

Anticipating a Blind Date

by Abram Olson & Angela Boyle

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Both of us (Abram and Angela) are continually working to hone our storytelling skills. The following stories were inspired by *The Short Story Writer's Companion* by Tom Bailey. The exercise was to first write a list of attributes about a character. Nothing specific, just a list of random facts such as shoe size and favorite ice cream. Then we were to write a scene where that character has a motivation—in this case heading out for a blind date—and include as many of those details as possible while still writing an engaging scene.

We reviewed our scenes together at the time and provided critiques. A year or so later (i.e., now), we came back to these stories and revised again with our new skills and minds. But this time, we recorded our critiques for our podcast, *Dodos Discuss!* The stories included here have been revised based on that conversation.

For more about the *Dodos Discuss* podcast:

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532 Steps

Abram Olson

Clarice discovered that agreeing to a blind date was the perfect way to ruin her week. She had felt paralyzed since her alarm went off Thursday morning, unable to go about her regular daily patterns because THE DATE loomed on the horizon in the way that social events do for introverted people. Like a sword of Damocles. Or a meteorite that, having lit up the sky at a great distance, crawled closer, got bigger, brighter, and more terrifying with every mental glance in its direction. She had no idea what to expect, having never been on a blind date before, and her imagination worked to fill the emptiness of her experience with every permutation of possibilities that it was capable of creating.

On Thursday and Friday, she had been busy at work and that had kept her mind occupied. But on Saturday morning she sat up in bed at 6 am feeling like she'd been electrocuted. Her mind was filled with fragmented pieces of a nightmare, her heart racing, and her stomach tied in knots.

In the dream she had been trapped in a bathroom with glass walls. This glass-walled bathroom was in the middle of a wide sidewalk. A very busy sidewalk. Think New York during the morning commute. Her bladder was full to the point of excruciating discomfort. She struggled to pee in as furtive a manner as she could but an endless line of pushy anonymous people stalked in and out of the bathroom. Some berated

her for taking so long and then turned their backs on her while she stammered a response. Others asked if she could spare some change. Or a cigarette. A few walked up to her with purpose and then stood glowering down at her with the intensity of a boxer trying to intimidate an opponent before the match.

Her work friend Janice—perfect skin, incredible taste, athletic—had told Clarice over lunch break on Wednesday that her boyfriend’s friend, Derek, was “a really fine person with a great sense of humor.” Clarice feigned interest while she munched away on her lunch salad, not realizing that Janice was testing the waters and would take Clarice’s apparent interest as evidence that she might be open to meeting Derek.

When Janice said, “You and Derek should go out for dinner this weekend!” Clarice stifled a gasp and sucked a half-chewed leaf of lettuce down her throat. It latched on to her uvula, triggered her gag reflex, and she coughed and sputtered, trying not to barf.

“Are you alright? Do you need help?” asked Janice looking very concerned as Clarice’s face turned red.

The lettuce came loose and Clarice swallowed it, disgusted with herself and the lettuce.

“No. I’m fine. Thank you.” She smiled trying to play it cool.

Clarice was stunned. *Does this really happen? Do people really try to set up their work friends with random people just because?* She didn’t want to disappoint Janice, whose excitement with playing matchmaker shone bright in her eyes and happy smile.

Satisfied that Clarice wasn’t going to choke to death on her lunch, Janice continued singing the praises of this Derek guy. Clarice chewed her lunch with great care and imagined herself screaming, “Not interested!” as she swept their lunches off the table in a dramatic gesture before running away.

But Clarice was sure that Janice would mock her if she declined, and Clarice hated being mocked. Even more than being set up on a blind date.

Mockery was her mother’s preferred method of getting her children and husband to do what she wanted. Clarice knew from sad and much-regretted

experience that she could be manipulated by this tactic as easily as a child can be manipulated with candy. She hated this about herself as much as she was unable to change this part of herself. What's worse, she was afraid that if she asked her friends and coworkers not to mock her, and explained why, they would be encouraged to exploit her by this vulnerability.

Clarice was more surprised than Janice when she heard herself say, "Sure, Derek sounds great. I'd like to meet him." She covered her surprise by stuffing her mouth full of salad and nodding while she chewed. The lettuce must have been in cahoots with Janice since it didn't jump down her throat and choke her to death for saying such a stupid thing.

