

Henry's Date



Imagine, if you will, being on a date with someone who seems a little on edge, though you can't quite put your finger on it. Although he comes across as a nice guy, funny even, the conversation doesn't quite flow. At the end of the date, he walks you to your car. Chivalry died somewhere in the 80's, so you find this gesture admirable. So much so, that you linger at the car, drawing out the conversation, hoping to make the connection that feels just beyond reach. You talk for a while, and he is clearly agitated, becoming more fidgety by the minute. Eventually, he all but shoves you into the driver's seat while hastily making an exit. You never hear from him again.

Now shift your focus to Henry, the date in question. Admittedly, that might be hard to do, as you've only heard one side of the story. You may be surprised to find that Henry is a well-adjusted individual lacking any obvious neuroses. He does, however, have a brain tumour, epilepsy, and he is blind in one eye. Not, he says, the ideal way to introduce yourself to a date.

Henry Meyer led a full, active life when, one day, he noticed a slight drooping in his right eye. As time progressed, his eye would be a little lazy every morning when he woke up. The problem would clear up later in the day. He wasn't too concerned about this in the beginning, but as time passed, the problem worsened and his eye would take longer and longer to recover. Eventually, he knew he had to get to the root of the problem.

His journey started with a visit to the optometrist, who referred him to a specialist at the Eye Institute. When he entered the room after undergoing an MRI, there were three doctors waiting for him. Jokingly, Henry asked if someone was dying. Nobody laughed. He knew their reaction couldn't be good. The doctors broke the news that the MRI had identified a tumour the size of a golf ball.

Finding a neurosurgeon who could explain the diagnosis in layman's terms proved challenging. Finally, Henry found a doctor who used an anatomical dummy skull to show him exactly where the tumour was. Shortly after, they operated and performed a biopsy. The tumour was benign. Brain operations being what they are, he had terrible migraines for a month after the operation. So much so that he needed help taking care of himself. His parents were tremendously caring during this period. With time life returned to normal, and he punctually went for follow up scans over the next two years. Eventually, it was as if none of it ever happened.

After a few years, Henry's eyesight became slightly blurry. Mistaking it for hayfever, he assumed the antihistamines he was taking would solve the problem. When that didn't work, he called on the optometrist again. The optometrist conducted tests and explained that there was no blood flow to the optic nerve. His neurosurgeon confirmed that the tumour had returned and that they needed to operate again. Henry had been training for the Two Ocean's race that was scheduled to take place that weekend.

"If this was going to be my last race, I didn't want to miss the opportunity to run it," he says.

The surgeon agreed to schedule the operation for the Tuesday after the race. "The race was such a special experience, it was an emotional run with many highs and lows". The evening before the operation, he took a walk on the beach. Even though the weather was calm, clouds were rolling in. For him, his circumstances could be described as the perfect storm. On the way to the operating theatre, he wrote down some thoughts deconstructing the nature of a storm. Recalling the notes, Henry says "a storm starts out calmly, the water becomes restless, it gets darker, and clouds form. Eventually, the waves are huge, you're terrified, and you're not sure if you're going to make it. After what feels like forever, it starts calming down and the sun breaks through the clouds. Storms test us, they make us stronger".

Waking up after the second operation, the room was dark. Confused, he asked his girlfriend why the lights were off. She replied that they weren't. "Then why are there bandages on my eyes?", he asked. She was mortified, not knowing how to tell him there were no bandages, and that he couldn't see. Between the time he'd had the doctor's appointment and had the operation, the tumour had cut off the blood flow to his optical nerve, leaving him blind in one eye. The surgeon couldn't risk removing the tumour, for fear of damaging the surrounding tissue, and therefore recommended stereotactic radiation.

For six weeks, Monday to Friday, Henry had an early radiation appointment. "You're alone in the room, you have a lot of time to think, a lot of time to be angry, a lot of time to be thankful, a lot of time to be confused. You go through a million emotions", he says. His relationship couldn't withstand the pressures of his illness and came to an end shortly after.

The radiation successfully shrunk the tumour. It has stopped growing and the doctors expect that it will die out over time. He was warned that he may experience short-term memory loss as a side effect of the radiation. Now, years later, he struggles to remember names and has to use habits to recall where he left his keys.

"It's terribly frustrating not being able to remember whether I've told a story or not. It's embarrassing", he says.

"I tried to use word association to remember names. If your name is Harry, I'd link it to Prince Harry, but then I'd forget the association".

As a result of the operation, Henry developed epilepsy and wasn't allowed to drive for six months. Being resourceful, he would cycle to work, and take the bus around town. Life had settled into a new normal, and friends kept trying to set him up on dates. He finally agreed to meet a girl, albeit reluctantly. He felt that telling a someone on a first date about the brain tumour and that he'd had two brain operations would be a little bit too much information, so he decided to fake it.

Taking the bus to the restaurant was his only option. The plan was to be on time, but it didn't quite work out that way, as the bus was slightly delayed. Close to the restaurant, his phone beeped. "Are you on your way? I'm waiting outside for you". Not wanting to admit to taking the bus, he told her he was just parking the car quickly. He practically ran off the bus so that she wouldn't see him arrive.

Nervous, but well prepared, he'd written her name inside his hand, knowing he would inevitably forget it. The fear that she'd see her name written on the palm of his hand plagued him throughout the date. Unable to relax, he kept worrying that he would repeat himself and come across as strange. "She was a lovely girl, but I just wasn't myself", he recalls. The last bus was scheduled to leave at 10 pm. Walking her to her car, his mind was on the bus timetable, for fear of missing the bus and having no way of getting home. Impressed that he'd walked her to her car, his date dragged out the conversation. Her car was parked right next to the bus stop. Aware that the next bus was the last one for the evening, he was anxious to end the evening and get her on her way, but she just kept talking. A few minutes later he saw the last bus arriving in the distance. Desperately nervous, he opened her car door and unceremoniously nudged her in. She finally drove off as the bus pulled into the parking lot. His nerves in tatters, he promised himself that he would never go through that again, it was just too stressful. "The guy on the date wasn't the guy I normally am. How could I meet someone if I wasn't able to be myself? That was the last time I dated. I decided to take time to focus on my health and regain my confidence", he says.

So if you happen to be on a first date with someone who seems a little more on edge than normal, be kind. You never know the story behind the story.