



Love is Blind

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MEETING ONE – LONG-SIGHTEDNESS

I've tried to explain to Tamsin that love at first sight is much trickier when you have multiple eye defects. I have four: long-sightedness, astigmatism, amblyopia and keratoconus. One for each time we met and didn't fall in love. Although, if I'm to approach this with an accountant's precision, I should point out that when Tamsin first walked into my life, I only knew about three. (The keratoconus that would transform my then-spherical corneas into something resembling the potato-mash pyramids

from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* was still twenty-four months away.) Nevertheless, three turned out to be plenty, and as I lay on the floor of Kim and Harves' share house in North Carlton, I didn't notice that the girl borrowing the art history book had Hollywood eyes, marble skin (albeit of the flecked, not-to-be-used-in-statues variety) and the loveliest laugh on earth.

I put that last bit in about the laugh to make myself seem less superficial, and already it's come back to bite me. The amateur sleuths among you are thinking (and don't get too excited, this is more Encyclopedia Brown than Perry Mason), 'Ah! But if you didn't notice her laugh, you can't blame that on eyesight. You should have heard the laugh, looked up, seen a blurred female outline that might potentially have Hollywood eyes and flecked marble skin, and edged far enough forward so as to fall in love at first (clear) sight.' To this accusation, I can only respond by entering into evidence this conversation:

Tamsin: Thanks so much for the book.

Kim: No worries.

Tamsin: I'll get it back to you by the end of the week.

Kim: No hurry. Take your time. By the way, that's Tony and Harves.

Tony: Hi.

Harves: Hi.

Tamsin: Hi. Anyway, guess I'd better get this essay done. Thanks for the book.

Kim: No problem at all.

Tamsin: Okay. [*short awkward pause*] Bye, everyone.

Harves: Bye.

Tony: See ya.

Kim: Let me see you out.

As you can see, not a lot of laughs. I'm not saying Tamsin didn't insert an inane punctuation giggle in the short awkward pause, but it wasn't a loveliest-laugh-on-earth giggle. It was more likely a better-get-back-to-it giggle. A better-not-speak-or-might-have-to-stay-and-speak giggle. And so my eyesight-related excuse for not falling in love at first sight still holds. Not that I should have to make any excuses. As long as the love-at-first-sight people have the princess from Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Princess and the Pea' in their camp, I remain suspicious. Twenty mattresses, twenty eiderdowns and she complains

about the goddamned pea. Imagine how things turned out once she got confident.

And of course there's the obvious defence: Tamsin didn't fall in love at first sight either. And she has 20/20 vision. Which is fine, by the way. It probably means she is a person of taste, of substance. She just said her goodbyes, and glided away from the threshold of my life, carrying an art history book.

MEETING TWO – ASTIGMATISM

She didn't fall in love with me at second sight either, although that might have been because I was wearing tights. It was Kim's twenty-first birthday party, the theme was 'gypsy', and despite being twenty-one myself, I was still receiving dress-up guidance from my mother. It wasn't like Mum and I didn't have a chequered history with dress-ups. At a primary school Christmas break-up Mum 'branch-formed' an ice-cream container into reindeer antlers that nearly took out an elf's eye. Years later, I was sent home from Year 12 Muck-up Day in my homemade polar bear costume because my real-life, eight-pound cod-on-a-stick was rotting in the October heat. But

drawing inspiration from the Village People, we refused to either end our collaboration or stop dressing up. And so it was that at Kim's twenty-first in July 1993 I delivered the speech in blue tights, a bedazzled red-and-blue silk bolero, black jodhpurs and hoop earrings that even Mum agreed were 'a touch too piratey'.

'But don't worry, darling, the university girls will go for the blue tights. Tell them it's your salute to bluestocking literary ideals. They'll think you're very feminist.'

I count it as a great fortune that, tipsy and armed with this perilously risky pick-up line, I didn't speak to Tamsin that night. She was one of the partygoers – a gypsy in my midst – but we didn't cross paths. Or if we did cross paths, my oval-ish, astigmatic eyeballs didn't do the job of noticing her. Instead I delivered the speech in honour of Kim, and in the words of Tamsin, 'left nobody in any doubt at all that you were *completely* in love with her'. I dispute this, and subsequently have even revisited the text of the speech, just to make sure. Unless I completely lost it in a section that's just marked 'nice bit' at the end, it's absolutely fine. In fact if anything, Kim's twenty-first speech is a textbook example of a single man making a feature of just how single he is, and offering himself to the room at large.

