Story Dates

The only dateable men were fictitious. Men, everywhere, knew women dead set on this philosophy. Women, everywhere, knew how impossible it was, yet desirable. It was a sad, nursed fantasy, but still a secret hope.

Across a candlelit table in a dim bar, a cleanly shaven, thirty-something guy sat across from a pretty brunette. They smiled at each other.

This is not a story about girl meets boy.

Nick, who embodied the epitome of American averageness down to his dirty, faded baseball cap, was not having a drink with an ordinary girl. As he talked, Jane flicked her eyes to his, and their gazes locked. Her eyes were fiercely blue. Shivers ran down Nick’s arm. He couldn’t pinpoint why, but he knew that he was already taken with her.

They had only just started talking, having walked over from a mutual friend’s dinner party that turned sour and awkward from a messed-up ratio. Too many guests were strangers to each other; not nearly enough of the dinner party could hold a conversation that did not die out after touching on the wet spring weather and their mutually unacknowledged miserable city jobs. (This friend, whom Nick knew better than Jane did, fell into the Wishing-For-Mr-Darcy type. In fact, Carrie had nearly stated it to Nick at her disaster of a dinner party. The conversation went like this:

Carrie, in kitchen, whispering loudly to Nick over a bowl of salad to be dressed: I wish Ben was here. He said he would come.

Nick, holding a pair of tongs: Right.

Carrie, grabbing the tongs angrily from Nick: Well, thanks for the sympathy. All men are idiots. Even you, yes, you, Nick. Don’t look at me like that – I’m not going to apologize. All men are horrible – except for in books. Now, if I could date someone out of a book...
Jane, walking into the kitchen with an empty bottle of wine, heard the last comment and snickered. She met Nick’s eye and grinned a sexy little twist of her pale lips. He smiled back at this petite, pretty lady with long brown curls.

And now they were across the street from their mutual friend’s apartment, nestled in the corner of an old-West, Spanish-twist themed bar. Above their heads, large fake antlers were nailed to the wall, from which hung a few large, lacy bras. Jane periodically glanced up at them and shifted, a bit uncomfortable. She tried to pay attention to what he was saying (was it something about animal brains? Jane couldn’t remember how they had gotten here). But despite her attempt to focus on Nick’s words, her eyes kept wandering up, and her mind kept going to the same thought: *The bras were tremendous*. She looked back at Nick and thought that his head could comfortably fit into the cup of one of the hanging bras. Jane suppressed a giggle.

“Should I be worried that you’re more into girls than guys, maybe?” said Nick.

Jane jumped, and flushed deeply. Nick laughed and she understood that he was joking as relief washed over her.

The reason, however, why the odd bras hanging on the fake antler on the wall entranced Jane so much was not something Nick could have guessed. Jane came from a novel, an old 19th century work that she now didn’t care to remember. The important fact was that she had been given a new life, and boy, did she love it. She clutched to modern Manhattan like it was the last floating piece of a sinking ship. But she had gotten her new life five months ago and although she was an unexpectedly brilliant pupil of the modern world, certain oddities like giant bras displayed in a bar still caught her off guard. She was rifling through the books and movies she had absorbed in the past months to try to place the scenario into a category. She had to settle on a cross between Coyote Ugly and Dirty Dancing.

People going from the fictional world into the real one (“exchanges,” as they were called) was a commonplace thing these days. Jane had heard of a distant second-cousin doing it years
before she learned of what it was, and even in Jane’s book, there were plenty of people, many of
them women, who wanted an exchange.

There was, however, one stipulation. Anyone leaving the fictional world had to be single
for a year in the new life. Fall in love with someone, or God forbid, get a happy ending with a
wedding, and they would both be sucked back and stuck in a musty novel forever. It didn’t
matter if the poor suckers who fell in love with a new exchange were not from the book world.
They were notified by mail from the Control Intelligencer Co. (“sick”, they all called it), and
given the choice – stay together in fiction or stay lonely in real life.

“Only the book world has happy endings,” was the proclamation passed down by CIC, in
order to stem the flux of in and outs – and also ward off anyone not serious enough about the
commitment. It had seemed odd to Jane that there would be anyone from the real world
interested in going into fiction, although modern disappearances were certainly frequent enough
for her to know that such people existed. Young women especially seemed to want to go into a
book and disappeared conveniently in the woods or on vacation. A loss for family and friends
who, but a chance for her to go harvesting for love.

Not that Jane minded the rule. Since the day of her coming out into society in London
during her sixteenth year, Jane had silently borne her mother’s flood of talk about marriage
suddenly unleashed. The woman had spent years busy trying to marry off her daughters while
keeping her eldest son from being hawked away by some country bumpkin. Jane grimaced at the
thought of her mother, who promptly forgot her the moment Jane chose to write in for an
exchange. For as long as Jane had known, asking for exchanges took place by post. The only
form of contact between the CIC and anyone wanting an exchange were through mail. Once
exchanged, there could be no further connection between past and present life. Life, Jane
learned, was a hard decision. It was something, however, she wanted enough to sacrifice
everything else for. And most importantly, happily not falling in love for a year – or even more
than one, if she could have her way. Jane had earned this way out with such d--- difficulty, that there was no way in h--- she would let a simple man steal it away.

