

Second verse, same as the first

by William Henderson

A second date one week after a first date. D, four years younger, a couple of inches taller, thinner, a British accent he picked up while going to boarding school in England, earrings, a tattoo of the Buddha on his back, shaved head, some facial hair, blue eyes, contacts. And me, everything he isn't, or I think I'm everything he isn't. Heavier, and shorter, and blonder, and no longer shaving my head, and 16 tattoos, and pierced nipples, and green eyes that change to hazel and blue, depending, and glasses.

He and I, walking to a nearby sushi restaurant. Near the end of January, 2010, snow and ice on the ground. I'm wearing a sweater and jeans, and he's wearing a sweater and jeans, and we're both wearing black pea coats. Before we left, he wrapped a scarf around his neck, knotting it effortlessly. I've never understood how best to put on a scarf. We're about two hours into our second date, and we're walking down the stairs leading from his apartment building to the sidewalk.

I'm hungry, of course I'm hungry, I haven't eaten since breakfast. Hadn't wanted to be heavier than I had to be. Which is ridiculous; lunch would not have caused me to weigh any more than what I weigh now, having not eaten lunch. Which is foolish, but I have a love-hate relationship with my body, and lately, I've had a hate-hate relationship with my body. And, because I want to have sex with him, later, now, in his apartment, in his bedroom, where we had spent our first date, talking, and drinking wine, and then having sex, or something very much like sex, I haven't eaten since breakfast.

When I had kissed him goodbye at the end of our first date, I said *Goodbye, White Rabbit*, because calling him *White*

Rabbit felt right somehow, and he said, *goodbye*, and I knew, then, what I had suspected hours earlier, that I would see him again.

Which was a problem, or would be — is — a problem. I am married. To a woman. And have been since 2001. She and I have been together since my senior year of college, 1998. She had been a junior. We got engaged nine months after meeting and less than six months after our first date on the Fourth of July. We remained engaged for nearly two-and-a-half years before getting married.

It gets worse, or, what I'm doing is worse than cheating on a woman who mostly loves me — and loves me even when she hates me, because couples can love and hate at the same time — because she and I have a son. He's a few months past his second birthday. Holly, my wife, and Avery, our son, conceived via in-vitro fertilization. The problem was mine, or, not problem, but the reason we used in-vitro fertilization was because of me. Initially, lazy sperm, my version of my diagnosis, but she and I haven't had sex in years, and when we've tried, I haven't gotten hard.

When we conceived Avery, we froze a couple of embryos, and we've implanted each, separately, in the past 12 months. Neither embryo took, though the second one lasted a few weeks longer than the first. She miscarried when she was at work. She texted to let me know, told me not to meet her at the doctor's office. That night, she buried part of what she miscarried in the front yard of our condo complex. I had been sleeping.

Holly is beautiful, no other word will do. She has red hair, and freckles, and big breasts. She's thin, and about five inches shorter than me. She has hazel eyes. Men look at Holly when she's in a room. If she knew how beautiful she is, and how easily she could replace me, I think she would. Avery looks like Holly, could even be a clone of Holly, which is better than his being a clone of me.

Me being on a date with D isn't payback, or even an attempt to figure out what I already know to be true about myself. I'm gay. And, if asked, I bet Holly would admit as much. But I love her, even when I hate her, and I love her, even though I am not happy being married to her, and even though she isn't happy being

married to me, and most nights after work, I come home and pour a drink, and then a second drink, and then a third, and then I watch television.

I'm a fucking cliché, and I know I'm a fucking cliché, and the only thing I have going for me is a close relationship with Avery. Holly works weekends, to minimize Avery's time in daycare, so while she's at work, I get Avery to myself, and Avery gets me to himself, and we play outside when the weather allows us to play outside, and we play dinosaurs inside when the weather doesn't allow us to play outside, and he's kind of my best friend.

D doesn't know about Holly, and he doesn't know about Avery, and I know I should tell him, but how do I tell him about my wife and son without losing whatever he and I are becoming, and we must be becoming something because our first date became a second date and he and I have texted frequently this past week.

Holly and Avery are asleep; neither know anything about this, right now, who I get to be when I'm not with them, who I like being when I'm not with them. And if I tell D that I am married and that I am a father, he will ask me — albeit politely, because he seems to be polite — to leave and not come back, because I think if I were him, I would ask me, perhaps less politely, to leave and not come back.

