

Nth Time's a Charm

Across from me, for the third time this month, sits the most mediocre man you can imagine. And for the third time this month, I've let Mom trick me into going on a blind date.

He picks up his drink with his left hand, and I wonder if he's ambidextrous because he answered his phone with the right one. Are there more ambidextrous people in the world than asexuals? I sneak my phone out of my purse to google it. Apparently it's 1% of the population for both, but the approximation for ambidextrous shows 80 million people and for asexual it shows 70 million. It probably hasn't been updated since we hit 8 billion people on the planet.

He swirls his drink like he's bored of it already. I can tell he feels the same way about me. His eyes rove my face for any sign of interest and it's clear he finds none.

"Well this has been fun, but I'm pretty busy so I should get back to work. It was Amalie, right? Tell your mom I appreciate the lasagna." I nod as he exits the cafe. For the first time in the last half hour I feel an emotion; it's anger, towards my mom's increasingly embarrassing antics to secure me a date.

Comfortable setting my phone on the table now that my company has left, I shoot her a text: *Really? Lasagna?*

She replies instantly: *Don't tell me you drove him away again!* It's followed by several crying emojis, in her usual dramatic fashion. I roll my eyes. She acts like it's the end of the world if I don't snag the next acceptable man that crosses my path.

I see the typing bubbles pop up and shut my phone off instinctively. I'm really not in the mood for her regurgitated lecture on how to get a boyfriend.

I take my iced coffee to go and tuck my phone away deep in the recesses of my purse. I won't be needing it for a while since I have the afternoon off.

The street is littered with people escaping their office towers for a light midday meal before they return to the monotony of corporate work. I turn the corner and wander until Hill Park enters my view. It's my favorite place, probably in the world. The best way to unwind after a failed date is to sit here and watch.

Not even minutes after finding a cool metal bench to recline on, activity surrounds me. People zip past on bicycles, whipping my hair and the leaves on dipping branches. Tiny songbirds titter in the hidden pockets of treetops. An elderly couple leans into one another on a bench across the path. Their backs are to me, but their silhouette emanates love. I envy them. To have already found that person who makes every day feel like wading through a calm stream is a blessing.

Sure it's nice to be flirted with, and I wouldn't call myself a romance-hater, but things don't work for me the same way as everyone else. When you're asexual, you follow a different play book. I can't expect my dates to hold the same mentality about sex that I do. I've heard the usual phrases more times than I care to count: "How do you know if you've never tried?", "I could change your mind," "You just haven't found the right person," blah blah blah. Not for me.

Hill Park reminds me that all the fuss about dating and "finding the perfect match" isn't the most important thing in the world. There are so many other wonders of life; why only focus on getting a partner?

I gaze at the sunlight dappling rocks beneath my feet. My head blocks out some of the light and the branches overhead create blots of warmth, forming our joint mosaic

of nature and admirer. This is a million times better than forced small talk in a crowded cafe.

It's been over an hour now. I take out my phone and power it back on. No new messages, so I guess Mom gave up on her lecture. I tell her I'll pick up some stuff for dinner on my way back. No response.

When I reach the door to our cozy apartment, I pause and shift the grocery bags to one hand so I don't drop my key. I could knock and wait for Mom to open the door, but I still haven't heard from her since lunch, so no promise she'd answer. I drop my key despite my effort, and my neighbor Aaron picks it up.

"Need a hand?" he offers. The shiny metal glints against his tanned skin. He's somehow darkened by at least two shades since he moved in last year. Just how much time does this guy spend outside?

"Thanks, I'm good." He returns the key to my waiting hand and waves as he heads to his own apartment. Based on his neon orange sneakers and empty water bottle, I'm guessing he's just come back from a jog.

I finally get the door open and the scent of old books and vanilla hit me in the face. I've been living here since Dad passed away three years ago, but sometimes it still feels like I'm intruding. Mom insists I stay with her so she isn't alone, but I wonder if we both wouldn't be happier with some distance.

She's sitting on the couch reading, like always. I guess she forgot to text me while indulging in fantasy. Her bookshelves cover every inch of wall space in the well-lit living room and they're all full. I don't know how many times she's read each one, but I

can tell you which are her favorites: anything that involves time-stopping, world-saving, heart-shattering romance.

“Amalie, is that you?” Mom’s voice is hushed and detached like it is when she’s lost in book-world.

“No, it’s a robber,” I say with mock seriousness before disappearing into the kitchen.

