

The Date

The world emerges in obvious and mistakable forms. Apartments come trekking out of the pre-dawn fog, advancing on the walker, animated by her progress. Bedraggled, unsteady by any standard, she topples up the stairs to the door of her apartment and gets inside.

She wakes up and gets out of bed and walks the grey hallway and turns off the television. She stands in the room. The light has sharpened around the window blind, like an eclipse in rectangle, and dust motes appear, hanging, hurtling. The rest of the room is varnished in blue-grey and folded in shadows. She sits down at a desk by the window and the computer glows like the sea through the porthole of a stateroom. She finds her account in the abyss and scrolls the profiles. The men want to enter her or whomever. Most are composed, as polished and purposeful as frames on a mantelpiece, each inviting the guest to ask, *and who is this one?* Some of them look like they could easily enter whomever. Others look like bathroom novices. Many have had their hair cut recently. One has blue eyes and a nose-ring. She clicks on him and immediately clicks back.

A door opens and the voices of a man and a woman erupt and carom down the stairwell in a language that sounds like kindling being split. They wind and tangle with the intimacy of knifefighters. The man is bellowing, stamping down the steps, bellowing on the landing outside Simone's door. He must look like someone seen from the air, calling for help—antic gestures and upthrust mouth. The woman's voice curls into a question. He howls an anapest and tramples the last flight of stairs that lead out of the building.

Simone arches her back out of its slouch and signs into a different account. She scrolls through the reviews of the men, browsing the commentary and the scores the women assigned their dates.

He bought flowers and chocolates for our second date, which was nice and uncreative. Then on our third date he gives me this tincture that is supposed to relieve what he called “menstruation cramps.” He said it was from the bark of a South American tree and a leopard slug that he dried and ground into powder. At first I thought it was some homeopathic roofie, but it worked really well.

Maybe he’s used to dating women for whom anal is in the cards on the first date. Spell out your boundaries early.

So my friend had this idea to go the total honesty route with this one guy she was dating and it must have totally worked because they’re getting married next week! So, I wanted to try that with the guy you see here. You know, “let’s be totally honest and not play any games.” It was great! I told him that I have two middle names and he told me that he wants to live in New Orleans. Then I told him that I’m adopted. He told me that he had to go to therapy because of the time with horseflies at summer camp. Then I told him I want to have three kids—which is kind of a lie by omission because first I want to get married, which, actually, he should realize because I selected the option of looking-for-a-serious-full-on-relationship-without-any-side-fucking on the commitment indicator menu. Then he told me about this time when he was fifteen and his sister was seventeen

and they had sex. Also, random thing, he knew how to pronounce all the French words on the menu. So, ladies, hands-off. This sisterfucker is mine.

A diesel vehicle shudders and the window rattles as it passes. Brakes hiss and the motor idles. Metal clanks on metal. There is a thud and the rushing, collapsing sound of gravity loosening garbage from the dumpster.

Simone arches her back out of its slouch and refreshes the profiles, sorting the worst scored men to the top of the page.

One man brought his ten year-old son along on the date and interjected commentary and speculation about the woman's body language, her hair, her choice of entrée. One man wore a stole made from rodents he had dispatched and pelted. One man—at the end of an otherwise normal date—pressed his mouth close to the woman's ear and whispered, "I've never gone down on a black before."

One read,

I'm on this date with Lord Hunkshard, who you see pictured above with his ha-ha, lawnmower smirk. His name is Benny, which reminds me of leather jackets and baby rabbits at the same time. Anyhow, we're on this date, my hair is amazing and our compatibility rating got two fireworks. We both selected the looking-for-a-serious-full-on-relationship-without-any-side-fucking on the commitment indicator menu. He has these beautiful lithe eyebrows, like otters cavorting atop the steel seas of his eyes. Okay, so fuck him. He asks our server about the provenance of the ling cod, a move that usually strikes me as whiny and makes the blood drain from my twat. But he is so unassuming, so curious, not judgmental and conflicted, and then he orders the fillet anyhow and I get to

watch his lips fold around those juicy slices of pink and black meat. For dessert I order almond bread-pudding with cherry fondant. It smells like an angel's orgasm. A dessert this lavish is code for *I'm going to let you enter me tonight and we're going to live together in a couple months*. And he eats it with me, which is code for *I'm ready to wash your dog and play nice when I meet your bitchy sister*. And then he says, "I'm having a great time with you tonight."

