

Escaping Flatland

Looking for Alice

This is part 1. You can read part 2 [here](#).

Someone once asked Gertrude Stein if she was a lesbian. Stein answered no, I just like Alice.

I was reminded of this story the other day after two friends, independently of each other, asked me for dating advice. I don't know much about dating. The reason they ask me is that I am a nerd and I am married to Johanna. Johanna is an Alice. That is: she is a singular human being, that I happen to love. She has an insane amount of integrity and a gravity field in her left ear that pulls my words out of orbit.

I don't know anything about dating, but I know, at least, how I found someone like that.

Don't assume you know what you're looking for

The first thing to realize is that, unless you have found one, you don't actually know what an Alice is.

When I was seventeen, my crushes were random. As if I was an untrained neural network trying to predict which image was a cat. Maybe this flurry of tan-colored pixels? Maybe this long bendy green thing? I got disappointed a lot, which was great because it meant by my early twenties, I could tell what I liked and what made me want to smash a cucumber to my face.

This happens to everyone, I guess. But some of my friends are noticeably worse at generalizing from their experiences. They keep making similar mistakes. Why is that? My guess is that those who predictably date the wrong people tend to think more categorically. A relationship goes up in flames. But instead of thinking that was a mean girl, update the neural net to avoid traits A, B, and C, they go, oh, you know . . . girls. Or, they do the same to themselves: I have a weakness for that type. They also think about relationships in categorical terms.

As if it is something they know how to define.

But when Gertrude Stein declined to label her desire as lesbian, she was, as I understand it, saying something like this: thinking in categories would interfere with my ability to freely pattern-match for the particular type of individual I resonate with.

Some people think Stein was lying when she said she wasn't lesbian. And they are disappointed by that. (The fact is that most people Stein liked happened to be gendered like Alice.) But hers is the right attitude: you do not like a category. You like individuals. And you're not born knowing which kind.

So what do you do? You go talk to a thousand people (increasingly less randomly sampled) and see if there are any patterns in who makes you feel excited and alive and true and heard. And then you start hanging out with people like that.

So, as I was saying, by my early twenties I had reached this stage. I had crashed and burned through a couple of relationships. I had tried a lot of weird things. And now I could sort of gesture at what I liked—kind people who are intellectually voracious and think it is cute that I obsess so hard about ideas that I fail all status games. Plus a lot of tacit stuff that I can't formulate well.

You can't afford not talking to Alice

The first time I met Johanna, on September 11, 2011, I was having a poetry reading in a bookstore. I was twenty-two. I figured she was probably there to see me. She was not there to see me. A month later, hungover in a café, we met again.

In the bookstore, I had noticed that we had a lot of fun talking. In the café, we didn't talk much, but from observing how she talked to her best friend, who had a snake tattooed on her arm, I deduced that Johanna was probably an Alice. You can learn a lot by observing how people hang out with their friends. She laughed like a hyena, and they were obsessing over some obscure book, and they were so raw and cute. I'd never been as intrigued by a human being before.

And the thing is, there aren't that many people you can have an amazing life with. Maybe 10,000, spread fairly evenly across the globe? A bit more if you're less weird than me, perhaps. Anyway, the number is small enough that you can't afford to be casual about it. You have to never let someone like that pass you by.

And this is hard because you should also not be a creep.

We exchanged words a few times as she passed my table and when Johanna was getting ready to leave I asked her if we should do something someday, which is always a solid suggestion.

“Yeah”, she said smiling.

“I have drunk my phone away, to be honest, but maybe if you take my number?” I said.

She did.

She did not text me.

I spent the next eighteen months trying very hard to make her feel like I wasn't obsessed with her, though I stopped to talk with her every time I saw her—in the supermarket, at clubs, in the street. We had a lot of fun; she wasn't into it.

This isn't the place to dwell on the particulars of that story, and why it took such time, though she tells me I should make it very clear that patiently waiting around for the possibility that someone might decide to turn your chemistry into something more can easily fall over into stalky behavior and you should never be a person with stalky behavior. (I wasn't!)

But if the energy is Alice, you should also not drop it.

When someone you resonate with is reluctant, you have to be very alert to moods. Make sure you are the one that backs off before they do. Signal that what you like is this particular thing right here right now, not anything that you are hoping to game it into. And don't flirt. But keep talking.

