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First Date



During a dull, damp, and unobtrusive day in the early spring, when clouds hung low in the sky, she passed alone, heels click-clacking, through a particularly uninteresting part of the city, and found herself facing a melancholy bar as the shadows of the evening quickly grew longer. The exterior was a flat black, occasionally interrupted by unimpressive graffiti. Two small windows framed the door; however, a small collection of neon signs and band fliers prevented them from providing any visibility. A small sign hanging over the door is the only identifying feature. It once read “Winnie’s Bar and Restaurant,” etched in wood; however the ink had largely chipped away from its warped and faded surface, so now it served more as an antique decoration than an actual sign.

She couldn’t help but admire her selection. The bar was innocuous, unlikely to have been heard of or visited before, with the added bonus of being difficult to locate and identify. She’d scheduled their meeting for a Tuesday night, knowing that nothing of interest happens on a Tuesday. She had even made sure that nothing of interest was within walking distance, steering clear of parks, beaches, theatres, and clubs. Over the last year she had relentlessly filled her free time with a series of projects: she’d alphabetized her pantry, she’d

started making her own bread and pasta, she re-grouted everything, she'd started following celebrity gossip. This had been her latest project. For the last week and a half, every day after she arrived home from work, she would obsessively search the Internet for possible bars, creating a color-coded map where she could cross-reference the location of attractions with the potential date locations. She had ended up with a few possibilities, but after walking by each, she had selected Winnie's as the least interesting and most nondescript.

She forced herself to cross the street and enter. She had to pause in the doorway for a few moments for her eyes adjust to the drastically dim interior. All the lights in the bar were on, but somehow they did nothing to discourage the substantial shadows. She selected a table in the corner near the rear of the building, allowing her a partially obstructed view of the door, and making it difficult for anyone entering to spot her.

She placed her purse delicately on the booth beside her, and crossed her legs. She felt her underarms moistening, and her foot began to do an involuntary twitching jiggle. In an attempt to dispel the cataclysmic sense of growing acidic nervousness she ordered herself a drink. She'd largely quit drinking about a year ago. While it had never been a problem, she'd been worried, given the circumstances, that it would become a habit. Tonight she was making an exception to this rule.

As she waited for her drink to arrive she fidgeted with her blouse. Nothing too bright or too low-cut. Expensive enough to look nice but cheap enough not to look flashy. She smoothed her collar, and re-tucked the bottom into her skirt. She resisted the urge to pull out her compact and check her lipstick one more time. Instead, she pulled her locket from under her blouse. She used to keep it on a short chain, so it hung at her collarbones, proudly displaying the delicate heart to everyone who saw her. Recently, she had exchanged the short dainty chain for a longer sturdier model, so she could hide it beneath her clothing. People used to smile and compliment her on the beautiful necklace. Now she couldn't stand for anyone but her to see it. The last time her mother had caught her wearing it she'd softly advised, "Don't you think its time you took that off, and start to move on?"

Finally, the bartender meandered back to her small table. He mumbled through his dark, limp hair, "Old Fashioned," taking the time to place a napkin between the small glass and the table, before once again disappearing behind the illuminated shelf of unimpressive alcohols. She let her fingers slip from the warm metal, extracting the

fruit skewer before taking a much-needed gulp. She popped the cherry in her mouth, relishing the sweet syrupy taste, while she considered the orange slice. She'd always hated citrus, especially oranges. Something about the smell and sharp taste disagreed with her. She used to order her drinks without it, not wanting to waste the fruit, but he liked oranges so she had gotten used to disdainfully plucking it from her glass and plopping it into his. He'd eat the orange slice with exaggerated enjoyment, relishing in her exaggerated disgust. This was the first time she'd ordered an Old Fashioned since it happened, and she had forgotten about the orange. For a few moments she watched the fruit dangle from the black sliver of plastic, releasing a few drops of alcohol and juice onto the tabletop. When she felt her eyes begin to prickle, she quickly balled it in a napkin and shoved it under the metal caddy holding the table's salt, pepper, and hot sauce. She wasn't going to let herself cry over a goddamn orange slice.

