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The Will to Find Myself

by Jason Hayhurst

I’ve never made it past the third date. Twenty-six years old, five years of practice, and all I had to show for it was a number of rejections that left me feeling less than human. Sure, the attraction was there. And they almost always gave me a chance, but one date was enough for most guys to see that I was different, and that maybe they should start looking the other way.

But this time—this time I had to make it through. This time, I was sure he would give me another chance, because I had planned out everything to the letter.

The restaurant I chose was the quietest I could find, a small Mongolian BBQ that was classy enough to pass for dating quality, but small enough that most other college grads wouldn’t take their partners here. I counted only two couples when I walked in, and they were already sat down and eating. No awkward conversations.

Most importantly, I made sure that there would be no kids. No little balls of angst that could scream their throats out and set me off. I made sure we arrived at nine o’clock. Any sane parents would have the children in bed by then.

Tonight was set to go perfect.

Barry sat across from me, and I was painfully aware that he was trying to make eye contact with me as he took a bite.

I, on the other hand, could only stare down at my bowl of rice, teriyaki chicken, broccoli stems and carrots. Anyone would think that it was a normal meal, but to me it was safe. No revulsion. No needing to force myself to eat some strange mushrooms the cooks had put on my plate.

“So…” Barry started, elongating the word so that it would catch my attention. I looked up at him, but still refused to look him in the eye. I feigned eye contact by examining his brow.

“This was a good choice,” he said. “I honestly thought that you were a “steak” kind of guy. But Mongolian is a good change of pace.”

He was trying to make small talk with me. Why do people insist on that? My mind whirred through the dozens of possibilities on how to answer, but I wasn’t sure which would be the correct response.

Does he want me to say “Thank you”? Let him choose the next restaurant for the date? No, I should say something about Mongolia. Crap, I’m not interested in Mongolia at all. I just don’t hate this food.

I realized that I had froze for too long. He looked away, and then coughed.

I tried to recover. He was a Biology grad. I could ask about that. “I remember you said you have Human Biology today. How was that?”

“Oh.” Barry faced me again. “I think it went great. Professor Sinne let us take a look at some slides of Skin Cancer cells. It was so freaky. You would never have guessed how they’d look up close.”

I nodded, maybe a little too enthusiastically.

“Listen, Jack. These last two dates have been great. We seemed to have hit it off. But…”

Oh, God. Here it comes.

“…I don’t feel like I’ve gotten to know you, at all. I mean, you said you’re an Art major, still in undergrad. Which I don’t mind, but I don’t even know you favorite color or favorite food. You seem to just listen to what I say and then—”

There was a clatter, plastic clanging against tile and the sound of shattering glass. I jumped in my seat and jerked my head in the direction of the noise. A customer was standing beside a waitress.

The waitress immediately bent down and started wiping up pieces of smash glass strewn on the floor with a towel. “I am so sorry, sir. I must not have seen you.”

The customer, dressed in formal attire, looked down at his soaked pants. “It’s fine. It’s fine. Nothing that won’t dry.”

He stepped around the waitress and continued on his way to the back. The bathrooms were that way, I thought.

“Jack. Jack! Look at me.”

“Look at me,” I echoed Barry quietly. Shit, no, that’s not right.

I looked back at him, who was staring at me strangely. His brow was deeply furrowed, but at the moment I couldn’t remember what that probably meant. Angry? Curious?

My hands were shaking and my legs were bouncing, creating a rhythm that shook the table between us. I pressed down on my knees to hopefully suppress the tremors, but all it did was make the earthquake a little less noticeable for the people around us.

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

I resorted to wringing my hands together until I felt pain. The urge to get up and start shaking myself out became nearly intollerable

“It’s obvious that you’re nervous, but I don’t appreciate that you’re ignoring me.”

“What?” I looked back at the waitress, still cleaning up the glass on the floor. I fumbled with my words. “I’m not. I’m not. I just—it was loud.” I forced myself to face him again, but my eyes couldn’t even meet his face anymore.

