

Carol

BOB HARTMAN



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Jack O'Malley stormed into the bookstore, but he did not leave the storm behind.

'Idiot weather!' he muttered, shaking the snow from his shoulders and brushing it off his head. 'I've got a million Christmas presents to buy and global warming decides to take the day off.'

'Idiot drivers!' he muttered again, stamping his snowy shoes for emphasis. 'That woman in the SUV nearly killed me. Cappuccino in one hand, cell phone in the other. What was she steering with – her knees?'

He stopped muttering and stamping and shaking long enough to look around. The place was

packed, and the line at the registers reached right to the back of the store.

‘Idiot shoppers!’ he muttered one more time. ‘Why does everybody have to leave everything to the last minute?’

Then his eyes landed on the table next to the door. ‘Wrap Your Arms Around the World’ read the banner above the table. There was a picture of an African girl on the banner – sad face, protruding belly.

‘Inevitably,’ Jack muttered again. And he shook his head as he watched the chatty women below the banner, wrapping customers’ presents and thanking them for their donations.

Idiot do-gooders! he thought. *The president’s got it right. Contraception. Abortion. That’s what Africa needs: fewer bellies to fill.*

And that got him thinking about his own belly.

Maybe I'll have a cup of coffee, Jack thought. *I need a cup of coffee. I deserve a cup of coffee. And maybe a muffin, too.*

And then he looked. And then he sighed. The coffee line was nearly as long as the one at the registers.

I'm going home, he decided. *I've had enough of this.* But as he turned back towards the door, there, halfway across the café, was a glimmer of hope. Like the angels above Bethlehem, like the star above the stable. His eyes lit up: there was one last empty table!

Jack formulated the plan even as he moved towards his goal. Remove coat. Grab magazine. Place coat on chair. Mag on table. Claim spot. Then join line at counter for coffee.

But just as he'd removed his coat, and a second after he'd grabbed the magazine, his eye caught something else. Just a glimpse. Just out of the corner. Another customer moving towards the table, cup in hand, coffee already purchased!

But it was his table. He'd seen it first, when he was still far away in the East. And he'd travelled through deserts of remaindered novels and past mountains of overpriced greetings cards just to get there. It was his table, so, willing his camel-coloured shoes on, Jack hurried just as fast as his still-wet soles would let him.

And that was his undoing. The slide was followed by a slip, then a trip, and finally a collision. And before Jack knew it, his coat was dripping with coffee.

'Idiot!' He was just about to do more-than-

mutter, when he looked up from his soggy coat. And stopped. And stared.

She was genuinely upset.

‘Are you all right?’ she asked. ‘I hope you’re not hurt.’

She was completely apologetic.

‘I’m so sorry!’ she said.

And she was totally and unbelievably gorgeous.

‘Here, have a seat,’ she offered, helping him onto one of the chairs.

Hair, thought Jack. *Look at that hair.*

‘And your coat,’ she said. ‘They must have a damp cloth here. Maybe I can keep it from staining. It’s probably still going to smell like coffee, though.’

Smell, thought Jack. *She smells so nice!*

‘And let me get you a drink,’ she insisted. ‘I

mean, one you won't have to wear,' she added, with an embarrassed smile.

'Smile,' he said. Said, not thought. 'I mean, smile. No, I mean swell. I mean, swell, great, thanks. How about a skinny pumpkin latte?' he added, immediately wishing he'd asked for a more manly sounding beverage.

Jack watched her walk to the line as one of the staff arrived with a bucket and mop. Obviously he watched too long. Obviously, he watched too obviously.

'Not a chance, mister,' mumbled the kid with the mop. But Jack wasn't so sure. There was this equation. An equation his friend Barry had told him about.

'You take your own age,' Barry had explained, 'you divide it by two and then add seven. The

number you come up with is the youngest possible woman you have any chance of dating.’

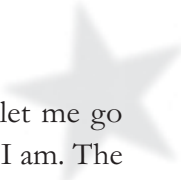
His friend called it the MD equation. For Michael Douglas.

So let's see, Jack calculated. I'm fifty. Half of that is twenty-five. Add seven, and yeah, she could be thirty-two, maybe even a bit older. And as for me, I don't look my age. I work out. I have all my hair. Here he glanced smugly at the kid with the mop. *I think I could be in with a chance.*

And when he glanced back again, there she was, holding a skinny pumpkin latte in what Jack couldn't help noticing was a singularly ringless hand.

‘That was quick!’ he said.

‘They're so nice here,’ she chirped. ‘They'd do anything for you!’ (*For you, I'm sure, Jack thought.*)



‘So when they saw what happened they let me go straight to the front of the line. And here I am. The name’s Carol, by the way.’

‘Jack,’ smiled Jack. ‘Pleased to meet you.’

‘So, um, doing a little last-minute Christmas shopping?’ she asked.

Jack nodded. ‘Yeah. A few more stocking-fillers for the kids. A little something for the ex.’ (*Might as well establish availability status up front*, he thought.) ‘And how about you?’

Carol took a sip from her cup and furrowed her brow.

They are amazing furrows, thought Jack. He was trying hard not to stare at her. He was failing abysmally.

‘I’m looking for a song,’ she said, ‘but I can’t seem to find the CD it’s on.’