And D and I are walking to get sushi, and I like D, and I think he likes me. Or is starting to like me. Or, even, will like me, in time. Snow and ice on the ground. Matching black pea coats.

“Can you hear it?” he asks, as we walk. We haven't said anything since leaving his apartment, or, we have, but only that we each want a third date, next Friday, less than 168 hours from this moment.

And I listen, and I don't hear the sound to which he's referring, and I tell D that I don't hear the sound, and I keep walking.

“There,” he says. “Crunch.”

“What?” I ask.

“The snow and ice,” he says, “it crunches when we walk.”

And I listen to the sound he makes when he walks on the sidewalk, which is covered in snow and ice, and the sound sounds like a crunch.

"I hear it," I say, and he smiles.

The restaurant is a few blocks from his apartment, and we go inside. A band is playing, and he asks if I want to order the sushi to go, which I do.

"About 20 minutes," the lady who takes our order says, and D pays, which reminds me that I haven't been on a date, let alone been taken out on a date, in years.

I like being taken out on a date.

"Let's wait outside," D says, and I smile.

"Sure," I say. I don't tell him how cold I am, and how I regret not wearing more than a sweater under my pea coat. Hadn't expected to leave his apartment, and when he suggested we go for sushi, hadn't wanted to turn down the suggestion.

Christmas lights still on storefronts and houses. A comic book store around the corner, a parking garage, Verizon across the street, and banks, three, his near Verizon and my bank two buildings down from where the sushi restaurant is. I should have worn a scarf and hat, maybe earmuffs.

D leads me to a nearby courthouse, which abuts the parking garage. We climb a flight of stairs and end up near a corner, protected from the cold on two sides.

"I have something to say," he says.

The way D says *I have something to say* makes me think that the night — and he with me, together — has been drained of any possibility.

"I'm a former crystal meth addict," he says.

Guess I've been waiting for the other shoe to drop. I knew that someone like him liking someone like me came with a catch.

"I haven't used in a while, but when I use, nothing else matters. And the last time I used, I destroyed my life, hurt people I loved, and almost died. Crystal left me with nothing, and I know if I use again, I will not come back. I will use until I die."

"But you don't use now," I say, like I am asking, not telling.

"No, but I like to occasionally get high. I only recently started smoking. I never buy it. My roommate gives it to me."

I say nothing because I don't know what to say.

"Will, I don't know what we're becoming, but if we're becoming anything, if you ever think that I may possibly use crystal, or if you think my drug use is growing out of control, then you have to promise that you will do whatever it takes to stop me."

I focus on his eyes and his head. He shaved his head before I came over. I like him with a shaved head. I like him. And I like him despite this confession.

He unwraps his scarf and ties it around my neck. I can smell him on the scarf. His scent, something else that I like, and something else that I've already started to recognize.

I know he's waiting for me to say something.

"Yes," I say. "I promise I will do whatever stopping you takes."

We don't say much on our way back to his apartment, or when we stop to get wine, two bottles. I figure one bottle is for us, tonight, and I wonder with whom he will drink the second bottle. I shouldn't wonder with whom he will drink the second bottle. Not like two dates. He will drink the second bottle.

While we eat our sushi, he feeds me part of what he ordered, and I feed him part of what I ordered, and he smiles at me and I smile at him. Hadn't even known how much I missed this until right now, in D's kitchen, at his small table, he on one side, me on the other, our food in middle. *Our food.*

"I like you," he says.

"I like you, too," I say.

"No, I mean I *really* like you," and then he stops talking, as if embarrassed.

I keep talking, not about liking him, which I do, which I *really* do, but about what I'm eating, and then about the wine we're drinking, and then about the music he turned on when we got back to his apartment, anything to keep him from taking back what he

had said. I haven't felt this kind of liking in more than a dozen years. I like feeling this kind of liking.

Two days later, I come over after he gets home from work. He works in human resources at a retail store. I work as the editor of a marketing team at a health plan. I've worked as a reporter, and as an editor, and as a freelance writer. I don't like my job, but my job is a job, and writers in Boston are a dime a dozen, and I have a family to support. He hates his job, too, which we had talked about during our first date, or, I had talked about because he hadn't said much of anything, and when I had apologized for monopolizing the conversation, he had said that he had liked listening.

