



As the warm breeze moved lazily through the moss-draped oaks, the three stood by the river, each carrying a quiet awareness they didn't quite name. Valentine's week had a way of spotlighting absences, and somehow all three of them, old friends who usually orbited fuller lives, found themselves unattached, on the same unlikely afternoon. The reunion was easy in the way only long friendships are, but threaded with an awkward tenderness, the unspoken question of how they'd all landed here together.

HIP

Mark busied himself with his phone, committed to capturing the perfect Valentine's selfie. It had to be at Spring Park, their February tradition, a ritual dressed up as romance, or at least proof of survival. His determination to finally get a photo without his chins multiplying felt oddly symbolic, like a small stand against the quiet erosion of confidence that *singledom* had brought him. The irony, of course, was that he was hopelessly 'unphotogenic'. Every picture exaggerated his most unromantic angles. But today was

different, he knew, lifting the phone just high enough to flirt with destiny. Today, maybe, he'd feel seen.

Aarna hovered close, wrestling with a different kind of vulnerability. She'd been dragged into a Valentine's-themed Instagram wager with her relentlessly smug sister: more likes by the end of February, or face the humiliation of cooking dinner. But beneath the joke was something softer and sadder, the need to feel wanted, noticed, proof that being alone didn't mean being left behind. She hoped a spontaneous photobomb might make her seem charmingly carefree, the kind of person love might stumble into by accident. Her fear was ending up frozen forever as an awkward footnote in Mark's attempt at self-reassurance.

Lisa watched them both with a familiar fondness, feeling oddly protective. She wasn't invested in the selfie itself. For her, this outing marked something more fragile. It was her first public appearance since a catastrophically romantic blind date two months earlier, a night that had unraveled into embarrassment and the realization that she'd mistaken hope for chemistry. Today was her quiet Valentine, a vow to herself that she was still brave enough to show up, still capable of joy, even if romance felt distant. Still, a small voice whispered that she might be tempting fate again.

As Mark's finger hovered over the screen, ready to freeze the moment, a playful east wind tugged at his hat, sending it skittering toward the river's edge. Instinctively, he turned, snapping the photo as Aarna lunged for his sleeve and Lisa tipped forward into the grass. In the scramble, laughter broke through first, real, unguarded laughter, followed by hands reaching out, steadying one another without thinking.

The result was accidental perfection: Mark caught mid-gasp, Aarna suspended between surprise and delight, and Lisa smiling calmly, as if she'd known all along that this was how it would land. The photo went viral. Mark's chins were present and accounted for, but so was something else: ease, affection, the visible comfort of people who knew each other well. Aarna's followers multiplied overnight, securing her victory and, more importantly, lifting a weight she hadn't realized she was carrying. And Lisa finally had a story that didn't end in disappointment, but in laughter and loyalty.

In the end, their shared awkwardness softened into something sustaining. Three friends, unattached but not alone, buoyed by history and kindness, proof that love didn't always announce itself with roses and reservations. Laughing, they wandered to the nearest wing joint, where the lemonade was cold, the sandwiches forgettable, and the companionship quietly profound. On a day, seemingly a *month* built for couples, they reminded each other that this counted too.

- STORY, PHOTO: EDITOR