MEETING THREE – AMBLYOPIA

Five years would pass before Tamsin and I would have an opportunity to not fall in love at third sight. The occasion was a share-house party thrown in a North Carlton backyard by four doctors and a management consultant. It doesn't quite have the romantic ring of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, but it did at least have the pouring rain.

'It's pretty wet,' I said to Tamsin and her friend Kate after they came over and introduced themselves. 'I might head on inside.'

We'd been standing there for five or more minutes talking about nothing in particular. I remember thinking they were both very beautiful.

'*Yep*. It really is raining.'

The line had been thrown out there. The *Four Weddings and a Funeral* thing to do would have been for Tamsin (or Kate for that matter) to blink away the torrent and reply with an overwrought, 'Is it still raining? I hadn't noticed.' (*cue violins*) But in *Four Doctors and a Management Consultant*, it was going to take more than rain to kick-start the cinematic score.

'Okay, we might see you in there,' Tamsin said.

‘Okay, cool. Nice to meet you.’

Tamsin now claims she was overacting every bit as badly as Andie McDowell to demonstrate that she was interested. She says that she and Kate had earlier discussed the fact that I had been on television (the 1998 series of the ABC travel documentary program *Race Around the World*), and that this definitely made me a more attractive option. I apparently had ‘celebrity appeal’, even if it was the tawdry neon intersection where the C-list met the D-list. She usually tells this story to support her contention that I was unduly slow to notice her, to fall in love with her. In response, I try to blame amblyopia, and failing that, accuse her (and Kate) of wading-pool levels of shallowness for their shameless celebrity-chasing. It’s an argument I can rely on. Tamsin has also kissed former *Neighbours* star Ashley Paske, whom you and I might know better as Matt the mechanic. The prosecution rests, Your Honour.

We didn’t get together that night. As Tamsin is fond of recounting, I staggered inside, grabbed a handful of Cheezels and went off to have a one-night stand with Lana. In fairness to my decision-making, it was an MA moment in what to that point had been a fairly G-rated life. I’d had

a crush on raucous, vivacious, exotic Lana for most of my university years, but before my ten weeks on the telly, she hadn't really noticed. This time, I batted my eyelashes and miraculously, she noticed. Hooray! Lana possessed some wading-pool shallowness as well. Although it should be said that I'd tinted those eyelashes dark brown for my *Race Around the World* audition. My advice to young single men looking for love? Wear mascara.

Sadly, it was pretty much a G-rated one-night stand. Indeed, in terms of time spent, it was more like a half-night stand. After achieving a drunken inertia, I sobbed for a few minutes over the recent (and as it turned out, thankfully brief) break-up of my parents and then passed out. I woke in the pre-dawn to discover Lana negotiating a daring escape. She'd managed to disembark and dress without disturbing any trip-wires, but then stumbled over a stray shoe sailing on the ocean of neglect that was my bedroom floor.

'Going?'

'Yeah, thought I'd go.'

Lana opened the front door and waved back into the bedroom. I sat bolt upright in bed and waved back. Awkward seconds passed.

Lana shrugged. 'I've got problems too, you know.'

MEETING FOUR – KERATOCONUS

At fourth sight, we definitely started falling in love; it's just that I couldn't remember Tamsin's name, or where I'd met her before. That sounds bad, but only if you're determined for it to. On another analysis (and let's dub this the glass-half-full goldfish theory), love at fourth sight for someone with no recall of the first three meetings is just as romantic as love at first sight. She was stylish, she had auburn-enough-to-be-off-the-hook-at-primary-school red hair, and she knew every word of 'Disco 2000' by Pulp.

'Hi, I'm Tamsin,' she said, materialising at the bar of the Builders Arms Hotel.

'I'm Tony, pleased to meet you.'

'Actually we've met before. A few times.'

'Oh . . . sorry.'

Tamsin, who doesn't smoke, lit a cigarette and blew smoke in my face, to demonstrate just how uninterested she was.

That first (fourth) conversation was about chicken. On *Race Around the World* I'd played a game of chicken in my hire car in the town of Chicken, Alaska, in a scene

that borrowed heavily from such chicken masterpieces as *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Footloose*. I'd gone into the story determined to use the word 'chicken' as many times as possible in four minutes and achieved beyond my wildest dreams. In the thrilling conclusion I was run out of Chicken by a woman in a pick-up who'd fallen in love with her long-bearded, miner/trapper, suspicious-of-strangers husband after answering a personals ad in a pig-shooting magazine.

