

Can I Be Honest With You?

An Edgy and Empowering Romantic Comedy Dating Memoir

Dates 1 & 2

Date #1: Not Such Perfect Strangers

April 2015

When I stepped into Perugino coffee shop, I recognized the lone, handsome Mediterranean man instantly. Sergio looked exactly like his profile pictures. But as I approached him, I felt instantly overwhelmed by the expectation of romance with a total stranger. Needing space already, I said a brief, awkward hello and escaped to order coffee. I wondered, *why am I getting coffee? I don't really want any.* Something was already off; I was out of my element, doing what I thought I was supposed to do.

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Just out of a decade-long relationship, I felt excited about my freedom. But I had never dated before. Every one of my previous relationships arose naturally out of established friendships or work. Clueless about dating apps, I started my adventures by cautiously dabbling in the Craigslist “personals.” Communications there seemed like trying to buy garage sale-type items from people I maybe shouldn't trust.

When a friend told me that OkCupid was free and simple to use, I snapped a few selfies and crafted a profile. OkCupid was a huge upgrade. People posted a variety of pictures, and there was plenty of room for written descriptions. I clicked the “Like” button on a few people and felt encouraged when Sergio and I matched. He was an actor with professional photographs that highlighted his sensual appeal.

As I dressed up for the date, I smiled in the mirror. My adventure was beginning! I felt thrilled about the potential connections and experiences that lay ahead. Sergio and I had exchanged only a couple of messages, and POOF! I was on my first date.

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I glanced over from the coffee counter. Sergio looked dreamy in the cozy nook; the cafe's red brick wall was a dramatic background to his dark skin and warm smile. I paid for the coffee, took a breath, and sat down with him. After some "nice to meet you" formalities, I defaulted to my social m.o. and started asking questions. "What do you do with your days?" "What type of acting?" "Where did you grow up?" "What was it like?"

Once I started, I couldn't figure out how to stop asking questions. Sergio was so open and expressive that the conversation quickly tipped way out of balance. He grew more dramatic, gesticulating as he enthusiastically re-experienced his childhood, his relationship with his parents, and even his parents' childhoods. This felt more like an interview than a date. Nodding and giving encouraging cues, I grew weary, silently assaulting my digestion with the acidic americano.

Why was I continuing to ask questions and give signals of interest when I didn't want to hear any more details? In the hour and a half we spent in that once-promising nook, Sergio never asked me a single question about myself. I didn't blame him. Both of us sat at that table, and extreme one-sidedness was the result. At the end of the date, as we hugged goodbye, he breathlessly said that he would love to get together again. "Let's be in touch," I squeaked out. Internally, I was cramping and contorting. Pangs in my jaw seemed to be screaming at me, *"Stop your weird smiling!"*

With sweaty armpits and an uncomfortably vibrating body, I was relieved to be back in my car. I shook on purpose, trying to release the stress. Desperate to understand what the heck had just happened, I

went home and straight to my computer journal. Typing feverishly, I realized something: *my need to be liked was an emotional straitjacket.*

At any point during the date, instead of continually generating questions and conveying interest, I could have simply been quiet and said nothing. I could have volunteered information about myself, finished my coffee—*or not!*—and said goodbye, or I could have spoken the truth: I felt uncomfortable that we were only talking about him. Instead, by feigning enthusiasm, I was basically lying.

Why was I so bound to accommodate others? The resentful passivity I felt on this date was reminiscent of my previous partnerships. Falling in love was invigorating, but my pattern was to sacrifice my freedom and independence for relationship security. I wasn't usually brave or mature enough to articulate my needs, and after a few years, preferred to follow my resentments out the door.

Looking in this mirror, I saw a version of me I didn't want to be anymore. In this new phase of dating, I needed to let go of some old habits and beliefs so I wouldn't waste hours, or years, accommodating (not such) perfect strangers.

I went back to OkCupid, resolved to use dating to practice radical authenticity. The journey ahead would require communicating in new ways, and I assumed I would stumble and fail repeatedly. But I was ready for whatever training was needed to get over my conditioned impulses and to find the courage to speak my truth.

Date #2: Learning to Pay Attention to My Inner “No”

May 2015

Reid and I connected on OkCupid, and from the get-go we were messaging voraciously. Physically, he was plain, fair-featured, and younger-looking than his age (he was 35). I felt drawn mostly to his smile. From his pictures, I thought, *what a sweetheart.*

In our messaging, Reid was active and attentive, and I basked in the regularity of his cyber affection. I loved that he wasn't afraid to talk about sex and found him sensitive and not overwhelming. He let me know that he was very interested in pleasing women. Since I have always been a pleaser, receiving sounded divine to me.

