

Amore

Ana Mier

“If I were a man...”

“Which you are.”

“Mm, yes, thank you. But if I were a man who was looking for love...”

“You’re single.”

“You don’t see me crying about it. If I were a man who was looking for love beyond college...”

“You graduated two years ago.”

“Don. I swear to God. Let me finish a sentence.”

We took a second to glare at each other. We simultaneously turned our heads back to a silly-looking Albert. His palms spread on the dark wooden table that separated our booth seats. The booth itself wasn’t helping his look either. Deep red and making him look pale and pinkish. His mug full of coffee untouched. Don and I didn’t know how to approach the situation. We weren’t men who actively looked for women. It didn’t help that they didn’t actively look for us either.

“Al, I think you’re looking in the wrong places,” Don said after he realized that my hypothetical wouldn’t go anywhere.

“Online is the only way to meet people these days,” Albert responded while squiggling away his brimming latte art.

“That’s a depressing thought to have,” Don muttered.

“Al. Look. Think to yourself: Am I content with advertising myself on the internet? Does it feel normal to go through the process of picking a profile picture? Would I be happy finally connecting with a woman even if she lived far away? For example, in Cheyenne, Wyoming?

Whenever Albert approached us with another dismal update on his love life, Don and I took our yin and yang roles. I was the motivator; the optimist. The keep-going-just-a-little-further-buddy coach. Don was the distant bad cop. He slapped Albert’s sensitive adult acne prone face with hard-hitting (sometimes potentially damaging) words. He was the realist. Being an optimist came naturally to me, and it still does. Yet, I hate to admit it, whenever Albert informed us of another romantic failure, I didn’t feel completely awful for him. When someone is crappy at something, it’s nice to have company. The three of us were equals.

"I've met five women online and gone on dates with all of them. I feel like it goes really well each time, and then they just never want to meet again. They don't 'feel the connection.' Five first dates. Zero second dates." Albert emphasized the quotation marks with his fingers. I could tell when he was getting annoyed because when he made the motion of quotation marks, they'd become bigger, more rigid movements. I'd say right then and there he was at an 8/10 level of annoyance.

"I wish we could help more Al, I really do," I hopelessly confessed, "but none of us know women. Truly. To an unnatural extent."

And it's true. All three of us successfully achieved engineering degrees in four years without being in a single romantic relationship. Plus, one of the biggest things that bonded the three of us together our sophomore year of college was the fact that 1) we were all only children, and 2) none of us grew up with moms. Mine passed away in a car accident when I was five, Albert's mom left his dad four days before he started the first grade, and Don (who had the most mom time) witnessed his mom succumb to a sad reality of cancer when he was eleven. Our mother tragedies left us alone with three clueless fathers. They did their best to teach us life lessons through rerun M*A*S*H episodes and heart-to-heart talks when we were at the grill (so they'd have something to do with their hands). One thing they could never fully express to us was how to talk to a girl. They would all call themselves lucky on more than one occasion when it came to discussing how they met the respective moms. And while they'd tell their stories, in their heads they'd think, Oh boy, this kid looks just like me. Hope he can get lucky too.

"What's wrong with me guys? Seriously?" Albert pleaded. His voice sounded solid, but his giant blue eyes were becoming unhinged. He brought his fidgety hands up to his head and rubbed his tossed salad of curly blonde and brown hair into more of a mess. Oh God, what was wrong with him? I didn't know what to say, and apparently Don didn't either. My eyes blinked out of habit to the right wall of the café full of scratched up words and colorful handwriting. A cheap, large board of pine. A chaotic wall of customers past and present. I switched my eyes back.

"Hey, I think you're a cool, good-lookin' guy," I lightly said back. Don obnoxiously rolled his eyes. I desperately wanted to change the subject. Talking about women would only get us going in a circular conversation. We would go absolutely nowhere; to be frank, a waste of my time. Yet, friends waste time with friends.

"It doesn't make any sense to me. I don't know what I'm doing wrong. I don't have any female friends to tell me what I'm doing wrong. What am I doing wrong? Why don't we have female friends?"

"You could try going to a spirit guide," Don dismissively added after another couple awkward seconds.

"What?"

"Yeah. Don't they make love potions?"

