

Saint Valentine's Toilet

For the First Annual Smooching Nooks of St. Louis Awards, I present the gold to Valentino's Restaurant. Mr. Dashing Danny Date, please mosey up to the stage for your medallion. Congratulations on asking me to dinner there, a truly original idea, untried by man, magnifipendous, really. Why yes, you can do a speech. What will you talk about? Valentino's – a spotlight in the city of 200 murders per annum? Valentino's – the only restaurant where you can find Catholic priests entombed in the basement? Valentino's – I forget the rest?

Honorable mentions from the Smooching Nooks Guild go to that one café off Manchester where they let you play with cats while you drink bubble tea, the Build-a-Bear Workshop behind the Science Center, and the Missouri Botanical Gardens where you could bottle the atmosphere and spritz spritz it on your wrists like they do at the mall. These places would have earned medallions too, except for the fact that you're not allowed to smooch in them. Nooooo, nonono. I've visited these places so many times with Nana that it simply wouldn't do to let Mr. Dashing Danny Date take me there. Not that we'd do anything wrong. Take the Botanical Gardens, for example, which have a hundred of these little carved benches tucked away in the rose garden where we could've sat for five minutes and eaten gummy bears and maybe played Would You Rather, then he would ask would you rather kiss a frog or hold my hand and I would blush and say Oh You Cheeky and as our fingers inch closer like ten slow-dancing caterpillars a family of tourists roll by with strollers and fanny-packs. No. I would see Nana in their eyes. Our hands would never touch.

If I ever do the gushy-juju, it will be here at Valentino's, in the Central West End, one of the less crimeful neighborhoods where you'd go for a poetry slam or a ginger poultice. The tablecloths are pleated like wedding dresses; they are small because they fall away beneath a ribbed ceiling that might have contained the entire sky – tangible proof of a different kind of

heaven. Valentino's used to be Saint Valentine's Cathedral, but like Nana says, the people here lost use for it after Y2K.

I'm alone, it is February 14th, and through the stained glass the sky is wide-brushed with rhubarb.

In the choir balcony, a snoring pipe organ is kept asleep by the lullaby of three girls in black dresses who sport microphones, clasped hands, and a shivering, sauntering confessional.

Near, far, wherever you are

I believe that the heart does go on.

Once more you open the door

And you're here in my heart

And my heart will go on and on.

Celine Dion, you Queen. I cross my arms and my legs. I uncross them. I tap my foot. On my phone, the 6:04 changes to a 6:05 over the lock screen – a selfie of Nana smoking. Outside the stained glass, a congregation of pigeons explode, flutter, and ascend.

Mr. Dashing Danny Date has not yet arrived.

I pull up his Tinder.

A shaven man in an Air Force uniform posing in front of the Disney Castle. Hair parted.

Danny, 42

Lover of music and movies, Chex Mix and Church. I do carpentry on the side and like to flip slightly used coffins and sell them at craft fairs. Let's grab a bite some time! God bless.

I'm not really a churchy person, so Mr. Dashing Danny Date might be a fixer-upper. Conservative I can work with. Excepting Nana, I come from a family of conservatives –

conservationists, conservitarians, what have you. I want him to be just conservative enough so that on our first date we'll have intercourse.

Like in *Titanic*.

After all, it's Valentine's Day and I know for a fact Jo and Savannah and all the other people from work are spending the night in Sheraton hotel rooms with their spouses, eating gummy bears and playing Would You Rather and occasionally checking their phones to receive an "everything is okay" text from the babysitter. And I don't think my desires are *wrong* – a feeling's a feeling. What's wrong with a feeling? I'm perfectly justified in meeting with a consenting adult – a real man, you know, a prince who inherited a dog food company, with three daughters and an evil step-mother. If we lived a hundred years ago he might have owned a castle. Just one night. One night of touching to make up for all my untouched places.

I bought lingerie for the first time yesterday. A string of red lace pokes out of my purse. My lips are dry.

INCOMING CALL. DANNY.

Oh heck, oh hellacious heck.

"Hello you."

I say the words in iambic meter so he knows I'm serious. My foot keeps tap-tapping.

"Hey, I'm waiting outside the restaurant, and I don't see you," his laugh is squeakier than a prince's is supposed to be.

"I'm at the table already."

"Alright, just stay there. I'll come to you. Sorry, sorry."

With the screen still pressed to my cheek, I scan the restaurant. The tables are booked; reservations probably closed in January. But he managed to schedule our date last Tuesday.

"So you're already at the table?" Danny's voice comes through again.

"Yup."

The tables here only have even numbers of chairs. Most of the guests are couples, although I see a few kids. There's a boy looking for his parents, also talking on the phone. He's probably ten. Clip-on tie decorated with baseballs. He has green eyes that flicker in my direction. Danny's voice falls silent in my ear.

The kid taps his phone, and Danny hangs up.

Uh oh.

My phone slowly draws away from my cheek. The screen is pale with makeup particles. On the lock screen, Nana is frowning.

"Danny Calderwood, president of the Moye Elementary ghost-hunting club. Pleasure."

The two green eyes hold on mine as he shakes my hand. He wears a purity ring. His hand does not fit in mine.

I open my mouth. I close my mouth.

I was about to say hi my name is Jessie and I work on the production line at a Girl Scout cookie factory and I live with my Nana, but the words got slightly muddled.

"Hello you. My name is Jessie and I'm a lion tamer."

"Lion taming," he nods. "You get dental out of that?"

Some heads turn from the nearby tables, and my face has rouged. Cheese louise, I feel pretty goofy right now when I think about the panties in my purse. My hand had trembled when I handed my gift card to the cashier at the Victoria's Secret, where they were selling the spritz spritz of the bottled air from the Botanical Gardens. A few people smile at us because they think it's cute, and I hide my face in my hands.

