

**The MIT Office  
of  
Work/Life Balance**

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The MIT Office of Work/Life Balance

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This novel was written for NaNoWriMo 2006. All characters and events are fictional, except the ones that aren't.

# Dedication

MIT is a strange place, because so many people love to hate it. You spend years trying to get out, and then decades sticking around. This book is for everyone who has suffered and enjoyed the Institute.



## Just Another Half-Baked Idea

It started after midnight, as so many half-baked ideas do. Matthew was in town, and we'd visited his favorite Chinese restaurant and were back at my apartment. I'm always hesitant to ask people too many personal questions, but usually nosiness overcomes politeness, so I brought up the topic of his dating prospects.

"So how's the social scene for people our age out at Amherst? Is it mostly a college town?"

He wasn't sure. "I have to admit that I haven't thoroughly investigated the possibilities. I've been too busy putting together the syllabus for this new class I'm teaching, and trying not to look incompetent and unprepared."

"At least you've got a job. I haven't even had any promising interviews since that last start-up imploded." I was a bit envious that he'd actually been the object of a subtle battle between two rival universities. "But do you think you're procrastinating to avoid the unknown? I mean, you've been there almost all summer." I teased.

One great thing about nerd society is that people tend not to be easily offended. Matthew readily admitted "It's certainly true that I have

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no idea how to get started trying to meet women. It's unfortunate that the college has HR policies to help 'trailing spouses' find positions, and even day-care placement assistance, but they don't do anything to help single faculty."

"Oh right, the Office of Get a Life!" I laughed "That might help colleges cut down on the number of desperate professors hitting on students, but can you imagine if the newspapers got ahold of the story on a slow news day?" We continued to gossip and made plans to get together next time he was in town. But even the next day, I was smiling about the vision of a special Office of Getting a Life.

When I ran into Jason and his new boyfriend, Ryan, at the used book store, I couldn't resist telling them about the idea. "Wouldn't it be interesting having that job at MIT? You could keep pretty busy." Jason and I had a long history of coming up with convoluted plots to improve the world, and many of them focused around MIT. Since we'd stayed in the area after graduation, most of our friends are still around, and everyone keeps up with current school happenings.

Although Ryan isn't an alum, he actually works in one of the student life offices, so he's been a great source for the insider scuttlebutt. He didn't let us down that day, either. "I just heard that some rich, eccentric alum left MIT a good chunk of money in his will, but it came with a whole bunch of strings attached, including a requirement that the school tries new ideas to 'alleviate loneliness for unmarried members of the community.' There's a special committee that has been evaluating ways to satisfy all these requirements, and I'll pass along your idea!"

Between job-hunting and worrying about job-hunting, I was busy for the next few weeks and had almost forgotten about this conversation. Right at the end of a Wednesday Night Networking event (which for some reason, is always held on Thursday), Jason called me. By this time, I was glad for an excuse to escape, since I was running dangerously low on my reserves of wide-eyed enthusiasm. There's only so many times you can give your one-minute elevator talk about how working as a software engineer allows you to play everyday, developing creative solutions to challenging problems. Even my eyebrows were getting tired.

"Hey, Alyse, are you by any chance available tomorrow around noon?" he asked.

"That depends on what you're talking about, but yeah, since I don't have a job, I'm pretty available." I admitted.

"Remember that crazy will where MIT has to do something to help single people? Ryan says that the committee has basically decided to start the Office of Work/Life Balance, and they're putting together a short list of people to interview. They're having a public meeting tomorrow to solicit input, but they haven't really advertised it. I bet if you show up, you can impress them enough to get on the list."

"But I'm looking for another software job. I don't think I'm the administrator type." I objected. But then I thought about my unofficial position as social events coordinator for our crowd, and figured a matchmaking job would be appropriately ironic. Since I was currently single, looking, and not succeeding, it would be completely silly to have a full time job trying to advise people in the same situation. So silly that it would be perfect---plus, MIT would be a great place to lay low until the

current tech recession blew over. I resolved to show up for the public meeting.



## Take Me Back to Dear Old Tech

Even though I'd been out of school for almost five years, each time I got off the T and Kendall and cut through the Med Center building, I had a sneaking suspicion that I had accidentally forgotten to bring my homework and would have to make a lame excuse about it. So I was feeling a little twitchy when I got to the meeting, but I was immediately reassured to see that Professor Immerman seemed to be in charge. MIT always puts together special committees to deal with issues, but if the problem is particularly difficult, they'll tap Professor Immerman to lead the group.

"Nice to see you again, Alyse. Have you come to give us some good suggestions on how to comply with the conditions of the Montgomery legacy?" he greeted me.

"Honestly, Professor, the issue of how to help lonely people at MIT is something that I've thought about a lot. In many cases, personalized coaching would go a long way. But, since we're not exactly an average population, it will take someone with a good understanding of what nerds want and how they think." I made my pitch. "So many people would be eager for confidential help in their social life, if it was available

in a professional yet casual setting. I'd be very interested in working on getting this sort of service going."

I may not remember very much about thermodynamics from grad school, but those excruciating lessons in how to nag, pester, wheedle, or otherwise convince people to help do your bidding have proved invaluable. I circulated through the room, making sure to meet as many of the other committee members as possible while bubbling with optimism.

As Jason predicted, the turnout for the nearly unadvertised meeting was very low, and most of the other "member of the community" who turned up didn't really know what it was all about. Apparently, it had been mentioned cryptically on the Events Around MIT Calendar as "A meeting to help people meet. Snacks provided." Thus, a few gentle loony community lurker types came, and some bored grad students. I think some of these people basically live at MIT, sleeping in libraries and getting all their meals at free-food events.

The next week, the committee called me in for a formal interview. There was some confusion about how exactly the Office of Work/Life Balance would fit into MIT's overall org chart, but the important part was that it would essentially be a one-person, independent office stuck into a spare corner somewhere, with minimal oversight and a tiny budget. The unstated message I got was that if you managed to stay out of the news, you would have achieved your goals. It would be nice to actually help some of the faculty and staff, but there weren't any sort of concrete requirements in terms of numbers of people using the service, or incremental happiness achieved. Since the whole thing was a bit of a

pro-forma effort to satisfy the conditions of that guy's will, MIT didn't have many specific expectations.

The interview itself was strange. I sat around a desk with four MIT staff people and a graduate student representative. Although everyone had introduced themselves, I couldn't keep them all straight. They each had prepared several questions.

"So Alyse," said John, or maybe it was James, "tell me what work/life balance means to you."

"I'd say that the goal is happiness and satisfaction, which can be achieved through a mixture of one's work and other activities and relationships. Now, the exact recipe will vary among people, and also across different times of one person's life, but generally most people will need both," I said.

"Why do you think work/life balance is an issue that people need help with?" asked the second man.

"Could you clarify whether you would like me to talk about why people have difficulties balancing the two, or why I believe that enough people have this issue that it merits MIT's attention?" I asked.

"The latter," he answered.

"Among the general public in the US and other Western countries, several large surveys have identified work/life balance as a top concern for people in the 30-50 year old range. Additionally, it has frequently been cited as a factor for turning down job offers from MIT, and as a factor when staff and faculty leave MIT. So I believe it is an issue of general concern that has a direct impact on MIT's ability to attract and retain top talent," I said. Next was the graduate student.

“What would you advise someone to do if they were having trouble finding a girlfriend?”

“I would help them evaluate whether they wanted to work on meeting more people or on approaching people they already knew. Then, I would ask them what sorts of things they have tried, and the advantages and disadvantages of them. I’d also help them brainstorm additional ideas,” I said.

“Alyse, I know you have been involved with MIT for many years, so you’re familiar with the MIT population. How would you describe the average MIT community member?” asked James, or maybe Jeff. Hah, I thought. I’ve heard this one before, and knew what the supposedly right answer was.

“One thing I can say is that there is no average MIT person, and few MIT people are average. Compared to the general population, I’d say that MIT folks are more likely to be attracted to challenges, and to have unusual ideas.” Finally, the last guy spoke up.

“Why should MIT hire someone who is not even married to help people with work/life issues? Isn’t having a family the main non-work thing people do?” he said.

“As you know, MIT does have resources to assist employees with child care, elder care, marriage counseling, and even spousal job hunting. But, as Mr. Montgomery noted, while a spouse or family might require some energy to maintain, they also provide a great deal of support. Single people have a lot less family support, and thus may be able to use some help from MIT. Of course, I do not have personal experience with

marriage or raising children. But, I think that single people will feel that I'm the same boat and able to understand their difficulties.”

During the rest of the week, I continued with normal job-hunting activities. The software headhunting firm that I'd been working with managed to schedule me for two programming interviews the same week. Since the tech bubble had burst, I'd been adjusting my expectations downwards, but even so, these were notably bad situations.

The first company wanted to pay half of the first year's salary in company stock (which would be impossible to sell, since it was not a publicly traded company, in addition to being practically worthless for a company with no product, no sales, and just a flashy website). The second company's interview consisted of what looked like final exam questions cribbed off of a couple programming classes, and they didn't want to even talk about what the company was doing, in case someone else stole their idea. Going back to work at MIT was looking like a better prospect, and I accepted the offer to become the first Director of Getting a Life.

## Getting the Word Out

The sooner the Office of Work/Life Balance opened, the sooner MIT would be able to get the Montgomery money, so things moved right along. I got an office on the third floor near the corner of the Chemistry building, formerly some kind of break room, complete with a couple coffee tables and old Institute couches. A filing cabinet and a power outlet for my laptop completed the furnishings. I was really gratified when the Institute Door Painter came by to put my name on the door---all my previous jobs had been with small software companies where you're lucky to get a laminated name label to Velcro to your cubicle entrance.

After the first morning of sitting expectantly, waiting in vain for anyone to drop by, I realized that the first order of business was going to be doing some publicity. And after trying to draft up an announcement, I realized the problem. While my real purpose was to help people make friends and meet potential dates, I couldn't make that too obvious in any publicity materials in case the Boston Globe got hold of the advertisements. I'd always suspected that a lot of MIT administrators spent a lot of time worrying about how to avoid the wrong kinds of

publicity. Certainly one of my big concerns was to make sure that any headline with the words “dating”, “matchmaking”, or “seeking love” would not also have the word “MIT”.

I knew of at least one place to look for potential visitors. I scanned the Science Connection personals, and contacted everyone who mentioned working at MIT to let them know that the new Office of Work/Life Balance offered assistance such as personal coaching for meeting people. After that, I got in touch with the course secretaries in the different departments, and got the names of all the unmarried faculty and staff. For these folks, I decided to go with a more personal touch, so I dropped by a few offices each morning to introduce myself. Quite a number of people I met during these rounds seemed pleased to find out that MIT was now offering some kind of quality of life benefit for single people. Finally, I waited until evening, and called to tell Nightline the real scoop about the Work/Life office. I figured they were in a good position to refer visitors who wanted to talk either about dating woes, or lack of date woes.

## Meeting Marilla

So that's how I found myself here, in a little office back at MIT, waiting for someone to drop in. It's never a good idea to not look busy, so in the meantime, I'd been surfing the web and putting together a list of online dating resources and ideas for things to do around town. After a couple years working frantically at a series of doomed start-up software companies, the complete lack of deadlines and deliverables was disorienting. Maybe this would be a good time to do some job-related research by posting some online personal ads of my own. After all, I wanted to be able to tell folks that I'm in the same boat as they are!

Having met some guys before, I knew that the most critical decision for putting together an online dating profile is which pictures to post. It seems typical to have something like one main picture, and two supplemental ones. Keeping it simple, I was leaning towards trying to convey one adjective per picture, and the adjectives were "fun," "approachable," and "attractive." It seemed like it should be pretty straightforward to find appropriate snapshots, right?



I heard a knock at the door, I looked up to see a tall woman wearing a navy blue T-shirt, black knit skirt, and one purple and one green sock (different lengths).

“Hi, I’m Alyse. Welcome to the Office of Work/Life Balance.” I said, trying not to sound too surprised. Not the most original greeting, but sometimes novelty is overrated.

“I’m Marilla. I’m hoping you can help me adjust to MIT.” She spoke clearly, but looked everywhere but where I was standing. Maybe she was nervous.

“Why don’t we sit down and you can tell me about how things have been going so far.” I headed towards one of the couches, and she sat down at the other one. Immediately, she picked up the set of magnetic marbles and started stacking them into a pyramid.

Since she wasn’t looking at me, I decided that maybe she’d prefer that I didn’t look too much at her either, but it was difficult not to take a long look. She had wavy dark brown hair about waist length, and small sections of it were braided with glass beads and thin, purple ribbons.

“What I find so strange about MIT is that people never communicate clearly, so I can’t figure out what they mean half the time. Plus, I tell people things, and they don’t seem to understand. It’s really frustrating,” she said.

“I can see how that would be annoying. Where were you before you came here?” I asked. I wasn’t completely shocked that she found MIT people puzzling, but I wanted to know what she was comparing us to.

“This is the first place I’ve been since leaving Ten Oaks. I lived there my whole life and I’m not sure it was a good idea to leave. Everything is so strange here on the outside,” she said. Marilla was still playing with the magnetic marbles, sorting them by size and color. Abruptly, she took off one of her shoes and socks (the green one) and scratched her foot. Leaving her foot bare, she looked at me for the first time, “What can you do?”

“What I’ll do depends on what you think would be helpful. How about if we talk for the next half hour about your background and observations about MIT. Then, let’s spend another half hour sketching out an action plan for going forward. If you decide it would be helpful to meet again, we can do that, too.” At this point, I was doodling on the etch-a-sketch, because it was getting difficult to keep taking with no eye contact. Maybe I should just pretend we’re talking on the phone.

“Can you tell me more about Ten Oaks? I haven’t heard of it before.” When she called MIT “the outside,” it made me curious about whether this place was some kind of commune or cult group.

“There are about twenty families at Ten Oaks. My parents were some of the original residents and knew the founders. Almost all the parents are scientists or engineers, and almost all the children are home schooled together,” she started. “I left because I wanted to do some experiments where I’ll need a nuclear reactor, and we don’t have one yet.”

I hoped she wasn’t here to steal MIT’s nuclear reactor, but I supposed it was probably nailed down pretty good. I decided to focus on the social aspects of Ten Oaks.

“So you must have known all the other residents really well, since you lived there all your life.”

“Yes, I knew everyone. Why are you looking at me so often?” she asked. “Why does everyone at MIT look at you when they’re talking?” It was kind of a relief that she brought up this question, because it was getting to be a distraction trying to look away.

“You’re right, Marilla. I find myself wanting to look at you while we’re talking, but when I noticed that you were not looking at me very much, I was trying to do the same. But I guess I’m just too used to eye-contact during conversation,” I admitted. “Outside Ten Oaks, you will probably find that most people are used to looking at each other if they are talking in person. It’s not just MIT. Tell me more about other differences you’ve noticed.”

I tried to concentrate on drawing a spiral with dots of different sizes, and resisted the urge to check whether she’d put her shoe back on. I wondered whether the nuclear reactor has rules about no shoes, no service.

“Another strange thing is that people here say things that they don’t mean, all the time,” she complained.

“It sounds like you have some specific incidents in mind,” I inquired.

“I went to the new grad student barbeque, and was talking to someone about the experiments I’m planning to do. He said that he had to go, but then I saw that he stayed at the barbeque for at least another hour talking to different people. It was like he just didn’t want to talk more with me.”

“Mmmm. Any other incidents you were thinking of?” I asked.

“When I met my advisor, he told all the new students that we could talk with him anytime we had questions. Later that afternoon, I started to ask him questions from the list that I’d made before coming to MIT. But we only got through the third question, and then he said he’d talk to me again later. I tried to ask him more the next day, but again he said he’d talk to me later and I still haven’t gotten past question three.”

She was upset, and had started to bounce herself up and down on the couch by twitching her feet. “I don’t know how I’m ever going to get to know anyone here if they don’t want to talk.”

“At Ten Oaks, everyone must have had the same rules for how to talk with each other. Outside, people still have rules, but they are probably not the ones you’re used to. Do you want to find out more about what people usually expect when they’re talking?” I asked.

“I’m not sure. It seems like it will be very complicated,” she replied. It was time for a pause for thought, so I started drawing a floral design. “But, the other reason that I left Ten Oaks is that there isn’t anyone there who I want to date, so I hoped to find somebody outside.” I was starting to feel a bit in over my head. It would be enough of a job to help Marilla get used to normal social interactions, let alone dating.

“Maybe it would make sense to spend some time figuring out normal conversations, and then later we can focus on dating.” I offered. “Do you want to meet again?” She arranged the marbles into a plus sign.

“Yes. When?”

“How about if we talk once a week. You can come at the same time next week, and prepare a list of five times at MIT when you’ve

talked to someone with an unsatisfactory result. List what you think the other person meant, even though they didn't say it. And then list the alternatives of what you were expecting them to do."

I hoped that getting her to guess at non-verbalized intent would be a first step to noticing a pattern in her interactions. My suspicion was that she was probably boring people with excessive technical conversations until they had to flee, but I didn't want to bring up that possibility at our first meeting. "Also, we talked about how people usually expect to look at each other when they're talking. Do you want to try doing that for three conversations over the next week, and let me know how it works for you?" She agreed, and headed out the door without saying goodbye or looking at me again. I'd have to find out a little more about Ten Oaks before our next meeting. It would be really interesting to know whether there were other residents who had successfully re-integrated with the outside society.

Getting back to the problem of picking out appropriate pictures for my online profile, I ended up narrowing it down to a picture from a summer jaunt to Rockport where I'm wearing a casual, yet slightly revealing spaghetti strap top, one where I'm swinging in a playground wearing a long crinkly skirt, and one where I'm dressed up for a holiday party and leaning off a ladder to put up some decorations. I decided to procrastinate on actually writing a profile, and start Googling Ten Oaks.

Not surprisingly, for a community of tech types, they had a web page which lists the group's purpose and membership application instructions. They have a lot of descriptions of the home schooling program, and their students who have won all sorts of science project prizes. But it's not clear how I could find out about former members

who were now living on the outside, until I came across the alumni list. There's one woman who's on the faculty at Amherst, so maybe Matthew could help me get in touch. I'm hoping she might have some good tips for Marilla, and heck, it wouldn't hurt to get Matthew out of his lab once in a while anyways.

## Late Night, Looking Back

After another evening of popcorn and reading trashy mystery novels, I've stayed up too late again. Usually I just fall asleep, but for some reason it was hard to clear my head. Having talked to my first real visitor, I was starting to feel like maybe I could make this job more than just a stratagem for MIT getting its hands on some alum's legacy. But thinking about Marilla, I realized that I didn't even have a great word to describe visitors. In the software world, you'd talk about customers or users. Social workers have clients, doctors have patients, and various other MIT offices just refer to their visitors as students. I'm going to have to stick with "visitors" until something better comes to mind, but worrying about vocabulary kept me awake. I finally gave in, and checked the online thesaurus. This just came up with "guest" and "patron," neither of which was exactly right.

Now I was really awake. Of course, I didn't really have a good idea of why I was awake, or what the purpose of life is, so I made a quick evaluation. Short term goal: sleep. Mid term goal: help MIT folks with getting a life. Other mid term goal: go on some dates and have a life myself. Long term goal: have a fun and stable job, along with a fun and

stable relationship. Obsessively checking email was probably not really helping with the short term goal, but I did it anyways and found an announcement about my high school class's 15th reunion party being in danger of getting cancelled because no one had volunteered to organize it. I guessed that all the social organizers of the class were probably busy with kids by now.

I was NOT considering volunteering for that job, but I was certainly curious about what some of those old friends and rivals were doing these days. I was feeling all nostalgic, and a quick flip through my senior yearbook brought up memories of a bunch of people that I hadn't talked to for years. As a lark, I decided to make a project out of trying to email one old friend each month. To kick things off, I looked at the high school web page, and found the only one of our teachers who was still on staff. Mrs. Danfield was a brand new English teacher our freshman year, and got everyone excited about doing scenes from Shakespeare and writing journals.

Dear Mrs Danfield,

I don't know if you remember me, but I was in your class the first year you started at Greenway High School. It was so much fun to have an enthusiastic and inspiring English teacher. Thanks for all your help! I guess you've been at Greenway for a while now, are the students any different than we used to be? I ended up majoring in chemical engineering, but then I worked as a computer programmer, and now I'm at the MIT Office of Work/Life balance. I hope you've been well, and maybe



I'll see you if our class gets its act together about a reunion party!

Alyse

Having sent off email to Mrs Danfield, I was suddenly really sleepy and ready to tackle short term goal number one.

## High Through-put Dating

I finally made it to work an hour late, after sleeping through my alarm. Two cups of tea later, Todd stopped by my office.

“Hi Alyse. I ran into Jason yesterday and he told me about your new job. I think I might have some useful information for you.” Todd was my TA for intro to organic chemistry, and has been teaching chemistry at MIT ever since he got his PhD.

“Great, you mean you can tell me about the challenges of dating at MIT after graduation?” I asked. I didn’t know anything about Todd’s social life, since we don’t have overlapping social circles.

“Actually, I wanted to tell you about how I solved the dating problem, and got married. I came up with a methodical approach I call ‘high through-put dating’, and I think it might make a lot of sense for other guys who are in the same situation I used to be in,” he announced.

“Wow, congratulations. Come in and tell me about it.” I said, going over to the couch. Todd pulled out a notebook and started sketching what looked like a chemical engineering continuous reactor diagram.

“OK, so you start here with the first step of meeting new potential dates. If you meet someone who seems potentially compatible, they pass along to the second step of having a first date. If you both think there’s potential, you go to step three, having up to eight more dates to determine whether you want to start a relationship. Step four is being in an exclusive relationship to figure out if it’s heading to marriage. Of course, you have a bunch of people going through steps one through three in parallel. It’s not until you get to step four that you change over to a serial process.” I nod, and he continued to draw on the diagram.

“I figure a 10:1 drop-off between steps one and two, and a 5:1 drop-off between each of the next steps. So to have a reasonable change of getting to step 5, you need 1250 people in step 1.”

“Wow, I never ran the numbers before, but that seems pretty reasonable, if you’re assuming that the people in step 1 are all pretty much strangers. If you date people you already know, you might take a short-cut to step three.” I offered.

“Right, but if you’re a guy my age, probably you’ve already tried dating any of your friends that might be appropriate, and you’re only making new friends at a rate of one per year, and most of those are going to be other guys or married women,” he countered. “So you need to meet over a thousand potential dates to have an expected marriage outcome.” This was not really good news to me, since I was certainly not racking up those sorts of numbers myself. But, he did say that he had a solution.

“Given those chances, what do you do make it happen?” I asked.

“The key concepts are to keep the pipeline full and to winnow efficiently at each step. I’ll send you my slides and podcast about the details, and you can email me if you have any questions. Got to run.” Todd waved and winked.

It surprised me that he’d made a podcast, but then I remembered how he used to tape all his chemistry lectures so that students could review the material. I wonder if students these days have ever seen a tape recorder? I couldn’t wait to hear about the rest of Todd’s dating methodology. He had an amazing way of explaining organic chemistry, and surely dating strategies couldn’t be more confusing than redox reactions and weak leaving groups.

## A Man Who Knows What He Wants

While I was still pondering the implications of Todd's calculations (meeting 1250 people?) and wondering when he'd told his wife about high through-put dating, a man appeared at my door.

"Hey, uhh, is this the place to get advice about women? I still haven't figured out how all the building numbers work around here." He seemed slightly embarrassed, but cheerful.

"Sure thing, come on in. My name's Alyse." He grinned, and sauntered to a couch, stretching his legs out.

"I just started teaching here this year, but I've been around campus for years. You can call me Tim."

"Oh, I just started here this year too. This is a new office for MIT, and I hope that a resource for helping people with their extracurricular lives will be a good thing. How have things been going for you?" I asked.

"I've been trying to understand why my dating success rate has been going down since I was in college, and thought you might have an

unbiased point of view.” He looked more serious now. “I don’t know if I’m losing my touch, or if women are different these days, or if it’s the thinning hair.”

“Sounds like you have a couple possible hypotheses, but tell me more about what you’ve noticed. I’m guessing it’s not the hair, because it looks fine to me.” I smiled. This sort of story was more what I’d been expecting to run into, but everyone had their own variations on the theme of how much harder it was to meet people after graduation.

Tim went on. “Back in college, it was reasonably straightforward. I’d meet a girl that I was interested in, run into her at a couple parties or doing an activity, and eventually get up the nerve to ask her out. I got a couple flat rejections, but sometimes it worked.” I nodded, and made a few non-committal encouraging noises. “Lately, the same approach is totally failing.”

“Do you think you have a statistically significant sample size?” I asked.

“Probably not, but I’m 0 for 5 in the last year, and I’m starting to feel like something’s going wrong,” he answered. Five did sound like more than bad luck, and that’s certainly enough to start making someone feel unloved.

“Tell me about how it went with the last few women.” I encouraged.

“I’ve been involved with APO for ages. I’m not an MIT alum, but I used to be involved in my college chapter. Once I moved to Boston, I started hanging out with the MIT chapter, going along on service projects and meeting students and alums. Over the summer, I

went to a couple river clean-up events, and met Gina. She's the new service chair who organized the events because she didn't think the chapter was active enough during the summer." At this point, my mental alarms are starting to go off, because Tim has got to be pushing 40, so it's a bit late for him to be hitting on students.

"So you met Gina during the summer..." I said. Tim sighed, and continued with the story,

"The events were a lot of fun, and afterwards, everyone went out to dinner. Gina was amazing; she's petite but has a great figure, and such deep green eyes. She always had something nice to say to everyone who showed up, and made everyone feel special. I think she especially liked to tease me about falling into the river, because I waded in after some soda containers a few times."

"Sounds like you definitely noticed her. How did you tell her you were interested?" I asked.

"She's always online, so I'd zephyr her to say hello and stuff. One day the weather was perfect, and she was complaining about being stuck inside working, so I asked if she wanted to meet up and go for a walk in the evening. She said that she had to go grocery shopping with her housemates, but sounded at least theoretically interested. The next day, I asked her if she wanted to go to a beach on Saturday, but she had to check whether she had rehearsals," he sighed again.

"Did you know whether she already had a boyfriend, or if she was even interested in men?" I asked.

“I heard some of the other students talking about how she’d dumped her last boyfriend just before the summer, so I think she was available,” he said.

“What happened next?”

“I thought I should wait to see if she suggested anything, since she’d turned down two of my suggestions. She was friendly when I saw her in the halls, and told me about this one-act show that she was rehearsing for. She said I should come see it, so I did, and after the show I asked if she wanted to go out for ice cream. A couple of the other people in the show were around, and she looked at one of them and said that they had already made plans to go to someone’s dorm room. After that, she stopped answering my zephyrs, and kind of ignored me at the last river clean-up. I don’t really know why.”

“Do you usually meet people through APO?” I asked.

“Mostly, but also sometimes at the science fiction library,” he replied.

“Are most of the women you’ve been meeting undergraduates?”

“I guess so. I think some of them are M.Eng students too.” Tim didn’t seem to think there was anything strange about this, so I decided to be blunt. “Do you think that the age difference would be a problem? I assume you’re significantly older than these women.”

“I don’t think that should matter. I’m really energetic, and when I meet women my age, they’re always either divorced with kids or too busy with careers to actually go do fun things. Plus, I think younger women are really beautiful, and you know that traditionally, the man is older than



the woman” he said, seriously. We had some severe delusions here, but I didn’t think I could clear them up very quickly.

“Tim, it’s likely that most college aged women will primarily be interested in men their own age. I think you’re at a disadvantage if you’re mainly meeting students.” He shook his head,

“But those are the women I’m interested in, plus I hardly even meet women my age. They just aren’t interested in doing the same things.”

“How about if I help you find a few one-time activities where you can meet some available women who aren’t students, and you give that a try. Then we can talk about how it goes. I think you need to decide whether to put effort into meeting someone your age, who is more likely to be interested, or whether you want to keep getting turned down by younger women until you manage to find one who’s willing to consider an older man.” I usually didn’t like to give someone pointed suggestions on a first meeting, but I hated to think about this guy continuing to work his way through student groups acting creepy with the women.