And now I'm listening to D talk about his day, and about a customer who had complained, and about how he will have to deal with the customer's complaint tomorrow, and he has already started smoking pot.

"I didn't smoke much before you got here," he says. "Do you want to smoke some?"

"No," I say. I take off my shoes and get in his bed. I watch his exhalation.

"Do you want to hook up?" I ask.

"OK," he says. "I know that's why you *really* came over."

He puts down his bong, and he gets out of the chair where he's been sitting, and he comes to me in his bed, where I am already on my back, ready for him to take off my clothes. I'm glad that we're been talking by candlelight. Sexy, this moment, by candlelight.

Maybe hooking up *is* why I really came over.

Holly and Avery are asleep when I get home. I told her earlier — as I had told her before going out with D on our first and second dates — that I had to work. She believed me. I think she likes me not being home. If I'm not at home, then she gets to focus on Avery. She and I are selfish, and I know that she and I are selfish. We've cultivated relationships and friendships with people to keep from acknowledging our broken marriage. And from acknowledging that our marriage cannot be fixed.

I think what I'm doing with D isn't wrong. As long as I don't fall in love with him, then I won't have to leave Holly, and if I don't leave Holly, then I will not become a part-time father. Avery is why she and I haven't divorced, and Avery is as good a reason as any why Holly and I haven't divorced.

She wakes up when I get into bed. She can smell the pot and asks about it.

"I was with a friend who gets high," I say. "Hung out with him after work."

Holly doesn't say anything else. Just wraps a blanket tighter around Avery and goes back to sleep.

"I like you, and I can't stop thinking about you, and I wonder if you would like to date it out," D asks the next night.

I'm at home with Holly and Avery. We've watched a movie. Now, Holly and Avery are putting together puzzles, and I'm talking to D via text messages. I know texting is writing, but texting is really talking, or I like to think of texting as talking. When I read D's words, as I've gotten used to doing in the last 10 days, I can hear him talking, British accent and all.

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"Do you want to be in a monogamous relationship with me?"

"Yes."

Dating D should be fairly easy. Holly has no reason not to believe me when I tell her that I have to work late, or that I am starting to work on weekends. Nights and weekends are always a possibility; she knows that. And since I'm salaried, she won't expect me to deposit any extra money on payday. And, since Holly and I don't have sex, agreeing to monogamy is easy.

But acknowledging my relationship with D on Facebook, which he asks me to do the next day? Can't. D's relationship request comes with an attached red heart. I ignore the request, which he brings up later that week.

“I’m not out,” I say. “My brother can see this. My colleagues. I’m not ready for my relationship status to be fodder for gossip.”

“I’m not willing to be pushed back into the closet,” he says. “An ex did that to me, and I promised myself I wouldn’t let it happen again.”

“Give me time,” I say.

And he does. His Facebook relationship status acknowledges that he is in a relationship, but does not link to the profile of the person with whom he is in a relationship. I signed up for Facebook to say I have it. I’m 32; I’ve never relied on social networking to communicate my relationship status. Holly and I have never linked our profiles with a *married* relationship status; Holly isn’t even one of my Facebook friends.

D and I don’t act like a couple at the beginning of a relationship — though how *do* couples act at the beginning of a relationship? — so he and I say that we were fated to meet, or that we have spent several lifetimes looking for each other, and now that we have met and reconnected, the pain of not being together has evaporated and the joy of union has coalesced in a cocoon we have built for two. We cannot tell where one ends and the other begins. And we don’t want to know where one ends and the other begins.

We talk. A lot. Stories overlapping stories overlapping stories. Over dinner and during sex and via text messages while we are working. He works a few blocks from me, and lives a couple of miles from me. Our proximity is another reason why I think I’m meant to date him, maybe end up with him long-term. Even though I’m lying.

But I’m not lying, I convince myself, because if I think about Holly and Avery, and if I think about telling him about Holly and Avery, then I can’t think about loving him, because I’ve started thinking that I love him, or that I’m falling in love with him, which is against the rules. Or, rule, singular. If I don’t fall in love, then I’m doing nothing wrong. He and Holly would disagree. Most people would disagree.

He and I don't reveal ourselves to each other all at once — or in full, in my case. I ask him questions, to shift attention from me to him, and from what I'm not saying to what he's willing to say, because I haven't figured out how to explain more than a decade of my life.