She did have to be careful now, however. Four months into mostly solitary living, and she had been itching for company. One of the girls in her new yoga class who had befriended her invited her to a dinner party, which had been – incredibly – more uncomfortable than even the dinners her mother used to throw. So when an interesting enough guy had asked her to escape with him, she shrugged and let him take her to a bar. Unhappily for Jane, though she felt in no danger of falling in love, the trouble with the odd hanging bras did bother her as she sat beneath them.

Still, for a five-month exchange, she congratulated herself on being so familiar with the new world. Jane had learned the mannerisms and ways of life quite quickly. She had always been bright, even back in Regency England, and to be honest, she now scoffed at the rumors that adjusting to a new century was too grueling and demanding. Within a week, she could go outside and buy cigarettes from the corner store. By the end of her first month, she enrolled in weekly hot yoga and started night classes. The CIC provided anyone who left the fictional world with what they thought was enough living for a year. But Jane, who knew what four or five thousand a year meant in her time, also knew what five thousand a year did not mean now. She was sharp enough to start her education immediately. She had always wanted to go to school anyway. She watched her brother Charles go off to Oxford, while she, although also sent away for a while, was brought back with nothing but an improved excellence in stitching, playing whist, and reading French. By two months, she was out and about like any regular New Yorker. By three months, she was trying on different personalities and life histories like dresses in a wedding shop.

Now at the bar, Jane went over the final life history that she had settled on for herself. College grad, current coffee barista and aspiring novelist. It was near enough to the truth. She was attending night classes in creative writing at community college and sending in any freelance to every publisher she could find. Was not New York the glorified city of opportunity?
If she could snitch out chances for freedom in her old world, she could certainly get herself to succeed here.

Across the table from her, Nick had already drained two glasses of beer and was eyeing the bar again.

“Another?” he asked her, more out of sheepishness at his own rate of drinking than politeness toward Jane.

She shook her head no. What was she, a heathen? Just her glass of red would do, thank you so very much.

Some things about the modern world disgusted Jane. She really sometimes detested the people. Her neighbor, for instance, in her apartment complex in Gramercy (here was a neighborhood she found nearly nothing disagreeable about) smelled foul whenever she saw him. He wore black leather, always, and slunk about in a mist of smoke. In her old life, Jane would never be allowed near men like this – or rather, they would never be in any place she would ever go.

Then there was the issue of vagabonds and common lecherous eyes. Everywhere she went, it seemed like men and women would stare at her for a bit longer, linger on her, look away from who they were walking with to glance back at her. No one had any sense of modern propriety or civility. Jane could also laugh at the idea of herself being a beauty. She was considered quite plain in her old book – and her mother took great pains to pinch her cheeks until they hurt and make her bit her lips so they would be rosier. Perhaps everyone was now just uglier. Or perhaps English women from her century in particular possessed a certain something that drew the lowly modern gaze.

Nick returned with another foaming glass of beer when Jane happened to glance at the door and almost sputtered out her wine. Walking in the door was someone she thought she recognized, for a split second, a distant relative whom she had once met years ago.
“Oh, there’s Freddie,” said Nick, also looking at the door, and on instinct, waving at the man he recognized before remembering that Jane was with him.

“Freddie?” Jane did choke on her drink this time. Frederick was indeed her distant cousin’s name. Could Fred have also exchanged and was this Fred walking towards her, almost sitting down at their table? A longer glance made it unmistakable. Here was Fred walking towards her, not in his old Regency coat and tights but a dark suit and shiny leather shoes. His collar looked so stiff and starched that she had the urge to bite it as if it were a rice cracker.

Jane had been in love with Fred once, as all young girls of fifteen were wont to do with older boys of nineteen when they visited obscure family to judge each other’s estates and horses. She was at the exact age to fall madly smitten with his every move for the two weeks he spent at her father’s house, but he was already a young man and never looked at his cousin as more than a child. It was a fleeting page in her past, but Jane felt all the old flutters tugging at her heart for moment, as Fred stepped toward her table. She had not seen him for years.

“Sorry, you don’t mind, do you?” Nick asked.

She shook her head, and then Fred was standing next to her. He patted and hugged Nick in a chummy greeting and then turned to Jane, brown eyes on blue.

“How’d you do?” she spoke before realizing what she had said. A slip of the tongue to her old times, but maybe one part of her wanted to. Fred smiled and said something back to her, but his eyes betrayed no hint of recognition. Jane’s heart fell. The silly flourishes in her head vanished immediately, and she remembered herself again.