“I don’t know if it will work,” he said.

“Tim, you have already noticed that your usual approach has not been working. It might be time to try something different.” I urged. “Come back next week, and I’ll have a list of possible activities for you.” He was still unconvinced.

“I don’t feel comfortable going to activities where I don’t know anyone.” I wasn’t going to let him get away with that excuse.

“Well, you can bring a friend, or if you’d prefer, maybe I can go with you. You don’t have to go by yourself. See you next week?”

“OK, thanks,” he agreed.

I called up my friend Jen, who’s a sort of informal advisor to APO, to get another perspective on Tim.

“Jen, can I ask you confidentially for some gossip about someone?” I knew that Jen usually had no scruples about passing on the titillating details, but I didn’t want word to get back to Tim that I’d been checking on him. “I met a guy named Tim, and something he said made me wonder if he’s been acting inappropriately with women at APO.”

“Oh my God, that guy.” Jen sounded pissed. “He’d been hanging out for years, and every year he fixates on a few women and starts bugging them. I’ve been trying to figure out how to get rid of him, but people don’t want to set a precedent for banning someone for attempted dating.”

“Right, that’s kind of what I thought. Would you let me know if it starts happening again?” Jen agreed to alert me if she noticed another situation developing, and I started putting together a list of Thing To Do In Order to Meet Women Who Aren’t Students.

## You're Always the Last to Know

Things were starting to get busy at the office. Before I'd managed to list more than five possible activities, I had another visitor. He was dressed in business casual, and had a certain air of gravity.

"My name is Lesley. Would this be a good time to talk?" he started. "The department secretary told me about this office, and I've heard positive recommendations." That was news to me, since I'd hardly had any visitors, but maybe he was just being polite.

"Nice to meet you, Lesley. I'm Alyse. Please come in." Lesley was tall and thin, and looked a bit like he should be wearing a top hat. It might have been a slight resemblance to Abraham Lincoln.

"My difficulty has been that although I've met a number of women since coming to Boston, I still haven't met someone whom I'm actually interested in dating," he said, with concern. "I've been signed up with this service that arranges lunch or coffee dates for professionals, and I think that their strength is more in quantity than quality." I was impressed that he was already using a dating service. The typical MIT

approach is to refuse all professional help and blunder along making a glorious mess with do-it-yourself.

“I guess quantity is at least a good first step. Tell me more about the women you’ve met who don’t seem right.” Thinking about Todd’s high through-put system, I wondered how far Lesley had gotten towards the target of 1250 meetings.

“Let’s see. One woman was a lawyer, very articulate, witty. Another was a high school teacher, seemed like she’d be the life of the party. I think the last one I met was an aspiring actress who worked as a computer programmer. She was a little introverted, but very kind and easy to be with.” Lesley looked thoughtful.

“But none of these was really your type?” I asked.

“I don’t think there’s a particular sort of women that I’m looking for. It’s not like I only date blondes, or need someone who enjoys travel. It’s just a question of chemistry, somehow,” he answered.

“Did any of the women you met seem interested in you?” I asked.

“I supposed. They did all offer me their phone numbers, and one of them seemed quite offended that I didn’t want to set a second date immediately.” Maybe I should get the name of this dating service to pass along to Tim, I thought.

“It must be a bit frustrating to have a series of dates but not meet anyone interesting,” I said. “Tell me about some people you’ve had a spark with in the past.”

“There really haven’t been many. I didn’t really date when I was in college, and I’ve really only had two short relationships since. Misha was kind of a tomboy, and was athletic and rather pushy. Daisy was a scientist, but loved classical music,” he looked sad. “Neither relationship worked out, partly because I had to move each time, and they both became tired of the long-distance problems.”

I noticed that when describing these women, Lesley had completely avoided mentioning how they looked. I wasn’t sure if he was trying to avoid sounding crude, or whether he genuinely hadn’t noticed.

“Well, Lesley, at least Boston has a large population, so I’m sure there are women you’d be interested within a 10 mile radius.” I said. But, I was getting a little suspicious about whether he might be chasing the wrong targets. “Would you also consider men?” I asked, trying to be nonchalant. I can’t always tell if that sort of question will offend someone.

“I don’t think so,” he said, looking slightly uncomfortable.

“It’s great that you’ve been meeting women, and that they’ve liked you. Do you want to keep going on these dates for a while and see if you hit it off with someone, or did you want to try something different?” I asked.

“I think I’ll continue with this dating service for another month, and then maybe re-evaluate,” he decided.

“That seems like a good plan. Feel free to come by after any of your dates, if you want to talk about them. We can also try to figure out whether there are some characteristics you’re looking for in another

person, so that you can give the dating service more information to use when matching you up.”

“Thank you, I probably will be back.” Lesley nodded, then walk out of the office. He’s graceful, I noticed. Maybe he dances or something. I had a fleeting image of him breakdancing with a serious expression and stylish yet understated shoes.

## Cast Your Fate to the Winds

Todd's email had arrived, and I first clicked through his slides before playing the podcast. Apparently, he was a proponent of internet dating as a good way to screen lots of people. Being detail oriented, he even had a suggesting organization system to use in order to make sure you didn't mix up the names and relevant details of the many people you'd be exchanging emails with. I guess even though everyone doing those dating sites knows that everyone else is simultaneously considering multiple people, it's very poor form to be obvious about it. For the first date step, he pointed out that the goal was to conclude the date with a definite decision about whether it was worth seeing the person again. Thus, if you were still ambivalent by the midpoint of the date, it was time to intensify the screening by concentrating on areas of uncertainty. For example, if the person seemed self-absorbed, you should try to turn the conversation to yourself and risk awkwardness rather than acting agreeable and going along with their monologue. That way, it would become obvious whether they resisted paying attention to other people. Similarly, if they mentioned being involved with a social circle, religion, or political group that might really bother you, you should get them to elaborate until you are either

definitely reassured or can definitely disqualify them from further consideration.

I figured that I should probably concentrate on the first two steps, so it was high time to get cracking on writing an online profile. It's tough to market yourself, but if I was going to be advising people to give this a try, it would be ridiculously hypocritical to avoid it myself.

Comfortable, quirky, studious yet spontaneous woman looking for someone who's happy with today but also working towards the future. I come highly recommended by my pet rabbit and all my ex-boyfriends. I enjoy meeting new people, bicycling, libraries, gardening, and board games. If you'd like, tell me about something you've been excited about lately, and something you've never done before but would like to try.

I filled out the application forms for a couple of internet dating sites, and waiting for the randomness to start. In some ways, posting a profile is like putting a message into a bottle, since you can never tell what connect might come of it. But I didn't just want to wait and see, so I resolved to spend some time next week looking through profiles and initiating contacts. It had been a long week, and I was looking forward to getting together with Jason and Ryan for Sunday brunch.

Before I managed to log out, I'd gotten two responses. Both were spam impersonating hot, foreign women who were eager to correspond. Someone should start offering a special online dating service spam filter.



## More Looking Back

That night, I got email back from my old English teacher, Mrs. Danfield.

Dear Alyse,

Of course I remember you! I think teachers always feel particularly attached to their first classes, and your class was a good group. I was glad to hear that things have been going well for you. I always wonder what all my students do after leaving school. Of your class, I have often wondered about you and Julia, because it seemed like you two might be able to do anything. Did you know that your friend Kelly became a teacher and is working at Greenway? She sometimes asks me if your class was as challenging, funny, wonderful, and annoying as the students these days. I feel that people are the same as always, but both the pressures and opportunities for kids these days have grown. Maybe everyone's world used to feel a little smaller. Come by and visit if you're ever back in the neighborhood.

Emma Danfield

I'm not sure if I remembered that Mrs. Danfield's name was Emma. I wonder if it was strange for Kelly to be colleagues with some of her old teachers. Kelly always wanted to be a writer or go into publishing after school. I wonder if she still writes now that she'd teaching. I haven't been in touch with her since we graduated, even though we used to each lunch together all the time at school. I looked her up on the school's website.

I wouldn't have recognized her at all, which explains why I hadn't noticed her when I was looking at the list of teachers last week. Back in school, she was going through a goth phase, and had her hair dyed black, and wore layers of makeup. Her website picture looked, well, like a teacher. Plus, she must have gotten married and changed her last name.

Dear Kelly,

Hey, it's a voice from your past! How have you been? I guess it's been a long time since high school! I heard that you're teaching at Greenway. How do you like it? What was college like for you? I'm sorry I didn't keep in touch. The quick summary of my life is that I went to MIT, majored in chemical engineering, ended up working as a computer programmer, and am now doing administrative stuff at MIT. Still single, so let me know if you know any nice guys in the Boston area!

Alyse

It was funny that Mrs. Danfield particularly wondered about me and Julia. I was always the class nerd, who did all the homework and worried about tests and grades and pleasing teachers. By the time I graduated, every teacher was convinced I should major in their subject in college, since they all thought their class was my favorite. Julia was the opposite, and only worked when she thought something was cool and interesting. When she really got into anything, she would produce the most amazing results. Poetry that made you cry, a science fair project that got her into the national level competition, intricately carved Christmas ornaments. We were a case where opposites had attracted, and had been best friends and good natured rivals for most of our school years, but it had ended after a terribly awkward senior prom when she'd gone with the guy I was infatuated with.

While I was sending that email to Kelly, I got 3 more spam emails off the dating sites. Gack, I wonder if any real people actually use these sites, or if they're just full of web crawling spam bots. Time to log off.

## Brunch and Suggestions

Since Jason and Ryan started going out, Jason has been trying to switch to a more normal schedule, instead of getting up after noon all the time. But since I'd known him since freshman year, I was still getting used to seeing him awake and out of the house. The concept of getting together for breakfast, or even brunch, was just never a possibility before. I like Ryan a lot, but I also have to admit that in addition to the pleasure of his company, their relationship was causing a number of handy side-effects like changing Jason's social schedule. When I got to the restaurant, I saw that they'd already gotten a table.

"How's MIT's newest administrator and matchmaking specialist doing?" Ryan greeted me.

"It's been interesting, but I can't say that I've done anything too helpful yet. People are just starting to drop by." I answered. "Have you heard anyone around campus talking about the new office?" I was curious what the word on the street was.

"I hate to say it, but there's a bit of grumbling from the student life services administrators and the staff quality of life offices. They think you have a much cushier job, and most of them are completely snowed

under with more people coming in for help than they can deal with. Also, there might be some resentment that you're not reporting up through their offices," Ryan informed me.

"Since my office is just experimental this year, it really does make sense to be reporting directly to someone who's going to decide whether to make it permanent or try another approach. Do you think the grumbling is going to cause any problems for me?" I asked.

"I just think you should watch out in case a disgruntled colleague tips off the Boston Globe about an entertaining human interest story. Maybe you should have a PR plan, just in case," he recommended.

"OK, I'll get right on it next week," I said. "So have you two done anything exciting this week?" I asked.

"Just the normal political fundraisers for the upcoming state representative race, but a friend of ours is having a fancy dress drag party next weekend. It'll probably be too much of a meat market, but we'll probably at least drop by," Jason replied.

"That reminds me, I might need some advice. What do you think are some things somebody could do to figure out what sorts of people they're attracted to?" I was still thinking about Lesley, and whether there were any useful suggestions I could offer. Unlike Marilla and Tim, Lesley didn't seem to have any obvious reason for his lack of dating success.

"How about going to a lot of different places where you can see a range of people? Because sometimes it's not just the person, it might be the entire context and atmosphere," Ryan suggested.

“It might also be interesting to try different personas, or to play up particular parts of their own personality. That could be good if someone is normally too inhibited,” Jason offered.

“Thanks, those are both good ideas. I figure I can count on you guys if I end up needing to introduce someone to a non-nerdly party scene?” I tried fluttering my eyelashes.

“Depends if they’re cute!” Jason said.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” I laughed.

“Any likely prospects yourself? Did you sign up for any online dating services?” Ryan asked.

“I finally did that yesterday, and so far it’s only been lonely Russian women hoping to meet a nice guy who’s willing to click on sketchy weblinks,” I said. “I haven’t tried looking through the profiles to contact anyone yet.”

“Maybe someone will just walk right into your office!” Jason joked.

“Nah, I promised the search committee that I wouldn’t use the job to further my own work/life balance. It would set a bad example for professors,” I said.

After brunch, I decided to call Matthew and see if he wanted to help get in touch with that woman who used to live at Ten Oaks. I’m not sure exactly what I thought she could do, but I had some vague idea that maybe she had figured some stuff out about life on the outside that would be helpful to Marilla. But I didn’t want to encourage Marilla to talk

with her if it turned out that she was unhappy about the outside, or had left Ten Oaks on bad terms, or was clueless and set in her ways.

“Hi Matthew. Are you surviving the semester so far?”

“Hosure level’s about 8 out of 10, so it could be worse,” he said. “How’s the job hunt?” he asked.

“You’re never going to believe this, but you know how you were saying that colleges needed more services to help single faculty?” I said. “I’m the one and only person in the new Office of Work/Life balance at MIT.”

“No way, how did you manage that?” he asked.

“Don’t tell people, but it’s really because MIT had to meet a bunch of crazy conditions of someone’s will. The office is experimental for the year, and I’m still trying to figure out what I should be doing and how to do it.” I replied.

“Good God, does that mean you spend all day with desperate nerds ho have boring tales of social woe?” he sounded horrified.

“Actually, the visitors so far have been pretty interesting. One of them was telling me about this kind of nerd commune in the Midwest. I guess one of the professors at your college used to live there.” Although my office didn’t have a formal confidentiality policy, since it wasn’t officially counseling, I didn’t want to be too specific about visitors and their problems. “I thought it would be kind of cool to meet someone who’d lived there. It sounds like a unique place,” I said.

“I always thought it would be great living in a nerd commune. A bit like the Manhattan project crossed with Woodstock,” he said.

Matthew does seem like someone who's cut out for communal living. He doesn't need too much privacy, he doesn't have tons of stuff, and he likes cooking.

"Would you be interested in saying hi to this professor, and seeing if she seemed interested in talking about the place? It's called Ten Oaks, her name is Susanna Merchant, and I think she's about our age." I asked.

"The name doesn't sound familiar, do you know what department she's in?" he sounded intrigued.

"Nope, I didn't really stalk her or anything, I was just looking at the Ten Oaks website to find out more about the place, and noticed that one of their alumni was at Amherst. Let me know what you find out if you end up meeting her." I said.

So having made a start at finding some useful suggestions for Lesley and Marilla, I decided to spend the rest of the weekend looking at online profiles and emailing strangers.



## A Plethora of Choices

It would probably have been canny to actually look at a bunch of profiles before filling out my own, but I was afraid that I'd feel too much pressure to sound original if I'd seen too many others. Once I started looking, it was clear that most people had trouble not sounding just like everyone else in 100 words or less. I reviewed Todd's podcast about Step 1, Finding People for First Dates. His suggestion was to contact at least two people per day using email, and to only use the profile writeups to eliminate obviously inappropriate individuals. Instead of trying to pick out a few interesting people to contact, he advocated contacting anyone who was not disqualified by their profile, and relying on email correspondence as a basis for another downselect. The idea is that most people aren't witty or creative enough to convey themselves very well in a short profile, but an email exchange would be more revealing. Also, he warned that a significant fraction of people who posted profiles were probably completely non-responsive, either because they were no longer looking to meet someone, or because they'd only signed up out of curiosity and had never intended to really use the service.

As specified in the high through-put dating recommendations, I started a spreadsheet listing people contacted and initial contact dates, with columns to track responses, note important information, and tally outcomes. Since I was just starting out and didn't have any ongoing email exchanges to reply to, I sent out 10 emails, following Todd's guideline of mentioning at least two things based on the contents of the person's profile. So according to his probability calculations, I should expect to get one first date out of the exercise.

I'm not sure how I ended up being the odd one out in my social circle's game of relationship musical chairs, but Todd's point about having already tried dating any friends who were good prospects really hit home. Over the years, almost everyone else I knew had paired off, making the dating pool shallow enough that I could practically see the "Do Not Dive" signs. So I was glad to be trying something new.

## Another Day at the Office

Back at work, I was glad to see that there were starting to be more visitors stopping by. Most of them were looking for quick resource lists, rather than individual sessions, and I was collecting a good set of on campus and local activities. So I had a decent list of ideas ready to talk over with Tim, to steer him towards meeting women his age. I reviewed my list:

1. Adult ed classes (cooking, crafts, languages)
2. Yoga or dancing classes
3. Singles night at the MFA
4. Speed dating
5. Volunteer work
6. Community theater
7. Book group
8. Religious community
9. Boating or sailing club
10. Online dating or match-up service

Since he had mentioned APO, it seemed like another volunteer group might make sense. But, I'd been around enough MIT people to know that the obvious, common sense suggestion is hardly ever the first thing they're willing to try.

I sent Todd a quick email thanking him for sharing his high through-put dating technique, and looked for responses from my initial 10 dating service contacts. Nothing so far, but maybe no one wants to seem too eager.

Sometime after lunch, Tim came in, looking woebegone.

"Tim, you look like you've had a long day already. Come in." I was concerned that something negative had happened on the dating front.

"I think I'm just doomed. Women just don't find me attractive anymore," he said, sinking onto a couch.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I finally ran into Gina again this morning. I was so happy to see her that I figured I should just go ahead and finally find out for sure whether she'd want to go out sometime. So instead of asking about a specific activity and time, I asked if she wanted to do something with me sometime," he said. "She told me that she wasn't interested and didn't think of me in that way. I'd really been hoping she would, because I think we'd really be compatible."

"It's tough getting turned down, but at least you got an answer," I said. "Do you want to talk more about ways to meet women, or are you too discouraged right now?"

“I just feel like nothing’s going to work for me, so I guess that’s not the best mood to be in when you’re trying to meet anyone. Would it be ok if I just kind of hide out in your office for a while? I’m too distracted to really deal with work right now,” he said. Tim did look crushed. I was sympathetic to the difficulties of keeping your ego up after a string of social rejections, so I told him he could stick around unless someone else came in. Tim pulled out a sci-fi paperback, and I decided to try to come up with a PR plan to deflect potentially embarrassing writeups.

Although Ryan and the search committee had both expressed concern that the Boston Globe might run some kind of “MIT in search of MRS” article poking fun at science types trying to socialize, I thought that MIT’s own student newspaper, The Tech, was an additional danger. I’d heard of several incidents where a semi-accurate Tech article had been picked up by the mainstream newspapers and blown completely out of proportion. Usually the Boston Globe was not going to come poking around campus, unless of course there was a scandal about alcohol, drugs, or parents suing the school.

It seemed like the best way to prevent The Tech from running a story with the wrong spin (i.e. ironic humor or anti-administration point of view) would be to work with them to produce a deathly boring article that would convince anyone who read it that there was nothing to see and that they should just move along. I put together the top level press release bullet points.

- The MIT Office of Work/Life Balance opened this fall, in room 5-335

- Currently experimental, will be evaluated at the end of the year
- Mainly for full-time MIT employees, although open to graduate students with TA/RA-ships
- Will complement existing offices and department resources such as Health and Wellness, and the Center for Work, Family, and Personal Life
- Resources for getting to know Boston/Cambridge cultural, educational, and arts activities
- Individual coaching available for priority setting and strategies for personal progress

I sent Professor Immerman an email letting him know that I planned to contact The Tech and help them with a brief, accurate announcement about the new office, since they usually like to cover any changes in the administration. He's a master at reading between the lines, so I was confident that he'd understand my implications. As I was finishing, I saw someone coming up, so I cued Tim that it was time to go.

"It was nice talking with you. Stop by again if anything else comes up that you'd like to discuss," I said, raising one eyebrow. Tim got the hint, and said his goodbyes. I vaguely recognized the man walking into my office, but couldn't remember a name.

"Alyse, welcome back to MIT. I'm Henry Forth, the department administrator from nuclear engineering. We met some years ago, but it's been a long time." I was relieved that Henry had introduced himself.

"Oh yes, I remember you were on the dining committee, and were talking to what seemed like everyone on campus. How are you?" I asked.

"Pretty good," he said. "My wife and I moved into Next House as the new housemasters last year, and I've enjoyed working more with the

undergrads. Our department is primarily grad students, so it's a fun change."

"That's great, I bet the students really appreciate you both." I said, sincerely. Henry had really impressed the students on the dining committee, who claimed that he was one of the few administrators who actually treated them like people instead of children. "So what brings you to this neck of the woods?" I asked.

"Mostly I just recognized your name on the door, and thought I'd say hello. But I also wanted to ask you about coaching one of our new grad students, Marilla Hines," he replied.

"I'm happy to talk with Marilla, if she'd like to come by," I said, not wanting to admit that she'd already been here. "Was there something in particular that you think she needs help with?" It seemed unusual for the department administrator to know a grad student by name, let alone be worrying about them, though I suppose the nuclear engineering department is smaller and more tight-knit than many others.

"Some of her professors have come to me saying that she makes them uncomfortable, and I've noticed her classmates are starting to avoid her. I'm afraid it will be difficult for everyone, but Marilla most of all, if she doesn't get some help fitting in," he said.

"That does sound like a bad situations," I agreed. "Do you know her well enough to guess what's going wrong?" Henry's an observant man, and I wanted to get his take on Marilla's mannerisms.

"She acts like she can't tell what other people are feeling, particularly when they're getting bored and want to talk about something else or

escape entirely. I'd never seen someone talk about nuclear engineering so much that a professor's eyes glaze over, but she'd been doing it."

"Henry, I'm happy to try to help, but I can't promise any results. Feel free to encourage Marilla to visit," I said. "If she does visit, I might check back with you, if there are things that the professors might want to do to make their interactions with her less difficult," I added.

After Henry left, I emailed another five men from the dating website, and wrapped things up for the day.



## Unexpected Emails

I was hoping that Kelly might have written back, but instead I was amazed to get a note from Julia.

Hi Alyse,

You might be surprised to hear from me. I've thought of you over the years, but never managed to actually write. When I saw the announcement that our class reunion was being cancelled, I got out my old yearbook and had a little nostalgia session. Do you know, you're one of the people I remember most from high school. Half the time, I wanted to be more like you, but the rest of the time, I thought you had your life on backwards. But all the time, I loved having you as my best friend. My brother was back in town for a wedding last weekend and ran into Emma Danfield at the grocery store, and she mentioned you were working at MIT. I'd love to hear about what you've been doing, and also what your most significant memories from high school are.

I was married for a while to an artist I met in college, but it got too crazy so I'm back on my own. I'm

working with a consulting company, so have been moving around pretty often. I've been painting, mostly abstract, and trying to figure out how to merge that aesthetic with a quilting and embroidery medium.

May the sun, moon, and stars shine bright for you.

Julia

Julia and I had drifted apart during our senior year, partly because our friendship had been stretched to the breaking point when we'd both been interested in the same guy. We never talked about it, even though we talked about almost everything else. His vacillations had made it impossible for me to really know whether I had a chance, and all the half-suppressed competitiveness I had with Julia got terribly personal. I didn't hold it against David or Julia when his fascination with her madcap ideas and frenetic inspirations won out over his long-standing but quiet friendship with me. But, while they had gone to the prom together, it had ended with another confusing incident that made me want to avoid them both. Once we all left for college, we exchanged a few letters, but our holiday visits never lined up, what with Julia's year abroad, and David's coop internships and trimester schedule. Back then, a month felt like an eternity, and losing my place with each of them was the end of the world. Getting to MIT was a new start, and since I couldn't figure out how to ever fix things with Julia or figure things out with David, I'd just let it go. I still wasn't sure what to say to her, but I wanted to say something, since she'd made the effort to track me down.

Dear Julia,

Let's not wait for someone to plan an official reunion. Let's celebrate having known each other for 25 years---can you believe it's a quarter of a century? I'm glad we don't have matching braces these days, but I could still use an occasional peanut butter and celery sandwich.

Alice

The first time Julia had packed her own lunch, she'd wanted to invent something new. Her peanut butter and celery sandwiches turned into a real fad with all the other kids, because she was just the sort of person everyone noticed. Somehow, by the time we were in high school, it had become a good-luck food, and we both packed peanut butter and celery sandwiches for any lunch before important afternoon tests.

I was distracted by getting my first non-spam mail from the dating site. Two, in fact. One was a reply to one of my contacts. Sticking to Todd's methodology, I recorded both contacts into the spreadsheet.

Alyse,

I thought you might appreciate this video of a rabbit letter opener, maybe you can show it to your rabbit. My name's Mayat. I do community theater, tutor ESL students, and am a management consultant. The coolest thing I saw last week was a one-act play submitted to our group's annual amateur playwright challenge. I'll tell you about it sometime, if you'd like to get

together. One thing I'd like to do someday is to sing in tune!

So what's the best book that you read in the last year or two? Have you ever written a fan letter to an entertainer, and if so, who was it?

Mayat

He sounded pretty interesting. I'd initially been unsure whether to contact him, because he was at the younger range of what I was considering, but had heeded Todd's admonitions not to filter too strictly from the profiles. The dating site's suggestions that people ask questions also made more sense to me now, since it did seem like a good way to actually have something to say.

Hello Mayat,

That video was hilarious, thanks for the link. Sure, I'd like to meet you. Maybe coffee next Sunday afternoon?

Now, you can't go telling anyone about this, but when I was younger and more credulous, I wrote to Kit, the talking car from Knight Rider. I told it that hanging out on earth was a waste of time, and that it should consider a career in space exploration. The book that really grabbed me this year was Blink, by Malcolm Gladwell. I was intrigued by the idea of knowing without being able to explain why or how you know.

My two questions are: When you get together with friends, what do you all usually do? And, tell me about

something you didn't think you'd like, but that has grown on you.

Alyse

The other one was a non-starter. I guess he hadn't read my info very carefully, because he was looking for a Conservative Jewish woman. I could only conclude that 100 words plus a stats table was too much reading for some people, but at least it wasn't autogenerated spam.

## Lesley Wants To Try Something New

The next day started along what was emerging to be a typical pattern of visitors. Most people had one or two questions about Boston-area activities, churches, or dating services that could be answered by the ever growing collection of info sheets I'd been compiling. A couple others wanted a sanity check and pep talk, but didn't seem like they'd want repeat visits. But towards the end of the day, Lesley appeared.

Again he was a bit more well dressed than the norm, and I could see why his dates had been interested. His long, dark eyelashes and short, silky hair triggered a pseudo maternal cooing instinct, while his graceful movements promised gentle consideration. I hoped that some of the men I'd end up meeting would look this good.

"Good afternoon, Alyse. I hope this is not too late in the day to bother you?" he queried.

"Not at all. The office is on a late schedule, since it seems to be more convenient for people to visit towards the end of the day. Please come in. How have things been going?" I asked.

“Much the same, which makes me think I should try varying my approach. The dating service has outdone itself scheduling, and I’ve met three women over the last ten days.” He paused.

“And they were nice, but...” I prompted.

“Just as before. Perfectly nice, but I couldn’t imagine developing romantic feelings for any of them,” he fretted. “I don’t know what else to try, but perhaps you have a suggestion.”

“I have a few thoughts. Now, you don’t have to try any of these things, but see what you think. I wonder if exploring some new atmospheres would make sense. Getting together with someone for lunch or coffee is a bit mundane. Maybe a more unusual context would put you in a different mood and make it easier to connect.” I offered.

“That’s an interesting thought. What sort of new contexts?” he asked, tipping his head towards me.

“Well, things like an art gallery opening, or a rollerblading rally, or a techno rave. Something that might seem out of character, but that appeals to an aspect of your personality that you don’t usually have a chance to express,” I suggested.

“Definitely worth consideration. Thank you. Any other ideas?” He looked intrigued.

“This might be inappropriate, depending on your current relationship with the women you’ve dated before, but I wonder if they had some insights into what seems to appeal to you most in a significant other. You could talk with them about it,” I tentatively suggested.

