

## Seven Dates

I. Your roommate Marcus sets you up with the first one. Actually, it's less of a setup and more of an ambush—he calls you on your lunch break and says, “You have a date tonight.”

Thinking he must be asking a question, you reply, “I don't think so.”

Marcus huffs an exasperated sigh into your ear and fills you in on the details while you shovel hummus and carrot sticks into your mouth at your desk. A woman he works with, reservations at a restaurant downtown. Somehow it does not occur to you to object until you are sitting at a table across from a stranger, your palms dripping sweat onto the silverware.

Dinner dates have always been your least favourite kind, and this one is worse than usual. The restaurant is too elegant for your plain work clothes, the food too expensive for you to enjoy. The woman is vivacious and pretty, dark-haired, wearing interesting shoes and spicy perfume. On paper, she is your type, even down to her low, husky voice. Through conversation she supplies you with a list of various identities: hospital administrator, foodie, dog person, introvert, only child, Trekkie.

You sit across from her, smile at her jokes, and feel nothing. You are still raw from dinners eaten in silence, nightly retreats to the couch. The sound of your ex slamming cupboard doors echoes through your brain whenever you look at anyone else. The scars on your hands ache with loss.

After dinner and before dessert, your brain seems to short circuit and you blurt out, “This is the first date I've been on since my divorce.”

The woman pauses in the middle of a story about coming out in her freshman year of college. “Really,” she says cautiously. You nod, open your mouth to say something else, then think better of it and shut it again. “Marcus didn't mention that.”

The two of you sit in silence until your date excuses herself to use the restroom. Like a fool, you sit and wait for her to return, eating hesitant little bites of your strawberry cheesecake. It isn't until the waiter pointedly presents you with the cheque that you think to go in after her.

Her interesting shoes sit on the counter next to the sink. The faucet is still running. It does not occur to you until later that you never saw her come back out through the door, and that the restroom has no windows. For the rest of the week you find yourself catching faint whiffs of her spicy perfume whenever you enter an empty room.

II. You meet the second one on one of those apps, the kind that shows you a picture and lets you swipe one way or another. Using it makes you feel indescribably silly, but you're lonely, and one of the pictures that comes up looks appealing, and you swipe accordingly. Three days later you are sitting in the coffee shop down the street, your stomach a tangle of nerves, wearing your orange corduroy jacket in hopes that it will give you courage.

The jacket is a new acquisition. For years you wore nothing but black, because that was what your wife wore, and she wanted the two of you to match. A few days after your marriage ended, you passed a thrift store and saw the jacket on a mannequin in the window, screaming its colour to the world. Its brilliance was food to your starving eyes, the antithesis of black on black on black. So you bought it, and now you are wearing it, and you do not know if you are trying to prove something to yourself or if you genuinely like the colour.

The caramel latte you order is scalding and too sweet, but you still manage to have it halfway gone by the time your date breezes in, bringing with her the smell of rain. She sits across the table from you, smiles, and tells you her name. You forget it instantly.

You have a wonderful time. You know this because you say those exact words aloud to her when you hug goodbye outside of the coffee shop, your head warm and pleasantly swimming. Your date kisses you on the cheek and whispers something in your ear, her lips almost touching your skin. Her words circle your brain once before disappearing down the drain of you forever, like the ring you slipped off in the shower the day you bought the orange jacket.

The walk home seems to take longer than normal. When you come through the door your clothes are soaked, your long hair heavy and dark with rain. Marcus looks up from his spot on the couch, his eyebrows raised.

"I'm surprised you're back," he says. "You were gone so long I figured you must be spending the night."

You want to tell him that you weren't gone long, that the date took less than an hour, if that, but when you look at the window behind him you see that the sky outside is black, the moon hidden behind a curtain of cloud. Your stomach lurches, and you rush to the bathroom before you heave the partially digested remains of your latte all over the rug.

After you vomit, you rest your head against the cool porcelain edge of the toilet and try to remember your date. The clothes she wore, the colour of her hair, what the two of you talked about. Every time you think you have a detail pinned down it somehow wriggles away, leaving your mind perfectly blank.

Before you go to sleep you make sure to clean up the bathroom, wiping all the little brown flecks of vomit from the toilet seat. You like living here, like Marcus, like the drifting, untethered feeling of being a roommate this late in life. You don't want to jeopardize that.