"Yes!" I say. "Me too."

Then everything continues to go very well. He is funny in the way good-looking men are sometimes funny, without making it a big deal, as if it were a secondary characteristic, a garnish, like a sprig of mint to finish the mojito. We make an inside joke about the bartender, whose operating theater we can see from our table. We call him Dr. Moltke. I use the word twat. In the ladies' room, a ballerina likes my hair. When I get back he has already settled up and we're out the door and fucking. And it's very good aside from a couple nameless desecrations, but mostly those come the next morning.

He rolls over and checks his phone. He frowns and makes a fist with his lips, "Okay," he says. "I need to tell you something."

Oh my god, he's going to tell me he has a health condition.

"I should be honest with you."

"It's okay," I say, "everybody has herpes these days. Everyone does. I do."

"No," he says, "I mean that I'm not really looking for a relationship. I mean I was, but then I went on a couple dates and realized, you know, your basic guy stuff: I want a variety of women. Anyhow, I didn't realize I hadn't changed my intentionality filter from looking-for-a-serious-full-on-relationship-without-any-side-fucking to what I really want,

which is: just-for-fun-no-commitment-seriously-just-for-fun-ladies-don't-get-the-wrong-idea.”

At first it feels like he raped my expectations. Then I regroup and think maybe it's an honest mistake on his part. After all, he only just checked his phone so maybe he's bad at the online because he spends all his time hand-planing barrel staves for artisanal distilleries, which is his day job (he says). I mean, look at his triceps, they're like rocket boosters hanging under the space shuttle. And maybe I can make an honest man of him. Then I come to my senses and realize he's a contrite, well-practiced monster and I'm one day further from getting serious with anyone, including myself. So, like I say, fuck him. I mean, don't fuck him.

Simone arches her back out of its slouch and slouches over the screen. The day is risen and traffic slashes the street outside. She checks the time. She clicks back to Benny's profile and types a message for him to read. In the kitchen, the coffee pot beeps and hot water gurgles through the grounds. Simone tucks her nose into her armpit and sniffs. She parts her legs and paddles the air at her crotch toward her face and sniffs. The smell of coffee reaches her. She gets up and stretches unsteadily and catches herself on the desk. The bathroom gleams and she cleans herself with its fixtures and bottles, slicking on the message of freshness, of well-tended female flesh, the smell of chemical flowers. The underwear goes on first then a skirt and a white blouse embellished with frills at the neck, undulating like the wings of cuttlefish. Then the mirror projects her. She takes off the skirt and puts on another one that sits higher on her waist and clings like chocolate poured over her hips. The coffee sloshes into a thermos, smoking and sparkling

darkly. The purse slides over her shoulder and her heels clack on the stairs, turning left and left and left in the still, cool vault until the door opens with a rush of city air—melting asphalt, the sour produce wilting in bins outside the bodega across the street, fryer grease emulsified with a gust of tobacco smoke that unfurls and dissolves ahead of a man who crosses in front of Simone where she waits at the top of the stoop, her legs very straight and one hand clamped to the railing. She is staring past him when he stops, cocks his head and plucks the cigarette from his lips. He whistles at Simone and smacks his lips as if by way of preamble, but he sees a man hobbling toward him, laden with white plastic bags full of milk and diapers. The shopper stops in front of the smoker and says in a pickled accent, “You are in way of me and perhaps also in way of lady.” He jerks his head at Simone and pushes his bags between them, up the steps.

“The fuck you talking about, fiddler on the roof,” the man says, stepping aside. He looks up at Simone. “Girl,” he says and looks at the rest of her, “you are hot at a drop of sweat.” He drags his cigarette and then he is the walker.

Simone arches her back out of its slouch and slouches over the screen. Mindy is tapping dotted eighth-sixteenth notes on the taupe aluminum coping of Simone’s cubicle frame with a five by six manila envelope. “That desk organizer is cute,” she says and points to Simone’s screen. “Look, it says ‘IN’ and ‘OUT’ so you know how to sort papers.”

