The Conversational Asshole:

Idil Cakmur

صفر

Every time someone asks Rithika how we met, she tells a different story. Often it involves me finding her in the streets of New York, crying alone on some park bench. Sometimes I'm the generous hero, selflessly offering her a shoulder to cry on. Sometimes I'm just the awkward bystander who felt obligated to help in some way, and slowly grew to love this stranger. And here we are.

The stories are often simple but outrageous, speaking to Rithika's personality in certain ways, but only if you already know her well enough to know which parts to pick out. Most of the time, the response is a raised eyebrow and nervous laughter. No one knows what exactly to do with this obvious lie, and the best case is an equally outrageous story offered in return. Then begins the little match of who can outdo the other, where we might grow to like each other without learning anything we trust to be true. More often, people retreat and look for other conversational partners, ones they can hopefully make more sense of.

There is no one I would rather be with in crowded parties of endless small talk than Rithika, and that is one of the many things I love about her. But I also have to admit: whenever we are together, we are, often and unashamedly, the assholes.

بر

David Lewis, one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century, wrote a paper called "Scorekeeping in a Language Game" in 1979. The goal was to bring out an interesting and often neglected dynamic underlying ordinary conversations. He called it "the rules of accommodation."

The general idea for these rules is not different than the "yes, and..." rule of improv: conversations work like games, but the scorekeeping works in strange ways. Certain actions gain their validity just by being performed, similar to the way I can introduce objects to the scene in improv just by asserting their existence. There were no tracks on the scene until I yelled "watch out for the train!", but now that I have, we will all pretend that they were always there.

The conversation is, similarly, a back and forth—a sort of tennis match, if you will. When you decide you want to talk to me, you decide to pass back the ball when I send it your way. So we begin. But there is one caveat: the rules of tennis are determined beforehand, we know how you can gain points. The rules of the conversation will evolve as we go, and so will our expectations of each other.

This means that, sometimes, I might end up making a move that you did not foresee, that you didn't even think permissible. Maybe I suddenly make a run for the bleachers and serve from the higher altitude, or maybe I put down my racket and ask you to approach the net, so we can simply hand each other the ball back and forth as we stare deeply into each other's eyes. It is certainly within your powers to say no and walk away. But you don't have to. Maybe you want to continue the

interaction, so you are willing to follow my lead. Maybe you just want to see where it goes, out of curiosity. Maybe this is something you have also always wanted to do.

More likely, your ability to walk away is not the first thing that occurs to you. It is not how we are built. If I put down my racket and ask you to do the same, you probably will, because the rules of accommodation are deeply engrained in all of us. When Rithika tells you the lie, you are not going to call her out. You are going to try to go along with it. It is just that, sometimes, you won't know how to do so.

ایکی

When I told Rithika I was working on a piece about her, she was incredibly excited. She has been my biggest fan since the moment we met, and is probably the biggest fan of most people in her life. It is her life motto, tattooed to her wrist, and the first of her "values" on her website:

> 1. Be a Fan
>
> When you find the good in others, tell them you found it! Try not to let jealousy or shyness stop you. Tell them why you admire them; tell them that you believe in them. If you act like a true fan of someone, you could change their entire life.

You can imagine Rithika is not someone who would typically be called an asshole, or someone who would take such an accusation lightly. When I told her the title of the piece, her immediate reaction was "Idil, stop, you are gonna make me cry!" And I understand her, even if, in that moment, I just started laughing and providing some tongue-in-cheek reassurances: "no, no, don't worry, it's *fine* that you are an asshole! — I told you already, I am an asshole too.

But the truth is, I really do understand her. I am a twenty-three-year-old who cried last week because I didn't know how to deal with my boyfriend calling me annoying. It seemed like a great moral failing.

My parents didn't care about much while they were raising me. Arguing over grades or pushing me to do more extra-curriculars was not really their thing. They just wanted one thing: I had to be a good person. Any moment of being inconsiderate, any word uttered that might have potentially hurt someone's feelings, any joke making slight fun of a friend, even if just for their dancing, and my parents would have a talk with me. I would be ashamed of myself for days every time, regardless of the severity of the crime, the intention, or whether it had the said effect.

Not much has changed since then. The emotion I feel most strongly is still guilt—perfectionism is hard to let go of. And yet, here I am, calling myself an asshole. And I think I am fine with it.