By the time you finish cleaning, you have forgotten all about the date. You do not notice this forgetting any more than you noticed the hours slipping away in the coffee shop.

Three days later, at two in the morning, you get a call from a number you don't recognize. When you pick up your phone, sleep-panicked and foggy, you are met with a tinny whisper hissing through static.

"Thank you for your time," it says. The voice seems familiar, but you can't quite place where you've heard it before.

III. The third date is a woman you see on the bus every morning. Short, blonde hair, excitable hands. You try not to look at her, but your eyes have their own agenda; they linger on the quick

flare of her smile, the proud arch of her nose. You find yourself inventing excuses to sit closer and closer to her, until one morning the only seat left is the one directly to her left.

You sit stiffly beside her, your palms as wet as your mouth is dry, until she turns to you and says, “You know, you can just give me your number. I promise I won’t lose it in the wash.”

Her smile is sweet, and she is true to her word. The two of you meet for gelato, sitting outside at a little picnic table when the inside of the cafe proves to be too crowded and noisy for conversation. Your flavour is chocolate, hers pistachio.

The third date tells you stories about herself between bites of gelato. Her birth, premature, and the resulting barrage of complications that shaped the first two years of her life. The pet Labrador whose death by drowning she witnessed during a summer picnic. A high school boyfriend who delighted in cruelty, and whose shadow she still feels falling across her on dark nights. She is frank and unashamed of this collection of everyday traumas; her eyes do not shy from yours, her head does not turn away.

Her bravery makes you brave, and you share a few of your own secrets. A girl you loved in second grade who inexplicably turned on you in third. Your old babysitter’s son, who led you by the hand into the basement and, afterwards, made you promise not to tell. The time you were driving over a bridge and saw a man throw himself over its edge, slamming into the water below. You even mention (briefly, cautiously) your wife, showing her the scars on your hands from her fingernails, the string of venomous texts she left the night you left her. Your date listens, occasionally humming in assent.

When you finish, as winded as though you have just run a marathon, she places her hand on your forearm. The tips of her fingers are ice cold from her gelato cup.

“Do you miss her?” she asks.

This is the first time anyone has asked you that question. After a moment’s reflection, you realize it’s the first time you’ve asked yourself, as well.

“No,” you reply, and are surprised to realize that you mean it. She smiles and leans in. Her mouth tastes of cold and pistachios.

You are excited to see the woman on the bus the next day, but when you board, she is not in her usual seat. She does not show up the next day, or the day after that. You begin to wonder if you did something wrong, if you were so boring or rude she felt compelled to change her morning commute to avoid you. All of your studiedly casual texts remain unanswered. Finally, you are forced to admit that whatever you did or did not do will remain a mystery; for whatever reason, she does not want to see you again.

“These things happen,” Marcus tells you, and you try to feel nothing about it, but you wake up with headaches from clenching your teeth in your sleep.

Weeks later, as the bus makes its morning crawl through traffic, you rest your head against the window and watch the other passengers in the glass. Three rows ahead of you, sitting in her usual spot, is the third date. Her head is turned towards you, her eyes open so wide the whites show from lid to lid. When you look at her seat—the real one, the one you can reach out and touch—no one is there.

IV. The fourth date is the one you sleep with. You aren't particularly attracted to her, or interested in seeing her again, but no one has touched you since the last grim encounter with your wife a year ago, right before you left. You are curious about other people, other bodies. You are also a little afraid that if you do not have sex soon, you will forget how.

The woman is petite and energetic, her laugh like the snap of a rubber band. The top of her left arm is tattooed with a swirl of curving vines, flecked here and there with little red flowers. She agrees to come back to your apartment for a cup of coffee, but when you get through the door, she reaches behind her neck to untie the top of her dress, letting it fall open to the waist. She pulls you into her, open-mouthed and hungry, stripping off your orange jacket without looking.

As you walk her, backwards, to your room, all you can think about is how different she feels compared to your wife: broad shoulders instead of narrow, round hips instead of sharp, hands that roam your skin freely instead of clutching at your neck. You wonder if these comparisons will haunt you forever, if your wife's body will always superimpose itself over every other woman you touch.

