

Date Night

Jamie Keegan

“I just think it’s just so important to feel comfortable in your own skin.”

That must have been the third time he said that in the twenty minutes since she sat down. With that same wide smile as well. It was charming in his Tinder profile; confident, welcoming. Attractive. But here it felt strange and just the slightest bit uncanny. After a few seconds of awkward silence—

“I think people, men especially but I guess women too, just put way too much effort into trying to be something they’re not, y’know?”

Before she can answer he goes on again. She was getting the feeling that most of his questions were rhetorical.

“Like, I get it. I used to be like that too. But y’know, I realised one day, just said to myself, I said this: ‘Stop pretending to be something you’re not and *start* becoming the person you *want* to be!’”

He paused like he was waiting for a sitcom audience to start clapping. She gives it about five seconds before opening her mouth to reply.

“Wow, that’s great, yeah. I think more people really should follow that logic.”

What the fuck was that? She thought to herself. Her smile was probably so obviously bored and skin-deep, and she was worried his feelings

were going to be hurt. Considering the blinding white glow between his lips hadn't changed at all, she figured she was in the clear.

"I think so too, yeah. I mean, think about it. Imagine if everyone on earth just stopped focusing on their shortcomings and just y'know, grabbed life by the balls and just made their dreams happen!"

Jesus, this fella's a genius. That was mean. He didn't seem nasty really, in fact over text he was quite funny. Just in person, there was something off. She didn't feel threatened exactly, but ever since his tight and sharp handshake over the dinner table before she sat down, there was an aura of unease. And the smile. She remembered joking with Anna how he must have used filters in his pictures, but up close she knew he was certainly the real deal. Too perfect, she thought. She took another sip of the Prosecco in front of her. The one she didn't want. The one this fella just ordered the second the waiter came around. Funnily enough he only had a glass of water, one he'd barely touched.

"I mean, this body didn't just make itself!" he laughed. "I did!"

For God's sake, can the food get here already? She needed to say something, just a question to get him off his gym-bro talk. She manages to get something out after her hopefully convincing fake laugh.

"I just need to use the bathroom there. I'll be two minutes."

"I'll keep count!" he laughs again. The smile still there, same shape. She could have sworn she saw something move in his face. A twitch, maybe. Time to go.

She is careful to not walk too fast or slow towards the bathroom door. A small look behind her and his eyes are following her. *Okay, that's weird. Or is it? Am I the weird one?* She gets into the bathroom and stands in front of the mirror. *I look good*, she thinks to herself. She didn't overdo with the makeup, and considering this guy's view on "being true to yourself", thank God for that. She reaches into her bag and takes out her phone, opening up the Tinder profile again, desperate to find something else to talk about.

Occupation: Accountant

Fuck. That won't do.

She exits the app and dials Anna. After twenty painful seconds she answers.

"Hell-OH!"

That always makes her laugh.

"Hi Anna, calling from the bathroom."

"Oooh, exciting! How's My Shiny Teeth And Me?" she asks. *Definitely was waiting to use that one.*

"He's... okay..." she manages to get out.

"Jesus, that bad?" Anna's voice turned concerned.

"No, not bad, just weird."

"Weird, how? Holly, there's lots of ways a guy can be 'weird' and some are a lot worse than others."

She pauses for a moment. What is it exactly that's bothering her? Is it the dull conversation? The smile? Come to think of it unless she was imagining it, were his eyes not a bit funny? There was a small disconnect, his gaze was oddly piercing and intense, yet somehow still empty. It was probably that with his massive grin. The "uncanny valley" effect.

"He's just *weird*. He looks like one of those freaky wax figures that made a wish to become alive."

She can hear Anna laughing on the other end. "You're an asshole, you know that."

"Ha ha, it's not just that. He non-stop talks about himself. And not even properly about himself. It's all some shallow 'I put so much effort into my body and lifestyle' gym-bro bullshit. I've barely been able to get a word in and press him about anything. And he went and just ordered Prosecco for the table and he hasn't drank any of it. Just a glass of water that he's taken about two sips of."

Holly realised she was probably coming across a complete mug at

the moment.

"Anna, look, I don't really know how to put it into words, but this guy is freaking me out a bit. I don't know whether to feel bored or intimidated by him."

"Alright, look, do you want to just fake the shits or something and get out of it?"

Holly stopped. *Does she really want to go that far?*

"No... I don't think that's a good idea."

"Oh. I finish work in about 20 minutes. Do you want me to come get you?"

"No, no, Anna it's not like that."

"What's it like then? Girl, if you think he's dodgy then don't take the risk."

"I don't think he's dangerous or dodgy really. I don't really want to hurt his feelings. He does seem nice like."

"Yeah but what's your gut telling you?"

Good question, she thought to herself.

"Look the food's ordered, I'll come back there and try and strike up a conversation until the food comes round. He offered to pay for it anyways so, might as well."

"Are you sure, Holly? Like seriously, if there's a problem, just go."

"I will, don't worry. I promise."

"You better."

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She made her way back to the table, and found his eyes fixed on her from the moment she opened the bathroom door. She avoided eye contact until she was closer to the table and gave a customary smile and wave. *Time to break the ice.*

"Jesus, the food is taking longer than a Chris Nolan movie."

What the fuck was that? This is why you shouldn't make jokes for fuck sake.