“Alyse, I believe that both Daisy and Misha would be willing to discuss our relationship, since they certainly wished to do so rather frequently both during and after the time we were dating. But I don’t think that I’d be able to get much additional insight, as I’ve heard it before. Too many times, in fact, and not always with a receptive attitude. But if you wouldn’t mind, perhaps you might have that conversation with one of them. As a disinterested party, you might be able to facilitate some understanding.” Lesley sounded distressed, and his request surprised me. I would have guess that he was a mostly private person who didn’t normally share too much with strangers. But, I’d certainly seen before that it can be much easier to admit things to someone whose interest is professional rather than personal.

“If you’d be comfortable with that, Lesley, I’m happy to talk with either of them. You’re right that it can be easier for someone who isn’t personally involved to facilitate.” I answered. He looked relieved.

“I appreciate that. I still care deeply about each of them, but have sometimes been guilty of avoiding their phone calls. I’ll email them your contact information and explain the situation,” he said. “I’ll also think about some unusual contexts that might work. Alright if I visit again in a week or two?” he asked. At this point, he looked like he wanted to make a quick escaped. It wasn’t unusual for someone to flee after sharing something that they hadn’t been planning to say, and there wasn’t any point in prolonging his discomfort.

“Sure, that would be fine. It was nice talking to you,” I said.

After Lesley left, I puzzled over the turn that things had taken. I know that the administrators in the student services offices had



complained that the students these days would sometimes pull out their cell phones during a conversation and say “Can you talk to my parents about this?” This surprising tendency to get their parents involved was a turn around from the more traditional student concern of how to prevent their parents from knowing much, if anything, about what they were up to at school. Yet Lesley was hardly young, so this wasn’t just a manifestation of the zero privacy generation. Oh well, I guess it didn’t really matter, but between Henry getting involved with Marilla’s issues, Jen keeping an eye on Tim, and the distinct possibility that I’d be talking with one or both of Lesley’s ex girl friends, confidentiality just didn’t seem to be in fashion anymore.

## Matthew Reports Back

My phone rang. I hoped it wasn't Daisy or Misha already, because if they were that eager to talk about Lesley, it probably meant a bad situation.

"Hey Alyse, it's Matthew here. I met Susanna and she told me about Ten Oaks." Right, I'd almost forgotten about her. I guess I was as guilty as anyone about interfering.

"What is she like?" I asked.

"She has really striking silver white hair, but otherwise doesn't look much older than us. She lived at Ten Oaks her whole life until somehow becoming obsessed with Buddhism about five years ago. She moved out here to study meditation, but got tired of it, and ended up teaching at the college." Matthew sounded happy, and I couldn't remember that last time he'd started a conversation without at least a token mention of being overwhelmed by work.

"Ten Oaks seemed like it would be such a strange environment. Did she seem like she was from a different cultures?" I asked.

“Not really. I mean, I could tell she was a science geek, but not any more so than our usual crowd,” he said.

“Does she still visit Ten Oaks now that she’s living on the outside?” I asked.

“She usually goes back there for most of the summer, to work on research projects and get a change of scene. Actually, she told me that they occasionally accept a visiting researcher during the summer. Maybe I’ll check it out sometime.”

“Neat. I bet you’d like it.” I replied.

“Speaking of visits, do you want to come out here later this month? There’s an interactive modern art exhibit opening. I hear that it involves the largest collection of refrigerator magnets outside of Norway,” he said. I had no idea that Norway was some kind of world leader in refrigerator decoration.

“Yeah, that might be fun. Maybe I’ll mention it to some other folks, too.” I said, thinking of Lesley.

“Any luck on the dating front?” he asked.

“Eh, one interesting email reply so far.” I said.

“Well, good luck. I’ll send you the link about the art installation.”

Assuming that Marilla was going to visit again (and usually, once Henry got an idea about helping a student, it was just going to happen) it seemed like I could suggest that she talk with Susanna about life on the outside. That would certainly be easier than me trying to explain everything myself.

My phone rang again. It was Jen.

“Hi Jen. How’s it going?” I asked, suspecting that she had something to report about Tim. Jen hardly ever called during the day.

“APO had a big meeting last night, and a bunch of the women proposed a resolution to restrict attendance at chapter service events to MIT students, chapter alums, and individual invitees. Some students objected, and eventually someone described the series of problems with Tim. That convinced everyone, and the service chair is going to contact him to let him know the new policy,” she said. “Thought you might like a heads up.”

“Thanks, it can be handy to know the real story before I start hearing peoples’ interpretations.” I said.

“Hopefully, this will make things more comfortable for the students, and it’s probably a good thing for Tim to get a big hint anyways.” I expected that he wouldn’t be happy about this, but student activities exist for the students. It had been a long day, and I headed home.

## Julia's Idea

I'd been wondering what Julia's reply would be. She had always been fascinatingly unpredictable, and I imagined that she might suggest anything from a trip to Easter Island to folding a thousand paper sea urchins.

Alyse

Darlin', if you're leaving it up to me to suggest a way to celebrate, I hope that means you're ready to go along with anything that comes to mind. No, not THAT! Never again.

What we should do is remember 25 things from our shared past. We'll each take turns, in batches of 3. Then we'll do something special to think of the last one together. Tag, you're it.

Julia

This sounded more interesting than origami sushi, but I wasn't sure that I was quite ready to get started yet. There was finally a note from Kelly, though, so I went onto that.

Hey Alice, so nice to hear from you! The quick summary is that I came back home after college, dragging my husband along with me. He likes it now, but at the time he wasn't sure that anything existed between the East and West Coast. We've got two daughters, Christy and Teresa. Teaching has been interesting, but I'm not certain that I'll do it forever. I heard a rumor that our class ended up with more than our fair share of teachers and professors, but I've hardly kept in touch with anyone, and most of our old crowd seems to have moved away. Take care! Kelly

There was also more mail from Mayat.

Hello Alyse,

Want to meet up at the Diesel Café in Davis Square, Saturday at 11? I'll wear a pumpkin hat, so you shouldn't have too much trouble picking me out.

These days, when I get together with friends, half the time we're at a playground or the zoo chasing their kids around, and the rest of the time we'll meet up for dinner. I'll have to admit that small children are something that I didn't used to like very much, but they've grown on me, as you say.

I think I used my first question already, so you'll only get one at the end. If you were world dictator, what's one thing you would change?

Mayat

I figured I could put off answering that until tomorrow night, but I did send off another two quick emails to other guys, since Todd had stressed the importance of keeping the pipeline flowing. I decided that there wasn't much to say to Kelly, but I had to respond to Julia.

Julia-etta,

My theme for the first three memories is waking up. First, remember how your parents would set up a tent in the backyard so we could sleep outside in the summer? There was one time when we'd caught a jar full of lightning bugs. I usually didn't like insects so much, but I thought it was so cool that they could make their own light. I woke up that night because you stepped on me on the way out of the tent. You were setting the lightning bugs free, so they could get home before morning, you said. By then, it was really dark, and we saw a shooting star.

Second, this is something I remember but never happened. I've had this recurring dream about waking up and having trouble getting the shampoo to foam up in the shower. Sometimes, you appear, and suggest that it would be easier to just shave off all our hair. We do, but it grows back right away, but when we look, we have each other's hair. Anyhow, when I see you, if you're wearing a hat or something, that's why I always watch carefully as you take it off.

The last one for me tonight is from our junior year trip to DC. We were sharing a room with two other girls, and you woke up all up at 6 in the morning,

because you couldn't wait to go see the pandas. The others went back to sleep, but we snuck out and watched the panda for two hours before showing up to breakfast. Which turned out to be lucky, because by the time the class went through the zoo, the pandas had hidden for their afternoon nap. One of the girls told the teachers that we'd gone out, so we got detentions, and on the bus ride back, you came up with a plan for revenge which was both simple and devious---basically, we wouldn't do anything, but we'd let her overhear what sounded like plots, and then just be really nice to her. You have the best evil grin.

Your turn-

Alyse



## Getting Some Ducks in a Row

Professor Immerman had agreed that a preemptive Tech story made sense, so I talked with one of the student reporters the next day. I was careful to be enthusiastically boring, pretty much confirming to most students' idea of an irrelevant administrator. The article came out exactly like I'd imagined, in the back pages, with completely non-memorable quotes like "*We save the calendar section of the Boston Globe, and have lists of ideas for activities around Boston, like museum lectures or restaurant events.*" I hoped this would prevent any other Tech coverage of the office.

Remembering Ryan's hints that some of the other offices seemed jealous, I decided it might be politic to visit them. Since almost all the student services offices opened at 8:30, but most students were unlikely to show up before 10, I came by with cookies. Then, since most of the offices are staffed by people who genuinely want to help, I tried to get them on my side by asking for advice dealing with the volume of traffic. I threw in a few worried comments about how the office was experimental and might be shut down, and about how it was lonely being the only person in the whole office. I planned to check with Ryan next week to

see if my MIT internal PR efforts to win over the other support services folks was having any effect.

Although I'd been exaggerating a little about having trouble handling the number of visitors, the office had gotten pretty busy. I decided to start reserving the late morning for scheduled visits, leaving the rest of the day for drop-ins. I also got a bunch of folders mounted in the hallway outside the office, so that people looking for various resources covered in the information sheets could help themselves without having to come inside.

## Marilla's Observations

Marilla came in, carrying a large three-ring binder.

"I've been writing up notes about all the conversations I've had at MIT in the last week," she said. "I've decided that the faster I can figure out what people really mean, the better." I noticed that she had looked at me a few times already. "So last time, you said that people expect you to look at them during conversations. I've been practicing, and can remember most of the time." She showed me the back of her left hand, and both shoes. "As a reminder to look, I've been wearing smiley-face stickers on my hand and feet."

"That's a good idea," I encouraged. "It probably seems like a strange thing to do, but if you get used to it, you'll just start doing it without thinking."

"But, I'm still not sure why everyone has to look at each other when they're talking," she objected.

"Marilla, I think this is actually related to your observation that people don't always say exactly what they mean. Because what people say out loud isn't always the complete message, they watch each other for non-verbal communications," I answered.

“That’s so inefficient. Why try communicate in a way that makes people have to guess, when you could just tell them straight out?” she said.

“Some of it is just habit and what people are used to. But the underlying reason is that people are sometimes trying not to make the other person feel bad.” I flipped through her notes. “When you were at Ten Oaks, what did you do if someone was talking to you for a long time, and you weren’t interested in what they were saying? Did you tell them that you were bored, or what?” I asked.

“That hardly ever happened, because everyone liked science and research. I do remember that there was one girl around my age who used to talk to me about TV stars, and it was boring because I didn’t even watch those shows. But I would just tell her that I didn’t want to talk about that stuff, “ Marilla remembered. “She’d switch to some other topic, or find someone else to talk with.”

“Most people feel offended if you tell them to stop talking about something using words, because it seems like you are both judging them and giving them orders. But if you use non-verbal communications, they can notice how you’re feeling and make their own decision to steer the conversation somewhere else,” I explained. “It looks like some of these conversations might have gone wrong because people were trying to tell you that they didn’t want to continue discussing a topic, but they didn’t say it verbally.”

“But there must be tons of different non-verbal hints that people use to say different things. How am I supposed to know what they mean?

What if people use different signals? Is it standardized in some way?" Marilla sounded frustrated.

"You're right that it can be hard to be certain what someone is hinting," I admitted. "But you can start by recognizing the most commonly used signals. If someone stop asking questions, stops nodding and agreeing with you, starts looking around or away, or even backing away, those are signals that they don't want to keep talking."

"OK, what else?" she asked, looking resigned.

"I might not be the best person to describe these things to you, because I've never lived at Ten Oaks so I don't know all the differences. Do you want to talk with someone else who used to be there, but has been living on the outside for a while?" I asked.

"Do you mean Susanna? I was still pretty young when she left, but my parents mentioned that I might want to look her up since I'd be in Massachusetts. I haven't tried doing that yet, because things have been so busy," she said.

"I don't know Susanna, but really, anyone who has lived at Ten Oaks and on the outside might be able to help you out," I suggested.

"That makes sense. I should probably have called her so that I could get prepared before coming here, but I didn't think there would be such a big difference in how people acted." She looked at her notes. "I'll start trying to notice those signals that someone is getting bored or wants to stop talking, and I'll email Susanna," she resolved.

"Uh, also, do you know Henry, the department secretary? He's pretty helpful, so you could probably ask him if you have specific questions about interacting with any of the professors." I ventured.

“I’m not sure that I know him, but I’ll keep that in mind,” she said. “Thanks. It’s a good thing that the classes aren’t too hard, because I’m spending all my time trying to figure people out.” I wondered what percentage of all brain processing time was devoted to figuring people out. Sometime, I had to agree with Marilla that it was ridiculously time consuming.

## Tim's New Role

I'd been wondering if Tim would come by after hearing that APO had essentially banned him from attending service events. When he came in, he looked more puzzled than upset.

"I'm having trouble figuring out what something means," he started. "I got email that the APO chapter had decided their events were only open to student members and chapter alums. But then, someone from the student life office called and asked me whether I wanted to be an advisor for APO. So it's like they both don't want me around and want me to be more involved."

I'm sure I looked surprised, because I certainly hadn't expected this latest development. I knew that student activities had to have a staff advisor or two on the books, but I didn't know who took care of the signing them up.

"I don't blame you for being confused. What do you think it might mean?" I asked. I didn't want to propose my interpretation right away.

"Maybe the chapter is divided about whether they want me around," he shrugged. "Or maybe they think I'm too old to be anything

except an advisor. I'm not sure if it matters that much," he said. "Because I already told the student life administrator that I'd do it, so I'm signed up for at least the next year."

"I know someone who is also an advisor for the chapter. Have you met Jen Riley?" I said.

"Oh, I think that Jen is an advisor through the APO national structure. I'll be an advisor from the MIT side."

"I guess your role will be a bit different from now on," I commented. I wondered if this advisor idea had been motivated by somebody wanting to point out MIT's policy against faculty dating students under their supervision.

"Mostly I think it just means I'll have an official place, instead of being some guy who happens to hang around," he answered.

"Well, congratulations on your new responsibility, then. Have you had time to think about whether you're interested in trying some new activities to meet women outside of MIT?" I asked. We hadn't discussed the "10 Ways to Meet Someone New" list, which by this time I'd turned into a standard information sheet. It was one of the more popular resource hand-outs.

"I did pick up a copy of that list when I walked by here the other day," he said. "I'm just not very good at talking to people I don't know under high pressure situations like speed dating or singles events."

"That's ok," I said. "I don't think anyone is particularly comfortable when they're meeting someone new, but maybe you could start with one of the more low-key options, if that sounds more appealing."



“I’m a big sci-fi fan, so maybe a book group,” he considered. “I noticed that you’d listed a bunch on the sheet, and some of them let you just drop in.”

“Sounds good, I hope you like it.” I encouraged. “Feel free to come by if you want to talk about how it goes.” As soon as Tim left the office, I dialed Jen’s number.

“Hi, it’s me. What’s up with the APO advisor thing?” I asked.

“Ugh. Some of the students put Tim’s name on the list of possible MIT advisors about a year and a half ago, and apparently it took MIT this long to actually ask him about it. I think everyone had totally forgot that he’d ever been suggested.” Right, so it hadn’t actually been any sort of intentional message at all.

“Sounds like that’s a bit awkward, then.” I sympathized.

“Oh my God, you don’t even want to know what Gina and the other women are planning,” she groaned.

“Sure I do. I’m really nosy,” I said.

“They’ve decided that Tim isn’t going to give up on trying to date students unless he gets what he wants and realizes that it’s not what he wants.” I laughed.

“That’s a novel approach. What are they going to do?”

“This girl, Tiffany, has volunteered to pretend to date him. The idea is that she’ll act like a total freshman, and make him realize that students are just too young for someone his age,” Jen said.

“Hmm. What if it backfires?” I asked.

“They’re pretty resourceful people. I couldn’t really tell them not to do it, but I did caution them about unexpected consequences,” she replied. I hoped this whole plot would be unnecessary if anyone from the book group turned out to be intriguing, but the whole situation was starting to sound like the set-up for a comedy of errors.

## Daisy's Hint

The phone rang, with an area code that I didn't recognize, and a woman with a slight English accent spoke.

"Hello, my name is Daisy Winston, and Lesley gave me your number." Ah, it was one of the ex-girlfriends.

"Hi Daisy. Thanks for calling. I've been talking with Lesley about his concerns around dating and relationships." I said.

"He's a wonderful person, but has failed at some kinds of introspection," she started. "Also, he always tried to avoid talking about our relationship, so I could never really get some things across."

"What would you have liked to tell him, if he'd been receptive?" I asked, feeling a bit uncertain about verb tenses, and hoping she wasn't a specialist in classical languages or something.

"The biggest problem was that he always seemed to be holding back, somehow. My roommates all thought it was because he was secretly gay. We definitely didn't talk about that," she said.

“I did broach the idea, but he didn’t pick up on the topic, as you might imagine,” I said, remembering my own suspicions. “Did you know any other women he dated?” I asked.

“I think I’m actually the only one he had a long term, face to face relationship with,” she said. “There was a woman named Misha, but they almost never saw each other. I think they met at a conference, and then just corresponded a lot for years.”

“Do you have any other suggestions for things Lesley should think about?” I asked.

“It wouldn’t hurt if he was less obsessive about how his laundry was folded, but that’s just a detail. Really, the big question is whether he’s capable of being romantically interested in women,” she replied. I could just imagine some elaborate sock folding protocol.

“Thanks for taking the time to call,” I said.

“Not a problem. Tell Lesley I send my regards.” It was cool that his ex-girlfriend still liked him enough to call and try to help with his social life, but I wasn’t sure how he’d react to what she’d told me. I wondered whether Lesley had tried going to some more unusual event to get into a more venturesome mood, and if so, what sort of event he’d picked out.

Since there wasn’t anyone in the office, I went online to contact two more men according to the high through-put dating instructions. So far, Todd’s estimate of 1 in 10 contacts moving onto the first date stage seemed high, though I didn’t have enough data to really tell. I’d scheduled a coffee date with Mayat, but the few other men who’d responded were all obviously on the no list. But here was a new one.

Alyse,

It's always a pleasure to meet a woman who comes recommended by her ex's! I'll assure you that I am similarly on good terms with important women from my past. It's late in the season to do much bicycling, but maybe you'd be interested in seeing the IMAX film about that sport?

Let's see. Something that I've never tried doing but sounds like fun is making wine. And lately I've been excited about learning to juggle. I'll ask you whether you prefer dogs or cats, and how you'd explain the saying that a rolling stone gathers no moss.

Dan

Well, he sounded interesting. I'd have to write back later. I also had mail from Julia.

Alyse-awake

Now you've made me think that I should also have a theme for this set of recollections. So I'll talk about gifts. I remember once when we were in middle school, you gave me a box of assorted ribbons, lace and beads for Christmas. It was like a box of possibility. The first thing I made was decorations for our pencils. The flowing ribbons and sparkling beads made me feel like this everyday pencil had turned into a magic quill. Wasn't it funny that at that age, you showed people who

your friends were by either dressing the same or having similar school supplies?

Another gift I remember was our joint Christmas present to Emma Danfield our freshman year. It was a dozen original poems that we'd written, and you'd illustrated my poems and I'd illustrated yours. It's strange, but I can't really remember what any of the poems were about, but I remember that one of your drawings had a baby dragon (almost the My Little Pony look) and vines with roses.

The last of my three for this turn is the gift of hair. I know, it doesn't exactly fit the theme, but I mean that Halloween party where my hair caught on fire when I was posing for a picture, leaning over a jack-o-lantern. I guess all those hair products really are pretty flammable. I completely panicked, and I think everyone else did too, but you put it out with my coat before any major damage got done. We all laughed afterwards because it was such a relief, and the whole thing was so stupid we wanted it to pass it off as a joke, but I know that everyone was impressed at what you'd done. And I appreciate that you saved me from both injury and severe social embarrassment!

Julia

## Meeting Mayat

I'd never actually gone on a blind date before, so I was feeling nervous about meeting Mayat. As promised, he was wearing the same goofy hat that he had on in one of his profile pictures.

"Hi, I'm Alyse," I said, remembering to smile and raise my eyebrows. I'd heard that you could give people a better first impression if you opened your eyes wide.

"Good to meet you. I'm Mayat How was your week?" he asked. He was dunking a scone into his coffee. I sat down with my soda and muffin.

"It was pretty good. I'm at a new sort of job this year, and am still trying to get the hang of it. How was your week? Read any more good one-acts?" I asked.

"Oh definitely. I love the annual amateur playwright contest, because some of the entries are so different than mainstream theater. I like plays about things that I've never thought about before," he enthused.

"I'm curious about that. What are some unusual scripts you've read?" I asked.

"The one I was really struck by recently was about a woman who reads that a number of languages are dying out because no one is learning them anymore, and decides to adopt one. She picks one at random that turns out to be a language spoken on a small Pacific island. When she

goes to live there to learn the language from a few village elders, she finds that their approach to teaching and living is surprising at first, but then feels right. Going back home, she starts finding other people to pass along the language and way of thinking,” he answered.

“That is cool,” I agreed.

“Have you ever visited other cultures?” he asked.

“I’ve never gone to live in another country, but I always thought that would be interesting.” I said.

“Yeah, I me neither. Although I did grow up in a small town, so it was a bit different coming to Boston. Where are you from?” he asked.

“I grew up in Ohio. I think the biggest difference was that I seemed to know people who did more different sorts of jobs there. In Boston, it can be too easy to just hang out with people that are pretty much similar. But I’ve really liked living here,” I said.

“Mmm hmm. There’s so many different things going on all the time,” he agreed.

The date went pretty well, with only a couple awkward silences. It sounded like his work was fine, but that he really loved his hobbies. He was a good conversationalist, and seemed compatible on general attitude and outlook. Mayat didn’t try to sneak in any sort of good-bye hug, but he put his hand on my arm and said he’d email me again. This wasn’t so bad, I thought. I figured if he did contact me again, I’d be up for another date. And, according to Todd’s calculations, I only need about 125 more first dates, right?



## Dinner with Jen

Jen and I got together for dinner, and I couldn't resist asking about the latest developments at APO.

"To tell you the truth, I haven't even been paying attention to the crazy plan that Tiffany and the other girls are up to. I've been too worried about two of the other students. They've always had some issues with growing up and dealing with people, but since they started dating, it's been worse. Their bumpy relationship has got them both about ready to check into a mental hospital, and their ongoing drama has half the chapter taking sides," she confided.

"That sounds serious, and like it might get even worse before things resolve," I said.

"I've suggested to them individually that they should talk to a psych, or a counseling dean. But no dice. Seems like they're concerned about something going on their record," she continued.

"Do they talk to you about things?" I asked.

"I'm chicken. I bet they would, but I haven't encouraged them. I just never know what to say when people are all upset," she admitted.

I'd never thought about that, but it was true that Jen wouldn't be at the top of my list of people to confide in about a personal problem. I could always tell that she cared, but she couldn't seem to resist throwing in irritating platitudes about how things weren't so bad, or would work out fine.

"If you've already talked to them about getting help from some of the on-campus resources, at least they know that you're taking them seriously and are concerned," I said.

"It surprised me, but Tim's actually jumped in and spending time with them," she said. "So at least one of their APO advisors is willing to help." Jen still sounded like she blamed herself for not volunteering to be a personal counselor, which was ridiculous.

"Jen, it's not your responsibility to do any lengthy counseling for these students. It must be tough seeing a bad situation but not having any answers. The students are lucky to have you involved and keeping an eye on things," I said.

I cheered her up a bit by telling her about Jason and Ryan's latest exploits on the party circuit, and asked if she wanted to go along to the modern art exhibit that Matthew had mentioned. I was teasing about the art part, because Jen has a deep loathing for modern art. It had turned into a shared joke. One time, as a joke, a bunch of us had redecorated her office with drop posters of terrible pseudo art, to celebrate her birthday. But even the idea made Jen shudder, I was looking forward to going.

## Refrigerator Magnets

““I’m glad you got a decent couch,” I told Matthew.

“We’re all becoming too old to continue sleeping on each others’ floors,” he said with a laugh. “Plus, I’ve found that the advent of Craig’s list makes acquiring furniture in a high student density region much easier,” he added. It actually looked like he’d spent some time arranging things, unlike his last apartment. There, he’d just lived with piles of belongings around the perimeter of a room, with a futon mattress in the center on the floor.

“So what inspired you to actively settle in?” I asked.

“Oh, I just thought I should straighten up in case I ever invited someone home,” he mumbled, looking away with a goofy smile.

“You’ve met someone?” I demanded. “That’s great!”

“I haven’t broached the idea of dating, but yes, I have been thinking about it,” he said.

“Seriously, I’m not going to bug you about it. I’m just always interested in hearing more stories from the dating trenches. I’ve got another first date scheduled with some guy from the dating site.” I said.

We headed across campus to the little art gallery. It was cold, and unpleasantly windy, so it was with some relief that I ducked into the What You See. As promised, the central installation involved an awe-inspiring number of refrigerator magnets. The walls were covered with twisted metal sheets that bulged and rippled into the room. There were also free-standing irregularly shaped metal things, vaguely giving the impression of ancient tree trunks with hanging moss. Most of the surface area was covered in kitschy, plastic refrigerator magnets. Visitors were picking out magnets that caught their eye, and rearranging them. Someone had put a clump of green ones at eye level on one wall, and others were arranged in flowing lines.

“Shall we get hands-on?” I invited. I started putting some magnets into a starburst pattern. Matthew was scanning the room and plucking individual magnets that depicted food, relocating them to one of the free standing sculptures. Most of the visitors were doing more looking and chatting than touching. I felt a bit underdressed, or perhaps just wrongly dressed, as most of the women were wearing variations on the little black dress. We swung by the gift shop on the way out, so I could pick up some extra refrigerator magnets (sunflowers and mandalas).

“Matthew, hello. I didn’t expect to see you here,” a woman greeted him. She had striking silver hair, with a large red velvet bow.

“Susanna! How are you?” he asked, lighting up. I went to look at the neon signs exhibit, not wanting to be in the way. The two of them talked animatedly for a few minutes before she left, waving vigorously.

As we walked back to Matthew's place, I restrained myself from asking about her. It was pretty obvious that she was on his mind, and I figured that she was the person he'd been interested in.

"Did you see the woman that I was speaking to at the museum?" he finally asked.

"I did, is she someone from the college?" I said.

"That's Susanna. She's a media studies professor, and the one from Ten Oaks. I was thinking, since you were interested in Ten Oaks, maybe I should see if she wants to have dinner with us," he said. I agreed, and tried not to eavesdrop as he made a quick phone call.

## Nerd Glasses

While Matthew bustled around getting dinner ready, I wrote back to Julia.

Julianna banana

I'll tell you about weather. Do you remember that time that school was cancelled because of that freakish hail storm? I'd been up most of the night working on our essays about Twelfth Night, and suspected that you might have been too. I was going back and trying to shore up a few paragraphs, but when you called, I was glad to leave off. You'd noticed that the Akron ballet had performance of Midsummer's Night Dream scheduled, and wanted to go see it. Even though the bus schedules were shot to heck due to the storm, we got there after a couple hours, and bought the special last minute tickets. The place was half empty, but when the music started, I forgot about everything but the stage. I don't think I've been to a performance that magical since.

Then there was that time we were waiting for our parents to pick us up after a science field trip, and a huge thunderstorm hit. It was half dark, and the lightning was beautiful and exciting. You were singing some choruses from someone or the other's Mass, and it was the perfect music for the mood.

And then there was the kite flying contest for extra credit in physics class. We were supposed to have researched different designs, and there was going to be prize for the kite that could lift the biggest load. Our kites flopped, but we lay around on the grass, enjoying the breeze and sunny weather.

Alyse

Susanna arrived carrying a bottle of wine and a box with assorted electronic components.

"Hi Alyse. I heard from Matthew that you were interested in Ten Oaks and what it was like to get used to life on the outside. So I brought along a few devices that I've been prototyping in lab." I wasn't sure what the connection between those two statements was, but figured that it would become clear. "I recently talked to a young woman named Marilla, whom I believe you've met already," she said.