Tamsin told me she'd enjoyed the story because it had a romantic heart. She said she remembered my final line as I drove out of Chicken, defeated: 'But my time will come, and hopefully it will come elsewhere.' It's only been in recent years that we've discovered that Tamsin interpreted this as meaning my time will come *to fall in love*, just as the woman in the pick-up had fallen in love. What I actually intended was that my time will come *to win a game of car chicken* and I hoped it would be in a town that's a bit more lively than the twenty-nine-person metropolis of Chicken, Alaska. I was thinking perhaps of Canberra, around summernats.

Fortunately, this misconception was not cleared up at the time, because I've since discovered that Tamsin is not

the biggest fan of muscle cars. Instead, we talked chicken, which eventually led us to an analysis of what is undoubtedly the funniest of processed meats: chicken luncheon.

By the time Harves came over, I was seriously impressed. Not everyone knows about luncheon.

‘Um, this is Harves, and Harves this is . . . Actually, this is a bit embarrassing, because I’ve forgotten your name again.’

‘Juliet,’ Tamsin said, throwing out her hand to Harves.

‘Hi Juliet,’ Harves replied. Relieved to finally have a name under my belt, I started throwing it around willy-nilly. ‘That’s great, Juliet . . . Can I get you a drink, Juliet? . . . Okay, I’ll see you back here, Juliet . . .’ Juliet, Juliet, Juliet, Juliet, Juliet.

After an hour or so, another friend, Matt, sauntered over to offer both of us a drink. I threw myself into the introductions, confident at last. ‘Matt this is Juliet. Juliet, Matt.’

‘Actually it’s Tamsin,’ she said, laughing that beautiful laugh and shaking hands again. ‘I’m just sick of him forgetting my name.’ She was Tamsin. I was *him*. And that was the moment I fell for her.

We didn't dance like two people in love. For starters, there were five of us: Tamsin, her two younger sisters, Amanda and Charlotte, her old friend Callum, and me. When the Builders Arms closed, we relocated to the Up Top bar just off Swanston Street – a hideous, ultra-cool doof hole – even though under normal circumstances, the sight of a red nylon queue rope fills me with terror. But for my Juliet (Tamsin to everyone else) I was willing to dance. To dance like I'd never danced before.

Indeed, I'd truly never danced half these dances before. Callum got us started with The Sprinkler (slow arm arc, rapid return), and before long we'd moved on to Starting the Mower, Picking the Fruit, Digging a Hole and Amanda's unforgettable Feeding the Chooks. My contribution was the minimalist Cowboy in Saddle, a stream-of-consciousness response to the fact that we'd just skooled a round of Cowboys at the bar. Tamsin loved Cowboy in Saddle; quite possibly it was her equivalent of the Juliet moment. Looking back, I'm eternally grateful we didn't order Black Russians. It's not that I wouldn't have tried. It's just that my Cossack dancing has never been much chop.

MEETING FIVE – I CAN SEE CLEARLY NOW

A week later, I embarked on a solo mission to the Builders Arms and, in the early part of that Friday evening, propped up the bar, waiting and hoping. Tamsin had given me her phone number as I'd left the Up Top bar the previous week and her goodbye kiss had planted just shy of my lips, lingering for an extra half-second of dangling hope. The kiss had said 'call me'. The huge brown eyes had said 'call me'. In case I wasn't very good with body language, Tamsin cleared up the issue by saying the words, 'Call me.' But I hadn't called her. I don't really have an excuse. It should be a hard and fast rule that if you dance The Sprinkler with a beautiful girl you've just met, you must call. But I didn't. And so I sat at the bar, nervously sipping my Geelong Bitter, watching the door.

Around nine o'clock she arrived. Again, her two sisters were in tow, which made me wonder whether this was a nineteenth-century Jane Austen parlour-room courtship that had been coughed up and transplanted into a Fitzroy pub.

'Hi. I was hoping you'd come again this week!'

'Really? I was hoping you'd call . . .'

‘Oh, yes, I wanted to call, it’s just that . . . well . . .’

We kissed hello, and the ‘well’ was allowed to evaporate into our beery surrounds. The kiss was all cheek and of parlour-room duration, but the ‘hoping you’d call’ had me hanging in there. After a round of greetings, the entourage retreated and suddenly, to the exact metre, we were back to where we were the previous week. Again, the topic was my TV work, this time a dead-in-the-water late-night comedy program I was co-hosting called *The Late Report*. The longer the show ran, the later it got.