Janice was ecstatic and spent the rest of their lunch break talking about all the exciting double dates that they could go on if Clarice and Derek hit it off.

Clarice typically spent her Saturday mornings cleaning her apartment. In the afternoons she did her grocery shopping for the coming week. In the evenings she cooked herself a nice dinner, something with a lot of leftovers so she didn't have to make dinner on work nights. And then she curled up on the couch to eat while reading a book. On this Saturday she did all of her normal things, but as fast as she could, while her mind spent every free moment envisioning several multiverses' worth of disasters.

Really, being stood up would be best. Then I can just enjoy dinner and go home and read. It would be a relief to be stood up!

But what if he does show up and he's one of those guys that think he's super sexy and leaves way too many buttons undone at the top of his shirt and a jungle of chest hair pokes out like a gross, wiry Brillo pad? What if he bathes in aftershave? Or has medical grade halitosis? What could be worse than that? He could talk in excruciating detail about his ex. Or his mom. Or how great he thinks he is at sex. This is getting grim. What if he has an earnest love for Jesus that makes me want to stuff my napkin down his throat? Or he might think that Lyndon LaRouche is the smartest man in the history of smart men? What could be worse than that? Thinking that he's going to be a billionaire because his cat leaves him stock tips in its litterbox every morning? At least that would be funny!

Clarice hadn't had much luck dating since moving to Seattle. She hadn't had much luck dating at all, really. She'd gone out with Dave Woods off and on through high school but only because he asked her to all the dances. He was fun to dance with and they'd always had a good time. But they'd lost touch after graduation and then, a few years later, she'd been walking home from work and had seen him in a café on Broadway. She was just about to wave and tap on the window to get his attention when he kissed the man sitting next to him. Clarice had broken into a grin. She walked home happy for Dave and relieved to finally understand why their relationship had been so strictly platonic.

While she ate lunch on Saturday, Clarice decided to cancel. She felt good about the decision. She took a bite of her tart juicy Granny Smith apple. A line of juice ran down her chin and she wiped it away with the back of her hand. She remembered last fall, after having a class with him two quarters in a row, she had worked up the courage to ask Rob Jones out for a beer. And he said yes! Clarice felt like she was walking an inch above the floor everywhere she went for the next few days. She spent an embarrassing amount of time dreaming about how the date might go in the days leading up to it.

Rob canceled forty-seven minutes before they were supposed to meet. Clarice was tying her shoes when he called. She listened to him tell her answering machine that "something came up" and he "wouldn't be able to make it."

And then, in what was either a miracle or an Olympic-level display of assiduous avoidance, they were never alone in the same room again for the rest of the quarter.

And he didn't come back to school for winter quarter.

Sure, his mother died. Or his dad got cancer. Or his brother was in a catastrophic car accident. Those were the rumored reasons for his disappearance. Clarice collected each of them and held them in the darkest place in her heart where her deepest fears lived. She knew, no matter what everyone else thought, that he had said yes to her because she had put him on the spot and he didn't want to hurt her feelings. Then as the time of the date got closer and closer, he realized that he was

so disgusted by her big feet, waxy yellow chicken skin, and dull cow eyes that he would rather uproot his life and move to another city to avoid ever seeing her again.

Clarice was sure that this is what happened, and no matter how nervous and anxious she felt, she believed that a bad date was better than a canceled date if for no other reason than a bad date had a definitive end. So, she changed her mind again and decided that she would go on the blind date with this Derek guy.

The Metro Diner serves a mean hot dog. Not as good as dad makes on his grill but nostalgia's probably giving dad's dogs the edge. They should use all-beef Ball Park franks instead of the fancy-schmancy, artisanal, free-range wieners. A hot dog isn't supposed to taste so good that you want to eat it on its own. Its only job is to provide a meaty, salty, fatty undercurrent to the rest of the flavors. Could a date even be considered a failure if you have a great hot dog before it ends?

What the fuck is wrong with me? Why do I have such powerful opinions about hot dogs? she thought to herself. Not for the first time.

The date was at 7:30. Clarice had to leave her apartment no later than 7:15. At least once a month, she had a dinner of hot dogs at the Metro Diner. She knew almost to the second how long the walk would take, how many steps it would take to get there. Four minutes thirty-seven seconds if she hit both of the crosswalks right. About 532 steps, depending on how busy the Bear Cave, the gay bar on her way, was. Sometimes the line blocked the street and she had to go around which added 212 steps. Tonight, she gave herself an extra ten minutes so that, if she lost something, she'd have a few minutes to look for it. As well as time to deal with a potentially long line outside the Bear Cave.