"Oh yes, she mentioned wanting to give you a call. I think outside society was more different than she was expecting," I replied.

"I spent a good deal of time reading up on non-verbal communication, conversation dynamics, emotional display, and basically everything I need to translate unspoken messages. In addition to the literature research, I interview psychiatrists and salespeople, folks whose

job involves interpreting the feelings of other people,” she explained. “And then, since it should be possible to program computers to do things that people are able to explain, I started working on automated devices to do the same kinds of translations.”

“Wow, that’s great. What sorts of devices have you developed?” I asked.

“The first lesson that I had to learn was how to tell when the person I was talking to was starting to get bored. But, the problem was that if I was deeply interested in the topic, I’d forget to notice their reactions. So I made these glasses. They have some audio sensors and a very basic web cam, and are programmed to detect involvement and interest level. If you are talking with someone and their interest level drops below a critical threshold, the glasses buzz.” It made sense that this was the first issue Susanna had dealt with, since it also seemed to be Marilla’s most obvious problem.

“Can I try them out?” I asked.

“Sure, put them on, and then start talking to me. Try to be more and more boring,” she instructed.

“Uh, ok. So, I was cleaning out my closet one time, and noticed that I had like five extra pairs of pants that I’d forgotten about. Mostly jeans, but also some slacks. I couldn’t remember when I’d bought them. But what I really needed were some new socks, so I still had to go shopping. I always used to buy socks at Kmart, but there weren’t any nearby, and so EEK!” I jumped when the glasses started vibrating. Susanna and Matthew laughed. “These are great! What did you tackle next?” I asked.



“It’s slightly embarrassing to admit this, but the next pressing issue was gauging potential romantic interest,” she said, quickly glancing at Matthew. “I’m not sure whether I can demonstrate this, given the limited number of people here.”

“Do tell us about the device, even if you can’t put it through its paces,” Matthew urged.

“This device has the same glasses mounted sensor system, but with a higher grade camera and less audio processing. There is also a necklace mounted watch, which has been modified to serve as the output display. It also contains a second, lower grade camera,” she explained. “Now, I only developed the recognition algorithms to rate male interest in females, thus the necklace.”

“I don’t understand that part,” I said.

“My nickname for the necklace part is the BGA: boob glance alert,” she elaborated.

“Right, that’s ingenious. What other signals does the algorithm look for?” I asked.

“There’s some detection of pupil dilation, some vocal feature analysis, and also proximity and posture recognition,” she listed. “I’m not as certain about the accuracy of this device as the boredom alarms, but it was a fascinating exercise.”

“Are you currently working on something new along these lines?” Matthew asked. I wondered if he was now making a special effort to avoid looking at her chest.

“I’m in the design stages of working on a deception sensor. It’s quite a difficult problem, but if we can achieve even partial progress, it would be a big step in artificial intelligence,” she answered.

Dinner was fascinating, as we discussed various ways that people consciously and unconsciously communicated. Of course this was complicated by the fact that talking about these things made us all self-conscious about what messages we might be sending each other, but everyone was in the same boat. I was delighted with Susanna, and suspected that Marilla would learn a lot.

## What Lesley Tried First

The next week, Lesley came by.

“I went to last night’s midnight roller blading tour of Boston!” he announced. “I can barely skate, but there were some facilitators who helped out the novices. It was quite fun.” He was smiling, and had an extra spring in his step.

“Great! Congratulations on trying something new. Sounds like you had a good time,” I said.

“Somehow, going out in public to do something that I am incompetent at was extremely liberating,” he observed.

“Did you have a chance to talk to people during the event?” I asked.

“I mostly talked with the facilitators during the event, but afterwards I went for pancakes with a small group,” he answered.

“Did the people seem more attractive than women you’ve met at through the dating service?” I was trying to steer into the main issue.

“Umm. Mostly it was other men,” he mumbled, starting to look uncomfortable.

“That’s fine, you don’t have to only try and talk to women. Just having a good time doing things is worthwhile,” I reassured him. “Do you think you’ll try some other new sorts of activities?”

“Most definitely. I’ve been making a list of things that no one would ever imagine me doing, and plan to try several,” he said, resolutely.

“Cool, I think that will give you some new ideas and perspectives,” I said.

“Have you spoken to Daisy?” he asked, out of the blue.

“Yes, she cares about you,” I said.

“Did she tell you things that she thought I should know?”

“Daisy has thought about you quite a bit,” I started, “It sounds like you suspect something about what she would have said. Do you want to talk about that today?”

“Actually, I don’t want to, yet. But maybe another time,” he answered.

“Sure, we can talk more some other time. Have fun with your new adventures.”

## Mayat's Revelation

I'd been wondering whether Mayat would email me. The first date seemed to go well, but I couldn't guess whether it had met his criteria. The truth was stranger than I'd thought.

Hello Alyse,

It's time for me to fess up. I'm writing a screenplay about a man's adventures with online dating, and have been setting up dates with women just to get some first-hand experience and gather material. I actually have a steady girlfriend, who is collaborating on the project. You probably didn't notice her, but she was at the next table taking notes on our conversation.

Of course, I would not include anyone's identifying details, and I would fictionalize any snippets of the date that I included in the screenplay. I appreciated your assistance with my project.

Regards, Mayat

I didn't have a column on the dating results spreadsheet for marking down guys who were just doing research. So I just tallied him under "No" and wondered if his screenplay would ever be produced. I did feel like this was sufficient grounds for a bit of grouching, so I called Jason.

"Jason, you wouldn't believe what happened now. This guy I met from the dating site told me that he was doing research for a film project."

"That's something new," he said. "Was he really a man, or a woman in drag? Because I think I already saw a movie about a guy going on a bunch of first dates, so he's missed the boat unless there's an exciting twist."

"I have no idea. For all I know, he's going one level deeper in self-referentialness, and actually the movie will be about women's reactions to being told that they were just part of a guy's film project," I replied.

"Better luck next time. Got anything else coming up?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm supposed to meet someone to see a movie tomorrow. Any general advice?" I said.

"All I can say is at least it's unlikely to be a repeat of the last guy," Jason snickered.

I decided not to give Mayat any more material, in case he really was working on the self-referential movie. So far my statistics were: 24 contacts initiated, 4 contacts initiated by the other person, 1 first date ("No") done, 1 first date scheduled, 3 in the email screening process. I

sat down to work on the last three, even though their initial replies hadn't been terribly exciting.

Geoffrey,

I don't know if I have a favorite equation. I mean, the  $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$  one is elegant and all, but I wouldn't necessarily buy the T-shirt. My current job is running a tiny office supporting employees at a university, which is a bit of a break from computer programming at a string of doomed start-ups. It's been fun doing something new, but the position is experimental, so I might be onto something else next year, or get back to coding. We can compare start-up experiences sometime, I'm curious whether I've had a representative sample or not.

What are some unusual T-shirts that you wear? And, tell me about a fun event you attended recently.

Alyse

Alex

No, I wouldn't avoid dating a guy just because we have similar names. But it would be a first. As far as food, I don't have too many things that I avoid. Just rabbits. I remember once when I went out with a big group of people and when we ordered a large, semi-random list of tapas. Sea cucumber and pig's ear salad was better than it sounds.

What do you and your friends like to do when you get together? Do you remember anything that you didn't

really want to do at the time, but now think was a great idea?

Alyse

As I was writing to more and more men, it was getting harder to be original. Of course, assuming that they weren't comparing notes, it probably didn't matter very much. I wasn't totally sure that Geoffrey's nerduousity wouldn't be too high, since one of his initial questions had been about my favorite equation. But I'd withhold judgment for at least another round of emails.

Alyse

For our 25th memory, how about if we have an old-fashioned slumber party? I'm going to be in Boston in a few weeks, and could stay over with you on Saturday night, if that sounds fun. We can paint our toenails and pretend to have Russian accents, or whatever other silliness comes to mind. And, we can talk all night, of course.

I'll leave you with three more recollections that I picked out, which are all firsts. I was thinking about the first thing I did after getting my driver's license. I came by your house, and we went to Friendly's for ice cream. It was so exciting to be going on our own, without needing a parent to drive. I had the windows down, and the wind was in our ears and hair. You ordered a neat bowl, but I had a dripping cone, as usual. When I dropped you off, I ran into your parents' car and dented the bumper. They were incredibly nice about it, but I'm



sure that didn't really reassure them about letting you ride with me in the future.

Then there was our first big argument. I'd spent the entire weekend making a giant paper mache set of lips instead of doing any of my homework. Monday morning I realized that my math grade was already in serious trouble, and couldn't stand any more zeros, and I asked to copy yours. I knew that would be cheating, but I was kind of desperate, and got so angry when you refused. I wasn't very nice, and threatened to never talk to you again. I couldn't believe you'd turn me down. But you sent me a note later, offering to come over after school and help me get caught up with all the math that I'd been neglecting over the semester. You were a good tutor, and I've often been glad that you didn't let me cheat when I wanted to do it.

The last first was embarrassing and a relief at the same time. You remember how we were both feeling like losers because we were almost 16 and hadn't kissed anyone. I suggested that anyone would count, and that we should just kiss each other. I can't remember why it was so important that we pass that milestone, but I do remember how strange it was to kiss you. We had a couple long and awkward moments, and then it passed, and we were just giddy to have escaped the lowly status of the never been kissed.

Hope to be seeing you soon,

Julia

Our first (and last) kiss had in fact been a strange experience. I'd wondered whether I had a crush on Julia, since she was fascinating in a way that none of the guys were. But that short kiss had felt so totally wrong. It had actually made me worry that the whole fuss about kissing was just a sort of urban legend, because mostly it felt uncomfortable. Though overall, it was a relief to find out that we both didn't like it, so our friendship didn't have to deal with other possibilities. Remembering that experiment, I wondered if I should suggest to Lesley that he try kissing a man, just to check.

## Meeting Dan

Dan had suggested that we arrive at the Museum of Science a half hour before the movie, so we'd have time to chat before it started. He had a boyish look, with a light build and cute nose. I was surprised that he wasn't much taller than me, since his profile had indicated a different height.

"Hey, you must be Alyse. How are you?" he said. ]

"Pretty good. I hope I didn't keep you waiting long?" I had run into some bad transit karma, and taken longer than I'd anticipated.

"No problem, I actually came a few hours ago because I wanted to check out some of the exhibits. I haven't been to this museum for years," he smiled. He touched my arm.

"Have you seen many of the museums in town?" he asked. I wondered what Susanna's romantic interest detector would rate him, since it seemed a bit early in the conversation to be touching me.

"I was at the aquarium last month, and the MFA and Peabody Essex Museum the month before. But partly because I had visitors, and

wanted to show them around,” I replied. “Did you like the exhibits today?” I asked.

“I was hoping for more dinosaurs. For some reason, I picked up some plastic dinosaur models at a toy store last week, and felt like seeing some fossils,” he said. Dan was easy to talk with, and we had no trouble chatting until the movie started. I wasn’t surprised that he first nudged my knee with his knee, and then put his hand on my leg, but I wasn’t sure if I wanted to encourage or discourage him. Remembering Todd’s advice that it was more informative to stop playing along with someone in order to see how they react to an alternative point of view, I decided to try being discouraging.

As the movie talked about red blood cell density and oxygenation capability, I wondered whether to go for a broad, non-verbal hint or whether to explicitly address the issue. After talking with Marilla, I could see some advantages to the explicit communication system. But I didn’t necessarily want to date someone who couldn’t take a hint. So I went with the throat clearing plus shifting weight method of extracting my leg.

Dan made it through the rest of the movie without trying any snuggling, so I didn’t have to put him into the definite no category. He did kiss my hand as we said goodbye, but that seemed alright. It was just a toss-up about whether this guy was charming or creepy. Once I got home, I decided to snoop on Google.

Nothing terribly incriminating turned up, but he did seem to have a web site. It didn’t look like he’d updated anything in the last year, but he was recognizable in several pictures. A tall blonde woman was in a bunch of the pictures, probably his girlfriend from the way they were

acting. Well, I guess it's not a crime to have an attractive ex-girlfriend. Since he'd specifically mentioned good relations with ex's, I figured I'd hear about the woman eventually.

## Tim Tries

Tim came in carrying a big pile of APO posters.

“I’m not sure the book group thing is any use,” he complained.

“How did it go?” I asked.

“So far, I’ve gone to two meetings. About ten people showed up each time, not all the same people. It’s true that there are a lot more women than men, but half of them are in their fifties,” he answered.

“Did it feel comfortable to talk with people?” I asked.

“I didn’t say much at the first meeting, since I hadn’t read the book. I guess it was ok at the second meeting,” he said.

“So some of the women were older than you?” I said.

“Yeah, of the ones who seemed like they were my age, probably two weren’t married. They seemed nice enough,” he said, sounding unenthusiastic.

“The trade-off with picking activities to meet people is that if you go with something that is not an explicit singles event, only a minority of the people there are going to be possibilities. If you went to a singles

event like speed dating, all the people you'd meet would be single women in your demographic," I pointed out.

"I just think it would be too awkward to try to talk with someone at a singles event, because you'd know that you were trying to evaluate each other," he said.

"It's up to you, and you don't have to commit to one approach or the other." I said. "Do you think the book group is interesting enough to continue with?" I asked.

"I did like the book, and I at least want to get a chance to talk to those two women a little more," he said.

"It's good that you managed to find something new and try doing it," I encouraged.

"The APO advising is going ok, but I'm not sure that Jen likes me very much," he mentioned.

"Oh? What happened?" I asked.

"It's just that there were some students who seemed to need some help, and she suggested the psychs and the counseling deans, but didn't even mention that they could talk to me," he said, looking disappointed.

"She might not be used to working with another advisor, or maybe she wasn't sure if you'd want to spend the time." I suggested.

"Maybe. I did talk to the students a few times, and she was pretty friendly afterwards," he said.

"It's nice that you're able to help when the students want to talk. Has it been ok seeing Gina and all?" I asked.

“Yeah, that’s fine. I haven’t tried to hang out with her outside of the chapter events, and so I guess she hasn’t had to brush me off,” he shrugged. “There’s another woman, Tiffany, who’s not in the chapter but seems to be friends with a lot of people. She talked with me for a while at the last event.”

“Uh huh?” I said, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, it’s not like she’s actually in the chapter, so I’m not her advisor or anything,” he said, slightly defensively.

“But?” I said.

“I know, it’s not a great idea to get interested...but she’s so energetic, and I have a thing for women with short, dark, curly hair,” he sighed.

“Well, if you consider the set of things you’ve done before where you knew they weren’t a good idea when you started, is there a trend in the outcomes?” I asked.

“None of my relationships have worked out, whether or not I thought they were a good idea at the beginning. So actually, I can’t disprove the null hypothesis,” he said.

“Tim, you have a point, but still.” I responded. “Anyhow, I’m glad that being an advisor is going okay, and it’s cool that you’ve been going to a book group.” He cheered up a bit, and said he’d probably stop by again sometime. I was getting a sinking feeling about the students’ crazy plan to have Tiffany teach Tim a lesson, but there didn’t seem to be much I could do to head off trouble.



## Lucky Charms

**D**uring walk-in hours, a man walked in, looking around nervously.

“My name is Euripides. I have a problem,” he said.

“I’m Alyse. Please have a seat, and tell me what’s been going on,” I said, trying to be reassuring. Euripides looked back into the hallway, and closed the door.

“I’ve been jinxed so that dating just causes disasters. My last girlfriend was something of a witch,” he said, closing his eyes. “I know this sounds ridiculous.”

“Well, I won’t tell you that you’ve got a typical situation there. How long has this been going on, and what sorts of disasters are involved?” I asked. I’m a little superstitious myself, but thought that Euripides might just be over reacting to typical dating difficulties.

“We broke up over a year ago, but she didn’t actually jinx me until she saw me with someone else about two months ago. I guess she was hoping we’d get back together, and that pissed her off,” he said.

“So for the last two months, strange things have happened?” I prompted.

“Only when I try to go on dates. She was considerate enough not to mess me up at work, which is relief, because I’ve got some really touchy experiments going on,” he answered.

“I guess it could be worse. Tell me more about the dating disasters,” I said.

“That same evening that she saw me with Tara, something happened. Tara and I were taking the T back to my place after dinner, and I was hoping it would be a good time to ask her if she wanted to be more than friends. When a woman came into the train looking woozy, I gave her my seat. As she was saying thanks, she threw up on me, and so of course Tara suggested coming over a different time.”

“Ick, that sounds seriously unpleasant. What happened with Tara later?” I asked.

“The next day, she found out that her company was transferring her to Dayton, Ohio. She got all busy making arrangements, and I figured there was no point trying to get something going,” he said. Euripides closed his eyes again, and took off his glasses.

“What happened next with the jinx?” I asked.

“I was disappointed about Tara, so I didn’t try asking anyone out for a few weeks. But, a woman that I’d seen a few times at my condo introduced herself. Jill said that she was new in town, and wanted to know whether there were any decent Chinese restaurants. She was cute, and seemed available, so I took the hint and invited her to dinner. While we were out, someone broke into her condo, ransacked the place, and

dumped her aquarium. She was totally traumatized, moved back with her parents, and the police took me in for questioning,” he said. Euripides put his hands over his eyes and hunched over.

“My God, that’s terrible,” I said.

“Then yesterday, I finally got up the nerve to try again. I thought maybe I was making too much of simple coincidences. I met someone from one of those online dating services, and we’d gotten together for drinks after work. I couldn’t believe how comfortable I felt with her, right away it was like we’d been friends for years. Plus, she looked even better than her profile pictures. We had just agreed to meet again for dinner this week when the topic of Oklahoma came up. She mentioned that she’d never been there, but was going out there in the spring for a family wedding.”

“Mmm hmm?” I encouraged. Euripides seemed on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

“Well, that surprised me, because I was also going to Oklahoma for a family wedding at the same time. Long story short, Jill turned out to be my half-sister, whom I’d never met because my parents had a bitter breakup when I was a baby,” he said, staring at me wide-eyed. “I could have ended up dating my own sister!” he moaned.

“Uh, good thing you found out before anything happened?” I said, rather lamely.

“I’m afraid to date again!” he cried. “What if the jinx is even worse next time?”

“Euripides, it sounds like you’ve had some bad experiences. It’s fine if you wait a while before going on another date. I’m sure that going

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on a date while feeling extra nervous is just shooting yourself in the foot,” I said. “But just in case, I wouldn’t recommend any sort of date where there’s any potential for a hunting accident,” I added. He agreed that maybe he just needed some time to get over the shock, and would come by again when he was ready to think about another date. The whole conversation was so surreal that I hadn’t even had time to wonder how the guy had ended up with a name like Euripides. I’d already started mentally nicknaming him “Lucky.”

## Marilla Plans an Experiment

Marilla had an appointment for the next day, and showed up right on time. I knew that she'd been talking with Susanna, and was curious about whether that had helped.

"Hi Marilla, how have you been?" I asked. She wasn't wearing the smiley face sticker on the back of her hand anymore, but she still had them on her shoes.

"I believe that I'm doing about 30% better with conversations within the nuclear engineering department, but I feel like that's too low. Possibly, some people have been avoiding me due to a negative first impression," she answered. She was doing a lot better with eye contact, I noticed.

"You're right that sometimes people are still reacting to previous interactions," I said. "You do seem more comfortable looking at me while we're talking, though. You must have been practicing."

"Yeah, I went overboard at first, but Susanna gave me a chart about establishing the correct amount of eye contact for the degree of relationship and topic of conversation," she said. "But, I think I'll need a fresh population in order to determine whether I've gotten the hang of

conversation dynamics. My suspicion is that I may still keep talking too long when the other person is starting to get bored” she said.

“Have you tried the nerd glasses?” I asked.

“Not very much yet, but I have an idea. I want to do a small scale experiment, with and without the glasses. It seems like speed dating would be the perfect venue,” she said, quite seriously.

“Are you familiar with speed dating?” I asked.

“According to my research, these are events where men and women are paired up for short periods of time, and given the opportunity to indicate positive or negative interest on a series of partners. Seems like a good way to gather outcome data from a number of repetitions using uniform conversational conditions. If I respond positively to everyone I meet, then I will be able to find out how they all responded, since double yes pairings receive notification.”

“Sounds like you’ve got it figured out. So you plan to compare results with and without the glasses?” I asked.

“Almost. I’ve heard that glasses are not considered particularly attractive, so I’m going to compare results with them turned on versus turned off. I’ve signed up for a session this week, when I will keep the glasses turned off. I’m also booked for a session next week, when I’ll turn them on,” she answered. I ignored the double entendre, and nodded.

“I’ll be curious how it goes. I’m glad Susanna has been able to help.” I said.

“Susanna has been great, but I was hoping that you’d give me some advice about what to wear to these events,” she said.

I looked at Marilla's outfit, which consisted of a turquoise knit dress, red boots, and black stockings. Today, she had her hair in a bun, with a small wreath of leaves around it.

"I'm not sure what to tell you, Marilla. I think that clothes can be a way to send a message, and I'm not sure what message you'd be aiming for," I said.

"I'd like to send as neutral a message as possible, because I want the experiment to focus on the conversations, not my clothes," she replied.

"In that case, do you have something along the lines of black pants, a solid colored sweater, matching dark socks, and dark leather loafers?" I asked.

"I can do that. How about my hair?" she said.

"Pull it back with a rather plain clip. Don't wear any other sorts of accessories, but if you feel like it, you could wear small earrings," I suggested. I was hardly an expert in how to dress, but I could certainly do a neutral look better than she'd been doing. "There are all sorts of magazines and books about fashion and dressing for different occasions, but why don't you just go for a sort of generic look for now," I said.

Marilla was now feeling enthusiastic and prepared for her experiments. I wondered if she'd be satisfied with just finding out the yes/no replies of her partners, or whether she'd try to pin them down for more of a debrief. I guess that since the glasses were recording basic audio and video, she could always do an after action review.

## Lesley Shocks Them All

The next day, Lesley came by.

“Greetings!” he said. “I’ve had another splendid experience!” Lesley looked pleased, and I could hardly wait to find out what he’d been up to.

“Wonderful! What did you do?” I asked.

“I went out with my department to celebrate someone’s birthday. We went to a karaoke bar, and I surprised them all by performing,” he smiled.

“I bet they were shocked to see you get up there,” I said.

“Actually, several of them had been daring each other to go up. One fellow started saying that he’d do it if I went first. By the time that almost the entire table had chimed in with similar sentiments, I’d decided to call them on it,” he said.

“Gosh, what did you sing?” I asked.

“I picked the Scarecrow’s song from the Wizard of Oz. I thought that it was fitting to have a professor singing about needing a brain,” he replied.



“Very fitting selection. Were you nervous?” I said.

“It was a bit nerve-wracking to walk up there, but once I got started, I actually had fun. I used to be in a musical theater group when I was in college, and I guess I’ve missed doing that sort of thing,” he said.

“I guess during the race for tenure, it’s hard to keep up involvement with hobbies,” I commented.

“Absolutely. I just got out of the habit of looking for fun,” he said.

“How did your colleagues react after your performance?” I asked.

“First of all, they had no more excuses for not getting up there themselves. A few of them did solo turns, but most of them went up for a group rendition of some pop song I hadn’t heard before. People were quite complimentary about my singing that night, but what I’ve noticed afterwards is that everyone seems to be acting more friendly towards me in general,” he observed.

“Maybe the experience changed how people think of you,” I said.

“That would make sense, because in a way, I feel like I changed how I think of myself. Or perhaps I’m just rediscovering a dormant image,” he said.

“What would you like to do next?” I asked.

“I’ve got a few more items on my list of things that no one would expect me to do. I plan to do at least one or two more surprising things, and then re-evaluate my general life and social plan in view of any resulting insights,” he said, resolutely.

“It sounds like you’re on a roll. Come by anytime,” I smiled.

## Mayat Resurfaces

The next day, I was leaving my apartment when I noticed Mayat, of all people, standing at the curb. I assumed he was looking for more drama for his screenplay, and ignored him.

“Alyse, don’t you recognize me?” he called out. I waved and nodded, and kept going. Mayat trotted along.

“Please, wait a minute. I need to talk to you,” he pleaded. I am just a sucker for that line, and against my better judgment, I paused and looked at him. “I’ve realized something important! Going on all those first dates has made it clear that something has been missing from my life,” he said, urgently. I sighed. While my job was interesting, it didn’t mean that I wanted a similar experience outside of working hours.

“Hi, Mayat. Why are you telling me about this?” I said.

“I have to tell you. Fate brought us together, and I’m not going to fight destiny any longer,” he said. I looked around.

“Ok, Mayat. You can stop with the candid camera stuff now. Very funny, go try it with someone else.”

“I’m serious! This isn’t about my screenplay!” he said, jumping up and down.

“I’m not interested. Bye,” I replied. I made my escape while he was trying to figure out what to say. Oh great, I thought. Todd didn’t run the numbers on how many crazed stalkers you should expect during the course of high through-put dating. When I got to my office, I figured it wouldn’t hurt to ask him if he had any techniques for getting rid of people.

“Hi Todd, it’s Alyse. Uh, I’ve been trying out your dating methodology, and had a question about contingency plans. Any tips for getting rid of someone who’s being too persistent?” I asked.

“There are two basis strategies, depending on the psychology of the clingee,” he started.

“The clingee?” I asked, not sure if I’d heard him right.

“Yes, the one who is doing the clinging,” he confirmed. “So, if the clingee seems to be the optimistic, non-hint taking type, you have to explicitly tell them that you are not interested in seeing them again and that you will not be responding to any further contact. Then, follow through,” he said.

“What about if the clingee is beyond clueless and into deluded?” I asked.

“That is the case for strategy type two. Refer to my FAQ list about getting a restraining order,” he said.

“Right, that makes sense. So, did you calculate the probabilities for encountering type-two clingees?” I asked.

“My suspicion is that this may be a gender dependent trait, but in general, it’s going to be approximately the same probability as starting a relationship. So you’re talking about something like 0.5% of the population that you are initially meeting or screening,” he said. “Good luck,” he added.

Maybe it was just bad luck to run into a loony as the first first date. But at least he didn’t turn out to be a loony long lost brother or something.

## A Concrete Situation

Euripides (or Lucky, as I was secretly nicknaming him), slunk into my office. Rather than looking nervous, as he did during the first visit, he looked just plain discouraged.

“I don’t know why, but I tried it again,” he said. “A friend of mine said that he knew someone that I might hit it off with, and set us up on a blind date. I was supposed to show up at the pub at 7pm. No problem, since it’s less than a 15 minutes walk from my office,” he narrated.

“Mmm hmm?” I encouraged. Lucky groaned.

“I walked out of my office and right into a newly poured sidewalk. I was up to my ankles in wet cement, and fell over, so I got cement all up my left leg and arm.”

“Oh no, what did you do?” I said.

“I thought it might be better to at least show up and let her know what happened. I got to the pub and met the woman, and told her that I’d had a bit of an accident and would have to take a raincheck. She got really mad, and said that if I didn’t want to have dinner, I should have

just said that instead of coming up with a ridiculous excuse,” he sighed. “So she stormed off, and by that time the concrete had stiffened up and I had to get the hostess to help put me into a cab, because I didn’t think I could hop all the way home.” I knew that I couldn’t laugh, but the image of the poor guy stuffed sideways into a cab was going to be the humorous high point of my day.

“I’m sorry. It might have been okay if she’d had more of a sense of humor about the whole thing,” I said.

“Yeah, well, I called my friend later, and he certainly had no problem laughing his butt off about it,” he said. “If this hadn’t been the latest incident of my jinx, I’d think it was pretty funny, too.”

“Euripides, there has to be some way for you to get at the bottom of this jinx. It’s not right,” I said, looking at him. “What options have you considered?” I asked.

“Well, the most obvious thing would be to beg my ex-girlfriend to unjinx me. I’m pretty sure that wouldn’t work, because she’s basically a very nice and considerate person unless she’s pissed. So, if she wasn’t still mad, she’d have already unjinxed me without my having to ask. If she is still mad, I bet that trying to talk with her would just get her more upset,” he explained.