A super subtle move, by the way, is sharing this essay with someone you like.

Share

Give a gift subscription

I started dating someone else. The someone else was kind and deep and worth a lifetime (maybe there are more than 10,000, after all). But I also knew—the way my words mixed with Johanna's was something that I could not turn down if the chance came.

Speed run authentic

In the winter of 2012, I wrote an essay claiming Adrienne Rich inverts T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in her poem "Trying to talk with a man".

Johanna read it sitting in the shower with the computer on the floor outside the stall. It was, to her, very obvious that I didn't have any idea what I was talking about. Did this bother her? No. She was more fascinated by the fact that, unlike all the other twenty-three-year-olds who didn't know what they were talking about, I wasn't trying to hide it. I wrote about the thoughts that passed through my head as if my thoughts mattered, unironically. And as if it didn't matter if this made people laugh.

That is perhaps the most solid dating advice I have, by the way—show the inside of your head in public, so people can see if they would like to live in there.

Walking home one night in April 2013, we happened to be walking along the same path. We came to the F. river. I lived on one side. Johanna lived on the other.

"Where are we going?" I said, trying to sound as much as possible as if I was talking about geography.

She nodded slyly with her head toward her block.

And—as far as my other relationship was concerned—so it goes.

A standard joke in my and Johanna's relationship has been how incredibly unattractive I made myself that night.

Here I was, clearly having been obsessed with her for one and a half years, which we both knew, and finally, I was being led into her bedroom, a room strewn waist-deep with books and objects salvaged from dumpsters and half-finished canvases stacked against the walls, and I decided that this was the right time to talk about how ashamed I was with myself, and how out of control my life was. I was reading St. Augustine at the time, too, and so made long references to his autobiography and the shame he described.

Johanna looked at me mesmerized: to see someone work so hard for something, and with such delicate care, and then, on the day of his success, decide to gamble it all on the move, let's be self-obsessed and say things that people find revolting about me. Like a character from Dostoevsky, I started talking, not about the girlfriend who I knew I was about to hurt, but

about how good it had felt when I met my first girlfriend, and how, after I'd kissed this first girlfriend, I had had to lie down in a slide on a playground, so full of emotion. And so on and on.

Anyway. There is a trope in romance that when you meet the person you are supposed to be with, you can talk about anything. You can apparently inverse that too: if you talk about anything that pops into your mind, you can tell if you're supposed to be with the person by judging their reaction. Most "dates" would have been hurt by my monologue that night, or bored, or appalled. Johanna's reaction was more something like: I've never met anyone who takes his thoughts so with such loving seriousness, and he's apparently not at all ashamed of his pain. I wish I felt like that about my pain. Also, I need to talk about ideas like this.

Now, on this particular night, I wasn't deliberate about talking with such self-sabotaging swerve. I was just, as I've said, twenty-three. And ashamed of myself. But I do think it is a good idea, generally, and one that I have used—to speedrun relationships by jumping directly to the strange parts. There is really no point in going to a café to talk safely (if you can avoid it). You want to rapidly extract as much information as possible, so you can figure out what you like and so that you can pattern match, and you want to communicate as much as possible, too, so you can filter people who wouldn't fit you anyway (which is why keeping a blog is good).

The type of person I'm assuming we're looking for here is 1) someone that you will find fascinating to talk to after you've talked for 20,000 hours, 2) you feel comfortable with them talking through the hardest and most painful decisions you will face in your life, and 3) the conversation is wildly generative for both of you, in that it brings you out, helps you become.

That is a very particular kind of conversation. You want to sample it as soon and as much as possible.

There is a scene in the opening of *Into the Abyss*. Werner Herzog is interviewing a Reverend who in fifteen minutes will go in to be with a boy as the boy is led to the gurney to be executed by injection.

The Reverend is talking about how the Lord works in mysterious ways, and so on—it is exactly the type of conversation you want to avoid. It is very ChatGPT. It is the Reverend repeating things he's said before—words that protect him, that allow him to perform the role of Reverend, instead of being what he is: a man named Lopez, who will soon have to watch a boy

die.

At one point, the Reverend, as a part of a monologue about the beauty of God's creation, mentions that he sometimes meditates on the beauty of the squirrels he sees on the golf course. Herzog, standing in a graveyard with nameless crosses, says, with mad Bavarian seriousness, "Please describe an encounter with a squirrel."

