

The First Date

I laughed nervously at the joke she rattled off, while excusing herself to the restroom. I can't really recall why. Was her quip actually amusing to me or was I just expressing the nervousness I felt running through my bones?

The lights in this restaurants are dimmed pretty low – a key detail I kept in mind when selecting our destination. I knew, at the very least, it would make the acne on my face a little less prominent. Even with a bit of my mom's cover-up, it continued to nag at me. Throughout our meal, I found myself peering into any reflective surface I could in hopes of finding that the angry little dots had gone back into hiding. I have no doubt that she noticed me gazing longingly the back of my spoon when the soup arrived. Clearly, I was already messing up the evening and it's only 7:15pm.

Every minute that passed seemed like an eternity. I began to twiddle my thumbs and look around the room as panic started to set in. Who knew people actually twiddled their thumbs these days? My brain was firing off bad scenario after bad scenario, as I saw the other happy couples in the dining room – each engaged in deep conversation, holding hands from across the table, or just playing a little footsie thinking no one would notice. Had she jumped out the bathroom window? Did she disappear through the kitchen? Is she just hiding in a stall, hoping I'll eventually give up and leave to avoid further embarrassment?

I'd blown it. After months and months of lightly flirting with one another, I'd finally blown it. I still remember how hard it was to even ask her out. I mean, could you imagine if she'd said no? I would have been the laughing stock of the entire school. Then again, maybe she said yes out of pity? Maybe this whole thing is a ruse and right this very minute she's out in the parking lot spray-painting my car, flanked by all her friends who'd been watching us through the windows this entire time with smirks across their faces. Nerd! Dumbass! Loser! Surely, my Thunderbird had become my own portable banner of shame.

Where was the nearest car wash? What if they slashed my tires too? There's a payphone over there. Should I call my mom now and ask her to pick me up? I don't think my social status could withstand a cut so deep. The last thing I needed was to be seen trying to powerwash neon paint of my own car. It's the middle of July. So, every passerby would have free reign to express their amusement to me with striking clarity.

I felt a droplet of sweat roll down the side of my face, despite the A/C being on full blast. Taking a quick consensus of the room it was clear that my anxiety was to blame. I grabbed the napkin from my lap and blotted my forehead. Oh, no! Had I just rubbed off any of the cover up? Is she going to come back to the table and realize I was wearing makeup this entire time? Or will she find herself so completely disgusted by my acne that she hurls her entire dessert across the table and right into my hideous face? I looked around in a growing panic, until my eyes landed on the metal napkin dispenser to my right.

Not wanting to draw attention to myself, I nonchalantly dropped my napkin to the floor. While bending down to pick it up, I tried to catch a glance of myself in its shiny, silver surface. What I saw staring back at me was a rippled face so blurry I couldn't make out a single detail. *"When was the last time they washed this fucking thing?"* I thought to myself. I sat back upright and took a deep breath. I'd just have to hope that the napkin missed my concealed mounds of fury. After all, following a quick inspection, I didn't see any greasy, tan spots on the napkin. If I'd made any contact, surely there'd be evidence.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spied the waiter approaching from the left. Finally. He was probably coming to let me know my date had fled with the busboy and they needed to clear the table for another reservation. Time to put me out of my misery.

"Sir, would you like me to refill your water?"

"She just ran to the bathroom."

"I'm sorry. Your water, sir?"

I closed my eyes for a moment and realized I'd blurted out the first thing that came into my head. I hadn't even listened to the question. Great. Now, this waiter I don't even know thinks I'm a complete looney tune. If she hadn't dug a tunnel out of the restaurant yet, I bet he'll intercept her and encourage her to leave while she still has a chance. She was far too beautiful to be seen with someone like. You only get one shot at high school and we both knew she could do better than this.

"Uh... yes, please."

He refilled my water and then went about his other duties. I picked up a lemon from the little bowl he'd left when we first sat down. I could see my hand shaking. I'd blown it. That's the phrase that continued to run through my head. Even as I squeezed a few drops of juice into my water, I couldn't help but wonder what a cooler guy would drink. Probably brandy or gin. Even as a high schooler, I'd have to imagine that with enough swag... with enough gumption.... you could walk into any establishment and order whatever drink you'd like – free of charge. After all that's how popularity works, right?

I had no sway here. I couldn't even find a close enough parking spot. We had to walk from the back of the property just to reach the front door. It felt like marching to my own death. Seeing all the corvettes, convertibles, and tricked out cars in the parking lot. I'm sure that's the moment she began regretting her decision. Honestly, if she'd run the other direction before ever stepping foot in the front door, I would've understood.

I took a sip of my tart water and looked at the clock on the wall. 7 minutes. It had been 7 whole minutes, since she excused herself to the restroom. How long do women usually take in the bathroom? Is it different when you're on a date and/or trying to escape the clutches of utter embarrassment? Could you formulate a reasonable enough excuse in less than 10 minutes? I've never had to escape anything before. So, I hadn't the slightest idea. For all I know, she'd formulated an entire contingency plan the night before and this was step one in the process.