“Mmm. Any other options?” I asked. I wasn’t exactly sure how Lucky could describe someone whom he believed was responsible for throwing him into a pit of wet concrete as a very nice and considerate person, but I guess it beat getting thrown into a cement mixer.

“I could just wait it out,” he said. “But I know she can carry a grudge for decades.”

“Well, that would be a long time to suffer,” I said. “Any other ideas?”

“I might be able to get some kind of lucky charm to counter the jinx,” he said, looking thoughtful. “She’s kind of a witch, but I don’t think she got really advanced with it.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know where to get a good lucky charm,” I said.

“Well, a lot of stuff on the market is just junk, but I have a few leads on more reputable suppliers,” he said.

“Are you going to try it?” I asked.

“It’s the only option that I can really pursue, so I guess I have no choice, unless I want to put up with more dating disasters,” he said, sighing again. I should have decorated the office with those hanging mobile sculptures that spun around in the breeze, I thought. All the sighing would have been useful. I wondered if there were other offices around MIT that had more sighs per hour.

“I don’t suppose there’s anything that might make your girlfriend get over being mad?” I asked.

“My guess is that if she started dating someone else, that would do it. But I can’t in good conscience involve some other guy. I mean, what if they broke up and this sort of thing happened to him?” he replied.

“That’s true,” I said. “Well, uh, good luck with the lucky charm search.”

## Jen Starts to Notice

Jen and I got together at her place for dinner. She was stirring a couple pots, and everything smelled good.

“So how you have you been?” I asked. I’d noticed that she looked tired, but didn’t want to comment on it.

“Eh, I’m ok. Just feeling kind of lame,” she shrugged.

“About what?” I asked.

“I thought that Tim would be a disaster to have around as an advisor. But this month, he helped the treasurer set up a better organization system for dealing with snack purchases and poster paint rentals. Then, he got the recruiting chair to have some brainstorming meetings, which led to a couple of the students trying out new and successful ways of attracting more attention on campus. Plus, he’s been keeping those two students who just had the bad breakup from acting out in public. I haven’t really done anything,” she mumbled. “And, he’s actually kind of cute.”

“Jen, you know you’ve always been the one the students all go to when they need ideas for service events or help with classes,” I said.



“I guess so,” she said. “This is ready, let’s eat,” she directed. As usual, Jen had come up with great renditions of favorite foods. This evening it was a sort of beef stew with noodles.

“Did you say that Tim was kind of cute?” I asked.

“You know I like nerdy guys,” she said.

“Well, this one’s available and looking,” I reminded her. “What’s the problem?”

“You remember how Gina and the other girls had this idea? Well, I’m pretty sure that Tiffany is doing a good job of chasing him down, and there’s no way I can compete with that,” she said.

“But, that’s just pretend. You think the students will go through with it?” I asked.

“You don’t know these women. Tiffany is having a blast, and she’s not going to back off. Gina’s convinced her that it’s the only way to make the chapter safe for women.”

“Even if the thing with Tiffany gets going, wasn’t the whole idea for it to crash and burn in some spectacular, lesson-teaching way?” I asked.

“But I’m sure he’d figure out that I knew about it the whole time, and feel like I was part of the joke,” she said.

“Jen, we’re talking about a guy who is slightly oblivious about women. I wouldn’t be too sure that he ever really knows what hit him,” I pointed out. Jen looked a bit more cheerful.

“I hadn’t thought about that possibility,” she said. We had a great dinner, and I’m sure that hearing about some of the online dating emails that I’d been getting convinced her that it could always be worse.

## Tiffany Hooks Her Fish

After talking with Jen, I wondered what Tim's take on the advisor situation was. I didn't have to wonder long, because he dropped by the next day.

"Hey, guess what! I'm dating someone!" he announced.

"So things are looking up for you?" I said.

"Well, at least I don't have to worry that no woman is ever going to be interested in me. Remember I mentioned a student named Tiffany who was visiting some of her friends in APO?" he said, cheerfully.

"Oh Tim, you're dating a student?" I asked. I wasn't surprised, but I wanted to let him know that this was not exactly normal behavior.

"It's ok, she's not going to join APO. Tiffany's really great. She likes science fiction, and so she might come to the book club. She's in the Tai Kwon Do club, and I've always wanted to try martial arts. And she just lights up the room when she's excited about something," he continued.

"Mmmm. I take it this is a recent development?" I asked.

“Yeah, after I saw her last time, I told her my email, and she’s been talking to me on zephyr and wanted to know if I was interested in seeing a movie at LSC. It turned out that none of the other people she asked could show up, so we hung out afterwards and she told me that she really liked me,” he bubbled.

I couldn’t totally blame the guy. How many 40 year old men can resist it when a teenager comes onto them? But even knowing it was all a set-up, I couldn’t help trying to inject a little common sense.

“Do you think it will be hard to have a relationship with someone with such a large age difference?” I asked.

“I don’t think it should matter that much. She said that she really likes talking to someone with a different perspective than her other friends,” he replied.

“And what about you?” I asked.

“It doesn’t bother me that she’s younger. I mean, women my age have so much more baggage, and sometimes they come with children, and it will be nice not to have to deal with all that,” he said.

“I can see what you mean. Of course, younger people are still trying to figure out a lot of things, so they can have their own sorts of issues in relationships,” I commented.

“I guess so,” he said, not looking too concerned.

“And how is the APO stuff coming along?” I asked.

“It’s been really interesting. I’ve enjoyed working with the different officers, and encouraging them to think of new ways to tackle problems. And it’s been nice working with Jen. I can tell the students all

respect her a lot,” he said. Tim bounced out of the room, looking pleased with himself, and I indulged in a bit of sighing. I dreaded what Tiffany might have up her sleeve.

## Marilla is Ready for More

Marilla came by, with her three-ring binder that was slowly getting filled up with notes, charts, and data about social interactions and non-verbal communication.

“I’ve got the results from my speed dating trials,” she said, briskly. Today she was wearing a tie-dyed skirt, a sweater with Christmas elves, and green striped stockings. She had braided her hair into three pigtails, and tied each one with a different colored scrunchy. I wondered whether she’d managed to dress more neutrally during the speed dating sessions.

“What did you find out?” I asked.

“Assuming that Susanna’s nerd glasses algorithm was tuned correctly for the speed dating milieu, the data suggests that I have not completely internalized the capability for noticing when my conversational partner is getting bored. During the session where the glasses were turned off, I received 1 positive responses out of 10. During the session where the glasses were powered on, the alarm sounded 8 times and I received 5 positive responses out of 10,” she said.

“Mmmm, I see. What do you think about the results?” I said.

“I’m going to have to practice more, but the data is reasonably encouraging. It suggests that if I can simply master the boredom identification algorithm, I should be able to improve the first impression that I convey. Also, this suggests that the improved state is sufficiently positive for dating purposes,” she said. “Of course, it’s a bit frustrating that this stuff is so hard to get the hang of.”

“I think you’re getting along rather quickly,” I said. “You know that most people you meet have been unconsciously learning these sorts of things almost their whole lives.”

“I’ve also decided to do some sociological and fashion research,” she said, excitedly. She held up a copy of the latest *Cosmopolitan* magazine.

“You’re reading *Cosmo*?” I said with surprise.

“Not just reading, I’m analyzing it,” she replied.

“Any conclusions so far?” I asked. Clearly, Marilla hadn’t been following the fashion advice, although truthfully, she didn’t look that much more bizarre than some of the extreme fashions from the magazine.

“I’ve identified several topic keywords for each article over the last few months, and ran it through a clustering algorithm. The words men, dating, and sex are barely differentiated, which means that articles that mention one of those words almost always mention all of them,” she said, showing me a diagram.

“Yeah, that seems about right,” I said, cautiously. I wasn’t sure where this conversation was going, but it could quickly veer into Too Much Information territory.

“Well, it seems likely that people here might have different attitudes and approaches to sex than we did at Ten Oaks,” she continued.

“Seems likely,” I agreed. “Have you asked Susanna about it?”

“I’ll probably talk to her about it later, but I thought it would be useful to do a little field research first, so I have some anecdotal observations to work from,” she replied.

“Marilla, uh, I’m not sure how things worked at Ten Oaks, but I feel like I should make sure that you know about some things before you do that,” I interrupted.

“Oh, don’t worry. We had a very extensive sex education program, so I’ve got a good handle on stuff like birth control, STDs, and predatory male behaviors,” she reassured me. “Also, we had a lot of hands-on homework assignments, and...”

“Ok, ok. I believe you. But it might not be a bad idea for you to just ask Susanna if there’s anything that she thinks you should know about how things are different out here before you jump into things,” I said. Marilla agreed that it couldn’t hurt to ask, and started hopping out of the room.

“Marilla, I’m just curious about the hopping?” I asked.

“Just a balance exercise,” she said, as she continued. She bumped into the corner of the doorway and dropped the notebook. “Oops, got to practice this more often.” I could only imagine that Ten Oaks must be a surreal experience for outsiders.



## Dan's Ex

I'd agreed to see Dan, the slightly touchy grabby guy again, since he was kind of charming. We'd decided to escalate to an actual dinner date, and I met up with him at an Indian restaurant in Davis Square.

"Alyse, Great to see you again," he greeted me. "What have you been up to?"

"Not too much, just work and hanging out with friends. How about you?" I said.

"I spent a few days in Maine with one of my ex's. She's a big hiking enthusiast, so we went to Acadia," he said.

"That sounds fun. It's cool that you still get together," I said.

"Yeah, I definitely noticed that in your profile," he said. "It's such a waste to completely lose contact with someone after a breakup. So tell me about the ex's that you still do stuff with," he asked.

"Well, some of them are out of state, so I mostly only see them at alum events or someone's wedding. But my gay ex-bf is still in the area, and we get together pretty frequently," I answered.

“Wow, that’s so sit-com. You have your own gay ex-bf?” he said, smiling.

“Yeah, but unfortunately, he’s not actually that good at fashion and decorating advice. How about your set of ex’s?” I asked.

“I don’t see the ones who have kids as often, although I guess I’m occasionally an emergency back-up baby sitter. But the woman I was just vacationing with, we have some hobbies in common, so we still do stuff,” he answered.

The conversation moved onto what activities we’d been involved with in college, and whether we’d continued with them or not. Dan wasn’t being too grabby, I noticed. Only one knee nudge so far. I saw a large group come into the restaurant, and one woman looked surprised and then walked over. I recognized her as the woman from Dan’s web pages, so I assumed she’d come over to talk to Dan.

“Dan, I thought you had to work late,” she said. “But I know you didn’t want to miss seeing Angie and Mark while they’re in town. Would you and your friend like to come join us?”

“I’ll just catch them tomorrow, I think,” he said.

“Ok. Hi, I’m Wendy,” she said, waving to me.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Alyse,” I replied, and she smiled and headed back to the group.

“Wendy’s the friend that I was just in Maine with,” Dan said. “I was originally going to go to dinner with the group, but when they switched days, I had to bail since we’d already made plans. I didn’t realize they’d decided to come to the same place.”

“Oh, that’s ok. Running into people always makes me feel like I’m living in a small neighborhood.” I said.

We talked about the small world, six degrees theory, and it turned out that Dan knew a fair bit about social network research. As we were leaving, Wendy intercepted us at the door.

“Hey, I just wanted to let you know that we’re going back to our place for dessert, so you can talk to Mark and Angie later. Bye,” she said.

“You still live with your ex-girlfriend?” I asked, softly. Wendy apparently had good ears, because she turned around with a funny look.

“Excuse me?” she said.

“Uh, I didn’t say anything,” Dan replied.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to embarrass you. I think it’s great that you’re still friends.” I said.

“What?” she asked, looking at Dan. He didn’t say anything, and I was starting to get suspicious.

“Wendy, Dan was talking about his ex-girlfriends, and told me that you still vacation together, but not that you were housemates,” I said, slowly.

“Dan’s an asshole, then,” she said, glaring at him. “Because we were still dating. But consider this a break-up,” she shouted, and pushed him out the door.

“Oh my God. I had no idea,” I said. She glared at me anyways, and I exited before she could do anything else. Dan was looking pretty uncomfortable, and I didn’t really want to hear any lame excuses.

“I don’t know what that was about. She’s not usually like this,” he said.

“That’s ok, I don’t really need to know anything else about the situation, and I’m not interested in hearing from you again,” I said.

Getting back to my apartment, I was still mad that he’d been lying, but the sense of ridiculousness was starting to seem pretty funny. I wondered if she was going to change the locks before he got home, or whether he would manage to talk her into believing that it was all some kind of misunderstanding. I updated my date tracking spreadsheet. At least the threat of a restraining order had gotten Mayat to disappear. I had another first date scheduled for later in the week with a guy named Edmund, who had gotten points for particularly witty emails. I hoped that date wasn’t going to be quite so exciting.

## Egg Drop Soup

I knew that nothing good had happened when Lucky showed up with his head half wrapped in bandages.

“Euripides! Are you alright?” I asked.

“I’m pretty sure that I got a defective four-leaf clover,” he said.

“What happened?” I said.

“I decided that instead of trying to buy a lucky charm, I’d just look for my own, so I’d know that it was genuine. Maybe the car exhaust around here is causing a lot of clover mutation, because it only took me a few minutes to find a four-leaf clover. I laminated it at Copy Tech, and then started looking through the Science Connection personals,” he explained.

“Seems reasonable,” I said.

“I emailed some women, and one of them agreed to meet for dinner last night,” he said. I really hoped that they hadn’t been at that same Indian restaurant that I’d gone to last night. “We decided to go for Chinese. The conversation was going well, and we’d put in our order, when everything suddenly went black,” he continued.

“What happened?” I repeated.

“I woke up in the emergency room. The waiter had tripped on my bag, and hit me on the head with a large bowl of soup. It took about ten hours for them to check out my head, stitch me up, and make sure that there wasn’t anything seriously wrong,” he said.

“That sounds like a bad way to spend the night,” I commented.

“As soon as I woke up, I told Hannah that she should just go home, but she felt bad leaving and stuck around for a couple hours. I tried to be at least a little entertaining, but it was very awkward. I finally convinced her to leave before the T stopped running.”

“I’m sorry you got clonked by the soup,” I said. “Maybe you should take the day off. You can’t have gotten very much sleep,” I suggested.

“Yeah, I’m heading home, but I needed to come in and pick up my insurance information. I just stopped by since I saw your door was open,” he said. “What freaked me out was that the waiter tripped on my bag. I’m wondering if somehow I’ve been causing all this bad luck through some kind of sub-conscious sabotage,” he said.

“Well, I doubt that you were able to subconsciously cause a half-sister to appear, or to encourage someone to break into your date’s apartment,” I replied.

“Maybe that was just plain random, but maybe the other stuff that has happened was actually self-inflicted,” he said.

“Do you think there’s a reason you might be subconsciously sabotaging your own dates?” I asked.

“I feel kind of guilty about the way I broke up with my last girlfriend, the one that I was accusing of jinxing me. Maybe I should at least try to apologize,” he said.

“You’re thinking of contacting her?” I asked.

“I’m just going to send a letter. That way, if she’s still mad, she can just throw it out,” he replied. “And then I’m going to get a better lucky charm, just in case.”

I had to admire his persistence. Lucky’s previous air of defeat had been replaced by the determined stubbornness that nerds so often possess. I was sure that he’d eventually succeed, and hoped that there weren’t many more dating disasters in his future.

## Tim's Infatuated

As he walked into the office, it occurred to me that possibly, Tim just needed to be clonked on the head by a bowl of soup. But I was pretty sure that MIT would frown on that sort of intervention. He looked less smug than the last time, but was still grinning.

“Just dropping by for a minute. I’m meeting up with Jen to talk about how to convince one of the students to take some time off before they crack up,” he said.

“It’s nice that the chapter has both of you looking out for their interests now,” I said. “I hope other things have been going well?”

“You mean Tiffany? She’s so interesting. Last night we went to the book group and she got everyone thinking about the symbolism of the forest in this one story. And she wore this red velvet outfit and looked amazing. It’s too bad we had to leave early because she had to write a paper,” he started.

“So you two have been seeing each other a lot?” I asked.



“Not so much. I talk to her on zephyr all the time, and we had plans to hang out a couple times last week, but she had to finish some problem sets. She had intended to get them done earlier, but didn’t get around to starting.”

“I guess since you’re pretty flexible about things, it’s not a big deal if she has to cancel,” I commented.

“I try to be easygoing. Actually, one of my pet peeves is people who can’t be on time for things, but I understand that she’s got a lot in her schedule,” he said.

“Sure, it’s tough being a student, and having to skip having fun to stay in your room and do homework,” I agreed.

“Yeah, she gets caught up in working, and loses track of the time. But she answers her cell phone, so I can just call if she doesn’t show up when I’m expecting it.”

“Mmm hmm. Technology is pretty handy sometimes,” I agreed.

“Well, I just wanted to say hello, but I need to go meet Jen,” he said, heading out the door. All in all, being flakey about dates wasn’t a terrible thing to do to someone, but I knew that Tiffany would be escalating things when this didn’t scare off Tim. I just hoped that she wasn’t getting in over her head.

## Edmund In Person

I wrapped things up at work cheerfully, planning to meet another new guy for coffee. Edmund had been particularly witty and entertaining in his email correspondence, so I was looking forward to meeting him. I wasn't too surprised to be finding out that a lot of guys don't seem to enjoy writing letters, and just came across sounding awkward or boring.

I recognized Edmund, even though it looked like he might have used a not-very-recent set of pictures on his profile. Maybe it was just a different haircut, I thought, trying to be positive.

"You must be Alyse. I'm Edmund," he said, sitting down at a table.

"Nice to meet you. So, you're just back from Mexico?" I asked. He had mentioned the trip in his last email.

"Yes, I travel there frequently. We have an important customer based in Mexico City, and I'm really the only one who's qualified to handle their questions. So I'm going back and forth almost every month," he said.

“Oh, what is your specialty area?” I asked.

“I’m really the only researcher who is putting together basic principles from mathematics, computer science, psychology, and social science,” he started. “Most people stay in their own area, and hardly know anything that is going on in other departments. But I have a joint appointment from the schools of business, computer science, and psychology.” This was weird. He was sounding a lot more pompous than witty.

“That’s interesting. I worked in software at a few different companies, but now my job concentrates on people,” I offered.

“Yes, it’s extremely interesting, and if some of my projects turn out the way I expect, I will have revolutionized science’s ability to model and predict human behavior,” he continued.

“Do you find that people are fairly predictable?” I asked.

“If you have enough data about a person, things like letters or speeches or even television appearances, you can extract a number of measures of their personality. Then, if you know the cultural and religious value systems that they use, along with some basics about their prior history, you can make a good start at predicting how they will react to different situations,” he said. “I can’t really explain all the specifics, but this is absolutely groundbreaking, and also the basis for a commercial computer game concept that I am developing.”

I wondered if Susanna’s glasses would have been buzzing yet. Remembering Todd’s advice, I tried to steer the conversation another direction to see how he’d react.

“I’ve never been to Mexico, but I visited Greece last year with a group of friends. I loved seeing all those famous sites,” I said.

“I don’t really travel for pleasure. Been too busy between my research and consulting projects. I have to work as quickly as possible, because there are a couple competitor who are always trying to steal my ideas. But I’ve got a sizable lead, so they don’t have much of a chance,” he replied. Alright, I’d try again.

“It is a lot of fun to turn an idea into reality. In some ways, my current job was the result of a crazy idea my friend suggested as a joke,” I said.

“There was even one guy who pretended to interview with me but was really just trying to get some information that he could sell to a competitor. So now I’m a lot more careful about whom I talk to,” he continued. This wasn’t looking promising, but I just couldn’t reconcile this guy sitting here with the incredibly engaging emails.

“You know, Edmund, I think your emails are just outstanding. You’re such a good writer,” I said.

“Thank you. I do write a lot of proposals, and it wouldn’t be bragging to say that I bag more than my fair share of them,” he said, chuckling. “But actually, my secretary handles most of my email and scheduling.” Aha, it was all becoming clear now. But who was this secretary?

“You must trust them quite a bit,” I fished. “Have they been with you a long time?”

“Well, Donna was working in the entire department for about 20 year before she got assigned to support just my group. But I’ve had her

for almost 10 years now,” he replied. Darn, it wasn’t an eligible bachelor. I extracted myself as quickly as possible, promising Edmund that I wouldn’t say a word if any of his competitors tried to pump me for information.

## Bumping into Susanna

I decided to go visit Matthew while the weather was still non-snowy, if not exactly good. The last date with Edmund had me feeling a little antagonistic about researchers, so we decided to get off campus and walk around town. Like many New England towns, Northampton has a plethora of shops selling interesting but completely useless knickknacks.

“How’s your dating pipeline?” Matthew asked.

“I’ve been keeping up with emailing people, but last night’s first date was like some kind of slimy hairball getting coughed out of the pipeline,” I said.

“That sounds potentially amusing, although undesirable,” he inquired.

“This guy was way too impressed with himself, and it turned out that his 60 year old, female secretary had been responsible for his intriguing emails,” I recapped. “That woman is sure talented.”

“So how are things with Susanna? Has she tried out the attraction detector on you yet?” I asked.

“I’ve run into her at lunchtime once in a while, and she doesn’t seem to mind if I stay and talk,” he said. “It’s a little intimidating, because she’s beautiful and brilliant. She could have her pick of any man on campus.” Matthew looked discouraged.

“Do you know whether she’s dated anyone since she got here?” I asked. “I have no idea, and don’t know who to ask. I’ve tried to gather a bit of intell, but the only thing I’ve discovered is that her students have practically formed a fan club, and her classes are always oversubscribed,” he said.

“Maybe she’s been too busy with researching how people socialize to actually do any herself,” I suggested. “I’m sure she’d be interested in engaging in little non-verbal interaction with you.”

“I don’t want to be just another data point,” he objected.

“I’m just joking about that,” I said. “Well, don’t wait too long, or someone will beat you to it, and then you’ll feel silly,” I pointed out.

Matthew told me more about his research projects, which mostly involved non-invasive brain imaging, and we speculated about the idea of a bad first date hall of fame. I was looking over my shoulder to say something about how if there were bad first date collectible cards, you’d need to pixelize the faces or use anonymity bars over the eyes, when I bumped into someone on the sidewalk.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t watching where I was going,” I apologized. “Oh hello, Susanna. Sorry to run you over like that.”

“It’s my fault too, I was thinking about facial expression recognition,” she said.

“Hi Susanna. How have you been?” Matthew asked.

“I’ve run into some problems tuning the image understanding part of the deception detection algorithm. I might have to do something completely random for a while instead of continuing to bang my head against the problem,” she said. I tried to signal Matthew that this was a perfect opportunity to ask her out, but my eyebrow semaphore wasn’t up to the job, and the moment passed. Susanna excused herself to run some errands, and Matthew watched her walk away.

“Matthew, you’ve got to seize the day a little more,” I nudged.

“Oh, is that what you were trying to signal. I thought I just had spinach on my teeth or something,” he said, sounding distracted. “She’s just so lovely.”

“Don’t psych yourself out by dwelling too much on how she’s so wonderful. Or, at least, devote a couple of mental cycles to noticing that she seems to like you,” I said.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“She was smiling at you the whole time. Didn’t you notice?” I said.

“Oh, I thought she just always was in a good mood or something,” he replied.

“Well, either she’s usually happy to see you, or she’s usually happy, but in either case, wouldn’t that mean she’d be more likely to agree to do something with you?” I asked. “Maybe you need an artificial deadline. Let’s say that in the next seven days, you have to ask her to do something with you.”



“Deadlines are certainly a crucial catalyst for productivity,” he agreed.

## Mayat's Grand Gesture

I was walking back to my apartment when I noticed something odd. The entire sidewalk in front of the building was colored. Closer inspection showed that it was melted wax that had been dripped into a sort of spiraling design, along with some glittering bits of metal. In the middle of the spiral, there was a small pile of red rose petals. While I was taking a closer look at the design, Mayat appeared.

"I don't want to talk to you. Go away," I said, heading for the building.

"But don't you like the mandala? I made it for you," he said.

"I'm going to call security," I said. He continued to stand near the curb, looking down at the sidewalk. I went inside and buzzed security to let them know that there was a nutty guy out there bothering me and defacing the sidewalk. I knew that would get them moving, because the building management here is particularly fussy about the sidewalks.

I didn't want encourage the guy by watching from the window, so I just channel surfed for a while. I noticed some flashing lights, though, and it sounded like someone was using a bullhorn. It all quieted down

after about half an hour, and I decided to check my email. While I was doing that, someone from security called back.

“We just wanted to let you know that the sidewalk artist refused to leave and started making a fuss when we began cleaning up the mess. We had to get the police involved, but everything is taken care of now,” he said. I reminded him that security should keep an eye out for this guy, since he might turn into a repeat offender.

The next morning, I got another email from Mayat.

Alyse,

This is the last time you’ll hear from me, because fate has stepped in. Last night, as I was being forced to leave and my work was being destroyed, a kind person recorded some images of my art using their cell phone camera. She offered to send me the images, so I gave her my card.

Well, Lila looked at my website, and got excited about my screenplay summary. She’s filmed a few independent/art movies, and wants to collaborate on my first dates movie. I’m moving to New York to stay with her while I finalize the screenplay and she arranges the casting and other details. I know that it is very sudden, but I believe in love at first sight, and know that Lila and I were meant for each other.

Sorry to have bothered you. I now realize that I was being silly, and my passing fancy for you was nothing more than an ephemeral delusion.

Mayat

Hmmm. I've never been called an "ephemeral delusion" before. But really, that's one problem solved, with minimal effort on my part. Maybe I'd have to start believing in fate.

## Lesley Gets Dressed Up

Lesley came by later that day.

“Hello Alyse. I’m a bit puzzled, and wondered if you might have a suggestion,” he said.

“I’ll give it a shot. What’s on your mind?” I said.

“The next item on my list of things that no one would ever think I’d do is to attend a wild party. Unfortunately, I’m not the sort of person that gets invited to that sort of gathering, and I don’t know how to locate one,” he explained.

“Right, I guess no one would invite you if it’s not something they could imagine you doing. I might be able to help, if you’d like to go to a party with one of my old friends,” I offered.

“Yes, if we could meet first, then assuming we’re both comfortable with the other, that sounds like a very feasible approach,” he agreed. I was sure that Jason wouldn’t mind introducing Lesley to a different kind of party.

“Let me send you both an introductory email, and then I’ll let you and Jason take it from there. Jason is an MIT alum, and I think you’ll

have some interests in common,” I suggested. I’d been prepping Jason and Ryan for this possibility, so I called Jason.

“Hey, remember that guy, Lesley, that I mentioned might want to try going to a party? Do you still think you can take him with you?” I asked.

“These guys I know are having a post-elections party tonight, and I’ve heard that those sometimes get pretty crazy, what with liberal politicians and gay rights advocates getting drunk. There will be tons of people there, so an extra guest would be no problem,” he answered.

“Great, I’ll put you in touch. Call me afterwards because I want to hear how it goes,” I said.

“OK, I promise I’ll stay long enough to watch out for Lesley and not ditch him by sneaking off with a hot guy,” he promised.

“Thanks, and it might be best if you don’t actually try to seduce him yourself. I’m already failing at not mixing my personal life with work, so don’t make it any worse,” I cautioned.

The next day, I figured I wouldn’t hear from Jason before noon. Around 2pm, he finally called.

“Well, I didn’t seduce him,” Jason giggled.

“Uh huh?” I said.

“So, first of all, we had to go to my place before the party because I thought Lesley looked a little too buttoned up. He was pretty cooperative, and Ryan agreed that he looked fairly hot by the time we were thought,” he started. “There were about a hundred people there when we showed up, and they had a disco ball and bubble machine

going, with loud music. First, we hit the dance floor to scope out the crowd. Turns out that Lesley is a good dancer, I noticed a couple of women and some men flirting with him,” he continued.

“That sounds promising. Did he seem to have a good time?” I asked.

