

## Jupiter and the 3D-Printed Raincoat

*Tell me about yourself.* When Ben was fresh out of culinary school and applying for restaurant work he'd been asked that very question, and said something about growing up as the quiet kid with a nervous stutter, being the first in his family to go to college, teaching high school, and out of nowhere discovering a passion for cooking. It's technically true. But it leaves out a lot. It's a story you tell at a job interview, not at a 40+ singles night. And when it comes to *that* Ben hasn't the foggiest where to start.

The singles night, for the record, was not Ben's idea. His friends had floated the concept last week, between innings five and six at the first Red Sox game of the season.

"It's been five years," James had said. "Maybe it's time to get back out there."

First off, the first Red Sox game of the season is sacred, and here James goes ruining it with a well-intentioned push to, what, download that Grindr doodad everyone's raving about? Is that what people are doing nowadays? Second off, James *must* know it hasn't been five years, but four years and seven months since Ben's wife, Sarah, passed away from breast cancer. Sarah was everything Ben isn't: adventurous, outgoing, good with people. Why get back out there, or, god forbid, download *Grindr*, for anyone else? Then again, Ben is forty-one now, and his daughter, Ellie, is starting at MIT in the fall—and moving out of the apartment to do so. Being alone forever with just the cat for company sounds...bleak.

So.

"You're doing the singles thing?" Ellie asks from behind a pile of AP Bio flashcards as Ben emerges from the bathroom, freshly shaved and questioning several life decisions.

"Um. I guess."

"Gross. Can Peter come over tonight?"

Peter is Ellie's boyfriend. He's incredibly sweet; Ben couldn't hate him if he tried.

"Only if—"

"We're 3D-printing a raincoat for Jupiter."

Ben imagines their cat, harbinger of chaos and ruler of beasts, pouting in a duck-yellow raincoat, and acquiesces against his better judgement. Then he leaves the apartment for Seaport, also against his better judgement.

It is often said that after a loved one dies everything stops, but after Sarah, everything felt like it was moving too fast, a perpetual freefall of medical bills and funeral planning and

casserole dishes. Ben adopted Jupiter out of a desperate need for connection, which did wonders until Ben realized the casserole dishes would only last so long. And there's nothing like hitting platinum status on Domino's delivery app to finally get you in the kitchen. It took trial and error—a lot of it, actually, but after a successful attempt at fettuccine alfredo, Ben discovered he loved cooking. Like, *love* loved it. Like, *make a major career switch in your late thirties* kind of love. Now Ben is a culinary school grad working in the restaurant industry, and honestly, he wouldn't change it for a thing.

So Ben knows he can do anything he sets his mind to. Ben might be shy, but he's talked to women before—with success, mind you—and can totally do it again. Even at forty-one. Even when he hasn't been on a first date in twenty years. At least this is what he tells himself on the T ride to the disgraced neighborhood of Seaport, fixing his hair and rolling up his shirtsleeves, wiping clean his glasses.

Ben can do anything he sets his mind to. But is four years and seven months of grief counseling and bawling over commercials with couples in them, adopting the cat and going back to the gym and making new friends and learning to cook—does that growth, the happiness he's found in his life since, mean he's moved on? Has he really set his mind to this?

*You won't know unless you try.* That's what Sarah would say. So Ben quits panic-preening and steps off the T into Boston's most gentrified neighborhood, due east for middle-aged singles and awkward small talk. Here he is, trying.

Ben's obnoxious hatred of Seaport is an inside joke among his friends from ages ago, in the early 2000s when they were first becoming friends. Back then the whole neighborhood was basically one giant parking lot, and they'd made fun of it for that, and then seemingly overnight it became whatever overpriced nonsense it's become, and now they make fun of it for all new manner of reasons. Ben imagines telling all of them about it afterward: *you won't believe what they're calling the new hotel, and it smelled like fish guts.*

The event itself is in the Seaport YMCA, which is totally dead. There's not even a receptionist to help out poor, directionally challenged souls who've already admitted defeat in the dating department. Way to knock someone while they're down. Ben's loafers squeak on the linoleum flooring in a fruitless search for a map, or an arrow, or anything useful. But there, finally, is a sign for the event by the staircase and then, down the hall, another, and there it is. The doors are closed; maybe it's cancelled. Hopefully it's cancelled. *Please* let it be cancelled.