As my hands work, my mind drifts off again. Today’s date wasn’t the worst. The guy was put-together and worked in finance. He had a good relationship with his parents and older sister. All things I admire in a partner. Mom met him through an old friend saying her son needed to get married this year; she wanted grandkids as soon as possible. I only found that last bit out while talking to the guy. I guess my sexuality didn’t come up in Mom’s initial pitch, or she chose not to mention it. Either way, not the guy for me.

I wait for the water on the stove to boil as I sprinkle salt in. I’m not opposed to marriage or anything. In fact, it would be nice to have someone who loves me. I’ve heard Mom drone on and on about how joyous her marriage to Dad was and how she wants the same thing for me. I admit, they were crazy for each other. I’d heard my friends growing up comment on it all the time, how much my parents genuinely loved each other and how sweet they were. What a powerful love, to have people who meet you for the first time instantly recognize how strongly you feel towards one another. But if I have to compromise my own feelings for someone to love me wholeheartedly like that, then I don’t want it.

“Dissecting what went wrong I hope,” Mom says as she walks into the kitchen. She’s always been a master at reading people’s thoughts. Is it something you develop from reading books?

“Just thinking. About work,” I reply. But she sees through me. Personally, I never developed that skill, nor how to defend against it, which is a far greater annoyance.

Mom lets out an unconvinced *hmm* and asks instead, “Whatcha making?”

“Lasagna.” I give her a snide look. She chuckles dryly.

“It never hurts to soften them up a little before the first date. What better way to a man’s heart than food?”

“Mom, I really don’t need your help getting a boyfriend.”

“Clearly you do.”

“No, I don’t.” I bang a serving spoon onto the counter for subconscious dramatic effect. “When I find a guy that checks all of *my* boxes, then I’ll give him a chance.”

“But you don’t even know what you’re looking for!”

“I know what I *don’t* want, and all the ones you pick out for me seem to fall into that category.”

“Amalie if you just gave them a chance—”

“No Mom, you don’t get it! I do give them chances. It’s not like we sit there and stare at each other the whole time.” Admittedly some of my dates have been like that. “It only takes a few minutes of conversation to realize we’re not on the same page.”

“Then how was today?”

I lean against the counter, trying to remember how the conversation started. “He asked how many kids I wanted, right out the gate. I don’t even think I had told him my name yet.”

She goes quiet, but I can see the fire in her eyes and I know I haven’t heard the last of this conversation.

I set out plates and forks for both of us while the pasta finishes. I didn’t actually make lasagna, just spaghetti and meatballs. Not all of us have time for luxuries.

Dinner is relatively silent as we both refuse to break the tension. It reminds me of our meals when I first moved in. Mom was like a robot for weeks. Her daily routine consisted of waking up, attempting to shower, then if I was lucky I could coax her into eating something. Some days she never left her room. Some days I didn’t try to force her. The sound of her sobs cut deeper when they weren’t muffled by drywall.

The silence is graciously broken by some National Geographic show Mom turns on in the living room. We sit facing each other, listening to the narrator describe how cichlid fish will sometimes eat their young if they have no strength to go out and find food themselves. I wonder how many animals are capable of making that decision.

In the morning I find a croissant on a plate next to one of Mom’s heart-shaped sticky notes. Even her stationary hinges on love. Apparently, the lasagna left an impression, and she’s snagged one of finance bro’s friends to be my fourth date of the month. Lovely.

This marks a new record for her, back-to-back dates. I'm meeting him in the same cafe at lunch. I only hope that the first guy explained how I feel about kids and all that so I won't have to repeat myself...for the hundredth time.

Lost in my thoughts as I leave the apartment, I nearly step on an oversized cotton ball. I shriek and back up into my door.

"Sorry!" I hear Aaron's voice shout. He hurriedly scoops up the creature and strokes its head. When it finally settles down, I see it's a rabbit. I move my face closer on instinct to admire it. "His name's Floppy. I'm watching him for my sister."

"Now that I have a better look at him, he's pretty cute." A callback to last night's show flashes in my mind; rabbits will also eat their young when stillborn to prevent attracting predators. I shake my head to forget, a little too violently, and Aaron gives me a weird look. I pretend not to notice and whisper to the bunny, "You be careful now." I rub his forehead in small circles and receive a semi-purr in response.

"Wow he likes you! It took me weeks before he let me touch him."

