

If Not Yourself, Who Would You Be?

Molly and Isaac decided to meet for their first date at a newly opened diner-style bar/restaurant in Islington. It wasn't an all-out Americana tribute but it had proper dining booths that offered privacy without too much intimacy. It was a good choice for a first date, Molly thought, because you could order food and drink at will - lunch at four, cocktails at noon or even breakfast for dinner. It had been Isaac's fairly insistent suggestion they meet there but Molly had read a sterling review of the place in Time Out and their agreement on venue made her feel reassured, if not outright excited, about meeting him.

Molly was thirty-four, pretty, and at the point where her capacity for having fun (as well as having more ready cash to spend on fun) had increased in conjunction with her decision to approach finding a long-term boyfriend or even husband like a proper project. Looking back on her twenties she was amazed at how earnest she had been, how much less she had drunk, chanced, experimented. Certainly she wouldn't have considered internet dating back then, nor would she have found the courage to walk into a restaurant, smile at someone she had never met in person and even kiss them on the cheek on arrival, as was de rigueur amongst internet daters these days it seemed (or at least in her brief experience). The Molly she remembered being a decade ago was someone who got hung up, sometimes for years at a time, on what her mother called 'unsuitable choices' or what her best friend Freya called 'fey gays.' Those fake rock stars don't fancy you, Freya would say. You're just not their species. And, besides, they're all gay, really, aren't they - all those narcissistic chest-waxing gym-bunny Hoxtonites. Freya knew because they fancied her plus her capacity for danger. Extricating her emotions from the unsuitable, Molly had found, required considerable effort and yet another effort was needed to retrain those well-worn hopes on the potentially promising, the ones she might have missed. But now, after a perfectly acceptable if less than thrilling year-long relationship with James, a web developer, that had ended with a slow glide into friendship, she felt ready. On New Year's Day she stuck herself first on a free site, then later in January, one with a monthly subscription - the fee irritating her into genuine pro-activeness. Three months later Isaac wrote to her on Guardian Soulmates and they began instant messaging about his PhD thesis on feminist views of post-millennium semantics.

Isaac had arrived early, texting her to let her know he was at the back and asking what drink she would like? When she found the corner booth he had selected, an overly-garnished Bloody Mary was waiting for her. They greeted each other with decided friendliness, locked eyes for a second and Molly thought what she couldn't help thinking on every internet date, a thought that barely made it into words before being waved away like smoke in her mind. I don't fancy you. And then the instant boomerang. Do I?

'So...!' she said, the 'o' of 'so' breaking off into an extra syllable as she sat down with a jolt in their booth. The meat-coloured leather seat was plump yet strangely low. She sat upright but the table still came up to just below her breasts.

'This place is exactly how I pictured it!' she said.

'I love it here,' said Isaac. 'They make any milkshake you want. I confess...' and he leaned conspiratorially towards Molly, 'I got here early so I could have a malt before you arrived. And now I'm having another.'

'Sweet tooth.'

'I don't know why I just told you that,' he exclaimed. 'You'll think I'm greedy.'

'Just a manly appetite.'

'Well...Enough about me. Tell me about you. I want to know everything. How was your day? How's the guitar going?'

Molly smiled. 'You know plenty about me already.'

It was true. He knew things about her even James had missed. She and Isaac hadn't spoken on the phone but they had been emailing and instant messaging for nearly a month. Molly had had other conversations on both her sites with other men, some becoming regular and two that had flourished into perfectly agreeable onetime dates but she and Isaac had kept up throughout. He had decided they should both do Proust's questionnaire like celebrities on the back page of Vanity Fair. This impressed her. I remember when VF was a good magazine, he had messaged almost at talking speed. If not yourself, who would you be? was his favourite question. He insisted they gender switch it. Mary Wollstonecraft for him. Paul Newman for her. Yeah, that magazine's really gone to pot, Molly had written, imagining that he must be taking the same kind of cosy delight in her retro turn of phrase as she was in agreeing with him that Vanity Fair was, like, so over. They used to both read Vanity Fair! They both still read The New Yorker!

'Sorry the seating's a bit low.' he acknowledged, as Molly leaned on the table. 'You must be worried I lied about my height. I'm six feet, I promise.'

From what she could see, he was bigger in person than she had anticipated but only slightly. In the 'body type' section on their site he had ticked 'a few extra pounds' and Molly was pretty certain she could see the top section of a broad but flattish beer gut, not that it bothered her. She had ticked 'curvy' on her own profile. When she recounted the whole night to Freya the next day, she admitted that in theory, despite the honesty of her profile pictures, he could have been a little surprised on seeing her for the first time. She had gained an additional fifteen pounds during her early thirties and she was content with that. You have a great figure, Freya had told her. Considering who you could get, you're not fussy enough.

As she and Isaac settled into various overlapping threads of conversation and another round of drinks (he refused to let her pay, although he had her fetch the drinks for some reason) Molly's discussion with herself continued to simmer. I don't fancy you. But as their evening together began to bloom, her mind created another debate: she wondered if there was a level of comfort that might serve as a foundation for something else between them. It was evident he liked her. He seemed absolutely ready for a real girlfriend. Yet as Isaac started talking in depth about his PhD thesis, it was James she couldn't help thinking about, the sweet fizz of anxiety in her blood during the early days with him. James hadn't played any mind games with her but in those early days she had felt every moment with him had been part of an unspoken assessment, like a driving test. She took a long suck on her second Bloody Mary.

