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The Name Game

by

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Winner of the 2017 Student Competition

Nothing is scarier than a first date.

Okay, well aside spiders. On my fear list, they're just below snakes and coming to grips with the fact that Donald Trump is president. While you can run from arachnids, anacondas, and spray-tanned buffoons, you can't flee from nerves, anxiety and new sensations. Especially not when you're me: Harry Baum.

Yes, I might as well be named Furry Rectum.

Disclaimer: my parents do love me (or so they say), and according to them, Baum is pronounced like 'balm.' But what does it matter? Out of the billion names in the English language, somehow I got stuck me with the absolute worst one. Alright, second worst; my first name could be Dick.

"Do you have a reservation, sir?" The Keg hostess, a petite blonde in a silk, coal-black cocktail dress, inquired.

I snapped out of my self-deprecating daze and nodded. "For two."

"Okay... I need your name, please."

"It's Harry."

She scanned the page. "Mister... Baum?"

I nodded. The waitress tried a poker face, then caved and cracked a smile. I treat subtle reactions like compliments. I grew up getting swirlies—because according to cro-magnon knuckle-dragging bullies, bums belong in the toilet—and as I got older, I'd learned to keep my last name a bigger secret than my browser history. Out in public, I operate on a first-name basis, like Bono. Or Prince. If only my musical abilities surpassed those of an orangutan with two mallets and a drum kit.

“Okay,” she said, checking her book, “just follow me.”

She led me to the farthest, worst-lit corner of the restaurant. I removed my jacket and hung it on one of the standing coat racks before sitting down at the table. Both spots were dressed with a cloth napkin and a set of cutlery.

So you’re probably wondering, is my date a mail-order bride? No. Jennifer introduced herself to me, Harry Bailey, on eHarmony.

Yes, I lied about my name—you would too.

I sat alone for a few minutes. All things considered, there were worse places to be, like a Nicki Minaj concert or at the theatre watching an Adam Sandler movie. Being trapped in a literal corner wouldn’t stop me from basking in the fun-but-classy atmosphere. My mouth watered at the rich scent of steak wafting in from the kitchen. And you know what? If I contorted myself like Mr. Fantastic playing Twister, I could even see one of television’s over at the bar!

Enter Jennifer.

Some people just have ‘it.’ When you see them, you know. Standing at roughly five-foot-nine, she was tall, but not imposing. She wore her strawberry-blonde hair down and straight. Along with a pair of suffocating blue jeans, she rocked a black blouse, and an eye-catching pearl necklace.

“Are you Harry?”

“Yes, nice to meet you,” I said, standing up to give her a friendly hug. She shared it, and when her body pressed against mine, the sweet aroma of her perfume invaded my nose. Think Germans taking over Poland in 1939, but with a hint of vanilla.

“You too,” she said, smiling and taking a seat.

“So, how’s your day been?”

“Eh, not bad.”

“Not bad? My dad says that also means not good.”

She shrugged. “I had a *long* morning at work-”

“Pardon my interruption, but what do you do?”

“I’m a teacher.”

My jaw dropped to the floor. “No way! So am I!”

“Really? Wow,” she giggled. “What do you teach?”

“Ladies first—besides, you were telling a story.”

Jennifer grinned. “Alright, well I teach grade eleven English-”

(I bet your male students love you)

“-And we’re doing Shakespeare. MacBeth. The only thing high school kids like more than their cellphones is complaining... but you know what? I can’t patronize them considering I caught myself dozing off at my desk!”

“Thou best liketh thy Shakespeare.”

Jennifer smirked. “Wow... that’s something.”

“Yeah, something heinous.” We both chuckled. “Well, I’m a middle school teacher.”

“That’s fun. What subject do you teach?”

I paused. “Health.”

“Health?”

“You know... like sex and alcohol and drugs. Funny, because I swear it’s the only time all three of those things are no fun!”

She laughed, which I found reassuring. Considering it was our first date, I didn’t know which was worse: admitting that I taught thirteen-year-olds about penises, or implying I thought substance abuse was amusing.

The waitress swooped in before Jennifer could reply. “Hi there,” she said, flashing Jennifer a patented server smile. “Are you two ready to order?”