"Haha really? I guess I have the magic touch." Aaron smiles and I'm momentarily blinded by his radiance. I continue speaking so I can reorient myself. "You know my dad...he had one as a kid. He actually had two, but he never realized they were different rabbits. Apparently the first one died and his mom felt so bad she got a new one and never told him." I laugh at the memory. Turning my eyes to face Aaron, I can't quite read his expression. Did I ruin the conversation? "Sorry, that was so morbid."

The corners of his mouth turn up in a smile. "No, it was funny. My mom did the same thing with my pet fish as a kid." I return his smile. "I don't think I've ever seen your dad. Does he live somewhere else?"

“Oh, he...he passed away a few years back. Before I moved in.”

It's his turn to be mortified. “Oh my gosh I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have asked.”

“No, it's okay. Mom and I are doing a lot better.” I wonder if last night's silent dinner shows on my face; hopefully Aaron isn't a fan of books. “I should get going. Can't be late.”

“Oh sure, sure. If you wanna visit Floppy before I give him back to my sister, you're welcome to knock on my door anytime.” Aaron smiles again before heading back inside his apartment. Suddenly my chest is tight. Am I worried about the bunny escaping again? Or is it because I'm thinking of Dad?

I get to the cafe early, and decide to kill time on my phone. I'm searching up rabbit statistics before I realize it.

An estimated 6.7 million households own a pet rabbit. Seems they're pretty popular, but that's only about 9.5% of the ace population. My eyes find similar numbers among the stats: about 86% of ace people are assigned female at birth and about 80% of rabbits purchased for Easter are abandoned or die within the first year. The second one saddens me. I fit into the first part, so I guess if I were someone's Easter present I'd likely be dying. I hope Floppy can defy this fate. Can I defy my fate of never finding a decent guy?

“Sorry for the wait, I was in a meeting.” A man in his late twenties with sandy blonde hair sits down across from me. A luxurious watch decorates his forearm. He catches me staring and exclaims, “It's limited edition.” I smile and nod politely. “The name's Marvin. And you're...wait don't tell me...”

I give him a full two minutes but he can't seem to come up with my name; so I relieve us both of the awkward silence and say, "I'm Amalie." I guess there was little mention of me from finance bro.

"Right, Amalie. Is that French? Sounds fancy." He mimes a moustache. I can work with a sense of humor; maybe this won't be so bad.

"My mother picked it from her favorite book, *Sound of the Sea*. It's a French romance novel about—"

"Uh huh, that's nice. Brock said your mom makes killer lasagna. How many dates until I get to try it?"

I grimace. "That's uh, a great question. I'd have to ask her."

"You do that."

We order food, and the waitress, perhaps sensing my desperation, delivers it in record time. Her eyes ask me if I'm okay as she pours Marvin another glass of sprite. I give her a faint smile to indicate I can hold my own.

"Do you have any pets?" I manage to ask, largely just to fill the drowning silence.

"Not a fan of animals, personally."

"Ah...that's a shame."

He inhales his BLT and gets up to leave, second cup of sprite emptied. "This was fun, but I don't think we're right for each other." At least we agree there. "You talk a bit too much for me. But the offer for your mom's cooking still stands. Catch ya later." And with that, he leaves. Meanwhile I'm quivering in my seat from anger.

I send Mom a seething text: *No more blind dates. Ever.*

The last few minutes of my lunch break are spent trying to calm down, to no avail. My eyes roam my phone screen aimlessly. Only when I look up “healthy snacks for rabbits” do calm thoughts begin to trickle back into my brain. Fresh fruits and veggies, hay-based treats, and even dried fruit provide plenty of options. Maybe I can bring something over to Aaron’s when I visit Floppy. Somehow I’ve already mentally accepted his invitation.

On my way home from work I still haven’t recovered from the infuriating conversation at lunch, so I stop by Hill Park. The wind blows through the trees at the perfect angle today where it creates a soothing sound, like what they play in the spa. Flowers on their last springs of life fall from the branches. They make a pile at my feet. I imagine picking them up slowly, one at a time, like counting sheep.

The sun is setting and the whole park gets painted in shades of pink and orange. I feel like I’m in one of Mom’s fairytale worlds. I wish I didn’t think of her right now; I’m still upset. But I can’t help it. I always want to share the beautiful things around me with her.

A flash of neon orange catches the corner of my eye and I practically whip my head around to see where it came from. A dog with little orange booties on its paws trots happily down the path. Geez, something must be off with me today. First I’m thinking of Floppy on my lunch date and now...