‘My dad adapts the Barbie dolls on that show so they have moveable jaws,’ Tamsin said.

She did terrific eye contact. Massive eyes. The sort you find in World Vision commercials.

‘My dad works in superannuation.’

I was struggling to hold the eye contact. When nervous, I have a tendency to stare at mouths. Hers contained nearly perfect teeth that told a story of adolescent braces followed by a relaxed attitude to retainers. The mouth started talking. She wisely decided not to take up the lead topic of superannuation.

‘Your parents still together?’

Oh no. I’d learnt from the half-night stand with Lana

that danger lurked. It was crucial to avoid making too great a mention of my parents' separation. I had to keep it brief. I had to keep it up-vibe.

I answered carefully and two hours later was still talking. As Tamsin puts it when she recalls the night, 'You did go on a bit.' She was definitely partly to blame; she offered sympathy and advice and, occasionally, a little reassuring pat of the forearm. I was slow, boring, emotional and drunk, but miraculously, still in business. We walked together to Bar Open, where I was meeting Harves.

I thought about Lana's parting words: 'I've got problems too, you know.' I had to turn this monologue into a conversation. She'd listened to me all night. Come on, Wilson, lift! Ask her about her. Let her talk. Offer her the conch, and she might just offer you the couch.

'I'm sorry to be crapping on. What about you? Anything wrong in your world at the moment?'

Tamsin stopped walking and glanced at the footpath, contemplating an answer. Eventually she extended her left hand, palm up. A slash ran from the webbing in her thumb across the distance of her hand. The scar was still pink.

'My boyfriend killed himself last year. Stabbed himself in the chest seven times with a kitchen knife. I was

in the room when it happened. A psychotic episode. He put the blade through my hand when I tried to stop him. I rode with him in the ambulance and he died later at the hospital.’

I took her good hand and tried unsuccessfully to say something. She stared back at the footpath. I thought I noticed a tear. ‘So there you go. It’s not exactly a barrel of laughs hanging out with me.’

Nearly eight years later, I’m about to print this out and take it into the next room to show her. I already know she’s not going to like ‘wading-pool shallowness’ a couple of pages back. I’m planning to defend it to the hilt and will argue that the kissing Ashley Paske bit has to stay, and that it works better with ‘wading-pool shallowness’. She’ll reply that it’s sad that I’m so desperate to be funny that I’d insult her just to get a laugh and that surely this is the real wading-pool shallowness on display here. And I’ll agree with her, and give her a big hug, and beg to be allowed to keep the line.

She’s also not going to like that I cut out our first kiss. Tamsin likes first kisses. She almost booted in the 2005

Keira Knightley version of *Pride and Prejudice* when we got the deep eye contact and the lean in, but no actual lip-lock. I tried to placate her, arguing that the sunrise and the airbrushing and the agonisingly slow rate of descent was syrup enough for a long stack of pancakes, with plenty left over for the French toast. But Tamsin was unconvinced. ‘I like first kisses.’

But she didn’t particularly like *our* first kiss, so it’s not going to get a run. It took her about half a decade to tell me, but now I know, and I’ve taken it badly. Apparently I sort of jerked her head around and rushed into it. Where Mr Darcy inched, I lunged. Where Mr Darcy glided, I pounced. Not that we know for sure how Mr Darcy went after the lean in; we’re just assuming things because there was such a nice sunrise. Nor was Mr Darcy feeling the pressure of a gearstick and a no-standing zone on Brunswick Street.

We’ve now had the discussion, and the compromise position is that we focus on the second kiss. We’re still on Brunswick Street. Still in the no-standing zone. In fact it’s five seconds later. I lean forward at a perfect speed. She moves up to meet me in perfect symmetry. Our lips touch. It’s just perfect.



Tamsin and Tony are still together and living in North Fitzroy, Melbourne. On 24 January 2007 they celebrated the arrival of their first baby, Polly Marie-Louise Wilson. The good news is that Polly has her mother's eyes. Tony Wilson is the author of two books for adults, the satirical novel *Players* and his World Cup memoir, *Australia United*. In 2006 he was a *Sydney Morning Herald* Best Young Australian Novelist. He has also written three picture books, *Grannysaurus Rex*, *The Thirsty Flowers* and *Harry Highpants*, and is part of the Breakfasters radio show on 3RRR in Melbourne. He can be contacted through tonywilson.com.au.