Afterwards, feeling happier than you thought you would, you let your fingers trail along the loops and whorls of her tattoo. It feels slightly raised under your fingers, reminding you of when you used to score pictures into your skin with the tip of a safety pin. Trees, smiley faces, tic-tac-toe grids, little abstract designs that held meaning for no one but yourself. Your limbs are sated and heavy, your brain suffused with a surprising, peaceful glow. Maybe, you think, this could work. Maybe it could be something.

"When did you get this?" you ask, and the woman turns her head to look at you.

"Get what?" is her response, spoken through a face-splitting yawn.

"Your tattoo," you clarify, tapping it with two gentle fingers. Something beneath the skin seems to curl and twist. "Is it old? Why vines? Did it hurt?"

She turns her whole body toward you then, her face a knot of confusion. "What are you talking about?" she asks. "What tattoo?"

You look at the lines of ink marking the surface of her skin and see that they are moving, the vines writhing in time to her pulse. The red flowers open and close, throbbing like raw and bloody hearts.

Excuses are made: an early morning, a busy day, an incipient cold. The fourth date leaves your apartment, baffled and insulted. You hear her slam the door on her way out and know that she will never call you again. Breath comes too quickly to your lungs as you lie in your bed and stare at the ceiling, surrounded by her unfamiliar scent. In the dark you see vines, moving.

V. The fifth date comes over to watch a movie. She is on the tall side, with long limbs, a comfortably rounded torso, and an unpleasant smell. Despite this, you invite her in, thinking that it would be rude to turn her away. Perhaps the smell will fade with time.

The two of you sit and watch the movie silently, wrapped in a thick cloud of stink. Both of you eat from the bowl of popcorn nestled between your laps, but you notice that she takes

just one piece at a time, and that although she chews and chews, she never seems to swallow. In the blue light of the television her skin looks waxy and grey. It's almost pretty, or at least that's what you tell yourself. The smell does not fade. If anything, it grows stronger.

The still air between you is unnerving; you are reminded of your wife, how she would retreat into herself when you disagreed and sit in silence, furious and immobile, until you finally apologized for whatever opinion of yours she found objectionable. The memory is loud. To drown it out, you turn to your date and ask her if she likes the movie.

She blinks. Her eyes are gummy rather than wet, and you can hear the noise the lids make, like cuts of meat slapping against a steel table.

"It's okay," she says, after a long moment of silence. Her voice has little squirming things moving around in it.

After the movie ends, she remains sitting on your couch for hours, staring at the blank screen. The smell grows stronger and stronger. You hint that you are getting tired. You mention that you work early tomorrow. You tell her, point blank, that she needs to leave. She looks at you as though she does not understand a word.

"But we're on a date," she says. When she opens and closes her mouth you can see a spitty wad of masticated popcorn sitting on her tongue, which is the colour of a bruise.

At three in the morning, so exhausted you can barely keep yourself from crying, you ask her what she wants.

"More food," she says. "I'm hungry."

Swaying with fatigue, you fling open your cupboards and scabble inside. A box of salted crackers, a packet of ramen, three dented cans of off-brand tuna, Marcus' strawberry Pop-Tarts. You sweep them all up in your arms and dump them into your date's lap. One of the cans of tuna bounces off her knee and rolls under the couch. She doesn't seem to notice.

"Is that all?" she asks. The words seem to echo up from some hollow place inside her. When you nod, she heaves herself off the couch with a gusty sigh that smells of cotton and ethanol.

"I guess I'd better be going," she says, as though it was her idea to begin with. She gathers up the food you've given her and walks out the door. Her gait is slightly off, one foot dragging a little. She pauses in the hallway and turns back to look at you, not quite real in the flickering fluorescent light, and in that moment you realize she is dead, that the smell she brought with her is not her own, but the stench of the grave.

"Let's do this again sometime," she says, and smiles. Bits of popcorn decorate her yellowed teeth.

Her footsteps are still fading down the hall when you slide the deadbolt home with trembling fingers. The sound it makes is very loud.

"Hey," Marcus says the next morning, opening the cupboard. "What happened to my Pop-Tarts?"

You take a swig of orange juice straight from the carton. "Bad date," you reply, and hope he doesn't notice how your voice shakes.

VI. The sixth date asks you to meet her for sushi in a little restaurant above a bicycle shop, a neon sign shaped like a fish flashing pink and green in its window. She is late, and you wait there alone for a half hour, drinking tap water and feeling foolish, before she finally scuttles in. She is windblown and panting and apologizes three times before she sits down.

