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Lou out of Luck

NAT LUURTSEMA

WALKER
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For Diarmuid



1

DOUBLE DATE!! Woo hoo!

Oh, me? I'm just off on my very first double date with my sister, Lavender; her boyfriend, Roman; and MY boyfriend, Gabriel. No big deal, don't freak out, but it would seem that *someone* has got cool lately. Hashtag blessed.

Gabe and I have been going out since November, when we had our first kiss. (In hospital. It was romantic but smelt antiseptic.) It's now January, so we're pretty long-term by my standards. (No previous boyfriend, no previous standards…) I wasn't in hospital because I was ill. We had been performing an underwater synchronized swimming routine in a fish tank that fell apart in a TV studio. I ended up falling off the stage in my swimsuit (*so* undignified and all over YouTube), which led to public shame and concussion. I was getting over my failure to

make it as an Olympic swimmer by training Gabe's team of dancers in synchronized swimming. They would have all been way too cool to talk to me ordinarily but they needed me to coach them for a TV show.

They say you find love when you least expect it.

Not that I'm saying it's love, but sometimes, when we're bored or queuing for chips, we'll kick each other gently on the back of the leg and I'm pretty sure it's code for: *My darling, I adore you, join me on my horse and we'll fight dragons*.

My older sister, Lavender, met Gabriel's older brother, Roman, through our adventures in synchronized drowning, and now they're going out too! This isn't great for Pete – he was the third member of the swim team and I haven't got any sisters left.

Even my mum and dad are together again, after ten years of divorce, so it's an emotionally complicated house. But it's working all right. FOR NOW.

"Double date, double tra-la-la…" I sing tunelessly to myself.

I drag an eyeliner pencil over my left eyelid. I am not a visual treat. I'm broad, tall and strong and I dress like I'm about to wash a car. My hair is so big and bushy it's like an animal trying to flee my head. But I'm trying to make the best of myself. First steps include: slouching less, buying cleanser and learning about make-up.

I think it's going pretty well. My eyeliner follows the line of my eyelashes and sweeps up a little at the edge. Just like on the YouTube tutorials – except I'm not calling everything "super-kyewt".

Confident, I tackle the other eye and give it its own beautiful neat sweep of black eyeliner. I am so good at this! Such an adult. New year, new me. I step back from the mirror and stare at my face.

Aargh! No!!

This is not super-kyewt.

I have meddled with the unholy science of make-up.

GAZE UPON THE HORROR I HAVE BIRTHED, AND TREMBLE!!

I look like a flipping sloth. My eyes are drooping down towards my ears. I scrub it all off and start again. But now I've got to sharpen the pencil, and the last thing my sore eyes need is something sharp heading towards them. I give up. My eyes are streaming and my hands are black. Great. That's the look I was going for: Dirty Hands Snivelling Girl.

I head downstairs to the kitchen. A small snack should get me back in the mood for a double date. Crisps for the mouth, cucumbers for the eyes.

Mum and Dad seem to be Up to Something in the living room. They're talking in low voices, and I find them busily assembling a fort – four chairs placed back to

back, a duvet draped over the top and cushions scattered inside. It's well built – they have honed their craft over many years – but I'm confused. The last time we needed a family fort was two years ago when Lavender had her wisdom teeth pulled out. To comfort her, we all sat in a duvet fort and she filled it with bloody tissues until it looked like a horror film and I begged to be let out.

Lavender appears behind me. "What are they doing?"

"We're going to have a lovely afternoon in as a family," Mum chirps, plumping up a cushion.

"Well, that *does* sound nice…" Lav puts on her diplomatic voice but I haven't got time for that.

"Noooo," I whine. "We're going on a double date! I've never been on a double date. I even put eyeliner on!"

"Where?" Dad says.

"It was wonky and my face looked like a melting sloth so I had to wash it off – please don't laugh at me, Mother, I can see you behind that cushion. The point is, I made an effort."

"Anyway." Lavender stands in front of me, blocking my babbling. "Gabe and Roman are expecting us, so we have to get going."

"I just called them to cancel," Mum says, smiling like she's not just SMASHED MY BRILLIANT SATURDAY PLANS TO DUST.

Lavender and I exchange a mystified look. Something

is really up. Is one of them ill? Are they divorcing AGAIN? Technically they're divorced, so I don't know how that would work. Dad's still out of work, so he couldn't afford to leave. I stop complaining and start fretting as I pull off my boots and crawl into the fort. Lav follows and we sit and look at each other, like, *Now what?*

"Are you going to join us then?" I ask. Mum and Dad aren't even in this "lovely" family fort! She's now clattering around in the kitchen and he's standing holding four or five remote controls and pointing them at the TV. I'm about to complain some more (I'm not whiney, I'm *annoyed* – I can't turn it off like a light switch) but I can smell cheese on toast and the Harry Potter music starts swirling around the room.

Humph. Well, this is quite nice actually. Not as nice as seeing Gabe, though… I tap out a quick text to him.

Sorry about today! Parents are weird. Xx

That's cool. Hope you're OK – what's the family emergency? xx

I show Lav his message and she pulls a confused face to match mine. A moment later, she holds up her phone – Roman has sent her a similar message. Except … I notice they sign off with four kisses. Gabe and I only do two.

I see there are also quite a few unicorn and princess emojis.

Gabe and I mainly use the poo emoji – it best represents our cheery outlook on life. But perhaps I should up my game. There's a lot of flags I never use.

