

FIRST DATE

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All the seats in the outdoor section are absolutely soaking.

The waitress is apologetic, but not overly invested in finding a solution. You don't blame her; it's 9am, she's the same age as you, and on the other side of a glass door is a solid eighty people all waiting on her to serve them. It's not her fault you came in before the sun was high enough in the sky to dry off the café furniture. Honestly, she'd probably have been happier if you hadn't come in at all.

But she *is* doing her job, so after a couple seconds she does come out with a "Maybe you guys could sit inside?" And *that* means you have to look at the other girl, the one you're here with, and you see to your horror that she's expecting you to answer. Coming for breakfast was your idea after all, your insistence that we sit outside, and now it isn't going to work out, now look what you've done?

Your head spins a little, your face heats and starts to itch, chest tightens, all the usual symptoms of mortification. How to buy time? "Do you want to do that?" you hazard, which makes it worse, because Rach answers too softly for either you or the waitress to hear and now everyone's embarrassed and it's all wrong so, so early in.

At the worst possible time, it occurs to you that this is technically your first date.

The waitress eventually vanishes; you wipe down both seats with your jumper only to realise Rach has already sat down at an adjacent table. At this point you resign yourself to a wet arse, which would be less stressful if you weren't already self-conscious about the figure you're cutting with your mud-encrusted jeans (maybe you're an optimist, but when a lookout is listed on Google Maps you tend to expect something with road access) and 'windswept' hair. Hers remains immaculate. Obviously.

And it's your first *date*.

It isn't what you'd envisioned, at least not this part of it. Seeing the sunrise together was lovely. So was the walk back down the hill, unexpectedly hazardous though it was. The leftover giddiness had carried you along the beach to the café, supported by Rach's stories

about growing up in the area, all of which you'd listened to with automatic puppy-dog adoration.

But now that the pair of you are motionless, there's the space to start thinking (worrying) about everything that's going on, rather than just *her, her, her*. And all of a sudden, there are crises appearing everywhere.

First of all, the weather is *awful*. The day has a sort of unfriendly sparkle to it; the sky is the exact colour of a fifty-cent coin, the calm ocean a similar dehydrated grey. The sun is bright but not warm, which feels like a betrayal in the middle of February.

The food is alright, except you casually, carelessly ordered eggs Benedict, which naturally came slathered in Hollandaise sauce, with a generous helping of bacon. Rach, meanwhile, is nursing a dairy-free smoothie and a veggie burger. You were once fairly sure that there's some kind of unfortunate triple whammy of allergies and intolerances that force her to vegan options most of the time, but that certainty is slowly dripping away in the face of the rock-solid knowledge that there is no logical way this morning could go well between the two of you. It simply doesn't compute. Therefore, you are obliged to pray: please, God, don't let her be a real vegan. Please don't let her hate me for this.

Unable to make eye contact either with Rach or your plateful of incriminating animal products, you shift your gaze to the wall behind her, and your focus to the third tragedy of this meal - the conversation.

Another thing that had been going fine before you got to this stupid café. The slightly ridiculous nature of your 5am trek leaving no shortage of fuel for banter. But here, surrounded almost exclusively by older couples who probably can't even switch on their cell phones, let alone use one to keep a brand-new relationship alive for six months from opposite ends of the world, well - what once seemed charming begins to feel pathetically absurd. Really, you barely know this girl. For all the hours that have been dedicated to your correspondence, you've hardly spent any time in her company. Surely this farce of a relationship can't hold up in the real world, surrounded by the real thing - how can you even talk to her? What can you possibly have to say?

It only gets worse from there. With one half of the conversation's participants paralysed by imposter syndrome, the easy flow of words sputters to a stop. Without the distraction of formulating responses, your brain is free to spiral into panic mode. Every minute of Rachel's

time you waste in awkward silence is another piece of evidence stacked against you. Eventually you have to do something, anything, to stop the torture.

“So, time to head out?”

Hating yourself for your cowardice. Then regret, for the flicker you’ve caused on Rach’s face - hurt or relief, could be either. Or both.

Everything becomes easy again when you’re leaving. Goodbyes follow a set pattern, and the two of you are used to them. You bicker over the bill and over who’s walking who to their destination (home for Rach, bus stop for you). You lose, because the hill Rach lives on is enormous and cruel and your stop is admittedly only a block from the café’s exit. She hugs you tightly, and it actually feels right. You step onto the bus and you’ve almost forgotten what a mess you made of the last hour.

As your bus turns the first corner, your phone buzzes against your leg.

I had fun, see you at the movie? Love you

Tomorrow. The movie. You’ll try again. (If she loves you, she’ll let you try again.)

And just like that, as the bus rattles on towards home, you start to feel that maybe, just maybe, there’s hope.