But as our online flirtation continued, certain mannerisms started to make him less appealing. His writing had a formal, corny tone. He apologized often. Filing these traits away as idiosyncrasies, I stayed open and curious about this quirky character. After a week of racy messaging, I texted a short video and asked him to send one back. His wide cheeks and round eyes reminded me of a toddler. Something in me sank; I was really expecting someone very different. I recoiled when he nervously said, "I'm *way* into plants ... instead of people."

I had imagined an attractive Reid until I saw him move and heard him speak. Still, I was ready to get my dating party started! My hopes about Reid were rapidly declining, but I didn't want or need him to fill any specific role, so instead of abandoning ship, I drifted onward.

We planned to meet for dinner at Cornucopia on 17th Avenue. Riding my initial excitement, I quickly called him when I had what I thought was a great idea, and asked, "What if, when we first meet, you kiss me right away, before a word is spoken?"

I conveniently ignored the wobble in his voice when he said, "Uh, OK, sure." I giggled as I told my friends about the plan. I thought it was such a racy, fun, out-of-the-box idea.

But Reid showed up at the crowded outdoor courtyard awkward on his feet. Totally stoned, he launched into feverish chatting. *How could he forget?* When I leaned in and whispered loudly, "You're not supposed to talk," Reid stumbled towards me and kissed me strangely, messily, on the side of my mouth. *Such a disappointment.*

During dinner's flat conversation, the final remnants of my fantasy dissolved; there was no way Reid was going to be my next boyfriend. But there had been so much buildup that I optimistically clung to the

potential and invited him home anyway. My hopes for this date were more powerful than our actual connection. I wasn't attracted to him but rationalized that maybe I could have a novel sexual experience. I hadn't been sexual with a man in almost a decade. After all that flirting, it seemed silly not to follow through with some action.

Back at my house, we went straight to my bedroom and quickly undressed. I wanted to become a new, more open and wilder version of myself. I hadn't seen a penis in a long time, and suddenly one was naked in my bed.

* * *

My high school boyfriend used to call me "fiercely independent." By my early twenties, I had already been through three major breakups. Afraid that I didn't know how to make a long-term connection work, I sought guidance from a trusted high school teacher and mentor. When she pragmatically reflected, "Amy, maybe you are a serial monogamist," I started to glow. *There were options besides marriage?* I joyfully and immediately adopted "serial monogamy" as my style.

I had wonderful partners who formed a long chain of three-year "love chapters." Then, in my thirties, I had a partnership with a woman that lasted a decade. There were many reasons for its longevity. Samantha and I were very good friends. She had two daughters and her financial dependence on me was challenging. The idea of breaking up our beautiful family was very different from my previous endings with single male partners.

However, I had never wanted "together forever," and ten years was extreme for me. My spirit always eventually busted me out of committed partnerships, needing to be free. When that long relationship ended, I made a promise to myself: I would no longer commit my sexuality exclusively to any one person. I needed a big change. The most honest and self-honoring path I could take was to no longer consider myself monogamous. I was determined to find a relationship configuration that fit me better.

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As soon as Reid and I were skin-to-skin, everything felt unfamiliar. I was detached and disconnected. After a little of his “giving” (as advertised in our messaging) my mind went foggy. I couldn’t feel my body as his penis entered me. He was floating confusingly above me, moving with a gruff vigor that made him seem lion-like. After a few re-positions, when I felt his testicles slapping into me from behind, I was finally able to find my voice and croak out, “I can’t do this.”

He stopped immediately and whispered, “We could just snuggle.”

With my head buried in the pillow, I answered, “I’m sorry. I think I need to be alone.” I could feel his disappointment as he put his clothes on and left. I had always had trouble speaking directly in sexual situations, especially about things I didn’t like, and longed to feel more sexually present and connected to myself. In the past, even when I was having sex, I was performing, or just going through the motions, and didn’t usually *feel* sexual.

With Reid, I didn’t give enough attention to the messages along the way telling me something was off between us. There were so many ways that I wasn’t attracted to him. I ignored my intuitions, observations, and body signals. I had my work cut out for me on the path towards radical honesty.

As much as I wanted to be free, this experience reminded me that I shouldn’t try to separate my heart and my body.

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