“I don't know how to talk about everything with you,” he says one night. “I'm going to sound awful.”

“Then don't talk about the awful parts,” I say. “Not now, anyway.”

So he doesn't. Instead, he talks about where he's lived, Texas, North Carolina, and, when life stopped going the way he wanted life to go in Texas and in North Carolina, with his mother in Peoria. He isn't close to his brother, doesn't talk to his father, and calls a woman that his mother helped raise his sister, even though his mother never adopted this woman.

“You'll meet her one day,” D says with such certainty that I believe that I will meet her, even though she lives in Illinois.

One night, D describes the events that led to the creation of scars on his forearms, twin scars, though one scar is darker and larger than the other scar. He hadn't wanted to die the night he cut himself; he just hadn't wanted to feel.

“I'm not suicidal or anything like that,” he says, “in case you were worried.”

“I wasn't,” I say, and I wasn't — am not. I noticed the scars during my first date with D and wondered about the scars during each subsequent date. When I look at him, I see the scars. I expect that one day I will stop noticing the scars, as I have stopped noticing the scars on my body. Both knees, childhood accidents, and a fingertip on my right hand, which I sliced open with the top of a can of tuna fish. And the scar that wraps itself around my body, a reminder of a series of surgeries I've had to undo years of overeating.

During my sophomore year of high school, I stopped eating, and in 10 months, I lost 110 pounds. Too much too quickly, my doctor told me and my parents, but I wanted to be thin and not

eating seemed like the best way to get thin. Initially, people encouraged, and even applauded, my weight loss; then, as I started shrinking faster than people liked, I was taunted. The people with whom I went to high school wouldn't walk on the same side of the hall with me. Rumor was that I had AIDS, and that I was dying. I was a virgin.

Most people assume I'm gay, and have assumed I'm gay since I was in fifth grade. Maybe sooner. Maybe fifth grade is just my first memory of recognizing what other people believed true about me. But coming out as a gay man in 1987, when I was in fifth grade, or in 1993, when I was a sophomore in high school, was impossible. Central Florida was no place to be gay. Might not be still. I haven't lived in Florida since graduating from college. If I could have sex with women, then I couldn't be gay. That's what I told myself. And that's what happened. I dated women because I could have sex with them, and I loved women because not loving women meant that I'd have to love men, and loving men meant that I am gay, and coming out meant losing everything. So when Holly and I stopped having sex — when I stopped getting hard with her — I blamed everything but being gay. But I have no problems getting hard with D. Case closed. Or, case mostly closed. Gay.

Nine years after losing the weight, as a 25th birthday gift to myself — a gift that Holly and I spent two years saving for — I had liposuction, and five years later, I had a tummy tuck. I hated how I looked before, and still hate how I look. Probably always will, which is why when D asks me to take a shower with him one Friday night, I hesitate before saying yes. I'm sure he's seen the scar; he just hasn't asked about it.

Only when he's in the shower, waiting for me, do I turn off the light in the bathroom and take off my clothes.

"What are you doing, rabbit?" he asks. *Rabbit, his nickname for me.*

"Mood lighting," I say, before getting into the shower with him. He gets out of my way so I can get under the water, and the water is hot, the way he and I like showers — but not baths, because

in baths, he feels like an ingredient in soup — and he kisses me and I kiss him and we are getting hard and then we are hard and then he is on his knees, sucking me off.

After, I tell him about the surgeries, and about how my surgeon cut away the skin where my belly button used to be, and how my surgeon had prided himself on sculpting a fairly perfect belly button for me.

D sticks his finger in my belly button.

"It feels weird," he says.

"I could have asked the doctor to leave off the belly button," I say, which I never would have done, but making a joke about my belly button is about all I can do with D so close to the parts of me about which I feel ashamed.

"That would have been weirder," D says. "You should pride yourself on sculpting a fairly perfect you."

Then, D kisses me.

"I don't look like a page from a magazine."

"You look like a page from a magazine I have been waiting for, and now that my first issue has arrived, I am not going to cancel my subscription."

I believe D, because I want to believe D, and I think that D must mean what he says because he told me that he will never lie to me. And I've told him that I will never lie to him. Which is a lie. I know my saying I will never lie to him is a lie.