Isaac was now explaining something about syntax and semantics. She realised while she was thinking about James, she wasn't listening properly. Focus, she thought. He's actually quite handsome. I am on a date with a handsome man. Isaac's eyes and hair were the same near black shade. His teeth were well-cared for. His face was a bit doughy but she could trace the bones holding it up, creating an appealing stage on which his kindness and wit could act. I like this face, she thought. They really could talk, too. Next they were onto families. Her parents clinging on, trying to make do and not divorce. His sister's husband acting like a psycho, threatening to take his nephew away. Molly had told herself more than once not to be emotionally slutty on dates, not to reduce her own family's fragility into a mere topic of chat. What if he were to meet them someday? She had already killed the chance for it to dawn on him that her parents might not be happy people, but it was hard to resist divulging.

'Well, that's just it, isn't it? We live in this highly therapized age,' Isaac concluded the latest strand of their conversation.

'I've resisted therapy thus far.'

'Therapy is the fashionable tonic of our era. However, while I don't see it as a cure-all, I do think it's useful.'

There was, for the first time, a dead moment between them. Molly wasn't really interested in therapy. In fact it made her feel a little squeamish with its growing cultural omnipresence. She was just about to fill the silence with something, anything, but then Isaac added: "I'm pro-therapy but I do think people think too much. I hate intellectualising everything, actually. And I'm doing a PhD! And teaching semantics. Ridiculous, really. When it comes down to it, we are animals.'

This last comment made Molly a little queasy. Searching for a new subject, she stared at Isaac's houndstooth jacket. She decided it must be expensive as it had taken time for her to notice that it was quite daringly coloured as well as nicely made - a subtle burnt orange combined with faded indigo.

'Where'd you get your jacket?'

'Oh, a designer pal of mine made it for my fortieth.' Now he seemed cool - not just stylish, but remote. Or was it her? Molly was a paediatrician. She didn't have designer pals. But then he smiled at her and the cold vanished.

'Another round?' he asked.

She hesitated. She was all talked out. She realised she wanted him to take himself away, show her she could miss him but it seemed he would only end their date at her command.

'I would, but I have an early start tomorrow.'

'Of course. Well, I'm going to stay here, maybe order one of their splendid burgers, so I'm sorry not to walk you out.'

'It's fine.'

Molly got up and started putting on her coat. Isaac watched her, still seated. She stood next to him, started to say goodbye as she did up the buttons and slung on her two bags. She felt flustered. Were they going to discuss meeting up again? She wanted to, didn't she? Out of habit, she checked her main bag to make sure everything was there, but it was half open, not fully on her shoulder and her scrabbling movements made something fall out. Her wallet. As if conspiring, her phone rang loudly. As she silenced it and adjusted her bags, she expected Isaac to shuffle over and pick up her wallet but he didn't. She picked it up herself, which involved crouching down with two heavy bags in high heels. As she rose, Isaac looked anxious.

'Everything ok?' she asked.

'Fine.'

The way he said 'fine' stung her a little. 'What's going on?' she asked him. 'Is it that I dropped my wallet? Were you worried I'd lose it?'

'No.'

This man has been sitting here, Molly thought, for nearly three hours straight. He hasn't been to the gents, he hasn't been to the bar. He got here before me and it seems he won't move until I'm gone.

'Isaac,' she said. 'You're a nice guy. But you didn't pick up my wallet. You ignored it. And now you seem upset. I don't mind you not picking up the wallet, I mean, it's not like there's some law, it's just...'

'I'm sorry.'

'It's fine, it's just... you haven't got up in three hours.'

'So?'

'So can you stand up? Are you going to be OK leaving?'

'Sure,' he said. 'But I'm not getting up for you. I don't appreciate your tone.'

'Well, I don't like the way you seem to be hiding something from me.'

Isaac sighed. He didn't get up - he slid. Slowly towards her. He slid along the seat of the booth in preparation to maybe get up. When he finally did, she tried hard not to react. Below the ribs he was elephantine, bell-shaped like a compressed slug. His vast gut hung low over the widest hips she'd ever seen on a man. He shot her a look composed of rage and apology in equal measures.

Molly did something that later she would decide had been the only viable option. She turned and walked away.

Years later she would play detective with that night. Had he arranged for their booth to somehow have lower seating than the others? Was he planning to go six hours without urinating if necessary? What if she hadn't challenged him? Would she have seen him again, messaged with him into the night, sent him Youtube links on fanciful whim, unknowingly delaying the inevitable? She thought the Isaac story might morph into a good anecdote over time but it didn't. She did, however, try Proust's questionnaire with considerable success on her next internet prospect, a reforming Hoxtonite who showed up wearing the exact same jacket Isaac had worn. My lucky jacket, Stanley said with a grin. Thirty quid in the H&M sale.