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When you are a child, love is all about what others can do for you. It is about whether they are prepared to fulfill your needs, since you cannot do it on your own. Kids are self-centered, they have to be. But then you grow up, and you realize that we are all playing a part in each other's lives. You realize that the wrong thing said at the wrong time can ruin a person's day, and likely much more. You realize there are expectations of you, things you are to certain people, and you have to live up to the roles.

But that really isn't the hard part. If you know what is expected of you, it is not so hard to play along. And in most relationships, we go through an excruciating amount of effort to make our expectations clear. After that, you just try your best, apologize when you fail, and try to be better.

Conversations don't work like this—especially not with people you don't already have a relationship with. You don't yet know what to expect, and what is expected of you. You try to figure out what the other is thinking and adapt as you go. You want them to laugh at the right times, to feel understood, to think highly of you in return. You want them to leave feeling like they had a good conversation, even if it often means you didn't.

This, of course, is what sets apart an asshole. An asshole is someone who has freed themselves from such obligations, typically much to our dismay. An asshole is someone who is happily inconsiderate, sometimes willingly so, and sometimes with a startling lack of self-awareness. Kids are assholes of the latter kind, but we often let them off the hook for it. Adult assholes are not unlike kids, but without the excuse: they've had all the opportunities to realize others matter, and somehow they have managed to remain unmoved.

دورت

In 2013, the American author and journalist, Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote an Atlantic article named "How the Quiet Car Explains the World." In this article, Coates talks about people who take long phone calls in the quiet car on Amtrak and decide, when you are trying to enjoy your drink at a bar, that you should instead be engaged in a conversation with them. Our world, he thinks, is filled with these people, and he gives us a working definition of an asshole to categorize them:

an asshole: a person who demands that all social interaction happen on their terms

This definition gets to the heart of what's problematic about an asshole. An asshole doesn't let you get a say in setting the terms. A quiet car is quiet only if that's what they want in that moment. A conversation is private only if they aren't interested in joining. Your desires are met only if they don't contradict the assholes.

But that is not all that the definition teaches us. It also makes clear that the asshole is a liminal being: he can only exist in a world where there are agreed-upon terms set outside of him, terms for him to violate without completely undermining.

I'm being an asshole when I hold onto the ball and approach the net *because* we had agreed to play tennis. Rithika is being an asshole *because* we don't expect to be lied to during small talk. But if we were to become trend-setters, our assholeness would self-destruct: our terms would become yours, and we would no longer be violating expectations.

This is where the rules of accommodation become important. David Lewis tells us that the rules of conversation just *are* the kinds of things we can, and do, play with. The rules of the game are not pre-determined, and the scoreboard updates retrospectively. If we start with small talk, it might seem odd or tactless for me to share my recent cry with you, as funny as it is. But it will not seem that way if the conversation ends with both of us opening up and being vulnerable. The scoreboard will update to make room for my initial confession being a successful strategy.

The rules of accommodation provide an opportunity: I can redeem my initial assholery if you accommodate me.

بش

Rithika and I have another close friend, Anant, who tends to be no more truthful than us at parties. He is, however, a more creative asshole.

Sometime in the last month, Anant found himself at a birthday party where he knew only one person, the one who had the birthday. But, luckily, he also found the book he needed to make the night fun: *How to Talk to Strangers.*

He spent the night approaching strangers with the book in his hand, telling them he had been struggling to meet strangers and is now trying to practice the exercises in the book, and asking shyly, *would it be terribly bothersome if I tried some of the strategies on you?* So he would begin, open a random page, and awkwardly perform whatever was asked of him—whether it was to maintain eye contact, crack a joke, or ask them personal questions and seem interested. The other guests would accommodate him with endless kindness, trying to help him improve, and gradually get in on the joke and laugh as they watch it being performed to others. That is how Anant met redemption, and not just of any kind.

آلتی

There is a special kind of intimacy involved in joking with someone, doing bits together, or playing games. "When we laugh together, that is a very special occasion," Ted Cohen explains in *Jokes*. "It is already noteworthy that we laugh at all, at anything, and that we laugh alone. That we do it together is the satisfaction of a deep human longing, the realization of a desperate hope. It is the hope that we are enough like one another to sense one another, to be able to live together."

Most of our conversations are characterized by a division of the mind: one part focuses on what is being said, the other assesses how the other person is reacting. We are constantly adapting our behavior based on what we take the other to think. We constantly accommodate. And in becoming shape-shifters, we leave the other with nothing true of ourselves.

All of that comes to an end when we laugh together. Laughter marks success: we can let go of the overthinking mind and relish in it. A moment of agreement, of connection. But those feelings don't have to be confined to laughter.

