

Jack

My youthful days of careless promiscuity are behind me. Although I'm no longer blinded by emotional naïveté, I go through phases of independence and want. When occasional neediness arises, I find myself chatting online entertaining the possibility of meeting someone. This is a dangerous mentality, not for the obvious risks of meeting a psychotic killer, but more for the relevant risk of extreme social awkwardness. There are creatures that give new definition to the words "grotesque" and "oddity" that never venture into public unless they're meeting someone, specifically me, from the Internet. This is part of the gamble. I know from experience that my blind date will turn out to be either excessively attractive or appallingly revolting. There is no middle ground. Where I fall on this scale of extremes is subjective to whom I happen to meet. I am sure on more than one occasion I've been someone's version of circus freak.

"Everyone has something they're not up-front about," my friend Brian claims. I agree with his logic. "People know which of their traits are attractive, and they'll play them up as much as it takes to counter the rest of their shortcomings." You can usually determine if a person's face is attractive or not from their picture. But pictures usually don't suggest what kind of shape their body is in. Faceless body pictures (which run rampant online) might indicate that someone is in incredible shape but their face is probably not very attractive, even though they swear that they're only being "discreet." And there are plenty of ways a picture can be outdated, manipulated, or even a completely different person altogether. I know Brian is right, but I feel that I'm pretty honest about myself online. I'm aware but not ashamed of my insecurities, and I don't consider myself to be someone that has anything to hide.

Jack and I had chatted for a couple of weeks. He seemed like a nice guy with a decent sense of humor, a cute picture, and indications of overall stability. As a rule I hate phone calls, even from friends or family. But for the sake of curiosity I gave Jack my number and we talked a bit on the phone. He had a pleasant voice: a little soft-spoken, but not overtly effeminate. We planned to meet for coffee.

I am terrible at meeting new people in any situation. It's clumsy and intimidating. I grasp for conversation and sometimes I stutter or say stupid things. On blind dates especially, I can never figure out the right balance of interest and indifference to show someone. Being overly eager is just as unattractive as being rudely self-centered. While worrying about the impression that I'm making, I'm preoccupied with assessing his merits and flaws. One of us will be disenchanted first, and then awkwardly make conversation to speed up the obligatory amount of time it takes to feel the "date" is done. Fortunately I've never been in a situation where anyone has just turned and walked away in

disgust. Unfortunately I've never been in a situation where both persons involved have been equally impressed enough to warrant a second date.

Jack called on my way to the coffee shop. He was running just a few minutes behind and didn't want me to be concerned. I appreciated the notice. Moments later he called back.

"Did I mention that I have C.P.?" he asked as if it were a logo on a t-shirt he happened to be wearing. It helps ease the tension of waiting to meet your blind date if you know exactly what kind of clothes to look for.

"Um, no. I don't even know what C.P. is," I wasn't sure if I should feel politically incorrect about my ignorance or not.

"Cerebral Palsy," he explained. "So I walk with a kind of limp."

"Oh. Well, whatever. I'll see you in a few minutes." My voice sounded casual but this was an obvious warning sign. It was his hidden insecurity. But was it a justified insecurity or not? Maybe it really was just a slight limp that he was more self-conscious of than anyone else. People can blow their smallest quirks out of proportion sometimes.

Timing was right, and he pulled into the parking lot just as I was getting out of my car. There was a wheelchair and a large Elmo doll visible in the back seat. This was not a good sign at all; I cannot stand Elmo.

As he opened the car door and pulled himself up out of the seat, I realized that this was much more than just "kind of a limp." His whole body was slightly disproportionate. His posture suggested he'd been mangled in some kind of accident, and each step he took required a jerky effort that almost threatened to throw him off balance and fall. But he clopped across the parking lot toward me, where I stood behind my most calm and untelling poker face. He extended a hand - curled and tense - for a handshake, which I met with all the graceful civility I could muster.