“I think so. By the end the night, some of the guests were really tipsy, and one guy was kind of pestering him. Ryan and I had to create a distraction so that Lesley could escape. Then we went back to our place, and Lesley kept us up talking for almost two more hours,” he said.

“Huh, what sort of stuff were you talking about?” I asked.

“Mostly, he had a lot of questions about our relationship, and what it was like coming out, and how we knew we were gay,” he said.

“And did you and Ryan agree on a gaydar reading?” I asked.

“Well, I was leaning towards yes, but Ryan isn’t sure. He thinks there’s a possibility that Lesley might just be a late bloomer,” he said.

“Thanks for taking him out with you. I hope it wasn’t too much trouble,” I said.

“Nah, I think he attracted a lot of attention, and so it was a plus. But I’m probably going back to sleep now,” he said.

That all sounded less definitive than I’d hoped. I supposed I’d had an idea that once Lesley actually interacted with some gay guys in a social situation, a light bulb would just go on. But, maybe only nut cases like Mayat actually make major life decisions on the spot.

## The Veto Stamp

Tim poked his head in, and seeing no other visitors, sat down on the couch with a bit of a sigh. Aha, I thought. Back to sighing.

“I’ve been having some disagreements with Tiffany lately. I never want to get into an argument, so I’m not sure what’s been happening,” he said. Tim looked glum.

“That sounds difficult. Have you noticed any sort of theme or trend in the tensions?” I asked.

“I’m not sure. One day, she was mad because she thought I was spending too much time talking with some of the APO students. Another time, she wanted to celebrate our two week anniversary, and I pointed out that anniversaries are annual events. She also accused me of being no fun because I didn’t want to jog around campus after midnight in pajamas,” he confessed.

“I’m afraid I don’t know too many people who’d be up for that particular excursion,” I said. Although at the rate Lesley was going, maybe streaking would be the next thing to try.



“See, that’s what I said, but she said all her friends were going to do it,” he said.

“Mmm hmm. There are some things that sound more exciting when you’re a teenager,” I ventured.

“I guess I did celebrate a one month anniversary with my first girlfriend. That was just before we broke up,” he said.

“So where do you think things are going?” I asked.

“I guess we’ve got some stuff to work out. But that’s the way all relationships are,” he said. “I’m willing to try to be more flexible.”

“Yeah, I guess it wouldn’t actually hurt you to celebrate a weekly anniversary, if that’s what she wants. But do you think you’ll want to cut back on the APO work? It sounded like you really enjoy that,” I asked.

“I think she only gets upset if I’m spending time alone with women students,” he said. “Maybe Jen could just take care of that part.”

“I know you don’t want to hear more comments about the age difference, so I’m not going to say it again,” I said.

“Thanks, I appreciate you listening to this, because I know you don’t really approve,” he said.

“Well, being in this office doesn’t actually give me veto power over who people date, so really, it’s all up to you,” I said.

Tim nodded, and looked thoughtful as he left. I had a brief fantasy of running around with a big veto stamp, hitting people on the forehead, but managed not to laugh. Of course, the counterpart to the big veto stamp would be a set of fuzzy handcuffs that I could use on people like Matthew and Susanna.

## Locating Susanna

Matthew decided to come out to Boston for the weekend, since his Friday classes had been cancelled for one of those pseudo holidays only celebrated by schools.

“Matthew, you look like you need more sleep. What have you been doing?” I asked.

“I had two proposals due last week, so I’ve been up a couple nights with that. My grad student went off for some kind of family reunion vacation, and I had to administer a bunch of his experiments that he was unable to reschedule. Work is eating my life,” he said.

“So spend the weekend not thinking about work,” I suggested.

“I’m not sure that will be any better. I think Susanna has been avoiding me,” he said.

“You think she’d avoiding you? Have you been trying to get together?” I asked.

“I haven’t seen her in the cafeteria, and she hasn’t been in her office when I’ve gone by,” he recounted.

“I don’t think it counts as avoiding unless she seems to be taking specific actions to not be in the same place that you are. You don’t actually think she’s sneaking out of her own office when she gets the alert that you’re in the building?” I pointed out.

“Sure, but I used to see her around a lot more. Why would she suddenly change her routine?” he said.

“You could ask her.” I said. “Or, if you want to be more indirect, check with her fan club. Maybe they know something.”

“It’s not like they’re some organized activity with regular meetings and a web site. I’m not even sure how to get in touch with them,” he objected.

“Are you sure they don’t have a web site? I think these days people are getting web sites for their kids before they’re even conceived. Your students’ goldfish probably even have web sites,” I exaggerated.

A few minutes of Googling later, Matthew had found the website.

“Oh no. It says here that she’s gone back to Ten Oaks for a sabbatical. The students also have a bunch of jokes about how she’s the most eligible bachelorette professor, and suggesting various famous people that she should consider. Although I guess most of these “Famous Scientists who should date Susanna” aren’t actually alive anymore,” he said, clicking through the pages.

“You’ve often complained in the past that if you notice a woman who’s actually single and interesting, she always ends up dating someone before you get a chance to say anything. Well, you have to admit that you

haven't exactly taken the most efficient path of approach in this situation," I said.

"You're right that I need more sleep. I'm starting to have more sleep deprivation induced bad ideas," he said.

"Like what?" I asked.

"If I got on a plane tomorrow, I could get there, talk to her, and get back to campus before my Tuesday class," he said.

"Whoa, I didn't think you'd come up with that. I'm impressed," I answered.

"I'm going to sleep. We'll see what I think in the morning," he said.

Sure enough, flying out to Ten Oaks still sounded good at six in the morning when Matthew got up, claiming that he couldn't waste time sleeping. I wished him luck as he headed out, and went back to bed for a nap.

## I'd Like You to Meet a Friend

I was slogging through more high through-put dating emails, carefully recording them on my spreadsheet and filing the notes into the right directories. A good fraction of men didn't even respond to my first email, so I only had to do follow up screening emails with about half of them. Still, keeping track of what I'd asked different people and what they'd said was getting complicated.

I had an unexpected note from Kelly.

Dear Alyse,

I hope the new job has been going well. You know how you said you were still looking for the right guy? I don't know if you'd be interested, but someone I know recently moved to Boston and if you'd like, I'll set you up on a date. I haven't hung out much with Andrew lately, but I used to see him all the time because our parents were good friends. My mom said that he hasn't really figured out what to do around Boston yet, so I'm sure he'd be happy if you wanted to show him some sights. Andrew's a nice guy, and works in educational software.

Kelly

One of Todd's rules was to publicize your dating quest with people you know, so they can suggest possible candidates. Given that Kelly had gone from hard-core Goth to suburban school teacher, this guy could be just about anyone. But given that Edmund the Boring had been my last personally arranged date, surely Kelly couldn't do any worse than that.

Dear Kelly,

It's nice of you to be keeping in mind! Sure, I'd be glad to meet up with Andrew and show him something around Boston. Go ahead and pass along my email. I'd love to be able to tell you that I was already seeing someone, but no such luck! But maybe sometime I'll tell you about some of the character's I've met in the process.

Alyse

I also had email from Julia. The date of her scheduled visit was approaching quickly, and I'd been thinking about her even though our email correspondence had dropped off.

Alyse Palace,

I can't wait to see you again. Today I went out and bought some sparkly nail crystals. Do you remember those nail polish markers that were popular for a while? My

mother was really happy when I started getting interested in nail polish, because I always used to bite my fingernails, so she wanted to use this as a ploy to get me to knock it off. But I'm pretty sure that's when I started chewing on the ends of my pigtails, so once Mom noticed, it was all short haircuts for me.

Nothing profound, just thinking of you.

Julia

Julia had really been my last close female friend. When I was at MIT, there were still a lot more men than women, and a lot of the women were clustered together in sororities or the all-girls dorm. So since I hadn't joined any special activities especially to meet other women, I ended up hanging out with mostly guys. At the time, I hadn't thought too much about it, but now I wondered if I'd either been scared to have another tumultuous relationship like with Julia, or if I'd been afraid that another female friend would be too much like a replacement for her. I didn't know too much about what college had been like for Julia, but she'd always been outgoing, so I had to guess that she ended up knowing everyone.

I had to give Andrew credit for timeliness. A couple hours after I'd answered Kelly's email, I already had a note from him.

Alyse,

I'm Andrew. Kelly probably told you that I'm new to Boston. It seems to be an interesting city, but I'm

afraid that I've hardly seen anything since I've arrived. Would you like to get together sometime?

Andrew

Not a lot of personal details or get-to-know-you questions, but maybe Kelly had already filled him in about me? Well, I guess it couldn't be worse than Edmund, so I sent him a few suggested times we could get together.



## Too Many Matches

The next day, a short, overweight guy with a terrible haircut came into the office.

“Hi, I’m Wade, and I’ve a little problem that I hope you can help with,” he said.

“I’m Alyse. Happy to try and help. What’s up?” I asked. As he sat down, I noticed that his socks were so worn out that the tops had frayed, and he had an embarrassing worn spot on his pants. I hoped it was going to be as simple as a bit of grooming and shopping advice.

“It’s my mother. I’ve been dating my girlfriend for two years now, but Mom is in denial and still always setting me up with nice Chinese girls,” he said.

“That must be awkward. How have you been handling it?” I asked.

“Well, mostly she gets her friends to have their daughters call me up, because she’s convinced that the reason I’m not meeting women is that I’m too shy. So complete strangers keep calling up, and I have to explain that my mother is confused and that I’m not actually looking to

meet someone. Then, they complain to their relatives, and Mom gets mad,” he said.

“Sounds like you could use a change of tactics,” I commented.

“I’ve brought Amy home to visit my mother many times, and keep telling Mom about her being my girlfriend, but somehow it’s not working,” he said. “Amy suggested that we just get married, because maybe a big wedding would make an impression. But I’m not sure I’m quite ready for that,” he added.

“Yeah, that’s not really a sufficient reason to get married right away,” I agreed. “Have you thought about other things to try?” I asked.

“I thought that maybe I should just go on these dates, and be so boring that the women would then avoid me. But Amy isn’t really pleased with that idea,” he said.

“Mmm hmm. Plus, you might not be able to pull off being boring enough. What if you forgot and started being entertaining?” I smiled.

“So, I was trying to figure out why my mother is acting like this, and I realized that her matchmaking urge seemed to go through the roof after my father died. Maybe she’s bored, or maybe she wants to go on dates and is looking for a vicarious experience,” he pondered.

“They always say that correlation is not causation, but in this case, I think you’re onto something,” I said.

“Basically, I’m hoping you can help me figure out some stuff for Mom to do instead of spending all her time setting me up with women,” he said.

“Do you want to suggest hobbies or activities for her, or did you want to directly encourage her to meet someone?” I asked.

“I don’t know, really, whatever seems easier. Maybe it makes sense to start with hobbies and activities, because I still feel a little squeamish about the idea of getting involved with Mom’s romantic life,” he said.

“I’ve got a handout about fun things to do around town. Why don’t you look through it, and see if any of them seem like something your mother would want to do?” I said, handing him the list. He read through it, occasionally laughing.

“My Mom’s a real character. I could see her showing up to some volunteer event for homeless people and just haranguing them trying harder to find a job. Or, I can just imagine her at a book group, telling everyone how much of a waste of time reading fiction is,” he joked. “But I think she might like a ballroom dance class, and maybe she’d meet some men,” he said.

“Well, I think it’s likely that there will be more women at the class than men, but you could try suggesting that to see how she reacts,” I said. “If picking up a new hobby or two does the trick, you won’t have to escalate into fixing her up with men. Does she have friends that she gets together with?” I asked.

“Not really, she thinks that older people are boring, so she hasn’t really made many friends since she came here. I wanted her to move closer after Dad died, but maybe it was a mistake for her to leave a neighborhood where she knew people already,” he replied.

“I’m sure it was a hard decision, but it’s not too late for her to make new friends,” I said. Wade seemed pleased to have an idea of something for his mother to do, and said that he might be back if he needed more suggestions. I wondered briefly why his mother hadn’t tried to get him to buy new socks or get a haircut, but didn’t want to imply that there was a problem with his appearance.

## Marilla's Preliminary Results

I'd been anticipating Marilla's next visit with a combination of curiosity and dread. On one hand, I was interested to find out how a selection of normal guys would react to a Ten Oaks style pickup line. On the other hand, I wasn't sure I could adequately explain normal social attitudes and non-verbal communications around having sex. Although I don't think of myself as particularly easily embarrassed, it was definitely the case that my friends tend to have an implicit agreement to share To Much Information about our sex lives.

So, when Marilla came by, I was trepidatious about what she might want to share.

"Hi Alyse, I've gotten two data points about sex outside of Ten Oaks," she said, right off the bat. "I can't quite figure out what happened, though, so I wondered if you'd be willing to contribute to an after action review. Susanna is back at Ten Oaks on sabbatical, so I didn't want to bother her." I decided that since this was, after all, Marilla, that I should just be direct about my concerns.

“Marilla, I do want to help, but like many people, I sometimes feel embarrassed talking about sex. So I may seem more uncomfortable than usual during this conversation,” I explained.

“Wait, what do you mean many people feel embarrassed talking about sex? I’ve read quite a lot of Cosmo articles, and that doesn’t seem to be the case,” she objected.

“I forgot to explain that Cosmo has a somewhat fantastical view of the world. Didn’t you notice that the women in those pictures are wearing clothes that you never see in real life?” I asked.

“Sure, but I just figured that was because no one here at MIT pays much attention to clothes,” she said.

“That’s true, but even if you go off campus, you won’t see many women looking like those pictures. Cosmo is a little bit like a television soap opera, it’s not an unbiased reflection of social attitudes,” I explained.

“I just thought that since this seemed to be the main magazine commonly sold that included a lot of articles about sex and dating that it was probably a good way to get a read on how people think,” she sighed. “Now it’s starting to make more sense.”

“Uh, yeah. So, how did your dates go?” I asked.

“I contacted several of the men from the speed dating experiment, and arranged to meet them for dinner, because I wanted to try experiencing romantic interactions,” she said.

“Who did you see first?” I asked.

“I thought it would be more efficient to talk with two or three people at once, so that I could parallelize the process,” she said. I goggled and laughed.

“Marilla, that’s unusual. People always arrange one-on-one dates, not panel interviews,” I managed to gasp.

“I’d hear about double dating, and thought it was common!” she exclaimed.

“Double dating is not extremely common, but it refers to two couples going somewhere as a group, not one person inviting two dates to the same event,” I said, getting a grip. I usually thought it was a bad idea to actually laugh at someone who needed advice, but I just couldn’t keep a straight face as I imagined the men’s surprise when they figured out what was going on.

“Why didn’t either of them say something?” she asked. “I mean, I’d put all their addresses on the ‘to’ line of the email. Surely they realized they were being invited along with someone else?”

“I can’t explain that. Maybe they didn’t notice, or they thought that the other address was just your alternative email account. People don’t always notice stuff like that,” I said. “What happened during the date?” I asked.

“M4 and M9 arrived at the restaurant at about the same time. I introduced them, and we sat down,” she said, reading from her notes.

“You didn’t call them M4 and M9 to their face, did you?” I asked.

“Of course not!” she rolled her eyes. “That would be weird. But I’m using a numbering system for my notes,” she continued. “We

discussed ethnic food, and M4 talked about his recent visit to Japan. M9 was more quiet,” she said. “While we were eating, I told them that I hadn’t had sex with someone from the outside before, and asked if they’d consider the possibility. That’s when they started acting funny,” she said.

I bet they started acting funny. And really, how strange would someone have to act before Marilla would notice? She’d taken off one of her shoes again, and was sitting with that foot propped up on the other knee, holding her pen in her toes. I hoped that she hadn’t done any prehensile toe tricks during dinner.

“Yes, I imagine they were surprised and didn’t know how to react,” I said.

“At that point, M9 excused himself to use the bathroom, and never came back. M4 asked me whether I meant that I’d been in a cult or something. I told him that Ten Oaks wasn’t a cult, and was partway through explain about how it worked when the glasses started buzzing,” she said.

“Ah, so you were using the glasses,” I nodded.

“I let him change the subject, and he asked me how many people I’d had sex with before coming here. I was listing them, and giving a quick summary of each guy, when the glasses started buzzing again. But it doesn’t make sense that he got bored, because he was the one who’d asked,” she said, sounding frustrated.

“I think Susanna tuned the glasses to pick up behavior that indicates that someone wants you to stop talking. Often, that means they are bored, but it’s also possible that they are uncomfortable with what you’re saying. Don’t you remember any Cosmo articles that mentioned



how it's a bad idea to tell men about all your previous sexual partners?" I asked.

"Yes, I thought of that afterwards," she sighed. "There seem to be so many rules that don't make sense. I mean, it's like looking at someone's resume before hiring them for a job. Why wouldn't you want to know about their sexual history? And why would he ask if he didn't want to know?" she asked. I was slightly grateful that this session had turned into explaining social conventions, and not decoding actual in-bed non-verbal communication.

"In romantic situations, people often want to feel special. If you talk too much about previous partners, especially all at once, they can feel like just one of the crowd," I explained.

"That's stupid, why would anyone think they should be the only one you've been with?" she objected.

"On one level, everyone knows that they aren't literally the only person you've dated, but there is a sort of necessary suspension of disbelief," I tried.

"Anyhow, M4 said he had to go, and that was pretty much the end of the date," Marilla concluded. "I can see that there are a lot of things that I didn't understand about dating on the outside. I'm going to have to think about it some more," she said.

"Just remember that a lot of television, books, and magazines aren't completely accurate depictions of how people actually interact," I reminded her.

"Got it," she said, making a few last notes as she walked out the door.

## Back from Ten Oaks

I'd been wondering how Matthew's spur of the moment trip turned out, so when he called, I couldn't resist a little light interrogation.

"So, what happened? Did you tell her that you're interested?"

"I didn't actually have that much time, since I had to be back for classes yesterday," he said. That didn't sound good.

"Uh huh?" I prompted.

"I think Susanna was surprised to see me turn up, but when she asked me why I was there, I couldn't just admit that I wanted to see her," he explained. "So I just told her that I was curious about Ten Oaks and thought it would be nice to visit while she was there. She showed me around the labs and houses, and invited me to stay with her for the night," he continued.

"So she was friendly," I noted.

"It was encouraging that she seemed glad to see me, and we had a good conversation. It turned out she was staying with her parents, and

they didn't ask any questions when she turned up with an extra person to stay in their guest room," he said.

"How long is she going to be there?" I asked.

"She said that she needed to use some of the special fabrication facilities at Ten Oaks, but that she's actually heading to MIT in a week or two. She's going to spend the rest of her sabbatical at the Media Lab," he answered.

"That's good, because it might get awkward if you have to keep visiting her at her parents' house," I observed. "I asked her if she'd like to get together once she's in Boston, so we have a tentative plan for dinner," he said.

"Look, maybe you should figure out how you want to move things along. You've got a week or two to think about it and practice what you want to say," I urged.

"I can't practice saying that I'd like to date her. I'd feel silly talking to the mirror, or an empty chair," he objected.

"Well it's not exactly a good idea to practice that kind of thing on an unsuspecting person, either. Look, I'm happy to pretend to be Susanna if you want to try out a few ways of bringing it up with her. Come visit next weekend," I volunteered.

## Cleaning Out

I was going to have dinner with Jen again, but when she called to ask if I could help her clean out some old junk from the APO office, I agreed to meet up a few hours early. We were lugging some boxes of old posters and handouts to the recycling area when we ran into Tim.

“Oh hi, do you need any help with that stuff?” he asked.

“We’re just about done with the paper recycling, but if you have some time, we’re about to go back to the office and finish sorting out all the accumulated junk,” Jen answered.

“Sure, I’m not doing anything right now,” he said.

“So how have things been going in the chapter?” I asked.

“The students just hosted a big regional meeting. It went off without a hitch, thanks to Tim’s getting them to plan out all the logistics ahead of time. A bunch of the other advisors told me how impressed they were with the organization,” Jen answered.

“I just reminded them about a few things. It was really just that the students worked hard to prepare for the event,” Tim said.

“I was worried that things would implode at the last minute because two of the students who were on the committee got into a big fight, but I think Tim managed to convince them to work things out more calmly,” Jen added.

“Sounds like you’ve been busy,” I told Tim.

“Well, Jen didn’t mention how she saved the day by visiting about a half-dozen Home Depots when the students realized the day before everyone was going to arrive that the rental folding chairs we’d ordered from a bargain supplier didn’t have floor protectors, and the banquet facility was refusing to let us set up the chairs. If Jen hadn’t managed to buy up all the floor protectors in the Boston Metro area, the guests would have all been sitting on the floor,” he pointed out.

“I guess you two can both feel like it was a job well done,” I said. We’d pretty much sorted the vast pile of cruft into piles for trash, donations, and useful things to keep. The last pile was much the smallest.

“I just wish that everything else was going as well as the regional meeting did,” Tim sighed.

“Oh?” I asked.

“Tiffany wanted me to pick up the alcohol for this party that her friends were planning, and got really upset when I refused. I don’t know how they ended up getting it, but I had to leave once I saw the drinking going on,” he admitted.

“You were totally right not to be any party to that kind of behavior,” Jen said, vehemently.

“I know, but she refused to talk to me for a week,” he said. “And next week we’re going to drive out to visit her parents. The car ride could be unpleasant if she’s still mad,” he said.

“You don’t think you’d just skip going?” I asked.

“She’s already promised to introduce me to her parents, so I don’t think I can back out,” he said, making a face. “Well, I’ve got to go now.” Jen and I exchanged glances as Tim left.

“Have you talked to the girls about how they think this whole plot has been going?” I asked.

“They still think it’s pretty funny. I think Tiffany is having a great time pretending to be a bratty kid,” Jen answered.

“She does seem to have managed to give the poor guy a hard time, but I just don’t know if he’s going to make the connection with it all being caused by her being a teenager,” I said. “Does Tiffany know that you’re actually getting interested in the guy?” I asked.

“No way. I’m so not going to discuss my love life, or lack of it, with the students,” Jen stated. During dinner, Jen turned it around and asked me about how the high through-put dating scheme was going, so I told her about the statistics so far, and we speculated about various ridiculous ways that my date with Kelly’s friend Andrew might go.

## Can't Find the Emergency Change of Subject Button

Since I hadn't had any real email exchanges to get a feel for Andrew's personality, I had no idea what to expect. Kelly had given me a good description of what he'd been like back when their families had seen a lot of each other, before they'd both gone off to college. But that had been about 15 years ago, so a lot could have changed. He'd agreed to meet me at a café near my apartment.

"Hello, you must be Alyse. It's nice of you to show me around town," he said. Andrew was on the tall side, and looked like he might have played football. Definitely more jock than geek in appearance, with a nice smile and charming curly eyelashes.

"Andrew, it's nice to meet you. Kelly told me you just moved here recently?" I said. He nodded.

"My company basically moved its headquarters here to be more in the thick of all things biotech. A lot of folks quit rather than move, but I didn't have any reason to stay in Atlanta. How do you like it here?" he asked.

“I really like living here. There’s always something new to do, and a lot of my friends from college are still in the area,” I said. “Speaking of things to do, I wasn’t sure what you’d be interested in. There’s things like the aquarium, or museums. Or, we could walk around Harvard Square or Newbury Street. And there’s always the Freedom Trail, if you like American history and don’t mind the cold weather,” I listed.

“I was actually kind of interested in seeing Chinatown, if you don’t mind?” he suggested.

“Sure, there are a bunch of shops, grocery stores with unusual foods, and places to eat,” I replied. “Are you a fan of Chinese food?” I asked.

“I don’t really know, because I’ve mostly only had Americanized Chinese food. Some of my coworkers were talking about how Chinese food in Atlanta isn’t nearly as good as what you can get here in Chinatown, and I was curious,” he replied.

“Well, we can head over then. And we’ll take the T. Have you gotten the hang of the public transportation here?” I asked.

“Not really, I guess I haven’t actually gone into the city much,” he explained. I led the way to the T, and mentioned a few of the key stations. We didn’t talk much on the train, since it was squealing loudly every time the cars went around a curve or changed speed. I decided to get off at Park Street so we could see the Public Gardens. I pointed them out as we walked by.

Andrew made a funny face, and I wasn’t sure whether to comment on it or not.

“Anything wrong?” I asked.



“Oh nothing. Someone walked by who reminded me of someone I used to know,” he said.

We went to a grocery store, and walked around the aisles for a while. I tried to explain some of the more unusual snack food, like dried squid jerky and seaweed strips, but decided that they were just something that needed to be experienced. I bought some of the snacks, but passed on the dried fish stomachs, frozen cooked beef tendons, and giant carrots since I had no immediate plans for any elaborate cooking. Andrew got some packages of chopsticks, and ceramic bowls.

We went to a seafood restaurant for lunch. Andrew wasn't too sure about the idea of picking out your food from the fish tanks, so we didn't go for the live-caught specials.

“So what sorts of things did you enjoy doing in Atlanta?” I asked.

“I used to play bridge a lot, but when my last girlfriend and I split up, I had to stop, since she was my regular bridge partner. Plus, most of the club was more friendly with her than with me, so I didn't want to stick around and make it awkward for everyone,” he said.

“Oh that's too bad. But I guess you could join a bridge club around here, if you enjoy playing,” I said.

“Yeah, I don't know. We had this whole elaborate bidding system with hundreds of different codes that we'd worked out together. It wouldn't really be the same with someone else,” he said, making another face.

“Sure, I can see that,” I said.

“I haven’t tried bridge myself, but one of my friends from college plays occasionally at the MIT club. I guess I only play the occasional board game at parties,” I said.

“So how did you end up in Atlanta?” I asked.

“After college, I didn’t really have an opinion about where I’d like to live, so I applied to jobs all over the country,” he said. “I actually went to Michigan first, but I met someone there, and when she moved to Atlanta for graduate school, I followed,” he continued.

“Oh, so you’ve had some experience at getting used to a new city,” I commented.

“I guess so. Going to Atlanta was tough, because I liked my job in Michigan. It was probably a mistake in the end, though. She didn’t seem to appreciate the effort,” he said, looking glum.

Oh oh. I had inadvertently managed to trigger two negative ex-girlfriend references within five minutes. I tried to think of some other topic.

“So how did your family know Kelly’s family? You must have lived outside of our school system?” I asked.

“Our parents were all friends in college. Of course I didn’t know it when I was a kid, but I guess my mother used to date her father, and my father used to date her mother. Then at some point, everyone broke up and switched. My mother mentioned it to me sometime after I was in college. They all thought it was funny how it all turned out, no hard feelings or anything,” he explained.

“That’s unusual,” I said.

“Yeah, I totally can’t imagine continuing to hang out with any of the women I’ve ever dated,” he said, with a half-laugh.

Gah, the ex-girlfriend thing again. Maybe I should just let him take the conversational initiative for a while. I concentrated on the ginger fish, and tried to smile encouragingly.

“So Alyse, have you ever gone on a whale watch?” he asked. “I always thought that sounded like fun.”

“I did go once, during a trip to Plymouth. It’s colder and windier on the ocean, so best to go when the weather is warm, but they do make trips out even when it’s chilly. We saw a few different kinds of whales, although I don’t remember a lot of details,” I replied.

“Yeah, I was vacationing in Florida with my girlfriend once, and I wanted to go out on one of those sorts of trips, but she was afraid she’d get seasick,” he said. I ate some more shrimp. I’d almost decided not to comment about it, but remembering Todd’s admonition that the whole point of a first date was to determine whether someone was worth another date, I jumped in.

“Were all of these the same girlfriend? You’ve mentioned a few different things,” I said.

“Yeah, we were together for a year in Michigan, and then three more years in Atlanta. We broke up shortly before I was transferred,” he said, sighing. Not a good sign.

“That’s a long time,” I said.

“The worst thing is that I was convinced that she was The One, and now I don’t know what to do with myself. I feel kind of stupid,” he said, looking a little tearful.

“Mmmm hmmm,” I said.

“I mean, I totally rearranged my life to be with her,” he said, looking angry.

“Moving to Atlanta was a big thing,” I agreed.

“Not just that, but I converted to Judaism, which took years. I had to learn all this Hebrew and study a bunch of religious stuff,” he said.

