

The Sad Men and Me

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NEVERTHELESS, I KEPT SCROLLING. FOR THE MOST PART, THE CATALOGUE OF faces continued, and I had the appearance of choosing. The illusion of poking a finger at what appeared in the app, and saying, *you, I'll look at you.*

These were men I was poking my finger at. Men who barely opened their eyes for the camera, some wore no shirts. Many had odd shaped heads. Was I becoming superficial or was the dating app a host of weirdnesses? Some wrote nothing in their profile but “man” as though that was enough. What had happened to these men? Were they isolates who traded on looks thirty years before, and now had hardly a sentence to utter?

One wrote, “I had a fall today.”

Instantly I felt the pull to care and I didn't even know his name.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yes,” he LOLed. “I need a hug.”

My cue to exit.

At least this man had been outside raking the leaves and smelling the ground. But I don't believe he is LOL. The grief of lack smells stronger. The frayed edges of whatever was contact and community.

Now community is a code word. *Ours* as in gated, boundaries drawn. Or used as a flag by politicians and companies to appear human, the community itself forgotten weeks later. I go blank when I hear it, it means so little. Maybe because I too never felt a part of one, never really wanted to. City dweller, settler, Jew, white woman, feminist, meditator, straight, Buddhist, poet, therapist...all these, none of these. I am itchy around belonging. Who do I need to be, to be here? The closest I got was a congregation where the rabbi said, “you don't even need to show up to belong.” I could do that. Not show up.

I used the word community myself when I created the job Poet in Community at a

university. *I am here. I'll write poems for you on the spot. I'll do workshops. Poetry in the service of your needs and your passions. There'll be no grades and no judgement. Use me.* I meant it and it was specific. A limited offering. Every community has its limits that's why it's called community not infinity.

The word community at its best waves—over here! But in cities where people are not necessarily in families, institutions, clubs, it's just a word. Theoretical. The opposite of what community was once, or is still when it has to be: not virtuous, just essential. We are your 911, whether you like it or not.

In the 1980s, I lived in the west of Ireland, alone in a house four kilometers out the Westport Road. In winter, the house was heated by a cooker into which I threw coal and turf. One night the cooker shot up so high, I could hear the flames being pulled through the chimney in the wind. I called Jack Geraghty who owned the petrol station in the next town. He talked me through, calming it down, calming me down. Then I went back to sleep. Community as 911.

Everyone knew every bachelor in town. Everyone knew everyone on the dole, on the drink. Everyone knew the artists, the ironmonger, the butcher with the big red cheeks and where his sheep ran the alley toward their slaughter. Everyone knew Mrs Flaherty who owned the lady's underwear store. They knew me too. I liked it. But I did not want to live there forever. I wanted a city.

This is not nostalgia. It's a reference point to the loose end I find myself in where I am not needed. I may be lucky enough to be wanted, but as a single, childless unemployed woman in her sixties, not needed. It is the beginning of irrelevance, the shoulder-tap of death.

I understand those men I'm scrolling past. We're not so different. It's lonely for me too, but also spacious. The price and privilege of freedom.

I appreciate the app, though I may never meet anyone. It lets me push my limits. How steady can I remain in the face of reactivity? Mine, theirs. When someone says something that makes my eyebrows shoot up or want to yell into an empty room, can I stay a little longer? Not flee in anger or fear, see if there's a question to ask or something to say from a steadier place? This is the benefit of app as chaperone. No risk, no rush.

One man wrote, that we had a whole lot in common. "It helps," he said "that we aren't obese." A scream came up inside my ears. I paused in my fury. Eventually I wrote:

"Thanks. You had me all the way until mentioning neither one of us is obese. My guess is that weight is important to you. This would make me nuts. Too bad. FYI—you might not know that most women have body issues, even thin ones like me. So maybe don't lead with that?"

He wrote back apologizing, asking me to put that comment behind us. "Staying fit is important to me. And it seems that most people (men and women) have let themselves go by our age." Here is where my curiosity ended. He didn't get it. Plus letting go is where we need to go by our age, I think. I was no longer flying with rage or curious. "Goodbye," I said.

If I can engage with what scares and enrages me, I can keep looking at the world. Otherwise, I too will soon post pictures of myself with my eyes closed.

The sad men were not just the ones who told me they were sad or depressed or anxious. The shared sadnesses were at least held in the airspace of text. They were named. In his book *And our faces, my heart, brief as photographs*, John Berger says, "And the naming of the intolerable is itself the hope."

It was the unnamed sadnesses, the pretend bonhomie, that hollowed me out. It seemed so long since any of those men had touched a feeling. And they didn't

want to.

“No drama!” They cried, “no baggage!”

How hurt they must’ve been.

“No liars! No cheaters! Loyalty!”

What happened to them? What chronic illnesses and estrangements had shaped or reshaped them? What of their previous partners whose “dramas” were no longer tolerable? Perhaps never understood, only withstood. Held off. What had they endured that I could only project into an imagined past and body? What happened to these particular men I don’t know, but it raised itself up like embossed lettering on the computer screen, stuck out, proclaimed almost operatically, in sentence fragments and parentheses. They were cues of harm.

One man said, “you’re the first woman to write to me on this app in three years.” My heart broke. But I was heartened too any time there was that much honesty. I thanked him for telling me. At least let this be a good experience for us, as kind as possible, however brief. I try to love them a little from a safe distance.