Three weeks is how long I'm able to hide my life from D. He doesn't understand why I haven't invited him to my home; or why I don't stay the night with him on Fridays, which we've claimed as our night; or why I'm never available during the day on Saturday or Sunday. He asks me if I'm seeing someone else. He asks me if I've changed my mind about dating him but haven't figured out how to tell him. He asks me if I want out, and out is the last thing I want, but I suspect that if D knows about Avery, that my not wanting out will no longer matter.

A Sunday. Holly is with friends. I'm home with Avery. And D texts and invites me over. So I get Avery ready, and I drive to D's apartment. When I park downstairs, I text D: I'm here.

I get out of my car, unstrap Avery from his car seat, and carry Avery to the front door of D's apartment building. Avery is happy to still be up. If he and I were at home, I'd be trying — and probably failing — to get Avery to go to sleep. I tend to let him stay up until he falls asleep on his own, which is one of several differences in how Holly and I parent Avery.

D opens the front door, and he looks at me holding Avery. D steps back, lets me in.

I walk up the stairs leading from the foyer to D's second-floor apartment. The front door is open, so I walk in, and then down the hallway, and then into the kitchen, where D's roommates are eating. Avery squirms until I let him go. He introduces himself to D's roommates, or he offers what passes for an introduction by a two-year-old.

"Who's the baby?" one of D's roommates ask. She works with D, and is planning to move out in a few weeks.

"He's my son," I say.

"No shit," D's other roommate says. He's D's dealer. I had met him the night I met D. Roommate and his boyfriend were getting high, and I had walked into the room where they were when I was trying to find the bathroom. I had been shirtless, and I had been embarrassed to be shirtless when I saw the two of them in bed, getting high, mostly naked.

"Yeah," I say. "He's two."

D stands at the doorway to his bedroom. He hasn't said anything. I'm afraid to look at D. I'm afraid I will see disappointment, maybe even anger.

Avery runs to, and then past, D. In D's room, Avery takes books off of D's bookshelf, and then Avery taps at several of the keys to D's computer keyboard, and then Avery asks D for "up."

D picks up Avery, who hugs D tight around the neck.

"I don't know how to entertain a small child," D says.

"Maybe we can watch a cartoon," I say.

D finds a cartoon on his computer, and pushes play. He sits in the chair near his computer, and Avery sits in D's lap. Avery watches the movie, which he hasn't seen before, and he sits still, which he rarely does.

"How?" D asks. All he asks. How?

And I tell D the answer I had prepared: Holly is my best friend. She and I met in college. We decided to have a baby together. We live together and co-parent Avery. We've talked about a second child. We've also talked about raising children while living in separate homes, *which Holly and I haven't done, but probably should, and should have long ago.*

"I'll have to meet her," D says.

"OK," I say, though I do not know how I will introduce D to Holly. She will know. I won't have to say anything, and she will know, just by looking at me looking at D looking at me.

"I knew there was something," D says.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"Is there anything else?" D asks.

"No," I say. *A lie — another lie — when I promised not to lie.*

I watch how D holds Avery, and how D wraps his arms tight around Avery, and how Avery makes himself comfortable in D's lap.

I can spend my life with you, I think; I want to spend my life with you.

Since Avery doesn't have the words he'd need to tell Holly where I took him tonight, or that he had seen me and D hug — though not kiss, because I am not ready to kiss D in front of Avery — I won't have to ask for Avery's complicity in hiding my relationship with D. I can't tell Holly that watching D fall in love with Avery — because D had fallen in love with Avery the moment Avery held up his arms and asked for "up," or maybe in the moment after Avery had relaxed into D's body, head on shoulder, feet barely reaching

past D's knees — is another reason why I think what I'm doing is, or will be, OK.

I still take you and your son, as is. I'm not scared. I'm not going anywhere.

A text from D, not five minutes after Avery and I left to go home so Avery could sleep.

Holly is sitting on the couch painting her toenails when Avery and I get home. She is wearing a pink bathrobe, and has wrapped a towel around her hair. I put Avery in the bed where Holly sleeps, which is the bed she and I shared. I haven't slept in that bed since the night I promised D I could be monogamous.

"Where were you guys?" Holly asks.

"He was fussy, so I took him for a drive," I say.

Holly continues painting her toenails.