Barry didn’t speak for a long time. “I asked you what you like to do on the weekends.”

“Stay at home.” The urge to stand turned to the urge to rock in my seat. Anything to calm down again, but I didn’t want this to be it. If I messed up one more time, he would probably just get up and leave.

“What’s at home?”

“It’s quiet.” But I couldn’t come up with a respectable answer.

There was another pause.

“I really want to like you, Jack,” Barry said, “but I don’t think we’re moving anywhere. Usually, I feel like I know a person better by the third date.” He stood up. “I hope that you aren’t upset.”

He walked off. I watched him as stepped around the waitress with an “Excuse me.”

The door chime ringed as he stepped outside.

#

I never make it past the third date. It should be obvious by now that I should stop trying, but I always find a guy that I think I like, and who I think will like me. I get my hopes up, and then eventually, something goes wrong. It always goes wrong.

I could blame my asexuality—that even if I made it past the third date the idea of sex is painful. I could blame the fact that I’m still romantically interested in men. Or that I’ve always been the kind of person that everyone just expects to be manly, due to my broad shoulders and desire to keep my hair short, and they’re disappointed when I come off as passive and quiet.

But in the end, I most likely can only blame the way my mind works. Socially inept. Oversensitive. And more often than not hyper-focused on the “wrong” thing. There’s a word for it.

My therapist, Soraya, a nice gray-haired woman with a slight crackle in her voice, listened quietly as I relayed the events of my date to her. She interjected at times to ask clarifying questions, and I could tell how practiced she was in being clear and direct with her words. Years of experience seemed to make her as articulate as if she were to write everything she said out in a literary journal.

“So you didn’t get to explain yourself?” she asked once I had finished describing what had happened.

“No,” I said. “He left while I was still trying to think of what to say.” I let my eyes be busy looking around the room, walking my vision along the intricacies of the stucco wall. I rocked gently back and forth where I sat on the couch across from her.

“All right. Then tell me. What would you have said if you had the time?”

My thoughts immediately left me. A sickening sensation weighed down my stomach.

“Jack, not only is it good practice. You might just find a little closure by being able to think through what you were going to say.”

“Good practice,” I repeated. I didn’t even bother to hide it. Soraya was happy to let me mimic her words.

I took a deep breath. “I think I would have had no choice but to tell him. I would have told him that I’m Autistic. That I wasn’t trying to be rude. That I just needed some time to be able to think of what to say.”

“What do you think he would say back?”

I closed my eyes. The room was dimmed, but I needed to focus on my thoughts. “I honestly don’t know. All I can think about is that he would have probably walked out anyway.”

“Then, do you think there would have been any benefit to have continued the relationship anyway? Perhaps it is a good thing that he left when he did. I’ve told you before. You don’t need to prove yourself to another man to be worthy of love.

“Perhaps you need to remind yourself that your own love for yourself is more important.”

I opened my eyes again, conscious of the ache that signaled tears were about to form. I was nineteen when I was diagnosed. Before then, I had thought of myself as only a failure. A screw up that couldn’t figure out how to be normal around other people. Something always went wrong.

I’ve been working with Soraya for six years to undo the damage of those beliefs, but I felt like I had barely made any progress. Especially since the world seem to prove time and time again that I was not built for community.

“Have you painted anything, recently?” she asked.

I nodded. “I haven’t finished it, but I am excited about it. I’m painting London again, this time in dark pastels. Big Ben looks perfect, and the streets are coming along nicely. I want to have it done by the end of the weekend.”

Aside from art itself, I have always been interested in London. Victorian London specifically. I’ve researched the era and painted more of the city than any other person could probably stomach. But to me, I just grew more excited with each fact I learned, and each detail that I could add to the canvas.

