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Opening extract from

Am I Normal Yet?

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One

It started with a house party.

This wasn't just any house party. It was also My First Date. Like first EVER date. In my entire life. Because, finally, following all the crap that had gone down, I was ready for boys.

His name was Ethan and he liked the Smashing Pumpkins (whatever that is) and he'd managed to grow real stubble already. And he liked me enough to ask me out after sociology. And he was funny. And he had really small, but cute, dark eyes, like a ferret or something. But a sexy ferret. And he played the drums *and* the violin. Both! Even though they're, like, totally different instruments. And and…

…and – oh, Christ – what the HELL was I going to wear?

Okay, so I was stressing. And obsessing. "Obstressing" times a million. In an utterly deplorable way. But this was a big

deal to me. I was doing something NORMAL for once. And I reckoned I could just about pull it off. And I *did* know what I was wearing. I'd run through every possible clothing combination in existence before opting for tight jeans, black top and a red necklace, i.e. what I reckoned to be the safest date outfit ever.

I was going to be normal again. But I was going to step back into it safely.

The outfit

Jeans = Cool, just-like-everyone-else, and I-won't-sleep-with-you-right-away-so-don't-even-think-about-it-mister.
Black top = Slimming – yes, I know…well it was a first date, and my drugs had made me a bit…puffy.
Red necklace = Hints of sexiness underneath, for when you've been a good boy, and in six months' time, when I'm ready, and you've said you love me, and lit some candles and all that stuff that probably doesn't actually ever happen to anyone…

…Oh, and you've been deep-cleaned and put through ten STI tests.

Nice. Safe. Outfit.

Put it on, Evie. Just put the damn thing on.

So I did.

* * *

Before I get into how it went and how it was the beginning of *something*, but not the beginning of Ethan, I guess you'll want to know how I met him so you have some emotional investment.

Bollocks. I just gave away that Ethan and I didn't work out.

Oh well. Whoever had a great love affair with a guy who looked like a sexy ferret?

How Evie met Ethan

New college. I'd started a brand new college, where only a handful of people knew me as "that girl who went nuts". Despite my tiny collection of mostly-home-educated GCSEs, the college let me in to do my A levels because I'm actually quite smart when I'm not being sectioned.

I noticed Ethan in my very first sociology lesson. Mainly because he was the only boy in there. Plus, the sexy stubble ferretness.

He sat across from me and our eyes met almost instantly.

I looked behind me to check who he was staring at. There wasn't anyone behind me.

"Hi, I'm Ethan," he said, giving me a half-wave.

I waved back with a flap of my hand. "Hi, I'm Evelyn… Evie. Always Evie."

"Have you done sociology before, Evie?"

I looked at the crisp new textbook on my desk, its spine still utterly intact.

"Erm, no."

"Me neither," he said. "But I heard it was a Mickey Mouse subject. An easy A, right?" He did this big grin that caused all sorts of stuff to happen to my insides. So much so that I had to sit down in my chair – except I was already sitting in it, so I just sort of wiggled awkwardly, panicked, then giggled to cover it. "Why are *you* taking it?" he asked.

A question. You can answer questions, Evie. So I smiled and said, "I thought it was safer than psychology."

Oops. *Think*. You think before you answer questions.

His face wrinkled underneath his mop of unruly hair. "Safer?" he repeated.

"Yeah, you know," I tried to explain. "I…er…well… I didn't want to get any extra ideas."

"Ideas?"

"I'm very impressionable."

"What sort of ideas?" he leaned over the desk with interest. Or confusion.

I shrugged and fiddled with my bag.

"Well in psychology you learn about all the different things that can go wrong in your brain," I said.

"So?"

I fiddled with my bag some more. "Well, it's more to worry about, isn't it? Like, did you know there's this thing called Body Integrity Identity Disorder?"

"Body Identi-what-now?" he asked, doing the smile again.

"Integrity Identity Disorder. It's where you wake up one day, convinced you shouldn't have two legs. You suddenly hate your spare leg, and you really want to be an amputee. In fact, some sufferers actually *pretend* to be amputees! And the only way to cure it is to get a limb hacked off illegally by this special leg-hacker doctor. People don't usually get BIID, that's what they call it, BIID, until their early twenties. Either of us could get it. We don't know yet. We can only hope we stay emotionally attached to all our limbs. That's why sociology is safer, I reckon."

Ethan burst out laughing, making all the other girls in my new class turn and stare.

"I think I'm going to like doing sociology with you, Evie." He gave me a tiny wink and a cheeky head tilt.

My heart started beating really quickly, but not in its usual trapped-insect way. In a new way. A good way.

"Thanks, I guess."

Ethan didn't do anything other than stare at me for the rest of the lesson.

That's how we met.

I looked at my reflection. First up close, my nose pressed against the mirror. I stepped back and looked again. Then I closed my eyes and opened them really quickly to surprise myself into an unbiased reaction.

I didn't look bad, you know.

From my reflection, you definitely couldn't tell how nervous I was.

My phone beeped and my heart did a little earthquake.

Hey, just on the train. Looking forward to seeing u tonight. x

He was coming. It was real. Then I saw the time on my phone and panicked. I was seven minutes away from leaving late. I chucked everything into a bag, then ran to the bathroom to brush my teeth and wash my hands.

Just as I'd finished, it happened.

BAD THOUGHT

Have you washed them properly?

I nearly doubled over. It was like someone had stabbed me in the guts with a knitting needle.

No no no no no.

And then another came to join the party.

BAD THOUGHT

You should wash them again, just to make sure.

I did double over then, holding onto the edge of the sink as my body crumpled. Sarah'd warned me this could happen. That the thoughts may come back when I cut down my dosage. She told me to expect it. It would be okay though, she said, because I had "coping mechanisms" now.

My mother knocked on the bathroom door. She'd probably been secretly timing me again – anything over five minutes was a warning sign.

"Evie?" she called.

"Yes, Mum," I called back, still knotted over.

"You okay in there? What time do you need to leave for your party?"

She only knew about the party. She didn't know I had a date. The less Mum knew, the better. My little sister Rose knew, but had been sworn to secrecy.

"I'm fine. I'll be out in a sec."

I heard her footsteps thump down the hallway and I let out a slow breath.

Logical thought

You're okay, Evie. You don't need to wash your hands again, do you? You only just washed them. Come on, up you get.

Like a well-trained soldier, I straightened myself and

calmly unlocked the bathroom door. But not before one last brain malfunction muscled its way in for a parting shot.

BAD THOUGHT

Uh oh, it's coming back.