“I was putting my face on,” she explains, and orders a bottle of warm sake for you to share.

It is a marvelous face; she has that knack of blending and contouring that you cannot master no matter how many tutorials you watch. The glittering sunset colours on her lids fade seamlessly into one another. Her eyeliner is perfectly symmetrical. Her lips are the flawless red of a ripe apple. You are so distracted by her artistry that you lose track of what she is saying more than once, and have to ask her to repeat herself.

Your wife would always give herself cat’s eyes when the two of you went out. This would take her at least a half an hour; she would sit cross-legged on the floor in front of her mirror, squinting doubtfully at her face as she drew careful lines around the edges of her eyes. If they were not even, she would scrub them off and try again, her expression darkening with each attempt. On nights when she couldn’t make them identical, you would show up late to dinner or the movies or a party, shooting apologetic looks to all sides while she strode ahead of you, glowering. She would drink too much on those nights, talk too loudly, hold your hand so hard the nails would bury themselves into your flesh. Over time, they came to fit there naturally. Your body made a place for them.

The sake cup is tiny in your hand, like a doll’s teacup. You hold it up to the light and look at the scars on your hands, little half-moon grooves just slightly darker than the surrounding skin.

The sushi is unremarkable, the conversation less so. You like the careful way your date gathers up her food between her chopsticks, the wide gape of her mouth as she tries to eat without spoiling the elegant line of her lipstick. She notices you watching her and laughs, a little self-consciously.

“Did it smear?” she asks.

It didn’t, you tell her, and she sighs with relief. When she lifts her sake cup, there is no lipstick on the egg-smooth surface of the porcelain.

“It’s so silly,” she says, but you can tell from her voice that she does not think it is silly at all. “Eating like that. This woman at work calls me a snake. Says it looks like I’m unhinging my jaw. I want to look nice, that’s all.”

“You do,” you say. The compliment seems to take her by surprise. She stares at you for a minute, then smiles, the width of it threatening to crack the red perfection of her lips.

By the time you leave the restaurant it is dark, the first snow of the year drifting lazily down out of the night sky. The neon fish sign blinks above your heads, pink to green, green to pink. You open your mouth to catch a flake of snow on your tongue and feel it dissolve almost immediately, helpless against the heat of your mouth.

“Can I call you?” you ask. You know the night is over, that this is not going to end with the two of you going to bed, but you think you’d like to see her again.

She smiles again and nods, stepping close. That light makes her face pale and unreal, a mask floating in a still, smooth lake. Her kiss is as flower-sweet as sake.

You don't understand what the thing on your mouth is when you pull away from her. It feels like another snowflake, right on the edge of your lip, but it does not melt. Frowning, you reach up to peel it off and examine it under the flashing lights. It looks like a fleck of red paint, caught there on the very tip of your finger. As you look at it, it disintegrates and blows away in the dark.

You look up at your date and see her face cracking, the carefully applied colours crumbling into powder. One of her hands strays up to the edge of where her lips used to be, and they are coated with a fine patina of red as the wind takes what remains of them. The eyes are gone. The mouth is gone. She is as smooth and blank as a cup.

You hear the scream bubbling up in her throat, but there is nowhere for it to emerge. The scream in your own bursts through and shatters the night, a kind of sympathy.

VII. The seventh date wants to meet in a park. The forecast is for warmth and sunshine, and so of course the day breaks in a haze of drizzle and with a sharp wind blowing from somewhere north. It blows right through your corduroy jacket—you should have worn your winter coat—and you pace up and down in front of a park bench, rubbing your arms to get the blood flowing. The duck pond in front of you is home to a family of mallards, proceeding across the surface of the water in a dignified parade. The wind does not bother them.

The date appears as a shimmer at the other end of the park, like a mirage. As she approaches, you blink rapidly and rub your eyes. Your eyes seem to be playing tricks on you, and you see her as tall and then short, fat and then thin, a blonde, a brunette, a redhead. It is not until she is directly in front of you that she settles into a shape you know. Small, slight, curly hair, wide eyes. She is wearing black.