As I stand up to leave, a street vendor selling fresh produce catches my eye. I rush over, hoping he hasn’t closed for the day.

“Do you have any carrots?”

“Sorry miss, no carrots today.”

I glance at the produce he has yet to pack up. “How about a cucumber?”

Walking home that evening with a single cucumber in my bag, I feel like a video game character after completing a mission. When I enter the apartment, Mom’s on the couch reading *Alice in Wonderland*. An odd pick, but I think I know why.

“Because of the show, right?” I say jokingly. After my time in Hill Park, I’ve lost my anger.

She looks up immediately. “Yes! How could they air such cruel details? I get wanting to be factual, but saying all that stuff about eating the young and then showing cute little bunnies is just plain wrong.” She huffs for dramatic effect. I smile. Maybe we’re more in tune than I thought.

She eyes my strange accessory. “Whatcha got there?”

“Oh Aaron’s watching his sister’s bunny right now. I ran into them the other day and he said I could come see him—the bunny.”

Mom’s quick to catch on. I know she’s been reading my every move since “Aaron” came out of my mouth. “Ohhhh a bunny. How fitting.” I shoot her a look. “You know Amalie, Aaron’s a nice-looking guy—”

“Mom, can we not do this right now?”

“I’m just saying, you didn’t show any interest when he moved in last year. Or during the building Christmas party.” She’s probably racking her brain for other possible interactions between Aaron and I. Or maybe she’s already writing our wedding invitations.

“It’s really nothing Mom. I’m just going to see Floppy,” I say through gritted teeth.

“But it’s clearly more than that.”

“And you know this because?”

“Because I’m your mom. And it shows on your face.”

“Could you stop reading me for *one* second! Not everyone is a character in one of your books. Maybe I don’t need a ‘Happily Ever After.’ Did you ever consider that?”

Mom’s momentarily stunned. Fueled by her silence, I take the opportunity to share more of my thoughts. “I’m different from you Mom. I like romance, sure, but it’s not a necessary part of my life.”

She breaks in, “But then who will be with you when I’m not here anymore?” The question cuts deep, and I’m transported back to those early weeks of tears and emptiness. The grief she must have felt all alone in her room, her perfect match gone from this world. For the first time I see it in her face, the fear that I’ll end up like that when she goes to join him.

“Mom…” And then we’re crying in each other’s arms, a mother and her daughter, two souls reaching out from different worlds, each with their own worries. That brief moment of clarity where I could read her expression full of worry and grief and desperation was enough for me to understand.

Still, she explains herself through shaky breaths. “I know I’m always harping about you getting a boyfriend, but I really don’t want to see you alone. Humans are social creatures, you know.”

I laugh, but it sounds more like a choked sob. “There’s no need for you to worry, Mom. You still have plenty of years where you’ll have to put up with me. The average

life expectancy for women in the US is 81 years, you know.” I add the last bit on for good measure.

“Gladly.” She gives me a soft smile and I think I can see the expression she used to give Dad on their anniversary. Maybe I can read people.

Mom tucks me into bed that night, the first time since I was a child listening to her fairytales of daring heroes on quests to save their one true love.

“I like Aaron. He’s a sweet young man who helps carry my groceries when you’re not here. And he’s got good sense to go after my daughter.”

“Mom,” I say, rolling my eyes.

“But the biggest reason I like him is because *you* chose him.”

I lean into her side and she places a kiss on my forehead. Hearing it out loud, I can’t deny it. This is the first guy I’ve “made a move” on. But is that enough to say that I like him? Mom said those words so easily. I don’t think I could do the same.

I don’t work the next day since it’s the weekend, which also means Aaron should be free. Mom left to play cards with some friends so I prepare myself in silence. This backfires, and my nerves grow tenfold.

After about half an hour of panicking, I gingerly knock on Aaron’s door, hoping it’s not too early in the day. No response. As I’m standing there like a fool in our hallway, cucumber brandished like a weapon, footsteps sound behind me, followed by laughter.

“I wasn’t expecting gifts.” Aaron’s warm smile immediately calms my nerves.

“Good, because it’s not for you.”

He lets me inside and refills his water bottle in the kitchen. Based on the return of the orange sneakers, he's been running again.

"Do you run often?"

He takes the cucumber from me and starts cutting it up answering, "As often as I can. Helps clear my mind."

Moving on from the casual touch of our hands that makes my heartbeat accelerate, I nod, thinking back to my time in the park. "I get you. Did you know 83% of workers in the US reported work-related stress last year?" Oh great, I'm blurting out statistics now.