“I can imagine,” I replied. I mean, you’d have to study a bunch of religious stuff in order to join a religion, right? He was just lucky that she wasn’t in a cult or something.

“I even had to get circumcised,” he complained. This was getting into way Too Much Information, but I didn’t know where the emergency change of subject button was. “Then, because she didn’t like using birth control, I had a vasectomy. Now it’ll be a huge hassle if I want to have kids and need to get it reversed,” he said, angrily.

Wow, Susanna’s nerd glasses would totally be buzzing if Andrew was wearing them. I guess he noticed my increasing alarm, and backed off.

“Sorry, I guess I’m just still really upset about the whole thing,” he said, taking a deep breath. “I didn’t feel like explaining it all to Kelly, but really, I’m totally not ready to try any sort of dating. I should have probably just come up with a good excuse when she brought up the idea of getting together with you,” he apologized.

I assured him that it was no big deal, and we agreed to just tell Kelly that we hadn't hit it off. I delivered him back to where he'd parked his car, and headed home to wait for Julia to arrive.

## Sleepover

I hadn't seen Julia for over 10 years, and since she'd run through looks ranging from shaving her head and henna tattooing her scalp to bright pink dreadlocks, so I thought I was prepared for anything. But when I answered the doorbell, she'd managed to surprise me again. Julia's natural hair color is a non-descript light brown, and it normally waves or frizzes depending on the weather. She'd actually straightened her hair and dyed it black, and paired that with the same boring all-one-length just past the shoulders haircut that I always got. She was also wearing glasses like mine, which I'd thought she'd given up for good after discovering how much more effective eye make-up was if she wore contacts. She squealed a little, and hugged me.

"Thanks for coming," I said. "Uh, you've got my hair?" I asked.

"I thought it would be easier to talk if we looked more alike, and I knew you weren't going to agree to both go out and get a new look. And this is just a wig, I didn't dye my hair," she said, laughing at my puzzled look.

"I don't mind, but I did have a moment of wondering if you'd gone off the deep end. We never had to look alike to talk before," I said.

“I’m kind of embarrassed that I’m actually predictable enough that you could dress up like me without having seen me for so long,”

“Don’t be, it’s comfortable that you still look familiar. I would have been horrified to come here and find out that you’d gone blonde or something,” she said. “And I know we always talked before, with no assistance from costuming, but you know that there are some important things that we never talked about,” she said, looking more serious. She held up a small bucket. “And look, I’ve brought the most outrageous fingernail art supplies that I could find.”

“I’ve got a large supply of popcorn, and some of those terrible Cheeze Balls that you used to like,” I said.

“Admit it, you like them too!” she teased.

“Yeah, but you were the one that got me hooked,” I replied. We went into the living room, where I’d set up sleeping bags, scented candles, and my box of high school memorabilia.

“I’m really glad you still have a bunch of this stuff, because my parents’ house got flooded while I was in college, so most of the things I’d saved had to be tossed,” she said, excitedly.

I pulled out my photo album first.

“One of my friends has been getting everyone she knows into photo scrapbooking, and I put together an album of pre-college photos. You’re in a ton of the pictures, and I think you’ll remember some of the other scenes,” I said, handing her the album.

“Oh look, you’ve got a picture of that year we dressed up as a two-headed robot for Halloween,” she laughed.

“Yeah, I remember how much we had to practice going up and down stairs before my parents would believe that we could go trick-or-treating without falling over at each house,” I said.

“And here’s the group picture of our entire stuffed animal collection! Do you still have any of these guys?” she asked.

“My mother actually donated a bunch of my toys, but I do have the little purple rabbit,” I said.

“You look so serious in this one,” she said, pointing to the picture of us at the regional science fair.

“I was just disappointed that I got such a bad rating. But that’s the year that you went onto the state competition and got an award. Look, here’s the news clipping about you,” I said.

“You kept this article from the town newspaper about me? You’re way more of a pack rat than I ever was,” she said, but looked pleased.

“Hey, I was like your number one fan. Of course I’ve got your press clippings,” I told her, pointing out the news story about the 4th of July parade, where she’s waving from the school float, and the write-up of the junior year play, with her as the female lead.

“Did you ever feel jealous?” she asked. “You never acted like it, but I sure got jealous when you beat me at something.”

“I know you did. You used to get mad at me the afternoon after each semester’s honor roll list was announced, and come up with the dumbest reasons to argue about something,” I reminded her. “And yeah, I was crushed when you got so much attention for being the best at



something that I'd really wanted to do," I admitted. We'd picked out some nail polish, and it looked like I'd be sporting electric blue toenails in the near future. The tradition was always that we'd each pick out the base color for each others' toes. I'd decided on a blood red for Julia.

"That's definitely something we never talked about," Julia pointed out. "I was afraid that if I admitted it, you would know what a terrible person I really was. But I guess I wasn't really hiding it as well as I thought," she said.

"So you didn't suspect that I felt the same way?" I asked. "I assumed it was obvious."

"Alyse, I think you're less obvious than you might think. You were so nice, helping me revise my science project display and even typing my handwritten report so that it would look better. I had no idea that you were feeling envious," she replied.

"Huh, I was helping you with the revisions to try and make up for feeling so envious," I admitted.

We were sitting with our toes splayed out, waiting for the second coat to dry. Julia had gotten a bunch of nail jewels and stickers, and I was looking through them.

"So your idea of dressing alike is already working," I observed. Julia was looking at the photo album again.

"I liked your prom dress," she said, looking at me and raising an eyebrow.

"Ok, that's something else we haven't talked about. Do you want to go first, or should I?" I asked.

“You go. And pass the Cheeze Balls,” she said.

“So, I wasn’t going to go to the prom, because I didn’t have a date. I had been hoping for ages that David would ask me, but he was going with you. But Mrs. Danfield wanted some volunteers to help the chaperones with the Breathalyzer station, and to keep an eye on the bathrooms, which sounded totally lame and boring. But, she specifically asked me to do it, and I was too much of an overachiever to turn down a request from a teacher,” I started.

“What you didn’t know is that I’d asked her to ask you, because I knew you weren’t planning to go, and I really wanted you there,” Julia admitted.

“No way, why did you care if I was going to go, when you were already going with David?” I asked, completely confused.

“I’ll tell you later. Finish your turn first,” she said.

“It was sort of embarrassing staking out the bathroom to discourage anyone from secretly drinking there. I mean, I couldn’t actually imagine being the voice of authority to prohibit my own classmates from doing something. Plus, everyone already thought I was a teacher’s pet. But luckily, none of the girls tried to sneak alcohol into the bathroom, so I didn’t have to deal with it,” I continued.

“Duh, as soon as everyone knew that there were going to be bathroom monitors, they weren’t going to try anything there. Go on,” Julia said.

“We had the last half-hour off, so I was walking around trying not to look stupid by myself. You said you had to go talk to one of the teachers about some last minute paperwork you needed for some

scholarship, and pulled me over to keep David company. It was too loud to talk much, and awkward sitting there not talking, so we ended up dancing,” I narrated. I looked at Julia again, trying to figure out how much of this she already knew.

“Then what?” she asked, looking completely neutral. I had no idea how she was going to react to the rest of the story.

“They finished up with some slow songs, and I was really torn. Because I was dancing with your date, but I really liked him. I never wanted to admit which guys I liked, because it seemed too embarrassing, but David and I had been friends for years, and I always fantasized that we’d develop a more romantic relationship. So I’m trying to act normal, but my brain is running in circles. When he kissed me, I was completely shocked, but at the same time, it was something I’d imagined so often that I half expected it. But this time, it was really happening. I didn’t know what else to do, so I made some lame excuse and left without talking to either of you,” I finished.

Even though it had been so many years since this happened, I was still embarrassed anytime I thought about it. I had always believed that friends were forever, and crushes weren’t, so friends always had to be the priority. But when it came down to living up to that idea, I’d gone behind Julia’s back with her date.

“Why didn’t you know what to do?” she asked, still looking neither angry nor upset.

“Well obviously I couldn’t continue standing there, kissing him, or let him say anything that might lead to me admitting that I’d always liked him. Which was what I really wanted to do, but even though I was

selfish enough to enjoy the kiss, I wasn't selfish enough to actually try to steal your boyfriend," I said. "And I couldn't just go confess to you about it, because that would have seemed like I was just telling about the kiss in order to get you two to break up, so I'd have a chance to snag him." At this point, Julia looked serious again, but also impatient.

"Alright, now it's my turn," she said. "First of all, I can't believe you never told me that you liked him, because if I'd known, I would never have asked him to the prom," she started.

"What? You asked him? I thought he had his eye on you all year," I said, shocked.

"I just wanted to go with someone, and I figured David would probably say yes because he would be too shy to ask anyone himself," she said. "So it's not like we were really dating or anything, and I didn't even really have any particular interest in him. I just figured he'd be a nice, safe date. Sort of like you, but a guy," she continued. I couldn't quite resolve this revelation with my memory that they'd actually been a couple, but at the same time, I couldn't remember any more exactly how I'd gotten that impression. Certainly, Julia and I hadn't actually ever talked about David, since I'd been trying to avoid letting on that I had a crush on him.

"So I'd gotten Emma Danfield to twist your arm about going to the prom because I just didn't think it would be any fun without you. But I didn't realize that you were going to have to hang out in the bathroom almost the whole night, leaving me alone with David. I hadn't really thought about what it would be like to actually spend the evening with him, I'd almost been thinking of a date as a sort of accessory, like a pair

of shoes. Something that you needed to complete the look, but not a person to talk to,” she continued.

“That’s really goofy, Julia,” I said.

“Well, I was young back then, ok?” she replied.

“To be perfectly honest, there was this other guy that I was actually interested in, but I knew he wasn’t going to ask me, and I wasn’t going to take the chance that he’d turn me down if I asked. So that’s how I settled on David, I was pretty sure he’d say yes. But, after having dinner and getting through most of the evening, with him, I’d figured out that he thought rather highly of you. In fact, I suspected that he might like you,” she said.

“No, I doubt that!” I said.

“Well, he didn’t suspect that you liked him, so there’s no reason to think that you’d know how he felt,” she pointed out. “I decided that everyone going around being all cautious and scared to admit who they liked was stupid, and that I should just go find Greg and see if he’d talk to me,” Julia said, laughing.

“You liked Greg? I had no idea! I thought you hated him because he was so obnoxious,” I said.

“Well, you understand why I was afraid he’d turn me down with some kind of sarcastic joke,” she said. “I made up an excuse to disappear and look for him. He must have already left, because I couldn’t find him anywhere, but I got back in time to see David kiss you. I was disappointed that I hadn’t found Greg, but feeling pleased with my abilities as a matchmaker, since you two seemed to have figured something out,” she said.

“Oh my God, you saw that?” I said. “I would never have been able to face you if I’d knew that you’d seen us.”

“Then, all I know is you started acting kind of funny around me, so I figured that maybe you didn’t actually like David, and were mad because you thought he and I had conspired to give him a chance to take an unwarranted liberty. When we both went to college, I got caught up with lots of new people and activities, and neglected to keep in touch with you,” she finished. I was still having trouble resolving our completely different viewpoints of what had happened, but had another important question.

“Julia, what really made you decide to get in touch again? I’ve missed you a lot, but I never got around to trying to reconnect,” I asked. Julia looked nervous.

“Alyse, I was thinking about my life, and when I’ve been happiest. I kept coming up with the conclusion that something had been missing ever since high school. I wanted to see if we could be friends like we were again, or if I’d lost that knack,” She was still looking down, pulling apart some cotton balls. I scooted over and put my arm around her shoulders.

“I’ve missed you too. You’re my evil twin, and I’m glad you’ve turned up again,” I said.

“You know I’m like a bad penny,” she said.

I was just relieved that she hadn’t decided to look me up due to some terminal illness, or being on the run from the Mafia, or having committed a crime. Julia was unpredictable, so it was hard to set any

limits on a worst case scenario of what might make her decide to do something.

“We’re going to be best friends again. And you don’t have to keep dressing like me, let’s just agree to talk about whatever we need to talk about,” I said. I had no idea what I’d be getting into, but I knew that being friends again would be worth whatever sorts of trouble she’d think up. Julia told me that she could get a transfer to work in Boston, and we agreed that actually sharing an apartment would be a complete disaster, she could easily get another unit in the same building.

## Third Time's a Charm?

It had been a tiring weekend, even with Matthew deciding at the last minute not to visit. So I hoped that Monday would be slow at the office. The first phone call made it clear that I wasn't going to get away that easily.

"I need you to come watch and make sure I'm not subconsciously messing things up," he said, with no preamble. I recognized Lucky, sounding more nervous than ever. "It's really important to have an impartial observer. I'm starting to wonder if I'm just hallucinating the whole problem," he said, urgently.

"When's the date?" I asked.

"I've decide to try avoiding restaurants for a while, so it's going to a quick walk along the river today during lunchtime. There will be a lot of other people walking around, so it won't look suspicious if you follow us," he said.

"I guess I could do that," I agreed, reluctantly. If the guy was going to get hit by a meteorite this time, I didn't exactly want to be standing nearby. But he did have a point about needing an impartial observer. I'd occasionally wondered if he was just a pathological



exaggerator or social hypochondriac, since it seemed impossible for one person to experience so much bad luck.

Euripides and a petite, animated woman passed by the bench where I was waiting right on schedule. It looked like she was setting a brisk pace, and they seemed to have a lot to talk about. I stayed back far enough that I couldn't hear the conversation, but could watch carefully. I noticed Lucky avoiding tripping over some uneven pavement, and stepping out of the way of a bicyclist. So far, so good.

Suddenly, a frenzied chattering overhead made us all look up. A tree branch was shaking, and the sound was getting louder. I saw a squirrel run down the tree trunk right ahead of me. As it reached the ground, it continued screeching, and made a beeline for where Lucky was standing. He saw it, and tried to edge out of its path towards the river. The squirrel stopped, staring at Lucky.

Euripides's date stamped her foot and started shouting "Shoo! Shoo!" at the squirrel. It spared a single glance her way, and started advancing towards Lucky, now silently menacing. He had backed up until he was right up against the railing, and was trapped. The squirrel began screeching again, and launched itself off the ground towards Lucky. He fended it off with his backpack, but with an uncanny amount of determination, it came back again and again. His date was looking horrified.

I looked around for help, but the only people I saw was a mother with two toddlers whom she was now hustling away from the bizarre scene as she talked on her cell phone. I heard a woman scream, and looked back to see Lucky's date running away with the squirrel in pursuit.

Lucky chased after them, and swung his backpack down, killing the squirrel.

“Oh my God, good thing I had some heavy books in there,” he said, looking at the motionless squirrel. His date had come back, and was looking a bit queasy.

“Sir, did I just see you attack a squirrel?” said a police officer, who had appeared on the scene.

“I wasn’t attacking it, I was just trying to keep it from attacking her,” Euripides answered.

“That squirrel was definitely out of control. I saw it jump at him several times,” I interjected.

“I got a call from a woman who said there was some trouble with a squirrel. You know that it’s illegal to hunt squirrels around here,” the police officer said, sternly.

“I didn’t mean to kill it, I was just fending it off,” Euripides protested.

“He saved me from that squirrel,” the woman added.

“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,” the officer said. “Squirrels don’t attack people. You’re going to have to come with me and have a little chat with the department of wildlife folks,” he said. Euripides gave up trying to explain, and the officer asked the rest of us for our names and contact information. They left, and the woman and I started walking back towards campus.

“That was bizarre,” I said.

“I’ve had trouble with squirrels before. They’re not as innocent as they look,” she replied.

“This has happened to you before?” I asked, incredulous.

“Oh no, nothing like this. I mean, they dig up my tulips or get into the attic, that sort of thing,” she answered.

“I feel sorry for that guy,” I said.

“Yeah, it was nice of him to rescue me. But I don’t think I can handle dating a guy that I’ve seen cornered against a fence by a squirrel,” she said. I guess Euripides wasn’t going to get any farther with this date. She turned off to head towards the T, and I went back to my office.

I’d gotten a message from Matthew while I was out watching Lucky’s latest dating disaster, so I called him back.

“I think I’ve been approaching this the wrong way,” he said. “The right thing to do is just to be as explicit and direct as possible, like they’d do at Ten Oaks.”

“That makes sense,” I agreed.

“But, I’m not sure if I can do that face to face. I’m going to send her mail letting her know how I feel, and ask her to meet me for dinner if she’s interested, or lunch if she’s not sure, and to just reply by email if she’s completely uninterested,” he said.

“Heh. Like sending someone a selection of roses in varying degrees of bloom,” I observed.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Oh, it’s an old-fashioned thing where a guy declares his interest in a note along with the roses. The idea is that the woman indicates

whether or not he should have hopes by which one of the roses she wears, if any,” I explained.

“And I thought I was coming up with an original combination of direct and indirect communication to achieve some non-ambiguity while avoiding severe awkwardness,” he said.

“It’s not exactly a new problem,” I pointed out. Matthew went off to start composing his email, and I started web surfing to look for things that Julia might like to do once she moved to town.

## Meeting the Parents

Later that day, Tim sighed himself into the office and collapsed on the couch.

“That was terrible,” he said. “I spent the weekend at Tiffany’s parents’ house, and it was like getting run over by a truck.”

“Mmm hmm. You had mentioned that you’d had some arguments with Tiffany lately,” I said.

“Oh, this was much worse than fighting about dumb stuff with Tiffany. First of all, her mother started asking her whether she’d been doing her homework, and whether she’d been wearing her retainer. Tiffany got all mad about it, and stomped off to her room, leaving me with her parents,” he said.

“Not a great start,” I said.

“So I’m standing around, and her father mentions how it was nice of me to give her a ride, and asking me about whether she seems to be doing ok at school, and whether I’ve met this guy that she’s been seeing,” Tim continued.

“Uh oh,” I said.

“Yeah, she’d told me that she really wanted me to meet her parents, but I guess she hadn’t actually wanted them to find out that we were dating. So I kind of played along, and tried to be non-committal about things,” he sighed.

“Her father mentions that they don’t want her to get too involved with anyone because it might distract her from studying, but that since she always seems to lose interest in guys after a few weeks, as long as she kept it down to one guy per semester, she’d probably be ok.”

“Sounds a little awkward, but not that bad,” I said.

“So I watched TV for a while with her father. But then at dinner, both Tiffany and her older brother came down. I guess she’d told her brother about me, and he totally didn’t approve. He started asking questions like how old I was, and whether I have social problems,” Tim said. “Her mother starts to tell him not to be rude, and he just starts shouting that I’m too old to be interested in students and that only someone who’s really messed up would be dating someone who could be their daughter.”

“So the secret was out,” I said.

“Then, her father basically throws me out, screaming about how if he finds out that I did anything with his daughter, he’d have the police after me. I just left, and haven’t heard anything from Tiffany since then,” he finished.

“You look kind of stunned,” I observed.

“I don’t know. I guess I didn’t really think there was anything wrong with seeing someone younger, but the stuff they said....do you think a lot of people would agree with them?” he asked.

“I did tell you that I thought it was a bad idea,” I started.

“But, I don’t really care if I’m doing something that people think is a bad idea. Like, researching cold fusion is something that a lot of people think is a bad idea. That’s different than doing something that people think is just wrong and disgusting,” he said, looking tearful.

“I know you’re a nice guy, and aren’t trying to take advantage of girls. But you should probably know that’s what most people will call it. Parents are going to be more upset than someone who’s not personally involved, but yeah, a lot of people will think you’re doing something wrong,” I said. Tim just slumped there. “Do you want to hide out here for a while, or just go home?” I asked.

“I don’t know, it doesn’t matter,” he said.

“Ok, well, you’re welcome to hang out. I’m almost done for the day anyways,” I said. He looked incapable of sustained movement, anyways. I was sorry that he’d been berated so much, but at least Tiffany’s plot had finally worked, so she wouldn’t have to go to even more extreme measures.

## Fight Fire with Fire

“**A**lyse, got a minute?” I looked up, and saw Wade and a tall woman, with short red hair.

“I’d like you to meet my girlfriend, Amy. And, we were hoping you could help out with some more suggestions about my Mom,” he added.

“Nice to meet you, Amy. I take it that Wade’s mother didn’t get caught up in any new hobbies?” I said, smiling.

“Yup. She said it’s no fun doing any of that stuff when she doesn’t have anyone to go with. I think she needs her own guy,” he said.

“She’s actually got a good sense of humor, and if she wasn’t driving me crazy with all the excess girlfriend candidates, I think we’d actually get along pretty well,” commented Amy.

“Do you have any men in mind, or were you hoping to match her up through some kind of dating website?” I asked. Wade and Amy looked at each other.

“Well, there’s that guy in our apartment building...”

“Yeah, but he steals people’s newspapers. That’s tacky.”



“How about your coworker’s Dad?”

“He’s like ten years younger than her, I don’t think it would work.”

“Right, maybe a dating site. One problem is going to be that there are a lot more single women in your mother’s age group, compared to men. So you’ve got to figure out some ways to have her profile stand out,” I cautioned.

“No problem, I’m on it,” Wade agreed.

“Also, don’t you think she’s going to be a little surprised when random strangers start calling her? What are you going to tell her?” I asked.

“Oh, I never try to hide things from Mom. She can sniff out something fishy like nobody’s business. I already had a little talk with her,” Wade answered. Amy looked at him, and started laughing.

“Does that mean the talk went well? I asked.

“She was quite resistant, and insisted that no one would ever call her up, and that she was too old to be dating. But, we agreed that if I proved her wrong, she’d be gracious enough to actually try going on dates. Since then, I’m pretty sure she’s been doing a little shopping to update her wardrobe, and I noticed that she’s got a new hair style,” he explained.

“Sounds promising. Do you have some photos for posting a profile?” I asked.

“Actually, that is a bit of a problem. She’s the shutterbug in the family, so usually she doesn’t end up in the pictures,” Wade said.

“Any ideas?” Amy asked.

“Wade’s direct approach seemed to work fine when he brought up the whole dating idea. Do you think she’d go along with having her picture taken?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, she’s kind of unreasonable about getting her picture taken. I’m not sure I’ll be able to convince her to do it,” Wade answered.

“You might not be good at sneaky, but I might be able to do it,” Amy offered. “I don’t think she knows about cell phone cameras, so if you keep her distracted, I might be able to get some shots. You know how she usually avoids looking at me anyhow,” she grinned.

“It’s great that you’ve been able to keep your sense of humor about this,” I told her.

“I figure that Wade had to have gotten his stubbornness from someone,” she said, nudging him.

The next day, I got email from Wade asking if I’d look over the profile he had put together for his mother. The pictures were pretty good. There was a romantic shot of her lighting a candle, and one where she dressed up and walking in a park. I had no idea how they’d convinced his mother to get on a sled, but her expression in that photo made me smile. Wade had taken the honest approach in writing the profile, and it certainly was unusual.

My mother is great fun, if you can handle feisty. She’s loyal, perceptive, and confident, and can make a banquet

out of a random bag of groceries. Drop me a line and maybe I'll set you up with the woman of your dreams!

I hoped that he'd get less spam than I did, but I doubted it.

## A Change of Search Space

I hadn't heard from Lesley in a while, but Jason told me that they'd gotten together for brunch once, and had another long conversation, which ended with Jason trying to teach him how to scope out men passing on the street. I wasn't actually sure that Jason was the best guy to demonstrate something that took a bit more coordination than walking and chewing gum, but he assured me that he'd practiced this particular skill.

But, when I got to the office the next morning, Lesley was already waiting. He looked tired.

"I hope it's alright that I came by this morning. I know you usually do appointments in the morning, but I thought that if you didn't have anything scheduled perhaps I might squeeze in," he said.

"Sure, I don't have anyone signed up today. Come in, how have you been?" I asked.

"I've been thinking a lot, and last night I couldn't sleep at all. I was thinking about Daisy and wanted to talk to you about what she told you about our relationship," he replied.

“I know she thinks you’re a good person, and that she cares about you,” I started.

“But?” he asked.

“But she thinks you would be happier dating a man,” I finished.

“Did she say why?” he asked.

“I don’t think so, but I imagine it was a combination of things she noticed,” I answered. “Does it surprise you that she said that?” I asked.

“To be honest, hearing that was a surprise the first time someone told me, but she’s not the first,” he said.

“Sounds like you suspected what Daisy would say,” I commented.

“It’s a bit of a pattern,” he agreed.

“So, I’m not sure if dating a man is on your list of things no one would think you’d do, or your list of things people expect you to do,” I said.

“I’d say that it’s probably on both lists,” he said.

“You’ve had pretty good experiences with roller blading and karaoke, and I take it that the party with Jason went alright?” I asked.

“Your friend is very nice, and he’s been kind enough to talk with me about this whole question,” he said.

“Do you mean the question of whether you’d like to date men, or the question of whether you should try it?” I asked.

“Err, both again,” he said. I waited. “I’m not sure if it would work, and I’m not sure if I want to be seen as non-typical,” he said.

“Maybe the approach of immersing yourself in a temporary context could be useful here. That way, you could try considering men romantically first, and then only worry about the image or identity issues later,” I suggested.

“Certainly it would be simpler to decouple the two questions,” he said. “I suppose there’s always the risk that I’ll find out that I don’t have any particular interest in men, either,” he worried.

“So right now, you’ve been trying to date women and not finding anyone. If you take a break and try men for a while, the worst case scenario is that you’ll discover that it doesn’t work any better,” I pointed out. “If that’s the case, you can just go back to looking for women.”

“Yes, that’s true,” he sighed. “I don’t know whether a larger or smaller search space is to be preferred,” he commented. Lesley still looked tired, so I suggested that he go catch a nap before his first class.

## Umbrella

“**E**uripides, you’re a brave man. And I’m not just saying that because I saw you fighting off a killer squirrel,” I said, when he came to my office and announced that he was going on another date this evening. “What are your plans for the date?” I asked.

“The woman that I’m meeting suggested going to a choral performance and then out for dessert,” he replied.

“I meant, do you have any plans for neutralizing the hex?” I asked. After the squirrel episode, we both had to admit that it sure seemed like a real enough hex.

“That’s the best part! My mom sent me some old furniture and stuff that she didn’t want anymore, and it had my lucky umbrella!” he said excitedly.

“Your lucky umbrella?” I repeated. I had noticed that he was holding an enormous patio umbrella, but hadn’t gotten around to asking about it yet.

“In fact, it’s my lucky dating umbrella,” he grinned.

“Don’t tell me you used to take it with you on dates? Isn’t it a little large?” I asked.

“No, I mean when I was still living at home, a lot of my dates consisted of sitting on the patio. I’d sometimes invite people over to go swimming in our pool, or use the Jacuzzi, and afterwards we’d often sit under this umbrella,” he explained, brandishing the thing at me.

“I see,” I said, even though I wasn’t exactly sure how he had decided that it was the umbrella, rather than a lucky picnic table or patio stone or chain link fence that had helped him with his early dating days.

“I just have to figure out how to disguise it for tonight’s concert,” he continued.

“That will be tough. Maybe you should consider just coming up with a good story for bringing it along,” I suggested. “Or, you could just invite the woman over early, and sit under the umbrella for a while before the concert.”

“Normally, that would be fine, but since I’ve got an active hex going against me, I’ll need the umbrella present for the entire date,” he said, resolutely. “I’ll come up with some explanation.” Euripides hoisted the umbrella and headed out. I supposed that a patio umbrella might be less off-putting than a trip to the emergency room, or finding out that your date is a blood relative, but it wasn’t exactly inconspicuous. It’s too bad that he didn’t have a lucky cocktail umbrella instead. I hoped the woman had a sense of humor.



## A Promising Collaboration

The phone rang. It was Matthew, and I knew that today had been when he'd planned to see Susanna.

"Alyse, I think I miscalculated," he said.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I don't know, but she emailed me saying yes to dinner, but inviting you along," he replied.

"That's kind of strange. No one accepts a romantic invitation by suggesting that someone else tags along. Well, maybe except Marilla. What did you end up telling her in your email?" I asked.