Ben is about to turn around and run for the hills when he spots a woman standing in front of the doors, sort of hidden by the shadows cast by the fluorescent overheads. She looks relieved to see him, as if she has survived some sort of apocalyptic event and Ben is the first person she's seen since the nuclear blast. Singles nights at the Y will do that to you.

"Are you also here for the social?" She wraps her arms around a floral-length sundress; it's warm outside, but in here the AC is on blast. Ben shrugs, then nods. "Oh, thank god. I don't have to go in alone! I'm Joy, by the way. Joy Flores."

"Ben Baker."

"That's a nice name. Y'know, I'm new to the East Coast and everything, and I thought if nothing else this'd be a good way to make friends, like, I mean, it'd just be nice to meet people outside of work and everything, but I haven't been on a first date in *ages*, honestly, over ten years, so it's nice I'm not going in alone. Is what I meant."

"Um. Right."

This is good; this Joy character can do all the talking and Ben can do all the not-talking, and if they go in together it won't be so scary. He gives an awkward smile to communicate this, suddenly wondering if she can tell by his arms that he lifts, or has she clocked how fucking terrified he is? Ben remembers being shy and bookish as a kid, getting teased for that. Remembers approaching Sarah at that party on New Year's Eve in 2001, both drunk out of their minds, saying *wanna do something dumb?* How he'd felt confident for the first time in his life. And how, during a brunch rush early on a Saturday afternoon, nobody in the kitchen cares if you're awkward or not, only if you know how to make an omelet right. Joy doesn't point out how anxious Ben must look, or the nervous sweat stains under his armpits. Maybe tonight will be okay after all.

That optimism lasts all of about five seconds, when they open the doors to find a room full of people who are *definitely* over forty. In fact most of them appear to be octogenarians. Fifty-odd pairs of elderly men and women are grouped up, playing BINGO and nodding off mid-conversation, smelling of soup and mildew. One man, squinting through his bifocals, cannot see the BINGO board. His partner keeps turning up her hearing aids and shouting *WHAT?* every time the facilitator announces a letter-number combination. And on the sign just inside the doors, in fine print: *THIS SINGLES NIGHT IS SPONSORED BY LAKEVIEW NURSING HOMES & ASSISTED LIVING SERVICES.*

Joy bursts out laughing.

“This is,” she says, gasping for air, “the funniest thing that’s happened to me in ages.”

Joy is pretty when she laughs, with her dimples and dark eyes scrunched up from smiling.

The thing about cooking is that rules and recipes are more like gentle suggestions, and if you don’t mess around with them a bit, experiment, test things out, then they’re going to taste as stale and bland as if you were eating the recipe book itself. You learn by watching how other people make X or Y item on the menu, and then do it your way regardless. It was the hardest part of being in the kitchen for Ben to wrap his head around. After all, one of his greatest talents is overthinking, followed closely by anxious pacing and existentialism. But once he got the hang of it, cooking came naturally. And so, to an extent, did confidence.

“Forgive me if this is too forward,” Ben says, “but I’m thinking we ditch this and go out for dinner instead.”

Which is how they end up at a pub a safe distance from Seaport, watching literally anything except each other in the longest awkward silence ever recorded, praying the waitress comes by with the complementary soft pretzels to break it. Joy is pretending the Irish flag on the back wall is the most fascinating thing in the world. Ben stares pointedly at the Sox game on TV. The Blue Jays are up by three. Abysmal. And is that waitress ever—

“Okay,” Joy says, setting down her menu, resting her chin on her hands. There’s a smudge of dried paint on her forearm; she must not notice it. “You’ve taken me on this date, but it’s been like twenty minutes and you haven’t told me about yourself at all.”

Oh, god. Here it is. After all that planning and worrying about it earlier on, Ben’s mind goes blank in terms of what one could feasibly say about oneself. In fact, all he can think to do is make this nightmarish admission: “Well, this is my first first date in twenty years.”

“Don’t worry about it. I was in your boat a month ago, and that date went *bad*. Like, he was into crypto and everything.”

“Suddenly the bar is on the floor,” Ben says, and they both laugh. Well, okay, they both hate crypto. There’s something. “Which, thank god, ‘cause my only conversation starter is showing off pictures of my cat.”

“No way!” Joy says, eyes lighting up. “My only conversation starter is showing off pictures of my dog! His name’s Alfie, and he’s a golden retriever, and he’s so cute, like a crotchety old man; here, I’ll show you photos once I find them.”