Clarice started getting ready at 4 pm. She just couldn't stand waiting any longer. She needed to do something active to prepare. Anything to get her mind off hot dogs and whether she should cancel the date. So she painted her nails with her favorite bright green polish. Once they were dry, she took a shower. She shaved her legs with more single-mindedness and attention to detail than usual. She was shocked when she got out of the shower and saw that forty-three minutes had passed.

She felt both awe at what she had achieved—her normal approach to a shower was to get in and get out in as little time as possible—and nervous dismay at all the water she'd wasted. Her normal shower lasted about six minutes. If her apartment was very cold and the warm water felt really great, she might stretch things out to a luxurious eight minutes.

After getting out of the shower, she stood in the steamy bathroom and brushed her teeth. Clarice made gentle swirling motions and counted the seconds she brushed in each quadrant like her mom taught her when she was young. With years of practice, Clarice had managed to forget the screaming and tears that had accompanied her early toothbrushing lessons.

Then she walked to her bedroom and stood on the short grayish-tan carpet in her bare feet. She stared at the folded jeans, socks, underwear, bra, and shirt that she had laid out before lunch when she had finished folding the laundry.

She sighed, pulled the towel off, and threw it across the room more or less in the direction of the dirty clothes basket. Forgetting the towel existed only a moment after it left her hand, she put on her bra and underwear and then stared at the jeans.

Ugh. Jeans.

She went to the closet and slid her sparse collection of dresses back and forth on their hangers while she compared and contrasted their qualities. *Too short, too long, not warm enough, I thought I gave that away?* Then she took out the dress she'd bought with her friend Joy one summer afternoon last year. A black, knee-length A-line with a red rose pattern. It was sleeveless although it had nice floral lace at the shoulders and across the front of her chest.

Clarice had worn the dress just once, on the night she bought it. After shopping, she and Joy had gone out for drinks. Joy had just broken up with her boyfriend and spent most of the evening telling stories of his stupidity and selfishness. Toward the end of the night, at the penultimate moment of a dramatic story, Joy made a sweeping gesture and knocked over the full, fresh margarita that had just been delivered to Clarice. It splashed up onto Clarice's face and chest and ran over the lip of the table onto her lap. Clarice ran to the bathroom without a word and found

herself holding in tears as she cleaned the sticky mess from her face and hair. She splashed water onto her new dress and rubbed at the wet spots with wadded-up paper towels until it felt almost not sticky.

At the table, Joy had ordered a replacement margarita. She was apologetic in the over-the-top way of drunk people, and Clarice spent the rest of the night reassuring Joy that she wasn't mad and that they were still friends every few minutes as the memory came and went in Joy's mind.

After walking Joy home and helping her into pajamas and bed, closing Joy's apartment door and starting down the stairs for the street, she felt relieved to be on her way home and free of that drunken neediness.

When Clarice got home that night, she wondered what to do to clean the dress. She had no idea and trying to find out seemed so overwhelming that she instead threw it on the floor by the hamper and forgot about it. The dress lay against the wall, crumpled and forgotten, stinking of margarita and cigarette smoke, for almost three weeks before she decided that she'd just wash it like normal clothes and hope it wasn't destroyed. The dress had survived her mistreatment and had hung in the closet ever since, making its way further and further out to the end of the rack as Clarice worked her way through her regular wardrobe.

Clarice appreciated that the dress allowed her to wear one of her regular bras so she didn't feel like her boobs might fall out at any moment. It was also the nicest, most formal piece of clothing that Clarice owned, which wasn't saying much. Her standard outfit was a denim skirt, worn with tights (usually a vibrant color), and a collared shirt with a cardigan. Most days she almost, but not quite, made it into "poor person business casual" territory, which was her goal.

She pulled the dress off its hanger, and put it on, struggled a moment with the zipper on her back, finally got it pulled up all the way, and then went to the bathroom to look at herself.

Not bad. She thought. She jumped up and down a few times before determining that her boobs remained properly restrained. She then immediately thought, *Does this dress make me look too eager?* Then: *Fuck it. I never really get a chance to dress up. Might as well enjoy it. And I can tell Joy that I wore the dress. She'll like hearing that.*

Clarice then finished drying her hair and put on just enough makeup that she looked like she wasn't wearing any. Then she went into the living room and put on her largest and clunkiest pair of boots. She loved this particular pair of boots because they were as reflective as a mirror, black, and they had large glow-in-the-dark stars all over them.

