

The Date

Emma Rennison

Not now. Not here.

It's happening.

I'm ignoring you.

You can't.

Please. Please leave me alone. Come back later. Tomorrow. When I'm by myself.

That's not as much fun.

There he is. Be normal. Smile. You've done it before. It'll be okay.

No. No, it won't. This is only the beginning. Here we go. First, it's the hiccup that gets stuck in your throat making your stomach begin to churn.

I'm not sick. I'm not going to throw up. It's all part of the process. You're just a tiny part of my brain. An insignificant chemical. You are nothing.

Hey you. It's great to see you again.

Hi. Good to see you too. I like the shirt. That's not part of your teacher's wardrobe, is it? I hope you haven't been waiting too long?

Not at all. I ordered some wine - chardonnay. Is that okay? If not we can get something else. I remembered you liked white, but we can get a red. Or rosé?

Chardonnay is perfect. Thank you.

Knock knock. I'm still here.

No, you're not. I'm okay. Can't you see? Leave me alone.

Why would I do that? We've barely started.

Yeah, and you can stop - I can stop - anytime.

Wrong. You can't fight this, fight me.

But I'm on a date.

Exactly.

We've already ordered wine. He's filled my glass. Actually, maybe that will help. A sip. A read of the bottle. Honey, popcorn, warmth.

You know it won't. In fact, it will make it worse.

I know this! I know it will! But I have to take a sip. It will make me look normal, look human, and not like some slack-mouthed marionette perched motionless with nothing to say or do.

Do it then. It'll make my job easier.

See? I had some. It's all fine. Ha! I can do this. I will do this.

How's your week been?

Pretty good. A new kid joined my class. It's amazing how well he's settled. I was prepared for lots of tears, but there's been none. He's a superhuman!

Sounds like it. How old is he? Six? Seven?

He's seven. Great kid. Really funny. Everyone wants to be his best mate already.

That's sweet!

How about that heat?

What heat? Oh, that. That's not good. That's not right at all. My cheeks are tingling. My armpits. Sodden. I must have a fever. Maybe a stomach bug, or food poisoning. Where have I been? What did I have? What did I touch? Don't let me get sick now. Please.

But I thought you could cope? I thought you felt stronger, in control. I love that just a degree or two forces you right back to me again. It doesn't take much.

Please stop. I was fine. I wasn't even nervous.

So what? You know that doesn't make any difference.

All I need to do is focus. Pick something, anything, and concentrate. The menu. See it. See every single word and stamp it into your mind. Don't skim through it. Take it all in. Take your time. Look at the letters. Look at the sounds they make. Take back control.

We'll see.

How about you?

Not much to report.

Did you go to the cinema? You said you might.

Did I? Oh yes, I did. I went on Thursday.

What did you watch?

Do you know, I can't remember. My mind's gone blank. Are you hot? It's so hot in here. Excuse me.

I have to fix this. I have to go. I need to be okay.

Locking yourself in the toilet won't help this time.

It feels better here though. Safe. Hidden.

And you can take all the deep breaths that you want. They won't work either.

It's something I can do that isn't controlled by you.

Do you know how dirty that floor is you're sitting on? How many germs are waiting to latch on as you stroke the tiles of invisible piss and shit and old flecks of vomit in between the cracks, missed by the mop over and over again? I know you can feel them as they climb onto your skin like an army of ants, marching over your hands to find their way into your mouth as your fingertips flutter over your lips. They are all over you now.

They are not! It's clean. It's a good restaurant. I've never heard of anyone getting sick here.

There's always the first time. And now it's just a waiting game.

No. I'm not listening to you. I can't think about that. I can't.

I love this bit. The retching and gagging until you finally force out nothing more than acidic hot bile. The sweat that pricks every inch of your skin while you strain and strain, heaving into the inevitable.

Please stop this. I don't want to be this person. I want to be back at home. I need to go home.

Home will not change this. It doesn't change who you are. It only means you are alone.

Alone is good. It's safe. I can be me.

Yeah, until I wake you in the early hours of the morning, your heart pounding and no one to share your fear with. That's alone. And don't pretend you like that because I know you.