“That’s good deskscaping for accounts receivable,” Simone says, “but most office drones don’t sort papers that way. This is just a novelty item.”

“You have to admit, though,” Mindy says, “it is pretty cute. The slot for ‘IN’ is like two feet tall and for ‘OUT’ it’s super short. It’s like a cartoon. And, look.” She waves a pearlescent fingernail at another icon. “That would be super fun, especially for the guys.”

“We *do* get to order a few of these gag-type accessories for each office,” Simone says, “but first we need to get the big stuff buttoned down—desks, secondary lighting, regionally appropriate decorations. Fishing scenes in the upper Midwest. Fishing scenes in the South. That little kokopeli guy goes on everything in the Southwest. In the Northeast they get a landscape of foggy fields with a barn or a sugar shack.”

Mindy is scanning disembodied heads bouncing through cubicle land.

“One time we were working with a bank manager in Wichita,” Simone says, “who wanted all the wall decorations to have a subtle oriental theme—his words—but mostly you should stick with samesy-samesy unless they make a request.”

Mindy nods with the earnestness of a child who has already forgotten the lesson. “Do you know what Rodney’s kid said to me?”

“What?” Simone says.

“Well, do you remember how Rodney made a big deal about being a good dad and keeping partial custody of his kid after the divorce.”

“I try to avoid Rodney,” Simone says.

“Oh, it was so cute,” Mindy says. “He got a bumpersticker that said ‘Real men act like dads’ and he brought his kid to the office.”

“Okay,” Simone says.

“So, anyhow,” Mindy says, “his kid told me that Rodney said that he would totally bone me.”

“That’s fucking gross, Mindy.”

“No, no, *Rodney* would totally bone me.”

“Yes,” Simone says, “I understand. That’s despicable.”

“I guess,” Mindy says. She looks disappointed. She purses her mouth into her cheek.

“But it’s also kind of sweet. Well, maybe not sweet, but, yeah, actually, kind of.”

“How’s your student, Simone?” Rodney asks. He has appeared out of nowhere and posts up like a ranch hand, hanging his elbows over Simone’s cubicle as if to watch green horses being broken. He hip-checks Mindy playfully. “How you doin’?” he says in mock New Jerseyan.

“Hiya, Rodney,” Mindy says.

Rodney grins at Simone.

“So,” he says, turning back to Mindy, “what have you been learning? Are you ready to move up in the world?”

Mindy’s eyes flash around Simone’s cubicle as if searching for what she might have learned. She shrugs and giggles.

“Use your words, Mindy,” Rodney says. And turning to Simone he says, “That’s what I tell my son when he gets flustered.”

“We’ve been discussing safe choices for regional decoration,” Simone says, “and desk essentials for a typical office drone.”

“Yep,” Mindy says, “and Simone showed me some fun accessories for an office drone.”

Rodney is frowning, “Don’t say that, Mindy,” he says. “It’s derogatory.”

“Sorry,” Mindy says.

“That’s okay,” Rodney says. “You probably didn’t know. My kid comes home saying ethnic slurs. He has no idea what he’s talking about until I tell him.” He chuckles to himself, “Then he gets this look on his face like a dog taking a crap.”

Mindy is watching him with the same mournful look. A phone rings.

“We can go through the second module tomorrow,” Simone says.

“I should probably get back to reception,” Mindy says and gathers a two inch binder labeled ‘Office Furnishings Accelerated.’ She drops the manila envelope she has been fiddling with and squats to retrieve it, apologizing, still hugging the enormous binder, and shuffles away through the grid of cubicles, a wave of yellow hair tacking left, right, left, right under the fluorescent glare.

Rodney studies her departure with a look of contempt, like a parent who is often disobeyed. “There goes Mindy,” he says. He shakes his head. “Not what you would call—” he seems to revise his pronouncement, “Not what you would call the total package.”

“She’s really well organized,” Simone says. “She has a sense of workers’ psychological relationships with their desks.”