She nearly jumped after the sharp, hearty laugh he let out.

“HA! Good one! God those movies, am I right?”

Okay, wasn't expecting that to land. At least we can make a conversation now.

“Yeah, they do go on a bit too long, don't they?”

“Yeah.” He laughs another bit, and the conversation goes dead. *Fuck.* Well, time for the nuclear option.

“So, you're an accountant, aren't you?” she asks, preparing for a bunch of economic jargon she'd never understand nor care about.

“I mean, it's my job, but I don't let it define me.”

That one got an honest laugh out of her and she would have relaxed if not for his eyes. For whatever reason they seemed to focus in on her response, like he was a computer storing information. *Why do they look so judgmental?* They were so at odds with the rest of his face. Then she saw it again. Not a twitch, a lump. She blinked, and it was gone again. *Okay, I'm losing it.* She looked down at her hand with the now halfway-finished glass of Prosecco. The glass she had left alone for ten minutes. *No.* She felt fine. She had never been spiked before, but she had seen it. She'd certainly have felt something. Which means she did just see a lump pop up on his cheek and disappear again. He started to talk again. Was it just her or did his voice sound more uneasy?

“Y'know, one time I was at the gym and, I was on the treadmill, y'know. And I was doing my running, making sure I was getting my hydration in, and I catch my face in the window reflection, and I'm just like 'wow!' that's an achievement right there. And you see, it made me think, because like that was the first time I really realised it, y'know I was like, 'Damn, I actually look good!' and it just felt amazing, y'know. I knew I was good then, as good as I always wanted to be.”

She didn't know whether to be relieved or more uneasy by this sudden opening up, but truth be told, she was still thinking of the lump. Her eyes were focused on his face, to give the impression she was paying attention to him, but really was trying to figure out if she

was crazy or not.

"It's just so important to feel comfortable in your own skin."

Jesus, a fourth time?! Was he having a go at her or something? Was she meant to say something? But before she can, a waiter puts a plate of chicken goujons in front of her. *Thank the Lord above*. She took the knife and fork and started cutting it up and just when she made eye contact again she saw he had no plate in front of him.

"Oh shit, sorry," she said, mid chew, before swallowing. "I didn't think you were still waiting."

"Oh, I didn't get anything," he replied, smiling.

She waits for him to start laughing, or say he's joking. *Please be joking*. Unfortunately, there was no reprieve. And she was left to eat while this weirdo was going to observe her like she was some dumb animal. She felt her face turning a slight red, both in embarrassment and anger. *Fine buddy, but that's all you're getting*. She pushes the Prosecco just a small bit away. His eyes follow her hand.

"Sorry, I didn't get the chance to say I'm not the biggest fan of Prosecco."

"Oh really?" he responded. His face seemed more inquisitive than condescending.

"Yeah, I just didn't want you to feel like you were wasting money. I mean, you can have it if you want."

"Oh no, you're fine. I actually respect it honestly. Alcohol I just think—" for the first time he makes a disgusted face, "no way. Poison if you ask me. I just ordered it because women like wine."

Okay pal. She's about to respond when he starts again.

"It just does awful things to you, and like look, I'm taking care of myself. It's why I'm not eating tonight, I don't want to get any nasty stuff in me, or any food on my nice clothes. I'm a bit particular, yeah, but it pays off. People might think it's weird, but it's just so important to feel comfortable in your own skin."

Fifth time. Bingo. She started to rub her hands a bit, as she tended to do when stressed. He started to do the same. *Pop.* Another lump on his hand. And then it moved. Instantly, his other hand bounced onto it. She locked eyes with him again, the smile seemed smaller, his eyes seemed angrier.

"So—sorry, I didn't mean—"

His face stretched back into the smile.

"Didn't mean what?"

"I just..." *Time to go, time to go.*

"I need to use the bathroom again... I'll just—"

"You're leaving, aren't you." His smile is still there, but his eyes shift again. No longer angry. Just sad. She tried to sputter something out.

"N-no, I just, I just— I haven't been feeling too good—"

"It's okay, Holly. I understand. I'm sorry." He took a sip of the water, and she noticed his hand shaking, as if he was terrified. A small drop of it spills on his white shirt.

"Oh for God's sake! I really thought it would work this time. FOR GOD'S SAKE!" The sudden shout makes her jump out of her seat and his hand snaps to her arm. *Oh no.*

"Please," she whispers out, "please just let me go."

"It's not your fault! I'm sorry, I did it all wrong, damnit! Ahhh...!"

He starts shaking again, and his body begins to rise, his hand still gripping her arm. *Let go, let go.* She reaches for the glass and throws at him.

"Let go of me!"

His grip releases, her arm is free. He covers his face and begins wailing and falls to his knees, the lump in his hand opens. Small droppings pop out falling on the floor. She covers her mouth in horror, the creatures on the floor begin moving. *Worms.* Worms begin spilling out from the opening in his hand, and before long the lump in his cheek begins to open too. Soon his body begins to crumple under

his white shirt and chinos as he sinks onto the restaurant floor. She stares, partly in shock, partly in pity. He echoed one more sentence out before bursting.

“I’m sorry you had to see me like this.”

He was no more now. Just a crumpled set of clothes with worms moving in and out. The only skin remaining is that face, now resembling a crude mask. Still smiling, still that wide gleaming smile.