She was thinking about whether she wanted fries or onion rings with dinner when she noticed that it was 7:14. *Oh, how hilarious would it be if I was late after spending all day waiting for this date to start?* Clarice pulled on her leather biker jacket, swung her large purse over her shoulder, grabbed the keys off the table by the door, turned the lights off, and walked out to the street.

It was raining. Clarice jogged from overhang to overhang as she made her way to the diner. Traffic was thick and slow, and she passed crawling cars full of miserable-looking people on her way to the restaurant.

Her guts were churning as she pushed the door open.



Don't Say “Delish”

Angela Boyle

Marguerite found a squeaker of a spot for her little green Geo Metro just down the street instead of halfway across town as expected. She was early for her blind date and procrastinating in the restaurant foyer. Like her car gurgling on a windy day down a street of potholes, her attention bounced between the bar and the dining room.

Bar. From there, she wouldn't feel the watery eyes of the waitstaff assuming she had been stood up. She could pretend she hadn't arrived twenty-five minutes early.

The lighting in the bar was dim as if intending to encourage intimacy or mystique, but it just made it hard for Marguerite to see. She squinted around the room, blinking in a futile attempt to force her eyes to adjust. Every surface was either dark and shiny, or chrome. All the hard surfaces made the conversations bounce around and become muddled together, mushing into a clamor louder than background noise.

At the bar, she stared at the stool that came up nearly to her armpit. Her friend Melissa—who had set up this bad idea—had also convinced her to wear a skirt. After forced skirts in private school—even worse, forced orange corduroy skirts—she scorned skirts or dresses after graduating. And since she had wide hips and a big bottom, all skirts (and pants, for that matter) were tight and loose in all the wrong places. But Melissa of the long legs and glossy hair had made her get a black, almost

metallic, pencil skirt and a loose ivory silk blouse to go with her necklace of mustard-colored beads, setting it on the counter at the store and waiting with a smile for Marguerite to produce her card.

The beads of the necklace were small at her neck and bloated toward her inconspicuous cleavage, ending with a bead the size of a baby's fist. Marguerite had stolen it from her mother's "discard" jewelry box, filled with all the items she couldn't get rid of because someone "special" had given them to her. It was from Marguerite's uncle who had died in a peculiar birding accident in Ottawa. Her mother had said it looked like it was made of pieces of baby poop. It also held the platinum and opal necklace handed down the generations to the oldest girl in the family. Her mother also chose to wear dickies under sweatshirts featuring kittens in flowers.

Marguerite perched a black Mary Jane Fluevog on the lowest rung for leverage, knees clamped together. In a gymnastic move seen in fashionable bars everywhere, she leapt and spun into the seat. Bracing her arms on the bar, she just made it. Maybe a 7.2. Precarious dismount. At 5 foot 3, she was only an inch shorter than the average American woman. She didn't understand why bar stools should be so hard to get onto.

The bartender sidled up in front of her, leaning on one elbow. He had frosted tips that were out of place next to his crow's feet. Based on the visible ravages of time, he looked about as old as her—forty-nine. In his cheap, starchy black vest and yellowing white, button-up shirt, he grinned like he was insurmountably sexy. "What can I get for you, doll?"

"Is there a special?" She wasn't much of a drinker, so she didn't have a go-to (other than not-beer).

"Pomegranate martini. Delish."

Delish? Who says *delish*? It made her want the drink less, but she wanted to order quickly more than to avoid a *delish* drink. "Sounds good."

"I'll have that right over." He turned to grab some items and shake them around. He almost twirled the bottles and shuffled the other items quickly like a timid juggler. If she were drunk, she might be impressed. Maybe three martinis later into the night.

"Thanks," she said when he set down the dark purple-red drink on a damp paper napkin.

He grinned at her for a second, but when she didn't say anything, he wandered down the bar toward another woman. She'd smiled back but couldn't think of anything else to say. Perhaps, *Slick moves*. Or, *Fine shooting, cowboy* (with finger guns, obviously). Or, *Wanna come over here and smother my existential screams with those pale but toned arms?* Yes, silence was a fine response to his painted grin.