"These are for you," he sets something in front of me, probably flowers.

It is a heart-shaped box full of gummy bears.

I won't touch it.

"Do you like it?" his concerned eyebrows knit in and out like Nana's crochet.

I really really do, but not like this.

"But Danny, your Tinder said you were 42."

“Tinder bans kids under 18, so we have to make up ages and swipe until we think we’ve found another under 18. You’ve gotta be real good at guessing. I mean, your profile said you were 39.”

“But I *am* 39.”

“To be honest, when I saw your profile I thought you were in third grade,” he starts to giggle and then catches himself. “But 39 is cool, too.”

The heat has rushed to my face. I blink a few times. My eyes are wet.

I got tricked.

“That was mean,” I mumble to the napkin in my lap.

His feet dangle off the edge of his chair, while in the background the opera girls belt out.

Near, far, wherever you are

I believe that the heart does go on.

I’m not so sure I like you anymore, Celine. As the date goes on, I find myself looking away from us, at the stained-glass windows which are now black with night. Danny follows my eyes.

“Did you know that when this was still Saint Valentine’s Cathedral, the priests used to turn wine into Jesus here?”

“Very interesting,” I nod.

“No, I mean right here, at this table. See how the building branches off in four directions from where we’re sitting? Like a cross? I reserved this table especially for that; it would have been an altar. We are the center of the show; the architects designed the church so that when we’re in this spot our voices carry to the rest of the congregation.”

“Mm hmm.”

I would assume the other guests could hear our lack of banter.

The waiter comes to let us know he is Mark and he will be serving us tonight and to know if we would like any drinks to get us started. I point out the sparkling apple juice already sitting in front of me. I've stopped sipping it.

"And you, young man?"

Danny pulls a pair of reading glasses from inside his jacket and scans the menu.

"Chardonnay."

The waiter turns to me, and his mouth puckers as if to make a w sound. But he stops, and as a result says many words at once – *who, what, why?*

So Danny ends up with the sparkling apple juice because he can't have the wine. And I can't have the wine because I want the juice. Both of us end up with bendy straws.

When the waiter glares at me, I close my eyes and I am at my locker at work – my coworkers at the Girl Scout cookie factory all have family photos in their lockers. Husbands, wives, children, all hugging in front of photographers. They have photos of newborns they would die for, boyfriends who went to war for them, and in mine I just have one picture. And it's of Nana. Frowning.

I'm the kind of person who says hi to them and they don't say hi back.

"So, Jessie, you said you're a lion tamer. What inspired that?"

I didn't want to answer him at first because I was mad.

"I play with a lot of cats. They're my Nana's. At first I played with a lot of small cuddly indoor ones, but after a while the small cats wouldn't do it for me. So I moved onto the streets and played with the strays that live behind the gas station. I went through a cougar phase. Then I discovered lions."

"What do you like about lions?" he tilts his head.

That was a hard one.

"I guess the way they always travel in prides. The way they always lick each other's wounds. The way they're never alone. My Nana and I watch them on National Geographic."

"Those are good reasons."

“Thank you.”

I meant it.

I sipped my sparkling apple juice.

“What about you? You said you were a ghost hunter?”

“Yep.”

“Well, have you ever, you know, seen one?” I whisper so our echoes don’t carry over to the rest of the congregation.

“I see ghosts everywhere,” Danny says. “I see a ghost in you.”

“Psssh, you goober. Me? A ghost?”

“Do you feel loved?”

“I-I.”

“Then a ghost has gotta be haunting you. It’s gotta be.”

I laugh because I don’t know what else to do.

“I can love you, Jessie.”

“Oh stop.”

“But I can.”

“You’re so cheeky. My friends have kids your age, Danny.”

“Do you have kids?”

“Nada.”

“Why?”

“I think it’s pretty self-evident,” I point at him, laughing even though I’m embarrassed.

The boy looks down at his clip-on tie, sullen.

“Do you want me to leave?”

“No —,” surprise, my voice cracks, my vision blurs, the corners of my eyes are cold. “No. I’m sorry. I just wanted to meet someone special. Just once.”

Swallow. Exhale.

*Once more you open the door
And you're here in my heart
And my heart will go on and on.*

Celine, you mud-sucker! A couple walks past us, probably in a rush to leave the restaurant and find the nearest empty bed. They are in heat like the lions in Nana's nature documentaries. The girlfriend notices Danny sitting across the table from me. She stops for a moment and smiles, touching a hand to her chest. *So sweet*, she mouths. Her boyfriend cringes. The two of them leave arm in arm.

I excuse myself and go to the bathroom. On the toilet, I weigh my options. Do I leave now, scold the boy, or take him to find his parents and scold him then? Either way, I want to scold someone. I unbutton my purse and pull out the red lace rigging, top and bottom. It is perfumed. I sit there, hunched over, sliding the lingerie through my fingers and imagining all the places where I could have been touched. I feel like a pedophile.

By the time I leave, I have already said goodbye. I have wiped my tears with the back of my hand. I have flushed my panties down Saint Valentine's rosy toilet.

When I return to our table, Danny is sitting there with his apple juice.

"Are you going to take your gummy bears?" he asks.

"Feed them to your ghosts."

"What?"

I inhale and then proclaim like the ancient priests who for a hundred years had stood where I stood and every Sunday morning had turned wine into Jesus.

"I said, feed them to your ghosts, you liar. Maybe you'll see them in hell."

The whole congregation hears it.

The three opera girls finally stop their song, not sure what the outburst was about.

While standing at the table, I dish out my checkbook. One hundred dollars and zero cents to Valentino's Restaurant. In the memo line, I write: *for my meal, for the kid's meal, and for the mess.*

And I leave.