It is your wife. You think it is your wife. It looks like her, her face and hair and tiny hands, but something about her features seems off. The eyes just slightly too far apart, the nose just a little too pert. Looking at her is like looking at a composite drawing of a criminal: the details are broadly correct, there's no single thing you can pinpoint as wrong, but the overall effect is facsimile, not fact. She stands in front of you with her hands open and dangling at her sides.

You say your wife's name. Your date does not respond to it. Instead she asks, "Want to go for a walk?"

The voice is not quite your wife's voice, even though it has the same sharpness, the same precise diction. This may be why you agree instead of running the other way.

The two of you stroll together along the paths, grinding gravel beneath your feet. You recognize the sharp-nosed shoes she is wearing, but you remember them being red. They are blue now. Her smell hits the right notes in your nose, tangy sweat and rosewater, but beneath runs the scent of hot metal. Everything about her is both familiar and unfamiliar; even her breathing is not quite right, as though she is pausing deliberately between each lungful of air. From the corner of your eye you watch the black blur of her form, wondering if it will shimmer and change again.

Because you have to, you ask, “Are you my wife?”

She laughs. A little tide of sick rises in your throat. “What do you think?” she replies.

You aren’t sure what you think. You aren’t sure of anything.

The two of you pause by the duck pond, watching the mallards swim in elegant circles. The fingers of her left hand brush against the back of your right, close to the scars.

“Why are you here?” you ask her, and she laughs again. The hand that brushed against yours reaches out to hold it. Her grip is firm to the point of pain, and you remember that crushing pressure, the way she would rub your bones against each other when she wanted you to stop speaking.

“I’m here because you wanted me,” says your date, and you shake your head.

“I left you,” you say. “That means I don’t want you. I don’t want you at all.”

“Does it?”

You can tell she is smiling, but you cannot make yourself turn to look at her and verify the fact. All unwilling, you remember the last time she touched you, right before you left. The crushing pressure of her hands on your shoulders, pressing you into the mattress. Her wine-sour spit cooling on your skin. The bruises she left on your thighs with her teeth, like pairs of errant parentheses.

The wind tugs insistently at your joined hands. If you made an effort, you could free yourself, but you don’t want to make her angry. Despite everything, you long for her to look at you with approval. You want her to comment on the bright orange of your jacket, the pink in your cheeks, your chic new haircut. How good you look. You want her to appraise you with her expertly judging eye and find your value raised in her absence.

Instead, she points at the ducks and says, “I wonder why they don’t fly south for the winter.”

You know the answer, which is that they got too used to being fed and stopped migrating, because why bother flying thousands of miles when someone will come along and give you a loaf of bread if you just stay put? There are signs all around the park to that effect, begging passersby not to feed them, and every time you see them you think guiltily of all the times you didn’t listen to them. These stupid birds will huddle on this pond all winter, hungry and miserable and maybe starving to death, and at least a fraction of the fault is yours.

You know the answer, but you don’t say it.

“I don’t miss you,” you tell her.

Your date—your wife—whoever she is—does not reply. One slender finger roams and finds its corresponding scar on the back of your hand. It slots perfectly into place. She hums with pleasure, a sound you remember from sex and from violence, and begins to apply pressure.

“Don’t do that,” you say, and she laughs for the third time, digging the nail in harder.

In a minute she will break the skin, and you will have another rosy mark to explain to your friends, another blooming bruise requiring a soothing salve of fiction. This, too, is familiar, this dread, this pain, and you are suddenly very, very tired of it.

“Let go,” you say, and try to pull away, but her fingers seem to be burrowing into your

flesh, like so many chewing worms. Even when you plant your feet and yank one arm with the other, her grip remains crushingly strong. She is breaking your hand. You can hear the bones begin to bend, groaning like tree limbs in a terrible wind.

“Stop it!” you cry, and turn in place to look at her, scattering gravel with the frantic motion of your feet. The ducks startle and rear as if they are about to take flight, but instead settle placidly into the water again.

The woman holding your hand is tall and short, fat and thin, a blonde, a brunette, a redhead. She has broad shoulders, a quick smile, a round, comfortable torso. Her eyeliner is perfect. She is wearing spicy perfume and interesting shoes. Her face flickers through a thousand combinations, some familiar, some not, quicker than you can draw in breath to scream.

“I hate that jacket,” she says, and her voice is like nothing you have ever heard before.

Then she is gone, and you are left alone in the park, staring at your bleeding hand.