Aaron gives a low whistle. "That's way too high, but I can't say I'm surprised. Do you have stats like that on hand for everything?" Phew, he didn't think it was weird.

"I just enjoy looking things up. Numbers make more sense to me than people."

He nods. "I feel the exact same way." The statement makes my heart flutter and I quickly turn around to distract myself. I've never been in Aaron's apartment, but it's the same layout as ours. Floppy's enclosure takes up most of the living room, and I can see that furniture has been pushed aside to give him more room. The little bunny's eyes lock onto Aaron as he brings the plate of sliced cucumber over.

"Feel free to have some too, he can't eat all this by himself."

"Sure." I munch on a slice and pick up another for Floppy, who jumps over to the bars and tries nudging me. I slip my fingers through and he takes the cucumber happily. My fingers linger and he licks them.

We chat more about job stress and I find out Aaron's a lawyer. I would never have guessed from his bright disposition. Just another example of how bad I am at reading people. Then again, I might have made some progress with Mom last night.

The doorbell rings and Aaron gets up to answer it. A cheerful voice shouts, "Floppy! Momma's back!" It catches me off guard, and as I look to Aaron he seems almost embarrassed. A woman enters, curly brown hair bouncing around her head as she plops onto the ground by the enclosure. Floppy recognizes her immediately and hops over, nudging her through the bars.

"This is Erica," Aaron introduces his sister in an exasperated yet fond tone. I would guess my mother talks about me the same way.

Erica smiles at me for a moment, but stays focused on Floppy. Even so, her expression is so kind I swear she's an angel. Beautiful smiles must run in the family.

"I'm Amalie," I say, trying not to disrupt their moment. When Floppy has been sufficiently adored, he calms and returns to his hide in the corner.

Erica stands, shakes my hand, and says, "It's so nice to meet you. Aaron mentioned a fellow rabbit lover. Glad we crossed paths." Her voice drips with charm. I can't help but think how successful she'd be on blind dates.

"I just think he's cute...Floppy." I laugh awkwardly. Erica looks into my eyes and in a second I recognize my Mom's expression when she's reading people.

"Then I'm sorry to say, but it's time for him to go home. I've troubled Aaron enough." She begins picking up Floppy's bowls and various items, I see a few brushes on the TV stand, and packing them into a massive bag. Next to the bag sits a carrier.

"I don't mind if he stays a few more days," Aaron admits, but Erica isn't swayed.

“No, I want him back home. My new floors are all done, so there’s no reason to keep him here any longer.” She turns around to face Aaron. “You could always invite Amalie to go on one of your runs if you want to see her that badly.” And with that, she scoops up Floppy and deposits him in the carrier, leaving Aaron—and myself—speechless.

She folds down the enclosure with practiced efficiency, then takes my hands. “It was lovely to meet you. I hope we see more of each other.” I nod and return her smile, but I’m also shocked by her forward hint to Aaron, who runs after her to the door. They hug, and I see her whisper something in his ear to which he shoves her into the hallway. I hear her laugh as the door shuts, the sound just as charming as her smile.

When Aaron comes back in, the tips of his ears are reddened. “Sorry about that, she’s very, um, direct.”

“She was lovely. I see the resemblance between you two.”

“Really?” His voice is so incredulous that I feel compelled to explain myself.

“Of course! Who else but your sister could have the same beautiful smile?” I freeze at my own forwardness. We both avoid eye contact, and minutes, maybe hours pass.

“Thank you,” Aaron manages to say at last.

“You’re welcome.” I still can’t look him in the eye, but fortunately, he doesn’t let the silence drag on.

“If you ever did want to go on a run…”

“Oh, do you go to Hill Park? It’s my favorite.”

“I know—I mean I’ve seen you there. You usually seem pretty lost in thought. I tried waving once but I don’t think you saw me, haha.”

My embarrassment deepens. “I’m so sorry!” I put my face in my hands.

“No, no, don’t be sorry! You look really at peace when you’re there, like everything’s right in the world. I know that feeling. That’s why I go running.” He smiles again, that gorgeous smile. I realize that Erica’s wasn’t quite the same. There’s an unmistakable warmth in the way Aaron looks at me. Maybe I am getting better at this. I’ll have to share my growing abilities with Mom and get some tips.

“I think it’d be nice, running together. How does tomorrow sound? You can come over to my place after. My mom’s a great cook.”