I want you to know that I’m writing about myself in the sad men. I wrote a poem once called “The Sad Me in Men.” My tears are not superior. Sadness pervades us and doesn’t belong to anyone. Like laughing. It’s how we recognize each other and are drawn or repelled. I wouldn’t be spending this much time there if it weren’t something for me too. And by something I don’t mean the seesaw of excitement and disappointment. I’m used to that and it’s not that interesting to chart the waves. They come.

It’s the possibility of spending a few no-name minutes in real contact with another consciousness. Forget relationship, I’ll take a question. If that’s not there, let there be tenderness toward the long felt lonelinesses that appear ghostlike in our messages, that are sometimes but mostly not named or breached and thus stay alone.

Still, we return to the app. Them with sing song

joviality: “trying again! “Looking for that special someone!” Me with my own quirk I’m too oblivious to name. My pretend casual.

Some men write on their profiles “NB: I do not give this dating app permission to use my information.” My NB used to be: “If you get involved with me, I will likely write a poem about you.” Most men thought this sweet. They had no idea. Poet Sheri-D Wilson stood on the stage in Toronto in the 1960s and said, “a relationship is good for two things, a poem at the beginning and a poem at the end.”

I don’t have a type. I’ve been with men who were bald, bearded and hairy. One had a Sam Elliot mustache. One had a gap between his front two teeth in his beautiful smile. They were boxer stocky and thin. A man from Colombia, a man from India, from Ireland, from Bermuda, from Stouffville. There had to be heat between us, connection, and they had to like a certain amount of drama as I tend toward emotional extravagance. It was a smorgasbord. Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Hindu, Atheist, Black, White, Brown. A sign painter, a writer, a musician, an online grocer, an accountant...I even married one. I loved many of them. I learned stuff in hard ways and in pleasure and am still in contact with them except for one who stalked me and one who died. I am grateful for all of them and rarely wish a history of one long marriage. But sometimes I wonder.

Tonight, I had a conversation with a man who wanted to share a lemon meringue pie. It was our first exchange.

“I’m slow,” I said.

“Be fast,” he said.

“Why? Where are you heading?”

“The beautiful relationship.”

That was it: iconic, chimerical, and capital T, *The*. It kind of shocked me that he thought we could leap over getting to know each other into *The Beautiful*

Relationship by sharing a pie.

I haven't been clear: physical intimacy and sex are on my mind too. Bodies flushed together. Just not right away. And isn't relationship about finding out what relationship is? When he said I'd like to share a lemon meringue pie with you, I joked, stalling.

"Don't you want to get to know me first? I could be the kind of woman who eats all the meringue!"

Of course, that only fed his desire.

I'm interested in the ways I can be playful, honest, fierce, curious, and vulnerable at a pace that doesn't throw my heart or awareness out the window. The pie man said,

"For some people, walking at a fast pace *is* their usual walk."

"You're right," I said, "I think we have different gaits."

I've been writing this over several nights after app encounters. One night I closed the notebook and fell asleep. At three or four in the morning, awake I checked the app. An interesting looking man had written to say his subscription had lapsed, and if I'd like to start a conversation to email him. Middle-of-the-night-me felt a wave of anxiety at the thought of going off-app right away, and the feeling of pressure that came from his factual note. He wasn't asking, he was stating. A familiar trope from my childhood. Awake-me would have no trouble saying, "no thanks," but middle-of-the-night-me fell asleep in fear.

I dreamt I was sitting in a group of nurses. A doctor was wheeling a man away. The man was barely aware. I said to the doctor, "You've wheeled over my head-phones." "Look at you," the doctor said, "getting certified today in the conference room." I'm not getting certified, I thought. I didn't know what he was talking about. Then the nurse on my right rubbed my arm and injected me for a long time.

"What are you doing?" I yelled. No one answered.

Their silence was eerie. I jumped up and leapt away and saw them standing together. I yelled again, "I know what you're doing. You're going to experiment on me." One smiled, nodding excitedly. They were like a group of teenage girls. One of my closest friends was among them. "I can't believe I trusted you," I shouted, "and now I'm disposable. I'm dead." It had been a lethal dose.

I was scared when I woke up. The nightmare poured into the day. Is this a consequence of trust? Or a consequence of being alive? As I went through my morning stretches, the thought came: *No one knows when they're going to die or how*. In the dream, I was justifiably enraged by the betrayal, but also enraged by my mortality. It was now my time.

People who are poisoned and stabbed aren't alerted in advance. People diagnosed, those who drown, they don't know until they know. Why different for me? I can't know when I'm going to die or how or by who's hand or what act. I have to keep my eyes open. I trust the ones I trust, unless I see them untrustworthy. Vulnerability is not an option; it's a reality of being porous and alive. I thought *every day is a blessing*. Yes, that hackneyed phrase came up in my mind. *Every day*. I'm going to die and while I'm here I want to have the million-fold emotions and sensations of all the experiences.

Tomorrow I will meet someone new. We had two conversations that left me curious and maybe a bit changed. I heard it in him too. I'm excited to meet him. Every rush of hormones is the first rush, even when there are fewer hormones. But he has told me a history that hurts. Presenting flags for relationship potholes. Plus, he's way too handsome, which can make me close my eyes to those flags.

Alerted by the risk of my own oblivion and the seduction of possibility, a line I have thought of before comes back to me, serving as a gentle instruction, reminder and caution: *see now, or you'll have to see later*. Here I go off app, my own chaperone.