

THE FIRST DATE

NOX

"Hi, Lubana?"

I feel a tap on my shoulder.

"Hey, yeah, uh, that's me. And you're Russel?" I ask, as I give you a once over.

"Yeah, hi," you say, as you take the seat opposite to me.

"Hi," I say again, with a polite smile.

This is uncomfortable. We both stare at each other; smile, occasionally. I don't know what to say next. I'm hoping you'll start the conversation. There needs to be conversation, right? That's why we're here after all.

The silence is stretching. I want to pick up the menu just for something to do.

"It's nice to meet you—"

"Do you come here often?"

We both start at the same time. Wow. Could this be any more awkward?

"Not often, but I've been here a few times before," you forge ahead.

Ever with another date, I wonder. This is a date-y place after all. Most of the tables are set for two. There are vines surrounding the light wood panel windows. Sunshine is streaming inside in soft rays, creating interesting patterns on the wooden floor tiles. I stare at these patterns as I think of what to say next.

"Have you ever been here?" you ask, after another uncomfortable stretch of silence.

"Uh, no. First time."

"How do you like the place so far? I hope I didn't keep you waiting long," you say with a little cough.

"Oh no, I probably arrived a few minutes before you. It's a nice restaurant. Quaint," I say, cursing myself internally for not ending the sentence in a question. Clearly you're making an effort to get

the conversation rolling. I should really be giving you something to work with.

"Is the food any good here?" I ask, instantly regretting the phrasing. I meant to ask "How is the food here", but of course I had to go ahead and make myself sound like an absolutely horrible person.

"Err, yeah. Well, I quite like it," you say. "You should really try the seafood soup. It's one of my favourites."

"Well ok, let's start with that then."

"Oh, err, you want to order immediately?" you ask. I guess I sounded like I was in a hurry. I didn't mean to.

"No, no. I mean, I'm not in a rush or anything. Just eager to try this soup now that you're saying it's so good, I guess. We don't need to order right now. We should talk a bit before I guess," I mentally cringe at how many times I'm saying the words *I guess*, "I mean we could talk a bit before ordering. Could, not should. Sorry, I'm just a little nervous. I mean..."

"Oh no, I didn't mean to say you were in a hurry. I just wanted to know if you were hungry. We could order now and then talk. I'm a little nervous, too, really. Don't worry about it. It's my first time meeting someone like this as well," we both ramble on, and then get silent again.

Urgh! What in the world is happening? This isn't a job interview, so why is my heart pounding at a hundred miles per hour? Your shirt is too tight around the belly. The buttons are bulging a little. Wait, no, that's not what I'm supposed to be thinking about. Is that what

I'm supposed to be thinking about? I mean, you're not fat. No, I don't mean to say that at all. I can just see the outline of your phone in your front

pocket. Maybe you used to be fat? Guys who have big thighs but aren't fat usually used to be fat, as far as I know. Wait, are you also looking at me like this?

I instantly sit up and pull in my belly. Urgh, I can't do this. I need to be honest.

"Look, I have never met someone like this before. Frankly, I never imagined myself in a setting of this kind. So yeah, I'm a little out of sorts, and I'm, uh, definitely over-thinking this," I say with a nervous laugh to diffuse the tension.

"What do you mean a 'setting of this sort'? You mean, like, an arranged marriage?" you ask.

"An arranged *marriage*, an arranged *meeting* – you know, this sort of thing. I'm sorry if I'm coming off as too straightforward."

"No, straightforward is good. And I totally understand where you're coming from. I hadn't imagined myself here either. I don't regret it though," you say, glancing up at me and then quickly looking down at the intertwined fingers on your lap.

Wait, did you just flirt with me? My eyebrows rise automatically. Phew, I wasn't expecting that. Did you just get cuter? I smile a little shyly.

I know a lot about you already from your biodata. There isn't much to ask – studied electrical engineering, now working in an MNC, perfect-on-paper husband material. I guess I could ask a personal question, one which I've been burning to know for a while anyway.

"So you planned on having a love marriage?" I ask, a little bravely.

You're thrown off by the question.

"Uhm, no. I mean, I guess. I don't know really."

"But then why

didn't you?" I continue to probe.

"It just didn't really happen. Never found anyone like that," you say. Then a little defensively you add, "What about you, huh? You didn't want a love marriage?"

"I..."

I should have expected that I guess, given the line of questioning I had started. I don't really know how to answer that. Four failed relationships before I decided to agree to my mother's plea for an arranged marriage doesn't really sell me well. Then I am also worried about what you will go home and tell your parents. Mine don't know anything about my past. I don't want to be exposed to them by my not-to-be-husband or his relatives.

You chuckle a little at my hesitance. "You don't have to worry. I won't tell my parents everything we talk about here; especially if you decide to confide anything about your past to me."

"Uh, no. I was just wondering how to answer. I haven't really had anyone like that either. I've liked a few people, but never actually acted on it you know. I've always just followed my parents' ideals about marriage and things like that," I say, mentally sighing with relief at having deleted all my social media before agreeing to my mother's man-hunt.

Suddenly I wonder whether you were being honest about your answer. I guess we might have a lot more to know about each other in the following weeks, if there even is a next meeting that is.

Something tells me there might be.

"So, the seafood soup?"

Nox endlessly worries about hostile alien surveillance. Increase this paranoid person's online footprint with feedback at nox.thewriter@gmail.com