

A Perfect Date – Evangeline, Year 10, NSW

It was Autumn and the whole world knew it; each cafe illuminated with the warmth of pendant lights, French jazz streaming out of cracks in the brickwork, streets lined with the delicate suggestions of leaves. Kate sat in the heart of a cafe, gnawing on her lip, flinching each time the cafe door swung open, bringing in with it swirls of wind and wafting chestnuts.

Around her, coffee machines ground merrily, cutlery clinked with glee, and the swell of conversation filled the air, all working together, forming a breakfast symphony. Businessmen streamed endlessly in and out of the cafe, carrying coffee and overconfidence. Couples swooned over piles of blueberry pancakes. One young man was making a scene, weeping into the hem of a blue dress belonging to a girl trying to wriggle out of his grip. Replaying this morning's conversation in her head, Kate fiddled with the edges of her cardigan and stared out the window. Layla always gave advice, wanted or not, and had lectured Kate that morning about why-she-should-really-get-out.

So what are you so worried about? I mean really, Kate, what's your worst-case scenario?

Kate picked up her phone, scrutinising her makeup. Worst case scenario...

A man sat across from her, eyes red and raw.

"Sorry I'm late," he sniffled, "probably a bad omen. Things don't get better from here on in." He chuckled awkwardly.

Kate produced a handkerchief from her purse. It was received with gratitude and a loud honk.

"Bit of a mess this morning. Got dumped recently. Happens a lot. Don't really know why." He shifted in his seat. "You'll probably dump me too, if the date goes well. That'd be a miracle. Should I just pay for the coffee now, before you ask me to leave?"

"No, it's alright."

"Girls don't seem to like me," he sighed. "I always drive them away."

"So," Kate prompted, "what do you do for a living-"

"She was the love of my life," he blubbed, "and she tore out my heart!"

"I'm Kate, by the way..."

A soggy gaze shot up at Kate. "Did you say... Kate?"

“...Yes?”

“That was the name of her childhood cat!” He buried his face in the tablecloth, sobbing and gasping.

Kate sighed.

The wailing continued unabated, however. “Why do I make a mess of everything? I don’t understand! Is this seat taken?”

Kate blinked.

“Excuse me, love,” the plump woman beside her repeated, “but is this seat taken?”

Kate stared up at the woman for a moment then glanced at the empty seat across from her and the dry tablecloth.

“Sorry, it’s for my date.”

As the woman waddled away, Kate focused back on the cafe’s inhabitants. The kids in the corner were getting rowdy, despite the desperate pleading of a flustered uncle. He was dressed like a fruit bowl; purple, yellow, orange, and pink.

Breathing deeply, she rubbed her hands, willing them to stop shaking. “At least you’re not that guy.”

The uncle was now flailing helplessly on the floor beneath a giggling heap of uncontrollable children...

Bursting through the door, turning cartwheels and singing, a rainbow blur flung himself on the chair across from Kate. His shirt, a blinding tie-dye swirl, made Kate nauseous. A waiter cautiously approached.

“A bowl of barbeque sauce, my good man!” he demanded, turning to the server. Perturbed, the waiter asked, “Sorry... what?”

“Barbeque sauce. It’s my favourite soup.”

The waiter nodded slowly before hurrying away.

Then it was Kate's turn. "I'm your date, Hooey. You're even more beautiful than my mother."

"Oh. Close with your mother, then?" Kate forced a smile, feeling her stomach turn.

"Extremely. I still live with her." The man nodded. "Can I see your feet?" He plunged his head beneath the table.

"You most certainly can not!" Kate shrieked, kicking him swiftly, "You need to leave now."

"Please give me a chance," the man pleaded, re-emerging and rubbing his face. "We can play hide-and-seek at the fish market if you don't like it here. You know - Mackerel! Polo!"

Kate felt that nothing short of violence would rid her of him -

Something struck her shoulder. A businessman had hurried past, bashing her with his briefcase.

"Yeah, trust me. I've got the McClintock deal sorted."

Kate scoffed, trying to still the churning in her stomach.

"Shush," she whispered, "be sensible. Be great."

She straightened her back. "Be confident."

"I'm here. You're welcome." A man in a pressed suit, gold cufflinks, and tousled hair sat himself at the table.

"Espresso!" he barked at a passing waitress.

"And you are?"

"Lawyer. Best in the business"

"Oh. I'm--"

"Let me tell you about myself. I'm allergic to coming second but I never sneeze. I love hot showers - that's a normal shower but with me in it." He paused to sip his espresso.

Kate rolled her eyes. "I don't think-"

"Let me do the thinking around here. I'm thinking you, me, that cute waitress, we bounce and head back to my place."

Kate gasped and pulled her cardigan against her chest. "How dare you-"

"I'm very good. I'll give you what you want. Ma'am, what do you want?"

"Ma'am?" - Kate shook herself out of her daze and looked up at the waitress standing by her. "Will you be waiting much longer, ma'am?"

Kate breathed deeply, allowing her lungs to fill - and then let go. A smile twitched at the corner of her mouth.

"No. My date's not coming. But thank you."

The waitress nodded sympathetically before returning to the kitchen.

"Allergic to coming second." Chuckling as she stood, Kate strolled out the cafe door and into the golden day that lay before her. The wind sent leaves into fiery swirls that blew away on a wind turned cold with autumn. Her phone buzzed in her pocket and she answered it.

"How was the date?"

"He didn't show."

"Oh, Kate. This is all my fault."

"You know what?" Kate took one last look over her shoulder as she walked away, "I think it could have been worse."