Marguerite looked up from her drink. Behind the rows of liquor were lighted mirrors. Between bottles, she spied her reflection. With the subtlety of an ant on a white bread and bologna sandwich, she patted down her graying hair, smoothing the straight bob. She moved her head around to see in the slivers of mirror, checking her face and looking for bad wrinkles. Not that there was a good wrinkle. Or anything she could do about any wrinkle. Perhaps face her better side to him? If she could figure out which one that was. If she had one. That line of logic could go on for a while, so she took a sip of martini instead. Not bad. Certainly not *delish*.

There was a menu on the bar a couple of stools down. Wrapping her legs around the stool as an anchor, she reached for it, almost toppling from the chair. Good thing she did Jazzercise and could crush a watermelon with her thighs. It was a small menu—two pages—but not stupidly overpriced. Thank you, again, Melissa. She had said this guy—Yasir—would get the check, but that felt so . . . *Mad Men*. He was a programmer for some car company and was tolerably well off. He'd probably pay the whole bill without even thinking about it. So why wasn't a "good catch" like this married? Who knows. Maybe his face looked like a butt. Or his personality did. But Melissa had said he was nice and good-looking. Maybe she meant when compared to Marguerite. Well, she'd find out soon enough, wouldn't she. No sense picking roses before they even have buds.

She held the menu out as far as her arms could reach before remembering to take off her driving glasses. Holding the menu nearly to her nose, trying to see in the dim light, she squinted at the *delish* options. Even though there was bangers and mash on the menu, she decided to order the vegan eggplant couscous. She aspired to go vegan, so she chose vegan options when she could (make herself). But she cherished eggs

and cheese. And bratwurst made life worth living. The snap of the taught casing with each cut. The browning from the Maillard reaction staining the sour cream. But vegan eggplant couscous was fine, too.

She took her phone from her bag—a glorified waxed canvas tote with pockets inside. Still twenty minutes until he should arrive. She should have parked farther away just so she wouldn't have to wait so long. She played with her phone a bit, just swiping between screens without focus. As much as she thought it would be cool to be a hacker—fighting for the little guy and cracking government codes—she had also set an alarm for 8 am on Thursday six months ago and still hadn't figured out how to turn it off.

She dug back into her bag to pick something to read. She always pretended she didn't know what she would be in the mood to read when out and about, but she always made the same choice: a quick-read, scientific-minded magazine. Tonight, she had brought a thriller, *Fair Warning* by Michael Connelly. She was about halfway through, and if this date didn't go well, she would probably stay up late trying to finish it when she got home. She also had *Moby Dick*. She hadn't even finished the first chapter, though she had read the first page twelve times in the last four weeks. She kept falling asleep or getting distracted by dirty dishes. Her pick now was, unsurprisingly, the latest *Discover Magazine*.

The lead article was “5 Hominid Skulls That Changed Our Understanding of Human History.” A second lengthy article was “Hidden from View: The Most Interesting Rare Orchids.” At Once and Floral where she was the head florist, they had a regular customer, Vigdis, who was enthralled with orchids but killed each one she brought home. She was in her eighties, and every Sunday they would chat when she came in after church, wearing one of her many gaudy hats, to get a new arrangement for her dining room table. Marguerite held the magazine at arm's distance, took off her glasses again, and then squinted at the description of the discovery of the Venus Slipper. At least she'd have some talking points for the rosy-cheeked, cloudy-eyed orchid killer even if Yasir didn't show up.



Regarding the Writers

Abram Olson is a photographer, printer, and tutor. He has been entranced by the natural world for most of his life. When his hair reaches untenable '80s length, he lets his wife cut it into a mohawk. He is currently a key figure at a university graphic design production lab. Abe also does freelance color correction and offers one-on-one tutoring in photographic methods and techniques, the Adobe Creative Cloud applications, and digital printing. Some of his closest friends are crows, and he loves Stellar's jays.

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Angela Boyle is a natural science illustrator and cartoonist. She received an MFA in cartooning from The Center for Cartoon Studies in 2016. The Brazilian tapir is her favorite animal, only partly because it has a mohawk. She runs the natural science comic anthology *Awesome 'Possum* (four volumes so far). She is a freelance proofreader and project manager for Chelsea Green Publishing, and does freelance graphic design work for First Second. She is the writer on *Maker Comics: Live Sustainably*, coming from First Second in April 2022. She most closely resembles the Stellar's jay.

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