**~Date Night~**

This place is beautiful. I sit on a bridge, barely above a small, slow moving creek. The trees sway in the gentle breeze and, for once, the bugs and allergies are being kept at bay by some unknown force. But it is not these things that capture my attention this morning. The leaves falling and birds chirping all fall away as I listen to the giggles of the baby girl behind me. A family has entered the park, a photographer stealthily taking snapshots to celebrate this family. As Dad makes baby giggle and older brother climbs the metal bars of another bridge, my thoughts stray to this new life growing inside me. Our family is expanding and I can’t help thinking back to how it all started.

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A blind date? Is she really suggesting a blind date? Sure enough, my best friend is pleading with me to ‘meet up’ with her boyfriend’s best friend. After three years, did she still not know me that well? The quiet girl…that’s me. I’m shy, introverted…a recluse. I’ve had one disastrous relationship and am not inclined to adventure into another. Plus, Jessie and her boyfriend, Mike, are about as opposite as they could be from who I am. They like to party. I love staying home. They drink and ‘have fun.’ I read books every free second I have. They skip school because they are “bored of the man.” I love learning. Since I am their opposite, it is only logical that I must be the opposite of Mike’s best friend as well. This is sounding less and less appealing. One more fact of note, blind dates only have a, what? 2% success rate?

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 “Thanks Jessie, but I think I’ll pass,” I politely declined. And that was the end of it, or so I believed. Not two weeks later, I found out how wrong I was.

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 It’s almost 9:00pm. My shift is almost over. If I can make it through these last fifteen minutes, I’ll be free to go home, help Mom and Scott for a bit, and then read. It’s not that I dislike my job, I think to myself. Quite the opposite, really, but I’ve been here since 1:00pm and I’m done dealing with people. Speaking of, here comes one more car.

 “Seriously? Why do people have to buy their “dollar items” at closing time? Go away!” I complain to my coworker. An older lady with much more patience than myself, she just smiles and continues straightening the shelves. As the door opens, my fake smile becomes sincere as Jessie walks in. She always knows how to lighten my mood. My smile falters, however, as she is followed in first by Mike, and then by another man. To call him a boy would be odd because he’s over 6’ and muscularly lanky. He’s Mike’s friend, though, so he can’t be that much older than me at 17.

 “Andrew, this is Lindsey. Lindsey, Drew. We’re going out!” she announces. Announces…like I’ve just won some big prize when I feel like I’ve just been accused of some horrible crime. Yeah, sure, he’s good looking, but I think longingly of my book at home, waiting to be read. Maybe I can still get out of this.

 “I can’t. I have 15 minutes left on my shift,” thank you…thank you…thank you, “and I have to help Mom and Scott paint my new room.”

 My coworker chooses that moment to oh-so-helpfully chime in, “I’ll cover your shift. I can close up by myself. You go have fun.” Great. Beginning to feel like the world is against me, I call my mom, certain her strict, no-nonsense, no dating rules will save me. Summary? Have fun. Be home before curfew. Awesome. Thanks Mom. Out of excuses and out of stalling time, I reluctantly follow the three of them out of the store and into this stranger’s car. Entering, I notice that I am up front with Drew while Jessie and Mike are in the back. No one tells me where we are going, but there’s nothing to do in this tiny town so I guess I’m in for a ride. Drew and I small talk for a while, nothing much except basic, “How old are you? Where are you from? What’s your favorite…?” etc. I soon notice that Jessie and Mike have exited the conversation and rustling is coming from the back seat. I glance at Drew and then away again quickly. This is awkward to say the least. He’s cute, older, and I’m a shy and awkward kid to him. Not to mention the only thing we can hear when we stop talking is…them.

 “What’s that metallic noise?” Drew asks. Thankful for the distraction, I pounce on his question.

 “It’s my ankle bracelet,” I reply. “It’s a jingle bracelet so I make music when I walk.” Lindsey…stop talking. Now. He’s three years older than you and you are sounding like you’re 12. Wishing I could melt into the fabric of my chair, I look outside, studiously ignoring the lack of conversation from the back seat. We finally make it to the restaurant. It’s a Chinese buffet and I don’t eat Chinese. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever eaten at any place that serves Chinese food. And, since it’s a buffet, you pay whether you eat or not. We go in the restaurant and Drew pays for me. That was nice, since it is technically a date, but seeing as I don’t know what I’m going to eat, I feel bad for him potentially wasting his money.

 We all find a table and then the other three scatter, finding food and stuffing their plates. I slowly walk up and down the aisles, not seeing anything I recognize as food. What is pepper chicken and why does it look exactly like orange chicken? How do you even pronounce this word? I don’t think a word can start with Ts…can it? Why does General Tso chicken looks the same as this beef? Getting higly frustrated, I mutter to myself, “I don’t understand Chinese food!” An older lady behind me giggles so I guess I haven’t been too quiet. “Come on!” I complain in my head, “I’m a picky eater! I’m not just going to try anything.” Just when it looks like that money of Drew’s truly was wasted, I find pizza. Yes, I am the girl who can sniff out pizza, French fries, and Jell-O in a Chinese restaurant. Content, I return to our table, ignoring the funny looks from other patrons, including Jessie, Mike, and Drew. By the time I finish my one plate, Drew and Mike are on number three and Jessie is finishing off number two. When the boys go off to get dessert, Jessie asks if I’m going too.

“I’m full,” I say and she responds with a look of pure incredulity.

“This place is not some cheap buffet,” she replies. Sorry? Did she just say that to me? It’s 9:45 and I had dinner at work. I’m not going to make myself sick to impress a guy who likely thinks I’m a waste of space anyway. Speaking of impressing, the boys return with Jell-O and proceed to ‘knock it down,’ swallowing it without chewing. Well, to be fair, only Mike does that. Drew seems to eat more like a typical human being. In fact, his conversation (now that all *four* of us are involved), has been rather impressive. He hasn’t spoken much, but he seems to be having a good time at any rate.

We leave the restaurant once Mike has had his fill of Jell-O cubes. As we walk to Drew’s car, Jessie suggests seeing a movie. It is now 10:15ish and I know there is no way I can see a movie. Mom would flip and I’d be out past curfew. Nonetheless, I call upon Jessie’s insistence and, par for the course, Mom permits it. Don’t get me wrong, I’m actually enjoying myself and Jessie and Mike are quite tolerable when they are participating in sober activities. Drew, I like him. It’s only been a few hours but I can tell he’s different than Jessie and Mike and, perhaps, more like me. I doubt he feels the same way though so I walk near the back of our group as we cross the parking lot and enter the theater.