“Oh,” Rodney says, “I didn’t know that was a thing.” He is still slung over Simone’s cube, his elbows dangling. “Anyhow, Mindy, whatever. I’m here—” he unhooks himself and slides into Simone’s cubicle, then drops to hunker in front of her knees. “I’m here,” he says, taking a breath, “to ask you if you want to get dinner this Friday.”

Simone arches her back out of its slouch and turns to her computer.

Simone pushes out of the passenger seat and the gravel crunches underfoot. There is a smell of chamomile and an apple orchard beyond the parking lot.

“Do you want to do the corn maze,” Benny says, “or start with the potato cannon?”

Their doors slam shut in quick succession.

“Let’s get a drink,” Simone says. “You make the barrels they use here, right? For the cider.”

“That’s right,” Benny says. “What do you do, by the way? It doesn’t say on your profile.”

“It doesn’t?” Simone says. “I think it does.” She sees a pigtailed child beating a pumpkin with a stone at the edge of the gravel parking lot. An adult yanks the girl away from the pumpkin and off her feet. The child screams and kicks and the adult hisses acid remonstrations. The sky has about an hour of sun left in it. “I’m a furnisher,” Simone says.

“A finisher?” Benny says. “What do you finish?”

“No,” Simone says, “a furnisher.”

“No,” Benny says, “I know. I heard you. I was being funny.”

“You were?” Simone says. The sun glares behind her. It is difficult to tell if she is smiling. “Is that your thing?” She says.

“What?”

“Being funny.”

“I can also juggle.”

“You’re the total package,” Simone says. “Did you grow up in the circus?”

“The suburbs,” Benny says, pointing. “I think we can get a drink over there.”

“No,” Simone says, “I know. I was being funny.”

They sit at a table in front of a van attached to a pop-up camper from which a dazed-looking woman emerges, misbuttoning her shirt. Her apron is the only qualification she seems to have for approaching them.

“Do you all want anything that I can get you?” She brushes absently at the fold she has buttoned to her shirt. She looks down and her chin folds. “Oh, my,” she says, “I’ve got my shirt on funny. Hang on.” She goes away to the camper.

“No,” Benny says and gestures, as if waving away flies, “I read about what a furnisher is.”

“Then you know we eat our mates after sex.”

“What?”

She is smiling now and Benny laughs to catch up.

The woman comes back to their table, wiping at a wet spot adhering to her shirt. “Lord of frogs,” she says, “I am just a mess today.” Then she adds, as though among family, in a lowered voice, “Donny left, you know.”

Simone nods.

“When was that?” Benny says.

“Oh,” she says, “going on five years.” She looks around the orchard. “He bought this land,” she says, “and sort of farmed it. Then he went back to Chattanooga with a lady trucker. She did mostly frozen chickens. Had her own truck. Donny’s probably swoll up on barbeque, trolling for lot lizards.” She frowns. “I’m sorry,” she says. “Do you want anything that I can get you? Did you try the potato cannon? Gillian has it firing really smooth.”

They order and the waitress goes away and comes back with two red plastic cups that slosh with foam. “Yep,” she says, “Enjoy yourselves.” She heaves a thumb over her shoulder like a tired umpire. “I’ll be in the camper should you need a refill.”

The date continues or finally gets underway now that the cider has arrived and they must stay put and drink it—an obligation shamming as the object of their date. Simone would rather be watching confusion, ecstasy and horror rippling through this man and he would rather enter her by whatever method. Simone sips her cider and Benny watches a dusty, silver minivan pull up in the gravel and disgorge tow-haired children and two adults. The adults are wearing red t-shirts advertising Willy Sanchez’s Smoke Show and the smears and stains of those who must toil in a barbeque pit. The children scamper toward the sounds of the potato cannon, which can be heard from behind the camper, wet expulsive blasts like giant loogies being hocked into the stubbled field further on. One of the girls stops to look at Simone and Benny as if they are strange and should not be there. The adults nod and approach the camper to bang on the aluminum door.

“They’re off by the spud thumper, Lil,” the man says.

The woman pounds with the heel of her hand, “They haven’t eaten yet, Lil.”