I started to sweat again. Goddamnit. I just let this droplet make its way down my face. I didn't want to risk smudging the cover up again. In an attempt to cool myself down, I went to take another sip of water. Empty! Oh, no. I'd consumed that entire glass of water in about 10 seconds flat. And worse still, now I have to go to the restroom. Why is this happening to me? I never asked to turn out this way. If I had a choice, I'd pick 'Cool Guy' each and every time. I certainly wouldn't have selected glasses-wearing band nerd, who listens to heavy metal and wears off-brand clothing from Target. I sat my glass back on the table and crossed my legs a bit, trying to offer a bit of relief.

Then, just as yet another droplet of sweat began its descent down my temple, I heard a familiar voice.

"Is it hot in here?"

I cocked my head to the side and saw her. She hadn't left after all. I couldn't believe it. No dirt from digging. No shards of broken glass. No spray paint canisters sticking out of her purse. No signs at all of an attempted breakout. My eyes followed her back to her seat, as I continued to look for some evidence of a failed escape. Then, my eyes met with hers. She raised her eyebrows a bit, as if you remind me that I hadn't said a word.

I blurted out through a fit of nervous laughter, *"Oh... no. I think it was the jalapenos from my sandwich."*

She smiled a bit.

"Understandable. I told you not to order it with extra."

"Yeah. I guess you were right. I'll remember that next time."

"Oh, so now you assume there's going to be a next time?"

"I... uh... I didn't mean..."

What was I doing? Did I just insinuate we'd be going on a second date? The first one wasn't even over. I can't believe I just said that – outloud! If I hadn't blown it yet this was last nail in the coffin for sure.

“Relax. I’m just messing with you. I’m having fun. So, you never know.”

What? That’s the only word my brain could muster. What? It just repeated over and over again. She’s having fun? How? My brain wasn’t capable of processing this information. I’d convinced myself so thoroughly that this entire evening had been a disaster. I never once took a moment to consider the alternative – that she was actually having a good time.

Fuck. I wasn’t talking again. How long had I just been in my head. Did I just make things awkward? Say something, you fool! Speak!

“I’m having a great time too.”

Nailed it. Way to go kid, you finally did something right.

The rest of the evening was a blur. I don’t remember paying the check, driving her home, or even laying down in my own bed. I was so elated by her comment that time seemed to pass by with reckless abandon. Less than an hour ago, I was sweating bullets at the thought of my life collapsing around me. And now, here I was with my head resting on my pillow and a smile across my face. How did such a miraculous transition even occur? Is it possible to feel this way every day? Is it too early to think I might be in love?

Get ahold of yourself. You went on one date. You still have to face the entire school tomorrow and who knows she told her friends. But, you know what? That’s tomorrow’s problem. She seemed to enjoy herself tonight and you’ve earned a moment of serenity.

I turned my head and placed my hands under the pillow to crotch my head up a bit. I stared at the clock on my nightstand. Although, I wasn’t even looking at the time. I was just kind of staring off into space. The neon green pixels filling more and more of my view, the longer I stared into their light. Then, all of the sudden, I heard a noise from behind me. A faint vibration jostled my bones through the blankets. I rolled over and saw my phone sitting next to me. I’d forgotten to plug it in. I reached over with one hand and maneuvered it to my nightstand, where I’d taped the charging cord for easy access.

Not wanting to move my other hand, I ungracefully managed to get the plug into the socket of the phone. When it began to charge, the screen lit up. And that’s when I saw it. I had received a new message. My heart skipped a beat. Was this it? Was this the moment I discovered the entire thing was a sham for someone else’s amusement? No. I can’t think like that anymore. For all I know, this was my friend reminding me to pick him up for school in the morning.

I flipped open the phone, navigated my way to the message menu; and there I saw her name. I hesitated for a moment, running all the possible scenarios through my head. In mere milliseconds, I’d gone through every emotional nuance known to humanity. Deep breath. I

clicked her name and what it revealed gave me a flutter of emotion throughout my entire body. It was breathtaking. It was happiness. It was warmth. It was joyous. I just sat there in the moment, reveling in the newfound confidence it'd brought me.

The message simply said, "*So, where to next?*"

Unsure how to reply, I trusted my instincts and went with the first thing that popped in my head.

"Wherever you want to go."

I waited in anticipation. But, this time I wasn't engulfed in fear. I wasn't sweating bullets. I wasn't even worried about what she might say. I was simply... content. All of the anxieties and worries I'd felt earlier in the evening were gone. It reminded me how silly it was to worry in the first place. I liked her and she liked me. First dates can be awkward and all things considered, I think I did pretty well. I didn't even spill my food on her or anything.

The screen lit up again.

"That sounds great. I'll see you at school".

I closed my phone, turned onto my back, and crossed my arms on my chest. I stared at the ceiling and smiled, before finally closing my eyes. I had a big day tomorrow. I was going to face the entire school and they were going to know just how happy I was. More importantly, I was going to see her tomorrow. And in this moment that's all that really matters.