Mum and Dad shuffle into the fort on their knees, armed with toasted cheese sandwiches and cups of hot chocolate. But I'm still not pleased about my cancelled double date so I keep a snooty face on while I eat. Like the queen visiting a disappointing cheese factory.

"So," Dad says at a look from Mum. "How are my girls?"

"OK," we say.

"How's school?"

"OK."

"How are your friends?"

"OK."

He sighs, and I try to think of something interesting for him. Lav beats me to it.

"Lou's cool now." She nods at me, pulling stringy cheese out of her sandwich. I stroke an eyebrow and await parental congratulations.

"*Are* you?" Mum looks astonished. Bit rude.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because … of the TV show. And boyfriend. And I got

a stub on Wikipedia, and even the mean girls at school don't bother making fun of me any more. They say things like, *Hey, girl! Cute top!*"

"*Hey, girl! Cute top?*" Mum repeats. "And you don't puke all over them?"

"No!" I say. "Because it's nice to be accepted, even by shallow people."

Mum purses her lips. "Lou, I raised you better than that."

"No, you didn't."

"I don't think we did," Dad reflects. "We were busy splitting up so we just stuck her in front of the TV."

Mum glares at us over her sandwich and the mood turns frosty. Dad dials back to my earlier point.

"Well, I'm pleased for you," he says. "If you actually *are* cool. The coolest person at MY school had a leather jacket and a motorbike and his mum had snogged Donny Osmond…"

"Who's Donny Osmond?"

"Bieber for the elderly."

"Oh."

"If you're cool then the criteria for being cool must have been lowered. You don't even have a tattoo."

"Not that you SHOULD," Mum says, quickly.

Lavender has a tiny tattoo that they don't know about. I'm not very good at lying so I stare at my legs.

Lavender breaks the silence.

"Can we open the side of the fort and watch TV?"

"Not yet." Mum puts down her sandwich and dusts her hands as if she's about to lift something. Not me, I hope – for her sake. Six foot and still growing. The basketball team try to recruit me at least once a month, despite my lack of interest.

"Your dad and I have something to tell you."

"You're splitting up *again*?" I blurt out. "You've just got back together! Make your minds up!"

"You're ill?" Lav says, eyeing Dad narrowly. "That's why Dad's lost weight."

"*Have* I?" He's thrilled.

"No! Look, you know your dad is still out of work," Mum ploughs on.

"I hate it when you call each other *your mum* and *your dad*," Lav tuts.

"Me too," I say. "You only do it when you're breaking up or that time when Dad found a lump on his—"

"YES, THANK YOU," Dad interrupts. "No need to bring that up. What your mu— Flora is trying to say is that she's losing her job too."

There's a long silence in the fort as Lav and I stop chewing and stare. My cheese feels greasy in my mouth and I don't want it any more.

What happens when neither of your parents are

earning any money? I wonder. And is there a polite way to ask this question?

"Like me!" Dad says, pointing between him and Mum and doing a little sit-down dance. "Twinsies!"

"Do you think that's helping, Mark?"

"No." He stops.

Mum strokes my hair. "The university has had its funding cut and a load of us have to go. But I'm not worried!"

"Why not? You should be," I say, and earn myself a hard nudge from Lav. "Lavender, PLEASE. I bruise like a peach."

"It's OK," says Mum, looking determinedly cheerful. "We'll tighten our belts—"

"They're already quite tight!" I blurt, thinking of Mum's recent embargo on brand-name sweets.

"And you girls have more than enough clothes. Lou, just PLEASE stop growing."

Hahahaha. OK, that's cool. I know she's joking, *très* LOL, but it is actually a genuine fear of mine that I will never stop growing.

"We have lots of things we don't need and can sell online," Dad says.

"Do we?" I ask. I'm not exactly drowning in frivolous possessions. Although … I start mentally pricing up my school books – shame to lose them, but, oh well, it's for

the family – bye-bye, physics! See ya, maths!

"And," Mum says brightly, "I'll go to the Jobcentre with your dad. That'll be something we can do together."

"But Dad said the Jobcentre is like a big shop that sells chairs and sadness."

Mum glares at Dad. "Thank you, Mark."

"I was feeling down when I said that! Anyway, tell them the worst bit."

"It's not the worst bit."

"Agree to disagree."

Mum takes a deep breath. "The mortgage payments on this house are quite high. If I don't find work soon, we'll fall behind. And we might … MIGHT … have to sell the house and move in with Grandma."

"Evil Grandma or Dead Grandma?" I ask.

"Which do you think?" she asks drily.

"Well, I know which I'd *prefer*."

Evil *is* a strong word to apply to an old lady with a dodgy hip, but she's worked hard to earn that name. She's a big fan of saying things like "your bald spot is getting bigger", or "the younger one doesn't have the looks of the first, does she?" when you're standing right in front of her. I usually give her a baffled shrug, like, *What do you expect me to do about it? This is my face.* Which is apparently "surly". Am I meant to laugh, as if she's made a lovely joke that we can both enjoy? "Well, I won't say

ANYTHING then! You're in a nasty mood," she'll say, with a sad sigh.

Dad pins back one side of the fort so we can watch Harry Potter.

"Where's the red-headed boy gone?" Mum asks.

"There," Dad says, baffled. "Right there. Literally on the screen under the red hair."

"He looks older."

"Older than what?"

"Than in the first film."

"Yes," I say, while Lavender ignores us and scrolls through her phone. "He got older."

"Ah. OK. I'm not really into wizards and goblins," she confides.

"It's not magic!" Dad says, exasperated. "It's a normal boy going from eight to eighteen!"