mind made up, he grabbed a couple of the waxy cones from the display, paused, pulled out a third - had a look at the price, and put the third one back. He needed to keep some money in case she wanted chips on the way home.

The shop assistant who'd been watching him from a distance smiled gently as she took them from him.

"Would you like them gift wrapped, sir?" He looked at her uncertainly until she added, "no charge - it's a special for Valentine's Day." when he nodded vigorously.

As he carried his beautifully-wrapped parcel carefully down the street towards the Rialto, he had a moment of panic. Would Annie laugh at the idea of candles? Should he have brought her flowers after all - as his mum had suggested. But flowers were so expensive this weekend - and there would be nowhere for Annie to put them as they watched the big movie. And he knew Annie liked candles. He's heard her talking to her friends about them.

That was before he'd had the nerve to ask her out. Or even to speak to her for that matter. She was so beautiful, so popular, always surrounded by friends - and with a string of boys panting for her favours. He didn't think he's got a chance.

And if he was honest, it wasn't he that had asked her out. It was the other way around. He'd been sitting on his own, reading, in the canteen and she'd come in with some of her mates. He'd seen them whisper something to her and giggle. Then, to his shock, she'd come over and sat down beside him, asking about his book. They seemed to have the same taste and as they talked, his initial blush had cooled down and he'd started to relax. It was as she stood up to re-join her friends that she'd said casually: "there's a great film on this weekend. Do you fancy going?"

Now he stood outside the Rialto, glancing at his watch and staring up the road in the direction he knew her bus would come. Finally, when he was beginning to panic that they would miss the start, a large red vehicle appeared on the horizon, drove up the road - and sailed straight past the bus stop.

He looked up at the upper deck, just in time to see Annie, with two of her friends, grinning out of the window at him and waving as they went on their way.

He slumped back against the wall; how could he have been so stupid? How could he have believed that someone like her would really have wanted to go out with someone like him? Looking at the parcel clutched in his hand, he heaved a deep sigh. Maybe his mother would like them. He could give them to her for Mother's Day. Although he'd have to change the wrapping first.

"Stood you up, has she?" A sudden voice made him jump. It was the girl from the candle shop. "I saw the little cow waving to you from the bus. That's a mean trick to play." She paused and looked at him in silence for a few seconds. "You know, I was hoping to see this film," she went on, "but I didn't want to go on my own." He looked at the tickets in his hand, then smiled at the girl and nodded. She linked her arm through his and they strolled towards the front door together. "By the way," she said, "my name's Annie - and Lily of the Valley is my favourite flower.