Albert narrowed his eyes at Don, then lasered them at me. I lifted my hands up in ignorance. I hadn't thought of love potions, but Don needed to stop acting like this was a joke. Albert was lonely, and he wasn't afraid to express that (which I commended). I sometimes wondered why I didn't experience the same agony that Albert felt. We were all on the same boat. As for Don, I had no clue what was ever going on in his mind. I, myself though, had seen women I was attracted to, but I had never looked with intention. For a while I thought that was normal, but once high school started I realized something was severely off. Guys around me became hypersexual, but I hadn't changed. For a little while I thought, Oh duh, I must be gay! But after watching a couple of Marvel movies, I didn't feel anything, so I dismissed that thought too.

"Okay, okay okay," I repeated, straightening my cap, "tell us a play by play of your date with the last girl."

"Okay. Her name's Olivia. I honestly thought everything went great. We were both adorably awkward—Don, stop making that face. We had coffee at that new coffee shop downtown. You know, next to the bookstore? We actually had a lot of the same likes and dislikes. We even talked about Deadpool. Oh, and later on the same day? She texted about seeing a Deadpool 2 billboard ad!"

That stumped me. With my extensive knowledge of not going on a single date in my life, this sounded like a great date. There was a loud poof of steam from the espresso maker that interrupted the quiet murmur of customers and faint Alt-J playing in the speakers. None of us flinched at the noise, we had been there too many times to be startled.

"What were you wearing?" I asked.

"I don't know. Jeans and a shirt?"

"What kind of shirt?" I pushed. I honestly didn't know where I was going.

"A nice one? One that made me feel good, I guess."

"Maybe you should try a turtleneck. I hear these days that modest is hottest." Both men rightly chose to ignore my comment.

"Did you just wash those clothes? Was your nice t-shirt wrinkled?" Don chimed in.

“Um...I can't remember. Does that turn women off?”

“I think a good question to ask before going on a date is ‘If I saw a company scout at this date, would they look at me and think they'd want to hire me?’” Don added.

“What shoes were you wearing?” I asked. Briefly I thought that maybe we were actually getting somewhere.

“Shoes? Um, sneakers.” Albert responded, uneasy. Don and I looked at each other. None of us knew if women liked sneakers on dates. What else could a guy wear? Oxfords? Loafers?

“Maybe before your next date look up ‘date outfits’. Like, ‘for men’. On that website Pin-interest. Pin-interest? That picture website with the pictures.” I replied. Albert nodded, and I could tell he made a mental note.

“So, you never heard from Olivia after she texted about the ad?” Don continued.

“No, no I did.” Albert pulled out his phone, “She sent me the ad pic yada yada yada...ah, yeah then I texted back, ‘I hear Deadpool 2 is pretty scary and gory, so maybe we should watch it together, just so I can keep you safe, you know?’” He swiftly lifted his head to see our reactions. My eyebrows had settled into an uncomfortable, concerned mound. Don was almost laughing, “Oh my God, Albert.”

“What?” He asked defensively.

“Did you just graduate from the eighth grade?”

“What else am I supposed to say?” Albert shot back.

“Not that.”

“The flirting does sound...adolescent.” I weakly added.

“Ok. So, tell me, what does adult flirting sound like?” Albert demanded, folding his arms.

Uh. Um. Don and I couldn't think of anything clever. Anything that came to mind was crude, and none of us were crude men.

“What did she say back?” I asked avoiding the question.

“‘Oh haha, you're smooth,’” Albert read, followed by another urgent look at the both of us for answers. “And then I responded with a smiley face and, ‘Thank you. I'm not always awkward. I have my moments.’ And that text was delivered two nights ago at 10:11pm. She never responded. Why didn't she respond?!” Albert's voice was getting louder and desperate. We quickly shushed him.

"You need to calm down Al," Don whispered. "There's too much caffeine in you, you need carbs. Go. Go get a croissant."

"You're right," Albert said, taking a breath. He slowly got up and walked to the counter, defeated. His thick, beat up Nikes squeaked underneath the reddish wood. The building was ancient. I remember the first time we decided to visit the coffee shop. We were pretty obnoxious when it came to coffee (still are), and we all had an established mental map of all the good coffee shops in the city. I think it was the giant painted portrait of Yogi Berra that made us want to go back again. And then again. And then again. It was sold a few months after we had become regulars, but by then our habit was established.