Cohen is wrong to claim that we need jokes to know we can live together. We have norms for that. We can reasonably expect everyone to act in certain ways, which makes living together

manageable. But that is also the cause of our loneliness. We follow the script, just like everyone, and leave without having shared a single moment of intimacy.

Intimacy is only possible when we step out of the routine of social interactions. We can genuinely begin to feel that "we are enough like one another to sense one another" only when we start playing with the strict rules of conversation, and see that people are eager to join in. We have to make ourselves vulnerable in certain ways, even if just by being silly and exposing a child-like side that we had long tucked away. We have to stop considering what the other wants and put something down that is true of ourselves, so we can see if they pick it up.

This is where the rules of accommodation help us: playing tennis together might be fun and good, but when we begin to break the rules together I can know that, in some sense, you are like me. You are a person who won't call me out when I approach the net, who will laugh along when I start handing you the ball, who will start the intimate staring contest of your own volition. That's how I know we can be close. It does not work if I have to prespecify the rules, and so I do need to take the risk of being an asshole, but I need to see you can play with the rules with me.

یدی

It's almost been a year since I met Rithika. The first time we met, she started telling me all about the "Rithika Show", her talk show where she interviews her friends and asks them the silliest questions. "I actually interviewed Jordan, have you met Jordan?" I told her I hadn't—it was my first time meeting all of these people. She yelled across a room of fifty people, "Jordan, raise your hand!" He did without a second of hesitation, with the biggest smile. He never asked what he had to raise his hand for.

I watched the interview when I got home. The first question she asked was the meaning of his name, the second was whether he had ever been in love before, and the third was whether he ever "accidentally" walks into the women's bathroom. She followed up Jordan's confused no with "Oh yeah, me neither, I don't do that for the men's bathroom. Yeah, what a weird question... I don't know who put that question there."

The show ends with a two-minute performance from their musical guest, which is just Rithika playing a children's musical toy as Jordan uncomfortably tries to tap along to the uneven rhythm. It's hilarious.

A week passed before I saw her again. She ran towards me when she spotted me, asked if she could hug me, and told me, *"I have the biggest friend crush on you!"* I laughed, unsure about how to respond, about whether I was being made fun of in a way I didn't understand. I hesitantly told her that I liked talking to her too, hoping my reluctance would not break her enthusiasm. It didn't.

Rithika and Anant were already close friends when I met them, but they quickly included me into their friendship. I was quite lonely at the time, in a new city, going through a tough break-up. We started spending all of our time together and I liked them so much, almost immediately. But it took me a long time to understand them, to know how to play along. I don't know if they even realized, but they were uncompromising in their strange ways. I am really grateful for that.

Shortly after I met them, I invited them over to my place. Rithika showed up with a window and a camera. The window she had found on the street while walking over, and she thought it would be a nice addition to my house décor, which she had never seen before. The camera was for her vlog. She started filming from the moment she walked in, and she hasn't stopped. I still haven't seen any of it.

Anant, I believe, walked in with lactose-free ice cream just for himself—I don't fully remember, but that is the kind of thing he would do. I've never met anyone like him, who becomes instantly at home in any space he is in.

Spending time with them, for a long time, felt like relearning how to exist in the world. They would start talking to strangers out of nowhere. They would make up ridiculous stories, ask the silliest questions. They always came up with games, always laughed. They constantly pushed the boundaries of social interaction, shifted the rules as if to pull the rug from under you.

I was caught off guard so many times, and soon realized I had no way of predicting them, no way of directing the conversation so as to please them. They would see right through it, and they had no interest in that sort of engagement. They were genuinely excited by meeting other people, getting to understand them and laugh with them. They wanted to get people to play with the rules.

I stopped feeling like I had to think, filter, adapt. It felt like being a kid: it was simple, we were people who genuinely liked each other. We cried and laughed and argued without it getting complicated, without feeling the need to hide. They became the people I went to when I felt like a bad person for one silly thing or another. I never had to feel self-conscious with them because those were the conditions under which our friendship had developed: we were, fully and unashamedly, ourselves, and that is what we liked about each other.

I became an asshole of a similar kind. I made an explicit effort to be more inconsiderate in social interactions, to stop worrying so much about how I can make the conversation good for others. I realized recreational conversations are there to build connections, to feel less lonely, to laugh together. I realized that there was a reason for the flexibility the rules of accommodation allowed. It felt stupid that this was something I had to learn.