"Basically, I told her that I admired her and thought her work was fascinating, and that I felt we had much in common. I said that I'd like to see her more often, and become closer. Then, I said that if she reciprocated, I'd like to have dinner. If she wasn't sure, we could meet for lunch. And if she wasn't interested, she could just not reply," he said.

"Is that really what you said, or is that just what you meant?" I asked.

“Oh no, I’m looking at the email again, and I talked a lot more about her work that I thought. And I guess I didn’t really say that I wanted to be closer in an intimate way, possibly she might have assumed I mean geographically. I don’t know, maybe this is all a misunderstanding and she just wants to set up a research collaboration,” he said, slightly panicked.

“Look, this is still a recoverable situation. You could tell her I’m busy, and then be more explicit during dinner about what you were really wanting to ask her,” I started.

“Sure, but what if I get too nervous and just end up agreeing to submit a joint research proposal?” he asked.

“This is so totally junior high, but would you rather have me actually come along? I’ll get up at some point and leave you two alone to give you an opportunity to say something, and then if you haven’t by the time I get back, you can get up and I’ll ask her if she likes you,” I suggested.

“The whole motivation for bringing up the idea of dating over email was to avoid a potentially embarrassing face-to-face encounter, so I can’t really scoff at the thought of using an intermediary,” he said. “I’ll tell her you can join us.”

When we met up for dinner, Susanna seemed distracted and Matthew was jittery. As we entered the restaurant, he made a move to open the door for Susanna, then seemed to have second thoughts, then lunged for it, and ended up knocking her over.

“Are you alright? I’m so sorry,” he said, offering her a hand up.

“I’m fine, don’t worry. I wasn’t really watching where I was going,” she replied. “This sort of thing used to happen to me all the time at Ten Oaks, but I thought I was outgrowing it.”

We talked about how she was settling in with the Media Lab, and about some of the other projects going on there. There were already a number of students hoping to do UROP projects with Susanna over IAP, and she was hesitant to take on more than one assistant.

“Often, I’d rather just immerse myself in my current project, and avoid talking to anyone. Although of course, there are certainly benefits to collaborative efforts,” she said, looking at Matthew. “Did you have any particular project in mind?” she asked.

I tried to look encouragingly at him, but I could tell that he was starting to flounder. I thought that having less of an audience might help, so I nodded and slipped off to the bathroom.

“Actually, I was thinking of something a little different,” he began. I crossed my fingers and counted up to 300 before going back to the table. Matthew engaged in some eyebrow telegraphing, which I interpreted to mean that he hadn’t quite gotten his point across. He excused himself, leaving me with Susanna. Best to get right to the point, I thought.

“Susanna, Matthew has been trying to tell you that he’s interested in dating you and wants to know whether you’d consider it,” I blurted. I was afraid that if I aimed for subtle, I’d also get mired down and be too embarrassed to be coherent. It had been quite a while since I’d done this sort of thing.

“Ah, I was starting to wonder. I’ve made some improvements to the attraction detector, so it’s a lot less conspicuous,” she said, pointing to her purse and the top button of her sweater. “I wasn’t sure I had the algorithm tuned right, and of course, I haven’t even started working on anything to interpret emails. Although I did read something about using linguistic semantic analysis to estimate degree of conviction with written essays,” she said.

“Great, but what do you think about him? Are you romantically interested?” I pressed.

“Yes, of course, I’m just nervous. I haven’t really had any highly successful romantic relationships, and I had hoped to be more prepared by the time I met someone,” she admitted.

“Susanna, I think it’s great that you’ve figured out algorithms for recognizing so many types of non-verbal signals. But you might be at the point where you can just have fun with someone without trying to pin down what it all means,” I ventured.

“Well, that’ll just have to do, because I have done any research into the post-relationship initiation phases,” she replied, smiling.

We were both giggling by the time Matthew got back. I left some money and told them I had to get going. This looked like the first successful matchup of the year; too bad that neither of the parties involved were actually people who had visited the office.

## Jen Makes Up Her Mind

The next day, Jen called.

“I heard that Tim finally broke it off with Tiffany,” she said.

“That whole episode with her family sounded brutal. I hope your students are done with teaching him a lesson,” I said.

“Yeah, I think that it turned out to be more unpleasant and less fun than they’d imagined,” she said.

“Did you hear about the breakup from Tim, or the girls?” I asked.

“Tim, actually. He came by and asked me if he could resign from being an advisor. He was discouraged about the whole idea of interacting with students,” she replied. “But I pointed out that he was a great advisor, and suggested that he just take a few weeks off to get some rest if he was feeling burned out.”

“What did he say?” I asked.

“At that point, he told me about the scene with visiting her parents. I felt terrible that he was devastated by the experience. I should

have discouraged this whole plot when the students started hatching it,” she reproached herself.

“I doubt you could really have stopped them,” I said.

“And unfortunately, they did have a valid reason for thinking Tim needed to learn a few things,” she admitted. “I started out thinking that he was a hopeless dweeb, but now I have to admire the guy,” she said.

“Do you want to ask him out?” I said.

“It seems like a bad idea right after he’s had a traumatic break-up,” she replied.

“You could start off subtle. No need to hit him over the head,” I said.

“And what if he finds out that the whole thing with Tiffany was just a scheme? He’ll hate me for being in on the joke,” she objected.

“It’s definitely a complication,” I agreed. “I can’t promise you that it’s not going to be a bad scene if he ever finds out.”

Jen decided to sleep on it for a few days, and give Tim some time to get over the shock. I went by Todd’s office for a pep talk, because I’d been having trouble keeping up the discipline of high through-put dating.

“Todd, I’m getting discouraged. I’ve got a spreadsheet and lots of checkmarks, but none of the prospects has gotten past the second date. What do you suggest?” I asked.

“Well, you could take a break from the methodical approach, and indulge in some inefficient tactics for a while. I found that getting in touch with a few old flames was both fun and enlightening,” he said.

“How so?” I asked.

“I’d had some idealized memories of previous relationships, but exchanging a few friendly emails with ex-girl friends was a good dose of reality. It became clear that things didn’t pan out with the people I’d met so far while dating methodically, the people I’d managed to date haphazardly also had their own drawbacks,” he explained.

“Hmm. So, basically, demonstrating to yourself that the grass wasn’t greener. I can see that working,” I agreed.

Since I was already seeing most of my college and post-college ex’s around town, and had no illusions about those relationships, I would have to go further back. Of course, that only left David, who was more of a high school crush than an actual ex boyfriend, and Gary. Gary was someone I’d met at a summer math program before junior year of high school, and we’d kept up a torrent of letter writing until he’d broken it off in favor of a girl he could actually see in person. We’d lost touch before college, but it should be fun to find out what he was up to these days.

Gary had a long and unusual last name, so it didn’t take long to track him down online. Apparently, he’d ended up as a professor of mathematics at a large state university. His picture on the school web site looked a lot like I remembered his father looking. I dashed off a quick note.

Hi Gary,

Congratulations on becoming a professor! Just wanted to say hello and find out how you’ve been. Can you believe

we were younger than your current students back when we knew each other? I've been bouncing around, working in different fields and still trying to figure out if there's something I want to do long term, or if it's more interesting just to change around every five years. I hope things are going well for you---drop me a line if you get a chance.

Alyse

Tracking down David would be more of a problem. Being named David Smith basically guaranteed online anonymity, since no one would be able to distinguish you from the hordes of identically named individuals. Not for the first time I thought of how there's no point in having a name if everyone has the same name. Unless you just have a limited number of neurons dedicated to name storage and decide to keep marrying guys named Henry.

Jen called back.

"You know, I've decided that if I can convince Tim to go out with me, then at least he'll get a shot at having one real relationship out of the whole fiasco, which is better than none," she said.

"You have a point," I agreed.

"Plus, I can't let some undergrad temptress beat me out for catching a man's eye. I have to strike a blow for older women everywhere," she continued.

"Ok, I don't know if this really has epic and symbolic aspects going on," I teased.



“That’s alright, I’m going to go for it,” she concluded.

“Happy hunting,” I said.

## Can You Get That at Amazon.com?

I hadn't seen Marilla for a while, so when I noticed her sitting on the floor in a hallway working on her laptop, I stopped to say hello.

"Oh hi, Alyse. I've been going around to different places around campus because I think I'm more creative in new surroundings," she said. I wondered if she meant that she'd been sitting on floors all around campus, but figured that as long as she was against a wall rather than in the middle of the hallway, at least she wouldn't get stepped on as much.

"What's your current project?" I asked.

"I've been writing to a man in Bulgaria that I met through an international matchmaking site," she announced. "I think it's like mail order brides, but this one has men as well," she explained.

"You know about mail order brides?" I asked. I wasn't sure if this was a term that she'd heard from TV, like "double dating."

"One of the other grad students in my department was explaining about it. One of his friends met his wife through this service, and I thought it sounded interesting," she replied.

“How do they handle the language barrier? Or does everyone speak English?” I asked.

“Oh no, most of the people from other countries who use the site don’t speak a lot of English. I think the fluent ones probably aren’t looking, or maybe they use the normal match-up services. They have some automatic translation utilities for email, which aren’t totally great, but are much better than I would have thought,” she said. “The really great thing is that since people are from other countries, and it’s almost all email correspondence, I don’t have to worry as much about all those non-verbal messages that everyone around here seems to use all the time.” That did make a certain amount of sense.

“Well, I’m glad it’s working out for you. Don’t let me interrupt you, then,” I said.

“Of course not, I’d just tell you not to talk to me if I was in the middle of something that I didn’t want to have interrupted,” she replied. “I’ll let you know when the wedding is,” she tossed off casually as I walked down the hallway. I turned around again.

“You’re getting married to this man?” I asked.

“That’s mostly the point of it, sure,” she said, sounding surprised that I was surprised.

“I just didn’t realize that you had already gotten to that stage in the relationship,” I explained.

“Oh, we haven’t yet, but I expect it will happen within six months,” she said.

“Err, well, I’ll just pre-congratulate you now, and really congratulate you later, then,” I said. The whole idea of importing spouses was something that I didn’t think people actually did in real life. (But I guess the US always does run a trade deficit?) I wondered briefly if next, Lesley would be getting married to some female friend in order to get her a green card.

## Cruising Along

When Lesley came by, I restrained myself from asking whether he was getting married for immigration reasons, since that seemed just too ridiculous. I did notice that he was wearing a tight knit top, and had gotten a young looking haircut with highlights.

“You look fashionable,” I commented.

“I wanted to talk with Jason and Ryan again, and they suggested a shopping expedition and visit to their salon. I haven’t gotten used to it yet,” he said.

“Have you been getting many comments from your colleagues?” I asked.

“Not really, although one of my students did make a positive comment at the end of class. Also, I believe that a man checked me out yesterday as I was walking in Davis Square,” he reported.

“So you’re trying a new look,” I said.

“It’s in preparation for a vacation. I’ve decided to go on a cruise,” he said.

“Uh huh?” I encouraged.

“It’s a short Bahamas trip. Although I was tempted to look for something more culturally oriented, such as a European history cruise, there isn’t that large of a selection of vacation themes if you’re also looking for a gay singles event,” he explained.

“Sure, you can always visit Europe later. Maybe after you’ve found someone special to go with,” I teased.

“I don’t know about that,” he said, looking slightly alarmed.

“Just teasing you. I think the cruise is a great idea for a short, immersive experience. Certainly, there should be enough eligible men that you’ll be able to determine whether you’re interested,” I said.

“Yes, that’s what I thought. However, in addition to updating my wardrobe, there are a few other preparations that I thought would be necessary,” he said.

“Oh? What else? I assume that Jason has already briefed you on the essentials,” I said.

“He and Ryan have been tremendously helpful, but there’s one issue where I still have concerns. Of course, this is extremely unlikely, but I’ve been worried that I might encounter a friend or professional acquaintance during the cruise,” he said.

“Sounds like that would bother you,” I commented.

“I just have this image of finding my graduate school advisor in the hot tub, or flirting with someone whose papers I reviewed,” he said.

“You’re right that it seems unlikely, but if the possibility is making you worry, maybe it would be good to have a plan for handling

that kind of scenario,” I said. “What do you think you’d do if that happened?” I asked.

“For a distant acquaintance, perhaps the principle of ‘least said, soonest mended’ would come into play. I could just acknowledge the connection, if it is brought up, but otherwise ignore it,” he said. “However, if I did encounter someone that I was very familiar with, I’m not sure what I would do.”

“I imagine that if you ran into someone you know well, but whom you don’t know is gay, they would be as embarrassed as you were. I don’t think they’d be likely to go around telling everyone else you know that the two of you had bumped into each other at a gay event,” I said.

“That’s true,” he agreed.

“And is there anyone you know who you might expect to be there?” I asked.

“That’s just it. Since I booked the ticket, I keep wondering if I might run into this old friend...” he said, smiling.

“Lesley, if there’s someone you’d like to run into in a hot tub, you can just call them. You don’t have to wait for a cosmic coincidence,” I pointed out.

“Maybe when I return,” he said, looking away, but still smiling.

I wished him a good trip, and hoped it would go well. Although Marilla seemed to be well on her way to finding a partner, I couldn’t really take any credit for the mail order bride idea, and I was starting to wonder if I’d managed to actually help anyone through this job. Other than signing a statement attesting to Lucky’s innocence in the squirrel

incident. I wondered how the patio umbrella had gone over at the choral concert, and just then, Euripides came into the office. He was still carrying the umbrella.

“Hey, how was your date?” I asked. He didn’t have any visible injuries, and wasn’t covered in cement.

“It was great! My lucky umbrella really did the trick,” he said, happily.

“What did you end up telling your date about the umbrella?” I asked.

“You know, I couldn’t come up with any sort of believable story, so I admitted that it was my lucky umbrella, and that I needed it to fend off a sort of hex,” he replied.

“Honesty the best policy, eh?” I said.

“Yeah, she thought the whole thing was really funny, and admitted that she was wearing her lucky socks,” he said.

“So you two were doubly lucky?” I asked.

“Definitely. We really got along great, and we laughed a lot. I have a good feeling about it,” he said.

“Are you going to keep carrying around that umbrella?” I asked.

“That’s the best part. When we were talking about how much easier it was to use a pair of lucky socks, compared to a patio umbrella, she had an idea that I could capture the essence of the umbrella in a more portable format,” he said, excitedly.

“I’m sure I don’t know how these sorts of things work. What’s the plan?” I asked.



“I’m taking the umbrella to this woman she knows who is a tattoo artist. If I get a tattoo of the umbrella, I’ll never have to worry about losing it!” he said, triumphantly. I briefly wondered where he was planning to put the tattoo, but quickly decided that it was none of my business. Instead, I congratulated him on having outwitted the hex. Since the hex and the dating situation were under control, I finally had a chance to ask him about the name.

“Say, Euripides, I was just wondering how you got that name. It’s unusual,” I asked.

“Oh, I don’t know, I just always figured I was named after my Dad. I’m really Euripides Junior, but that sounded funny, so I hardly ever use it. Euripides is a common name for men in his extended family,” he said. “Goodbye, and thanks for your help with the squirrel and stuff!”

## Heart and Sole

That evening, I had email from Gary.

Alyse,

I'm so happy to hear from you, and to hear that you're doing well. I just got tenure here last year, and have been trying to reclaim my life. The last five years were just a blur, writing paper after paper, and trying to get noticed in the field. Being a professor was always what I wanted to do, but I had hoped that it wouldn't be the only thing I was able to do. Now that the pace is less hectic, I'm reading novels, watching TV, and vegging out. Maybe I'll be up for more interesting activities in a while, but for now, just not working is exciting enough.

Tell me more about the different fields you've tried out. You were always someone who could take the road less traveled, and I'm curious where it's taken you.

Best wishes,

Gary

Hmm, he didn't mention being married or anything. I wondered what his story would be if he'd come into my office for a visit. I poked around online looking for David, but he wasn't listed in our class reunion page, and I couldn't search his college alum website since it was only accessible to other alums. Then I called Julia, who was watching a bizarre reality TV show, and got sucked into watching it with her while we talked on the phone about the contestants.

After the end of the show, I couldn't sleep. Now that I'd tried to find David, it was really bothering me that we'd lost touch. Talking to Julia had at least relieved my feelings of guilt about smooching her prom date, and I couldn't help but wonder how things would have turned out if I'd stuck around after that first kiss. I'd had a crush on David since elementary school. We had always paired up for working on projects (since it had become clear that trying to work with Julia would usually end in one of us having a screaming tantrum, and usually but not always with her throwing things).

I now suspected that I'd never made any close female friends in college because I hadn't gotten over missing Julia. Remembering how it felt when David kissed me made me wonder if my lack of dating success was somehow due to that unresolved situation with him. Of course, Julia had often joked that I saw all sorts of subconscious effects and links to the past when things could be much more easily explained by random luck. Maybe I should just get a lucky tattoo and call it a day. Feeling kind of dumb even though no one was watching, I got a Sharpie marker and drew a little red heart on the sole of my foot. Soul, sole, close enough, and I finally fell asleep.

The next day, Wade came back, this time on his own.

“How’s the response for your mother’s profile?” I asked.

“You know how there are just a lot more women than men in her age group. I’ve had a few responses, but not too many promising ones,” he said.

“It’s only been a week or so,” I said.

“One funny thing is that one of the responses was actually from a woman that my mother had tried to set me up with. She was responding because she wanted to fix her father up with a nice woman,” he laughed.

“Perfect, have you two dutiful children achieved your goal?” I asked.

“We’re working on it. I just thought it was so funny that this was someone that my mother had suggested in the first place,” he said. I had a sudden thought.

“Wade, you remember when you said that you thought your mother was trying to set you up on dates because that’s really what she wanted for herself. Maybe it wasn’t a coincidence, that woman who she’d wanted you to meet. You don’t supposed that the actual women that she picked out were also selected because of a connection to someone she’d like to meet?” I asked.

“I don’t know, I never thought to ask all these women whether they had eligible fathers or uncles or whatever,” he pondered. “But I still have most of their contact information, so I can certainly find out!”

“Couldn’t hurt,” I agreed.

“I had dropped by to see if you had any ideas about places to find more eligible older men, but now I think I’ll first try asking these women

about their families,” he said, practically bouncing. I wished him good luck and made a quick note to myself to make a list of possible places to find older bachelors just in case.

## The Plot is Revealed

I'd written back to Gary about switching fields from chemical engineering to software to helping people get a life. Todd's theory about re-contacting ex's to remind yourself of why you weren't dating them anymore seemed to be born out by his reply.

Alyse

Sounds like an interesting job you've got there, but don't you think it's a waste of your education? In a way, your acceptance into MIT for both undergrad and grad school meant taking a spot that numerous other students were competing for, and now you're playing matchmaker? I hope you'll forgive me for hoping that you'll return to the scientific fold.

Gary

I guess the guy has a lot invested into the idea that science is a special calling, since he's basically made being a professor the one and only purpose of his post-school life so far. Maybe I should send him Todd's presentation about high through-put dating.

I'd been wondering for some time how to disseminate Todd's method to the MIT population at large. It certainly seemed like an approach that would be both appealing and effective, but I didn't want to risk the publicity that could ensue from publishing something so explicitly dating related out of this office. When I saw the annual Charm School advertisements, it seemed like the perfect venue, so I called to convince him about it.

"Hi Todd. Do you have plans for IAP?" I asked.

"Other than helping out with the Kitchen Chemistry series and going to the sci-fi marathon, not really. Are you trying to rope me into something?" he replied.

"Yup. What would you think about doing your high through-put dating lecture?" I said.

"It's something I've considered, but never really gotten around to. But you know, this would be a good year to do it, because I anticipate being busier in the future," he said, happily.

"Oh? Why's that?" I asked, on cue.

"We're expecting a baby in the spring!" he announced. I offered my congratulations, and told Todd that I'd take care of signing him up for the lecture. I wondered if he would be coming up with some interesting child-raising methodologies over the next few years.

I was wrapping things up at the office when Tim and Jen stopped by. They were holding hands, so I assumed that Jen's determination to make a play for the guy had panned out.

“Hey, how are you two doing?” I asked. They looked at each other and smiled. “Nevermind, I get the picture,” I said, also smiling.

“We were hoping you’d join us for dinner. I’m cooking,” Jen invited.

“Thanks, you know I never turn down your cooking,” I replied.

When I got to her apartment, Tim was sitting on a stool, keeping out of the way. We chatted about the recent campus laughingstock, a dorm entry whose members had accidentally set fire to their hall when they’d poured a jug of isopropanol over their countertops and lit it up. Of course, this reminded us for the time a fraternity had set their roof on fire burning secret papers, and several other silly incidents involving fireworks, plumbing, and drunken ideas. Tim’s cell phone rang, and he stepped outside. I took advantage of the opportunity.

“So Jen, I see you two managed to get together,” I said. She giggled.

“I was shameless and pretty much threw myself at him, but I think he appreciated the gesture,” she said.

“Modest and ladylike behavior is overrated,” I agreed.

“I’m still worried about how he’ll react if he finds out about the Tiffany thing,” she said.

We could see Tim pacing around outside and talking on the phone. He came back in looking stunned.

“What’s wrong?” Jen asked.

“That was Tiffany’s father,” he said.

“He didn’t call up to yell at you again, did he?” I asked.



“No,” he said, slowly. “No, he actually apologized, and said he’d been feeling guilty about it, and wanted to explain the whole story.” Jen froze, and then interrupted.

“I’m really really really sorry about what she did,” she said.

“I figured you must have known about it,” Tim said, looking at her. I was wondering whether I should admit that I’d known too, or if that would just make things worse. “That’s the most elaborate plot I’ve ever heard of to convince someone to go out with you. You know, I would have been thrilled if you’d just asked directly. You didn’t have to put on this whole show to get me to notice you,” he continued.

“That’s not what...” Jen started.

“It’s ok, I’m flattered that you’d think it was worth that much trouble to get my attention,” he said. “I don’t care how you did it, or even why, since everything turned out great.”

“Err, how about if I keep an eye on the pots, while you two go kiss and make up?” I suggested. They didn’t argue, and the food was about ready by the time they got back. Of course, I’d burned the bottom of the rice, and stirred bits of onion all over the stovetop, but Jen didn’t seem to mind.

## NPR

An apartment in my building had become available, so Julia was getting set to move in. I knew she was at home waiting for the movers to arrive, but hadn't expected her to call me at the office.

"Alyse, I just heard the strangest story on NPR," she said. "Do you know someone named Marilla?" she asked.

"Yeeees. What did she do?" I replied.

"Her blog made the news. Sounds like she's been writing about her dating adventures at MIT. From the story, she's a hilarious writer. Anyhow, your office is mentioned a lot, so I thought you'd want to know," Julia told me.

"Oh no, I'd better see what she wrote," I said. Of course, Marilla's actual blog site was unavailable because the server had gotten overloaded once the site got famous, but NPR had mirrored a lot of the entries for their online story. I couldn't help groaning a little. She had experiment notes, with the men numbered M1 through M20. She had bulleted lists of helpful comments I'd made. And, she had written extensively about her conversations where the nerd glasses had detected

either boredom or other types of discomfort on the part of the other participant.

While I thought that the publicity would probably be good for Susanna's research, it would be highly embarrassing for MIT, and I was likely to be out of a job. The deal going into this position had been that I could pretty much do what I wanted, but I had to prevent any humorous human interest stories about nerd dating from making headlines. I called Professor Immerman's office to leave a message with my cell phone number, and wasn't surprised when he called back within 15 minutes.

"Of course I realize this is not your fault, but as you might expect, we'll have to disclaim any official knowledge or support for your matchmaking or dating advice efforts," he said.

"No hard feelings, I understand. Since the entire thing was experimental, I didn't think it would last more than a year anyways, and the past six months have been very interesting. It was fun working with you," I said.

"You've done a good job putting together resource sheets. We'll make them available from another office, so your efforts will live on, to some degree," he said.

"I assume I should just repeat the official story of what the office was for, and admit that I went above and beyond those functions purely of my own initiative, if anyone asks?" I checked.

"That would probably be best. MIT will pretty much say the same thing. We won't publicize your resignation, but it will be implied that you were doing something no one ever imagined you'd be doing," he said.

“I’ll just wrap things up during the rest of the week, and then I’ll be out of there,” I said. He wished me good luck, and went off to deal with the Boston Globe.

## You Lose Some, You Win Some

Looking back, I totaled up the score. Tim, Euripides, and Marilla had all found significant others. Plus, Tim had sworn off dating students, Euripides had a lucky tattoo, and Marilla's disconcerting behavior had gotten slightly less bizarre. As a side effect, Jen had a boyfriend and Matthew had both a promising research collaboration and a girlfriend. Lesley was on his way to enjoying the gay singles scene, and Wade was having fun turning the tables on his mother. I certainly couldn't take credit for most of these outcomes, but I'd done a bit of strategic nudging here and there, and it had certainly been a break from working at doomed start-ups.

I was packing things up when I noticed that one guy had three no-show appointments over the last week or two. I guess he missed his chance. Getting distracted from that, I realized that Julia and I could job hunt together, since she'd been thinking of quitting her current position after staying with them long enough that they wouldn't regret paying for her relocation. The process would be more of an adventure and less of a chore with her around. I wondered if she'd be willing to sign up for

interviews at the same place, dress up like me, and pretend not to know each other.

What I saw when I heard the knock at my door made me drop a box of papers.

“David!” I said, trying not to fall over from the surprise. “What are you doing here?” I asked. He had the same earnest look that he had during high school, but he’d filled out and wasn’t nearly as obviously a nerd. And his stunningly blue eyes were just as magnetic as I’d been remembering.

“I just joined on as a research assistant. I’ve made a few appointments to see you, but then didn’t show up. But I thought I’d better come today, before your office closed for good,” he explained.

“But, I didn’t recognize your name,” I said, puzzled.

“I’m using my mother’s maiden name now. I got sick of being mixed up with other people all the time. Collection agencies were always showing up looking for the wrong David Smith, and I’d get emails for other people all the time,” he said.

“Good point. You know, having a common name also makes it impossible for someone to look you up online,” I commented.

“Julia managed to track me down,” he said. “I guess she’d be a good stalker.”

“Oh, have you talked to her?” I asked. Since Julia had admitted that she’d never actually be interested in David, I had no idea why she’d put the effort into finding him.

“Not really. I don’t think she contacted me because she wanted to talk or anything. Mostly, she just wanted to let me know what you were up to,” he said, coming over and sitting down on the couch. I noticed that he still used the same aftershave that he had during high school. I was surprised to remember it so clearly, but at the same time, my brain was becoming incapable of coherent thought.

Ack. This was just like that time we were in that spelling bee, and I’d been doing reasonably well through the preliminary rounds. But, after a bunch of people got eliminated, I ended up sitting next to David and instead of being nervous about spelling in front of an audience, suddenly all I could think about was that he was sitting close enough that I could reach over and touch his hand, but that it would be completely inappropriate. I reminded myself that even if we’d know each other during high school, it didn’t mean that we knew each other now.

“Wait, why did you make appointments and then not show up?” I finally managed to ask. He just looked at me for a while.

“I wasn’t sure if it would be appropriate for one of your visitors to ask you out on a date,” he said, finally. While I was still working out the implications of what he’d said, David kissed me. It had been over fifteen years since the first time, but it seemed like only moments ago. How could this be such a surprise and yet seem like coherently engineered fate? I sure wasn’t going to be able to figure it out, at least not until my neurons stopped firing randomly.

“Today’s my last day here, and I’ll be off the job in a few minutes. I could meet you back in your office?” I offered. Our third kiss was as stunning as the first two, and I felt like an infatuated teenager.

“Wonderful, we’ve got a lot to catch up on,” he said.

After he left, I made short work of packing up the rest of my stuff. As I was leaving, the phone rang,

“Alyse, I wonder if you’d consider staying at MIT,” Professor Immerman started. “We just received a copy of the conditions around a rather unusual bequest, and I know you’re capable of handling unusual commissions.”

“I appreciate you thinking of me. Would it be alright if I waited until Monday to talk to you more about this? I’ve got to go adjust my work/life balance...”