I observed Albert interact with Lydia, the barista who normally worked at the coffee shop when we were there. Albert arched his neck to look at the menu, and with glossed eyes read out his order. Lydia, listened attentively, and smiled a little as she punched in his order. Then she looked back at him to say his price. I thought, What does a woman look like when she likes someone? Did she always look that sweet when she helped me? No matter what I was thinking, Albert wasn't paying attention whatsoever. He was too busy fishing for extra change. Funny that he's so aware of when he rejected, but he's blind to when he's noticed. I turned my gaze from Al to the nearly empty mug of Americano in front of me. I looked over at Don who was playing with his napkin.

"You think Lydia could be interested in Albert?" I contemplated out loud.

"I met someone." Don replied quietly. Oh God.

"Huh?" I quickly said back, shocked. I started to smile. "Don, what?"

"Yeah, I met her two months ago. And...and we've been dating, I guess officially, for about a month. It's going really great. She's really great." Don nervously un-creased and re-creased the folds of his napkin. He turned a light pink shade.

"Don! When? How? Who is she?" I rapid-fire questioned him. Don turned to look at me with a serious set of eyes. I kept my smile and I tried to make it look relaxed.

"She's my podiatrist." He said in a reluctant straight tone.

"You have a regular podiatrist?"

"I, uh, had Athlete's Foot. And she was who I had the appointment with." Don muttered almost shamefully while he fixed his thick-rimmed glasses.

I pulled my smile muscles a little further in utter shock. I must have looked insane. I was absolutely amazed. I wasn't sure what I was

more amazed about: that Don had a romantic connection with his podiatrist even after she got a look at his feet, or the fact his Athlete's foot was so severe he needed prescription ointment.

Turns out sometime during the appointment he was able to sneak in an Arrested Development quote, and she got the reference. From then on, it was history. As Don started talking about his doctor girlfriend Leah, I couldn't help but smile with him. Of course, I had to be happy for him; he was my friend, basically my brother. He deserved a companion. His hands tossed wildly in the air as he described the practically impossible events. Then, he looked straight at me, "Steve, you'd really like her. Like really, really like her. She's beautiful, and clever, and smart, and funny, she's got the best laugh." The genuine smile slapped on Don's normally moderate face was infectious.

Don wasn't like me and Albert, he was a guy who actually had handsome features; it was his intensely introverted personality that usually made women avoid him. I put my hand on his shoulder and gave him a good, friendly shake. "I'm happy for you." The equilibrium had been compromised. After I took my hand off his shoulder, I started to pick my nails. Anxiety. I felt like a timer had started.

"But don't tell Al. You know, since he's sucking at dating right now." Don quickly added. I nodded, understanding where he was coming from. Don, in love. I guess he was a hopeless romantic like Albert. Don pursed his lips and looked like he was thinking of saying more.

"Anything else?" I slowly asked tilting my head a little, still picking my nails.

"I don't know, man. I mean, I'd like to think Leah and I are in it for the long run. Albert is scouring the lands for a woman like a madman. Do you not think of relationships? Don't you ever wonder what you're missing?"

"Not really," I coolly responded. I don't know!!! Did I want to say yes? I was so removed from the desire. How does one feel the desire?! Romantic love in my eyes seemed to be more of a burden than a privilege, but who was I to judge? I had never experienced it, yet I started to realize how strange it was that I had never actively wanted it before.

"Hey!" Al returned to the booth with a pile of croissants and demanded we each eat one. My shoulders jumped with surprise. "So, I'm taking your advice Steve, you know, mixing it up, whatever. Do you think women go to the library to meet men?"

I turned my head to the high-climbing, brick wall that Don was leaning his head against. The wall once home to a five-foot Yogi Berra face. I had time to figure myself out. Albert was awful with women. I had time, I had time. I glanced over at Don who peeked at his watch

to meet me with a tired gaze. I didn't know how we were going to end up. The best way I could comfort myself was to admit that whatever happens that will happen was meant to happen. Wise man once said, "It's tough to make predictions, especially about the future."