I slowed my pace to match his so we could walk into the coffee shop together. I began my questions, caring nothing about the answers except what leads they might give for other questions. It didn't matter as long as I seemed interested in the conversation. That's all it would take, just putting in enough time to qualify as a date. I'd been in more awkward situations that required far more grace and effort than this one. But thinking back I couldn't remember a single one. I was totally blank, and that unnerved my confidence a little. Trying not to think about that I continued spitting out polite and interested questions.

The coffee guy apologized, refusing the debit card I was holding up, "Sorry, we have a five dollar minimum."

"Oh." My total was only two dollars and fifty cents. "Just go ahead and put his order on mine as well."

"You don't have to do that," Jack said. The coffee guy paused, waiting to hear the final verdict.

"I don't have cash," I confessed, "I'll just pay for both so I can meet the five dollar minimum."

"I'll give you cash then," he said.

I found myself unsure how much to protest. Is it rude to pay for a handicapped person's coffee? Does Cerebral Palsy even qualify as a handicap? Does it send the wrong sign to pay for your date's coffee if you really didn't want it to be a date? My mind flashed back to several situations in movies or television shows where a handicapped character defiantly throws back money in the faces of condescending charity-givers. "I don't need you to pay for my coffee," I could hear him screaming, "but I wouldn't mind some pity sex..."

I had forgotten to ask for decaf.

My social anxiety forces me to look for places to sit that are away from the crowd, but I was weighing this carefully because I didn't want Jack to think I was ashamed of being seen with him. I wasn't, I reminded myself. I wasn't ashamed to be on a date with him. This wasn't shame. This was something else.

I came to terms years ago with the fact that I'm a shallow enough person to acknowledge how much physical appearance means to me. Trying to prove to myself that "looks aren't important" only ended up in awkward sexual situations with fat hairy guys. Why pretend? So I just own up to it and admit that I only care about getting emotionally involved with guys I think are hot. Not just cute, but "hot." There is a significantly different level of sexual indication in "hot" that "cute" doesn't quite encompass. "Cute" is accepting, tolerant, permissive. "Hot" is mesmerizing, irresistible, demanding obsession. "Cute" is local weather girl. "Hot" is Barbara Walters. "Cute" is good enough to dance with while "Hot" is boning the head cheerleader after being pronounced best Prom King ever in the history of jockstrapped quarterbacks.

Jack wasn't cute. I was bothered by the idea of having to explain to him that things wouldn't work out because I'm shallow. Everyone as I understand it, has some unrealistic expectations of the type of person they want to date. And in order to forge that special emotional connection with someone else, you have to be able to accept the unsavory conditions of being human. Nobody is in any way perfect no matter how attractive or lovable they are. This is the reality of it: everyone has bowel movements. Everyone has body odor. Everyone has bad breath at one point or another. But everyone does not have Cerebral Palsy.

The more he talked, the more I realized that he was really, sincerely looking for someone to fall in love with him. Despite my ongoing obsession to gamble with blind dates, I have considered the realistic possibility that I might be single for the rest of my life. And I've accepted this should it prove to be my fate. Jack had not. It was evident in the way he said the word "boyfriend," with a hushed reverent tone, and the hopeful way he indicated that in a relationship he

would feel confident enough to move away from Nashville. I considered what type of person would date Jack. I wondered if he knew about the different categories of Munchausen Syndrome, specifically the one where people harbor a sexual obsession for those with special needs. I bit my tongue. The date was nearly over.

He asked if he could call me again. I was used to lying at this point of any date. Of course, call me anytime. It was great to meet you. We'll hang out again. I drove away without the sense of relief that I expected to feel. I was bothered. Dating meant getting to know people and determining if there's enough of a common bond to invest a greater part of your life with them. For me at that moment, there was more to it. Dating, to me, means sizing people up and facing the many reasons why I don't want to know more about them, the many reasons why I like isolating myself from social interaction, and the many reasons why I'll die a single and possibly lonely old man.