

The Third Date

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She fell into my arms in sweat and half-groans. Hungry kisses like bites, missing the lips, catching an eyebrow or an ear.

I planned an evening paddleboat ride as a sort of foreplay to our third date. Two weeks ago on our second date, she brought me a daffodil and dropped it in my beer. She blew me a kiss at the door after I drove her home. I opened car doors, picked up checks, pecked her on the cheek. She giggled as we stepped gingerly into puddles as we boarded the paddleboat. I didn't think to tell her to wear sneakers.

We'd met online, of course, like everyone else. Her pics: wide-set eyes, a half-smile that tempted, a lock of auburn hair dangling in front of an eye like a hypnotic watch. The hottest: she licked a lollipop. On the first date she had worn a sleek suit the color of sand, her hair in a smart bun. But then the second date: coming in out of the rain, droopy flannel shirt, slipping on a wet floor. Now this, the third date. I once thought her turned-up nose was cute but now asleep in the bed next to me, she looks childish, ordinary, one knee with a bright surgery scar I hadn't noticed before.

Now I lay here in bed, the two of us under a single sheet, the blanket and quilt having fallen to the floor. Her name slips my mind for a second as I drift in and out of sleep. I don't get up because I don't want to wake her. Then we'd have to navigate through the sharp, uncomfortable edges of banal talk that follow third-date sex.

If this were college, the compulsory walk of shame would follow, the one that accompanied impulsive trysts. I'd prefer that now to a series of sluggish minutes waiting for dawn. The first kiss now feels millennia old. I spot my boxers on the floor, a plaid puddle next to the bed. I don't see my other clothes or keys or phone I discarded earlier, just how many hours ago I don't know. Under the sheet my penis looks garish, ornamental, unnecessary. I want my own bedroom, the warmth of my ancient dog Jake who can't see or hear but smells out my loneliness and sleeps on my feet.

When I eventually get up, she doesn't move. Phew. I pace her house. I look at labels on pill bottles. Drugs I don't recognize. Maybe for cramps or headaches. She's an attorney, I remember that now. I imagine her thin fingers gesticulating wildly in front of a jury, her tall, lithe figure propped up by stilettos that clack on the hardwood court floor, her hair stabbed into submission with a pencil, delicate pearls dipping into the darkness of cleavage. What was her name again? Bess, that's right.

I return to the bedroom. I think about a clean getaway. Under the blanket on the floor, I find my clothes. Then I spot a condom wrapper. Should I leave a note or send a text? Her snore is a slight whistle, her body an amorphous lump under the fawn-colored sheet. I drop my clothes back into a small pile. I don't trust myself to make nice over morning coffee and then leave forever. I put on my boxers and return to laying under the single sheet. Her breathing changes, evens out, shortens. I wonder if she is awake.

My stomach knots itself several times over as I lay there. I want to leave. Somehow, though, I am frozen. Women across the last decade parade through my mind's eye – cheeks blushed, eyes sharpened with mascara – their movements assured. They each say what I once said to them.

"I'll call you, I promise," said Debra.

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"We don't have to do anything. We can just hold each other," said Elaine.

"I'm not ready to date," said Mariah.

"You'll be great for some other lucky girl, just not me," said Kate.

My legs throb, which is often the case when I'm exhausted. Under the sheet, I notice my hairy lower torso, flabby skin, old stretch marks now more white than purple, the appendectomy scar I often forget about. I am much too old for this. I turn away from Bess, flip over on my side, butt to butt. I hope she's not awake. I can't face her. I sleep.

When I wake, the bathroom light is on, and the other side of the bed is empty. I don't even know what day it is or what I have to do tomorrow. No, not tomorrow. Today! In a state of drowsiness, I forget my age. I think of Bess's soft, supple body falling on top of mine. This, our third date. Her fluid lines. I can't move and the house is dead quiet. Perhaps she is gone from the bed, from the house, and I am alone.