My date blushed. “Sorry, I haven’t even looked at the menu...”

“That’s okay! I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

While Jennifer flipped through the jumbo-sized laminated pages, I tried my best not to stare. The last time I’d been on date with a girl this perfect was... never. That was partly because I never meet the right people and partly because I’m a recluse—being a social butterfly when your name is Harry Baum is like job-searching with a criminal record.

A few moments later, the menu closed. “I think I’m going to get thai chicken,” she said, pushing it forward. “Can’t say I’m feeling a steak.”

“So you’re telling me we could have gone to Swiss Chalet and saved money?” I deadpanned. Jennifer looked mortified. “I’m totally joking,” I laughed. “Mind you, had I known you were a teacher too, maybe I would have suggested it.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s every teacher’s favourite restaurant!”

She wrinkled her nose. “It’s not mine.”

“Me neither, but I’ll never turn down rotisserie chicken.”

“Or those white rolls. They’re the best!”

I shook my head. “That’s racist, Jennifer.”

She rolled her eyes—in good fun—and we joked around until the waitress returned to take our orders. Thai chicken for her, and an eight-ounce sirloin with garlic mashed potatoes for myself. Medium-well. Medium-rare is gross. Rare is a crime against humanity; you may as well eat the cow alive!

“So, Harry, do you have any hobbies?”

“A few. I’m a big Blue Jays fan,” I said. “My dad introduced me to baseball when I was a kid. Through July and August, we’d go to almost every home game. But that was back in the late-nineties when they stunk, and the tickets were dirt cheap.”

She smiled and nodded. “Yeah, I remember those days. They’re pretty good now, which you must find exciting.”

“You follow baseball?”

“Yes.” She paused, then confessed. “I’m a Minnesota Twins fan.”

“On purpose?”

“They used to be good!”

I laughed. “So did Britney Spears—in like 2006...”

She folded her arms across her chest. “Should I remind you the Blue Jays missed the playoffs for over twenty straight years?”

“Alright; point taken. Tell me about your hobbies.”

Turns out Jennifer dabbled in a myriad of activities, from art—oil painting and sketching—to travelling. She is *dying* to visit Peru. I made a mental note to write that (along with everything else) down when I got home.

Our food ended up being worth the wait. My steak was cooked to perfection: seared on the outside, with absolutely no pink in the middle. Mashed potatoes are tricky; too runny and they become a drink, but too thick and they stick to your teeth like plaque. Thankfully the chef struck the perfect balance.

“My chicken is great—just enough kick,” Jennifer said. “How’s your steak?”

I made an ‘o’ with my thumb and index, then cut myself another piece of steak. The savoury mix of spices were an atomic bomb, and my tastebuds were Hiroshima. Or Nagasaki, take your pick.

When we both finished our dinners, the waitress brought the bill. Jennifer reached for her purse, but I promptly stopped her. “I’ve got it, don’t worry.”

“We’ll split it.”

I shook my head. “No, we won’t.” I removed my debit card from my wallet and inserted it into the machine. Best sixty dollars I’d ever spent. With that out of the way, we jacketed-up and left the

restaurant. The air had cooled down considerably, to the point of chills. We stood in silence for a moment, but Jennifer broke it.

“You know what, Harry? I had a great time tonight. Thank you.”

“Me too—thank you.” I shuffled my feet. “Look, before I let you go, there’s something I need to tell you about me. You’ll probably laugh and think I’m a freak-”

“I will not, trust me.”

“Okay. Well...,” I trailed off. I’d walked myself into a corner; it was do-or-die. “My name isn’t Harry Bailey. It’s Harry... Baum.”

She giggled. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“That’s kind of cute!”

I felt as if the weight had been lifted off my chest. “You don’t think I’m a freak?”

“Of course not; it’s just your name!”

“Wow... thanks, Jen.”

Her facial expression hardened. “Never call me Jen.” I flinched, and opened my mouth to apologize. “No,” she sighed, “it’s not your fault, Harry. It’s hard to explain... Uh, my... my name last name is Nitles” —pause— “I’m Jen Nitles.”

Two years later, we got married and became Mr. and Mrs. Scott.