Nick and Fred were exchanging a few words, but she felt like she had just gone to a theater expecting a romance movie but instead found it about a sandwich.

“This was great,” she scooted out of her chair with a screech, “But Nick, sorry to cut it short, I have to go, you understand —”

Fred jumped away from the table, “Stay! Don’t let me ruin the date,” and turning to Nick, he said, “Sorry, buddy, I’ll just go over to the bar.”
But Jane had already stood up, scooped up her purse, and with a tight-lipped smile at Nick and a chant of “no-no-sorry-but-gotta-go,” whisked out of the bar.

Outside of Bar 6, a swarm of New Yorkers descended on her in an evening misty rain that had just started falling. Jane sucked in a breath and let it out slowly. Something is so delicious about a city in the rain. She was picking her way through puddles and trash on the sidewalk when something stopped her.

“Jane!” Nick’s voice sounded intense enough for her to jerk to a stop and turn around.

He wasn’t Nick. Fred was hurrying toward her, squinting against the mist. Jane’s arm shivered into goosey flesh.

“Jane! It’s you, isn’t it?” he caught up to her and grabbed her cold hands. They stung from where he touched her.

Jane could not speak, so torn as she was between embracing him and running away from him.

“I had a feeling it was you!” Fred seemed elated. He grinned and bounced so violently that his eyebrows jumped straight up into his tousle of hair. He pulled her toward the side of the walk so that they were beneath the awning of a shop, and out of the way of passers-by.

“Now who would’ve thought little Jane would have come out here to the Big Apple?”

“It’s not that surprising,” Jane snapped, but added, softer, “I like the people here.”

Fred considered her for a bit.

“Well, what a very adult decision of you, Janie. Tell me, how did you pay for it?”

“Pay?” asked Jane. And then she understood: the reason why she stopped hearing about him from her mother, something she couldn’t deduce when she was fifteen or sixteen, but could see now. Fred must have chosen the pay-for-your-exchange way instead of the queue and lottery, as many men had done. It was a dicey decision, as he must have spent nearly all of his future estate on the exchange (“Five or six thousand a year, dear!”). Fred would have left his younger brother and sisters to nothing more than a barren family name.
Understanding of her situation also dawned on Fred, as a shadow fell across his face.

“So you took the contract instead of paying? I guess they say that with everything comes a price.”

Jane nodded in silence and shivered. Fred still held her hands in his, except now it felt like a vice-like grip.

“I don’t care much for love,” she sighed, “And what poor living soul wants to be sent to a book life?”

Frank barked out a sharp laugh that startled her, “Hah! Some people would give anything to have their lives written out for them. All this working, paying rent, getting up, always working, always worrying, Jane. Sludge, sludge, sludge. What’s in it for them in this crap city? I mean, don’t misunderstand me, Jane, I love it here, but what I really want now is a family, a life again, you know? Wife, kids, maybe in the countryside. You know how hard it is to meet someone for real over here? What I’d give to do it over again!”

He had gotten more and more frantic throughout his speech, such that his eyes flared with a wild gleam as his hands tightened on hers. Jane tried in vain to pry her small hands out of his bear grasp.

“Oh, Fred, let’s not talk like that. I waited ages to get a real life and all I’ve been avoiding is anything that can get me sent back.”

“How do you mean?”

Jane sighed, “I shouldn’t have gone on a date -- Nick was a mistake. I just want to go to bed and sleep. Fred, do be reasonable – just let go for a bit, won’t you?”

Instead of letting her go, Fred swooped in and planted a solid, heavy kiss on her lips. Jane stiffened in shock, but at the same time felt a familiar swoosh fluttering in her stomach. She thought suddenly about the pot of daisies on her desk that needed watering. She thought about the half-finished pan of lasagna in her fridge. She thought about a tabby she saw in a nice
shelter over the weekend that she had wanted to get. All this passed through her head in an instant, yet it could have been hours, so clear did everything now make sense to Jane.

In one forceful move, she shoved Fred away. He staggered back, mouth agape, and backed up into door of a shop from her push.

“Jane,” he breathed, wet hair plastered across his forehead, “come back with me.”

Jane straightened her hair and zipped up her jacket before looking up at him.

“Don’t try to find me, Fred,” she turned away and didn’t look back.

A large crowd of people had just ascended from a subway stop nearby: a tall blonde in red lipstick and a large black hat, a couple that walked together beneath a clear bubble umbrella, stooped bearded homeless men and young girls in ankle boots. Jane slipped into their midst, disappearing among them, groups of people who could have also been exchanges, silently passing her by. What a choice it was to give herself a new life. Sometimes, in a quiet lull, she could still hear the faint rattle of a horse carriage from a lifetime ago. But it would always be quickly overrun by the ding from a bike bell, the squeal of a little kid, or on occasion, if she was lucky, a call from a new friend.