“I’m on the edge of my seat.” In the end they end up talking mostly about their pets, and after the soft pretzels Ben purposefully keeps the geeking out over this new show on the Food Network to a minimum, and Joy casually mentions owning a tattoo business, and Ben asks her about the craziest tattoo she’s ever given someone, and suddenly two hours have gone by.

“I moved here from San Diego after the divorce,” Joy is saying. “I guess I thought I needed some major change or something, but it was kind of an impulse decision, which isn’t something I normally do. In the sense that usually I really think things out. But this I didn’t, and it’s kind of been a mess, to be honest with you.”

“How so?”

“Well, it’s been so lonely here that I just went to a geriatric singles night in a place called *Seaport*. Don’t you think the name’s kinda stupid? Like, it’s by the sea; of course it’s a port. You don’t have to say it twice.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying! For two decades!”

Joy laughs for what must be the twentieth time that night, and Ben finds, for what must be the twentieth time that night, that he really, *really* likes her laugh. That, and the tattoo of a sun on her shoulder, and the way she mixes ketchup with barbecue sauce for her French fries—it’s the right way to do it, which few are enlightened enough to understand. Joy talks about living in San Diego, the family she left behind, which members of said family like barbecue sauce mixed in with their ketchup. And Ben isn’t thinking about how embarrassing it was that he’d shown up to the wrong date night or if he looks okay or how this game will cost the Sox the World Series, *again*. Actually he’s thinking about San Diego, or what Joy will have to say next.

By the time they leave the sky is twilight-purple, the sun having dipped below the horizon over an hour before, and there’s a cool breeze coming off the harbor. Joy lives closeby, and so Ben walks her home because that’s what you do, plus also he doesn’t want to stop talking with her. Luckily Joy is running low on paint, so they get sidetracked in a crafts store. Then Ben finds out Joy hasn’t been to Boston Common yet, and they get sidetracked again, so it’s another ninety minutes before they find their way to a tall, brick apartment building near Chinatown.

The last few hours have felt like the best parts of cooking. Because since the octogenarian episode, Ben has trusted his gut instead of listening to the little voice in his head worrying over how long is long enough. But now all that worry about what’s normal when you’re forty-one and

unfamiliar with the current dating scene or what Grindr is comes rushing back. And now he's got no clue what to say.

"That was really nice." And then, after a stagnant awkward pause: "Um. Yeah."

"I had a lot of fun," Joy says, which is really the same thing but put a lot more eloquently. "You're really nice, and also thank you for paying for dinner; you really didn't have to do that. Next time I'll make it up to you. Well, if you want there to be a next time. Sorry, sometimes I talk too fast and forget what I'm saying, so I shouldn't have assumed—"

"I'd like there to be a next time." This comes out of nowhere, an admission that shocks the both of them.

"Oh. Well, me, too."

"Okay," Ben says. "Um. Bye."

"Bye," Joy says, and then says it again as if it'll be less weird the second time, and then she goes inside and Ben, too wired to take the T, walks twenty-two blocks home.

There's giggling outside the door of the apartment, and Ben smiles to himself while fumbling with the keys. Actually he hasn't been able to quit smiling since the restaurant. The door squeaks open, and there are Ellie and Peter in hysterics over the sight of Jupiter in his little raincoat. Peter is taking pictures like their living room is the red carpet. Jupiter is *not* amused.

"How was it?" Ellie asks.

"Kind of a bust," Ben says, which isn't a lie; it's not like the octogenarians had much to offer. "How were things here?"

"Great, Mr. Baker," Peter responds. "Thank you."

"Mrow," Jupiter complains.

Getting ready to curl up in bed with the latest Food Network cookbook, Ben imagines what it will be like next time he meets up with his friends. James will almost certainly ask how the singles night went, and Ben will say *James, you really mucked the whole thing up. I mean you really blew it. It was all 80-year-olds; I'm not even kidding.*

Out in the living room there are more laughs; it sounds like they're watching television now. That's good. Ellie spends too much time studying, so Ben hopes Peter will stay a while longer, and that they'll ask for dinner. Because soon Ellie will be an astronaut or astrophysicist or whatever it is, and she's got plenty of time to be a grown-up with grown-up problems like making friends after moving across the country and becoming a chef or getting tattoos. Because

one day someone, whether it's at a job interview or a meet-and-greet in the Seaport YMCA, will ask her to talk about herself. And these are the days she'll look back on to do just that.

*But you'll never guess who I met outside.*