Heck, I even purchased *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate* a few years ago when the video game came out. I have never been much of a gamer, but the draw of being able to run through the Victorian streets of London had gotten me so excited that I had splurged the money on the game. Twenty hours later, I had nearly finished, and realized that I had barely eaten anything, nor had time to get a good sleep.

“I want you to do something else this weekend,” Soraya said. “I want you to write a letter, saying goodbye to Barry. I know that it is not your favorite thing to do, but you don’t need to share it with anyone. It’s just for you to get all your thoughts out on paper. What you do with it is up to you.”

I stayed silent. I hated writing. Words had never been something I was good at, and having to toil through figuring out what to write would be tiring. But I had done this before. The last few times my dates had left me, Soraya told me to do the same thing. I had done it, and although it had been hard, my mind had felt clearer.

Slowly, I nodded.

“Good,” she said, writing down the prompt on a sticky note and handing it to me so I’d remember. “Now, is there anything else you’d like to discuss before we wrap up.”

#

It was about a week after my appointment that I happened to see Barry again. I was on campus heading toward class, when we passed each other on sidewalk. I knew when he recognized me. His feet started picking up the pace, and he looked away.

Does he hate me, I thought? Or does he feel guilty?

I didn’t know. I was late for class, anyway, but…

I pulled out my earbuds, and became aware of the car engines on the street beside me. It was disorienting, and I immediately wanted to put my music back in to block it out the best I could.

I had written the letter as Soraya had said to do, but it wasn’t enough. Perhaps this would be.

“Barry,” I shouted after him.

His shoulders stiffened, and he hurried away. I walked after him. “I need to talk to you.”

“I don’t want to talk,” Barry said, still not looking at me. “I thought I made it clear that our date did not go well. Now move on.”

“I will, but I wanted you to know. I did enjoy our date, I just… I was nervous, and when I’m nervous, it’s hard for me to keep it all together, sometimes.”

“That’s an understatement.” He stopped, turned to look at me.

I tried to keep eye contact, but after a second I looked down at his mouth as he spoke.

“You were the first man I’ve dated in a long while, and I wanted it to go right.”

“I wanted our date to go right, too.”

“But you blew it. I mean, you rarely shared anything about yourself. You were withdrawn, and couldn’t you at least smile?” One side of Barry’s mouth tilted up in disgust. “Three dates, and I felt like I had gotten nowhere with you.”

“I thought that we had gotten along fine,” I said. “But maybe I didn’t see it from your view.” I jolted as a car sped up beside us, the engine revving up.

“See, that. You’re doing that thing again. Your locking up and I can see your not entirely focused on the conversation.”

“I’m trying the best I can, Barry. And I was going to tell you. I was going to tell you why I struggle so hard in conversation. Everything around me… I just struggle to shut it out.”

“Everyone does, sometimes.”

“No, not like this. Not like.” I looked down at the ground, examining the cracks running along the sidewalk. A bug skittered just beside my foot. “We don’t have to try again. You don’t have to like me, but I wanted to explain, if I never saw you again, that I really did enjoy the time we spent together.”

“And I enjoyed some of it too,” Barry said. “But I can’t deal with the feeling that we were still not connecting. I deserve more.”

I looked up at him again. “You do. But I think I deserve more, too. I deserve someone that is willing to hear an explanation. Not just shut me down. I know that’s not you. I hope you find what you’re looking for, Barry, but I deserve more, too.”

Barry’s brow furrowed. “I don’t want to talk to you again, Jack. Go find what you’re looking for.” He turned around, and started walking off.

The moment he did so, some great weight plummeted from my shoulders down into my stomach. I hadn’t realized that my breathing was thin. I forced myself to take a deep breath, like Soraya taught me.

I turned on my heels and walked the other direction toward class.

Soraya had taught me a lot over the last few years, about self acceptance. It’s hard to accept yourself when the world doesn’t seem to want to accept you, either. Maybe it’s because I’m different—the way my brain works is different—but I know that I should keep trying.

Even if I don’t find someone, I still need to work on finding and accepting myself.