She took another gulp, and decided to focus on the situation at hand. She reminded herself that this wasn't a big deal, that people did this all the time. In fact there are probably thousands of women just like her waiting in bars just like this for their blind date to arrive. Adam, a friend of Sarah from accounting, was supposed to arrive in 8 minutes and 24 seconds. The date was the result of a group effort, largely spearheaded by her endearingly concerned best friend, Mindy, to get her to forget and reenter the dating world, or as Mindy kept calling it, "the real world". She begrudgingly agreed once it became annoyingly clear that Mindy was not going to abandon the effort anytime soon. She did her makeup for the first time in months, and put on an outfit that was as close to cute as she could muster, and made herself actually show up.

No matter how much Mindy pressed the issue, no matter how many people supported her, no matter how many guys they presented to her, she couldn't make herself want to be on a date, to want to move on, to let any of it go. More than anything, sitting in this dingy bar she wanted to go back. She could almost imagine if she put herself in the right mentality, if she said the right thing, or concentrated hard enough she would be able to force herself back. Back, before last year, before anything had happened. He would be sitting across from her with a big smile on his face because he was always smiling his big goofy smile. He would be telling her about some nature documentary he watched last night, and how there's a type of frog that can spit poison or something like that. There would already be a couple of empty bottles and glasses on the table, along

with a pile of used napkins because he probably would've already spilled something because he was always just so goddamn bad at holding things. She could see him sitting across from her, see him leaning back in mid laugh when he turned pale and silent. His radiant smile transformed into a stoic frown, his skin turned pallid and gray, and his secondhand t-shirt became a suit.

She stood up. This wasn't right. This could never be right. She shouldn't be at this bar without him. She shouldn't be sitting down, having drinks, getting dressed up while he's dead, while he's gone. She couldn't do this. She couldn't betray him. She couldn't leave him behind.

She tucked the locket back under her blouse, and grabbed her purse. Headed determinedly to the door, she collided with something warm and solid.

"Oh my gosh! I'm very sorry, but I think I'm supposed to meet you here. Sorry I'm a little late; I had a bit of trouble finding the place. You're not leaving already are you?"

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. The innocuous and painless escape she had desperately wanted had just been eliminated. It could've just been a mix up- wrong place, wrong time- they'd reschedule; nobody would've known, but now she's trapped. She watched his welcoming smile fade and turn unsure, as she kept standing there unable to think of what to say.

She kept trying to look at him, but it was like she couldn't make her eyes focus. Everything about him was wrong: hair is too long- not him, smile too straight- not him, too short, too stocky, too tailored- not him, not him, not him.

"Hey. Is everything okay? You are Laura right? I'm sorry, I -". She didn't let him finish. Hearing her name was a physical blow, driving the knife of not him deep into her gut. She felt the pain of it radiate through her body with each heartbeat, sending the electric sting of not him racing through her. She moved all at once, flinging herself towards the exit, while shouting, "Sorry! I really have to leave now," and added, "Nice meeting you," as she slipped through the heavy blacked-out door. She heard an incredulous "What the fuck," before the door slammed closed.

Gulping down the damp night air, she blindly fled from Winnie's. She walked several blocks at top speed before realizing that nobody was chasing after her. Nobody was going to force her to go back.

She realized that she was being incredibly rude to Adam. She realized that she never actually paid for her drink. She realized that

Sarah and Mindy and her mother were all going to be disappointed and worried with her for acting this way.

She felt her eyes begin to well up, but she was so tired of being so miserable. The street around her was deserted, so she let out a guttural “FUCK YOU” to no one in particular.

For a moment she considered turning around, finding Adam and apologizing profusely, sitting down and pretending to be okay like everyone so desperately wanted her to be.

Instead, she took the new lipstick Mindy had bought her out of her purse and threw it down a nearby storm drain. Then she used her sleeve to try to wipe any trace of it from her face, uncaring that it smeared up her cheek and ruined her blouse.

She walked a few more blocks, and hailed a taxi. She returned to her empty apartment. She shed her clothes and remaining makeup, turned off her phone, crawled beneath their covers, and stared silently at the unchanging darkness.