Lopez is a bit surprised by the question, but he takes it in a playful spirit—his voice lifts, joyously. He starts to talk faster. (This is where the conversation shifts into the type you want.) He is no longer saying versions of things he has said before, he's not protecting himself, he's just there.

From that point on, it takes about ten seconds before he's crying.

In interviews, Herzog likes to mention this conversation to explain his craft. "But how on earth did you know to say that?" says the interviewer. "Were you just trying to say something unexpected to unbalance him?" "No, it was not random", Herzog says. "I knew I had to say those exact words. Because I know the heart of men."

This is to a certain extent true—finding a question that good under time pressure is remarkable—but it is also fairly trivial to do what he did. If you want to prompt someone to be authentic and playful and generative, you usually just need to ask them something where they have a rich experience to pull from but have never pulled an answer from that experience before. If you ask two or three increasingly detailed questions about something they tell you, you get there.

Or you can prompt them by yourself going into uncharted territory, perhaps thinking aloud about something that confuses you. And you make sure to do so in a way that leaves room for them to use their experience to reason about what you are saying.

When you enter this strange and unstable realm of conversation, you get a lot of information rapidly. I tend to find that almost everyone is captivating and loveable when I manage to talk like this. But when I do it with Johanna—especially in the first few years—it was like my entire mental landscape broke apart and all was possibility and flux. As Philip Glass says about his mentor, Nadia Boulanger, "it was like having a brain transplant".

That open conversational space, which is the heart of our relationship, is not something I can explain; it is not something I knew I was looking for; I'm not even the same person after

having been there. It does not look anything like I imagined a relationship would or should look.

Which gets me to the last point I wanted to make:

Don't talk about the people you date

if you take [jelly fish] out of the water their entire form disappears, like when an unspeakable truth is lifted up out of the silence and expressed as lifeless gel, yes, they're untranslatable, they must stay in their own element.

— Tomas Tranströmer, *Baltics*

When you talk about people you like, or rather when you talk about that thing that happens between you—you have to transform a very complex impression into a string of words. Some relationships can easily be compressed into a compelling string of words. This is usually because they conform to some sort of trope of how romance should look. In my experience, great relationships are harder to compress into a sensible string of words.

And the problem is this: we are social creatures. If people look at you with a confused, or even worried, expression when you tell them about your lover, you will likely feel bad. If they start giggling and act all excited about your luck, on the other hand, you will feel a surge of affection toward your date.

This will tilt the playing field against the wonderfully incomprehensible and singular relationships that you should be looking for.

I remember with a cold sweat that I almost turned Johanna down because I felt confused by my inability to explain what our relationship was and why I liked it; confused by my friend's lack of excitement, and by their excitement about other, more legible people, that wanted to date me. I made the right choice only by retreating into silence.

You might have noticed this pattern in *War and Peace* if you've read it. Tolstoy repeatedly describes love as something that happens in the group first and only then spreads to the individuals who are to act out the love. Prince Vasili Kuragin decides that it would be wonderful if his daughter, Hélène, married the newly rich Pierre. He invites Pierre and Hélène to sit close at parties again and again, and the partygoers get all excited about seeing, as they

think, the start of a great romance. Pierre is pretty confused by this. Do I like this person? Everyone thinks so. She is beautiful. But . . . and then they are married.

And it is, of course, the type of relationship that makes you want to commit suicide-by-duel.

This happens all the time (I mean: the abandonment of Alice in favor of a lover chosen by the group), but few people are perceptive and crass enough to notice where their emotions originate. That's why we need novelists.

What I'm saying is this:

You are born with this weird interiority that no one else can see.

You can't see it either at first. But if you run enough experiments you get a sense of how that inner space behaves. In particular, you can figure out which types of people can fuse with your interiority and expand it.

You will not be able to explain how this fusion works. So don't do it.

But when the interiorities do fuse: notice how things are set in motion.

Warmly, Henrik

Upgrade to paid

This essay is continued in Dostoevsky as lover:

Dostoevsky as lover

I think this was one of the best things I've read in MONTHS - thank you <3

I loved this and especially the 3 ideals around communication: 20k hours, comfort in talking through hard and painful decisions, and conversation that is "wildly generative."

No posts

Ready for more?