Stop. Just stop.

I've been with you on those sleepless nights, your cheek squashed against the cool bathroom floor as your legs twist around the base of the toilet waiting for it all to pass.

Do that to me this time. Do it tonight. I'll give you tomorrow as well if you leave me alone.

I'll decide when it happens. It's not up to you. It's never up to you.

I can beat this. Beat you. I can put my disguise back on. Refresh my lipstick. Straighten my hair.

Look at you. Look at the state of you. That seven-year-old boy he told you about can cope better. You're pathetic. An absolute waste. How can you even think you should be here? You aren't like these people, laughing and talking and enjoying themselves. You can't do that. You are not normal. And this, all this, is unfixable. No one can help you. No one can make it better. It's you and me. Always.

No! You're wrong! I'm not talking to you anymore. You're not real. If I ignore you, you'll disappear. Just keep breathing and focus.

Are you okay?

Yeah, I'm okay.

Do you want to look at the menu again? The specials board looks good. I'm saving room for that sticky date pudding.

Yes, please.

You look pale. Would you like some water?

I'm a little tired.

Hi! Hi there. Could we have another bottle of water, please? Here you go, have some of this - that might help.

Thanks.

Have you chosen? The wine's good isn't it? I'll have to remember this one so we can have it again.

It's nice.

It's busy tonight, hey? I haven't been here before, but have heard great reports. Hope it lives up to the reputation!

I'll have the risotto.

Are you sure you're okay?

Nice try, but he knows.

Come on! I was doing well. Why are you still here? Please. Please not the shakes. I've already thrown up. Can't we leave it at that?

I haven't finished with you yet.

Why? This is stupid. I'm stupid. Why does this have to happen to me?

Because you're you. That's who you are. And I am who I am. We come as a package.

I need you to stop.

You can't make me stop. We have to see this through now. We'll do it together.

I don't want to lose this one. He's so nice. If he sees me like this he'll leave. He won't understand. I want to be normal. I want him to see me as a nice normal girl. Not this. He didn't sign up to this package. No one signs up to this package. That's why I'm so good at hiding it.

You think you are, but you're not. Everyone can see you. Everyone knows who you are.

Do they?

Yes. That man looked at you, and the lady over there too. The waiter hasn't taken his eyes off you since you walked in. They are all waiting. Waiting for you to crumble into your own personal demented grand finale.

No! It's not true! Please don't let it be true. I can't stay. I need to go. It's too much. Too many people. I can't get out. There's too much in the way. I'm going to be sick. Where do I go? How do I get out?

I need to leave.

What? Why? We just got here. We ordered the wine.

I can't tell you. I can't explain.

What do you mean?

I need to go.

But I'm starving. I was getting the steak.

I'm sorry.

Tell me what's wrong. Tell me why we have to go.

I can't. I can't talk.

I don't understand.

I'm sorry.

What's wrong with me?

Everything. Everything's wrong with you.

Leave me alone. You've ruined my whole life.

That's what I'm here for.

I don't want to be like this.

Well, you are.

I've messed this whole thing up. Again. I hate myself.

And my job here is done.

Come on. I'll get us a taxi.

Yes.

You're shaking. Are you cold? Your teeth are chattering.

No.

Take my coat. Here we are. Can you get in okay?

Mm-hm.

The Warren please, mate. Mordialloc. Come here. That's better.

Have you gone? Is it over? Am I me again? Hello?

I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for that to happen. I'm sorry I ruined our night.

You didn't. It's okay. But what was wrong? Did I do something?

No. It wasn't you. It's all me.

Don't cry. You can talk to me. I want to help.

I don't know. You might want to run away, not see me again, and I wouldn't blame you. Not for a moment.

You can trust me. I'm here.

Really?

Really.

Emma Rennison's need to write began with a career in PR and communications where she specialised in forestry and conservation issues. She ran campaigns about rare birds, forest fires and - the most controversial of all subjects - dog poo. She moved from the UK and replaced wellies with gumboots, followed by her real hip for a bionic one. She now resides in Melbourne with her husband, two young children and a variety of animals.