“Okay, Lil,” the man says, “there’s a couple out here saw us bring them by.” He turns to smile at Benny and Simone and a brown gap shows in place of one eyetooth. The adults shout goodbyes toward the children and the gravel crunches under their sneakers until the minivan takes them again. The man waves good-naturedly to Benny, like a child awaiting some reward or freed from a chore.

“What was that about?” Benny says.

“I don’t know the story,” Simone says. “I’m going to find the ladies’ room. Make something up and tell me when I get back.”

“Want another one?” Benny says and twirls the dregs of her cup.

Simone hooks a thumb up over her shoulder like a hitchhiker and makes her way toward an odious looking outhouse stunting a clutch of sumac shrubs around it.

Lil peers out from the screen window of her camper with a wary expression like the one the girl has turned to Simone and Benny. “You all want another round?” she says.

“Please,” Benny says.

Lil comes out toting a pitcher of amber liquid with a crown of froth sinking over the lip. “That was Donny and his lady trucker,” she says, taking the empty cups and tilting them to meet the spout of cider. “I don’t use her name.”

“Didn’t you say they went back to Chattanooga?” Benny says.

“I may have,” Lil says. She lifts the half-poured pitcher. “To wishful thinking,” she says and drinks. “I have to see about those children.”

Benny nods and drinks in sympathy as Lil goes away. He listens as she swishes through the long grass in the direction of the potato cannon. After a moment, he reaches into his breast pocket and takes out two one-milligram pills of rohypnol and drops them into one of the cups, stirs it with peace fingers and positions it in front of where Simone has been sitting. Simone bangs out of the shithouse waving the air before her like one beset by hallucinations. Benny waves to her and smiles as she makes her way across the gravel and wizened tufts of chamomile. “Not so nice,” he says as if it were a question.

“No,” Simone says, seating herself and taking a bottle of antiseptic gel from her purse.

Benny leans in like a conspirator, “That was Donny and his lady trucker,” he says.

“Lil told me.”

“Really?” Simone says.

“That’s what she told me.”

“What did you make up?”

“I didn’t get to that,” Benny says. “Cheers.”

“This is a weird place,” Simone says, as though it were a compliment and they drink.

“I’m glad it’s not just me,” Benny says. “I thought it would be more ye olde tyme and less hillbilly. I just sell them barrels. I’ve never been here before.”

“No,” Simone says, “I like this.”

“Good,” Benny says. He smiles at her. “I’m having a good time, too.”

They drink.

Across the orchard, birds move like black hexes against the sky and settle in the trees. A child’s voice floats from beyond the camper, “When you dream, do you see colors? Or do you just remember seeing colors?” The long grass swishes rhythmically and another child says, “Probably you see colors.” They cross onto the gravel next to the camper and see Simone and Benny. He smiles and waves at the children. They stare at him warily. The girl pulls the boy by the sleeve, “I have to go,” she says and they continue toward the outhouse. The boy’s voice flutes the still air and reaches Simone and Benny at their table as the girl enters the outhouse, “Because how could you remember something if you didn’t see it?”

“Excuse me,” Benny says, getting up, “just a minute.” He walks the gravel toward his car.

“Hey,” Simone calls after him, “have you had enough of me?”

“No,” he says, half-turning to her. “I just have to get something from my car.”

She waits until he is out of sight and quickly reaches into her purse and extracts a minuscule vial containing a thousand micrograms of lysergic acid diethylamide that she uncaps and pours into his cider.

The crowing of the birds from the orchard has faded in the growing darkness. Bats flit across the last of the whiskey colored clouds hanging on the horizon. Nothing but smudges are visible. The gate that Lil walks closed creaks on its hinges. A car approaches—the hum of its tires followed by a burst of headlights from the forest and the gate and Lil appear before it and vanish. Lil locks the gate and crunches the gravel in the tightening whirl of the receding car. She finds the woman still sprawled across the table, catatonic, breathing like a sedated animal, drooling, pliable. The man who was with her is not to be seen, though she hears voices in the orchard. She climbs into the camper and it wallows while she rummages around. A baleful shriek tears through the orchard. Lil steps out and slicks through the wet grass, the field bleached and steaming in the beam of the flashlight.