

Bad date

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“When two personalities meet an emotional storm is created”

Wilfred Bion, *Making the Best of a Bad Job*

Usually after I went on a date, I would regale friends with the story of all his foibles and our embarrassing moments. I loved recounting the experience of chance intimacy with a total stranger. Like the Indian man (or maybe he was still a boy) who was a bundle of nerves from start to finish. At first I enjoyed his excitement but his nervousness never settled. When I mentioned in passing that I was Jewish, he rubbed his fingers together and raised his eyebrows. I played dumb – unkindly perhaps – and he plowed on. ‘So you’re rich’. Or words to that effect. I’m embarrassed to say I didn’t correct him. It was hardly done out of malice but I awkwardly moved the conversation on. We weren’t a match anyway and so I thought better leave it, keep it as a story to tell when I got home. A story at whose expense though? At his for throwing around antisemitic stereotypes? Or at mine for failing to set him straight? Perhaps I should have seen it as an opportunity: I doubt the man had ever met a Jew before. Not that it ought to have been my job to educate him.

Navigating difference is never easy but I’ve had a lot of practice. My family home operated in a state of near-permanent identity crisis. My dad grew up on a dairy farm in the Netherlands and my mum is from a big Jewish family in the US. The language we spoke at home was a sort of stilted Dutch, rescued by at least three dialects of English. I would leave the house to reluctantly engage in the local culture – mashed potatoes, biscuits, apologising – before returning home safe to the familiar cultural dissonance of my home. It meant a lot to me that I was an outsider, that I came from a different culture to everyone else. Seeing myself as different helped me be aware of how people treat each other. I felt isolated but I was able to think surprisingly clearly. It did leave me with some big blind spots though. Where exactly did I fit in? And was I really so special?

I’m going to try to tell the story of my own faux pas. In this story it’s clear that I was the problem, that I was the one for him to laugh about with his friends. That is, if I wasn’t immediately binned and forgotten, into the pit with all the other flippant self-absorbed white boys he must have sifted through. In hindsight, I should have left before we ever got as far as my embarrassing, shameful moment. If there’s anything I learned about dating, it doesn’t get better if it starts off badly so it’s best just to pull the plug. Timing these things is always difficult, though. There is a fine line between being dismissive and self-assured.

I want to make clear that I don’t see a black and white distinction between intercultural and intracultural relationships. On a certain level, every monogamous romantic partnership becomes a negotiation between two private cultures, a little United Nations of two – a bilateral agreement. Of course, this perspective can obscure some of the powerful realities and challenges that come from relationships more traditionally understood to be intercultural. And yet, it is totally possible that if my dad had married the daughter of a Frisian farmer, their relationship would be far more fraught than the usual gripes and squabbles he and my mother share. Perhaps he would have wondered what there was to discover beyond the flat landscape of his youth. Perhaps the prejudices and stuffy old rituals would have gotten in the way of their happiness.

So I stepped out of the tube at Old Street and made my way to the bar. He was already sitting there, looking at his phone. It was an awful echoing room decorated as though to look like a public toilet, with white ceramic tiles and uncomfortable chairs. It was the kind of place where I had a headache from the moment I arrived – although maybe I’m just making excuses. He was cute, with long thick hair and a quiet demeanor. In fact, now I reflect on it, his quietness is what unnerved me. I’ve always felt confident in these initial

meetings. The most scary thing would be that it went well – and if it went badly it was just a good story to tell. Anyway, if I just let things flow then the other person would usually be anxious enough to break the ice. Today was different, though. This man was nonchalant, uncaring even.

By this stage I had given up on pursuing the myth of a ‘socially ideal’ partner. How wonderful it would be to meet another Jewish boy, how many problems it would solve. I wouldn't need to change what I wanted, I wouldn't need to find new friends, I wouldn't need to prove to them that this relationship would work, I could just continue living my life – we could continue living our lives. No wonder so many people settle down with the person they met at school. No wonder so many people chase after that perfect person for such a long time. I was past that stage, though. I was ready to accept that I would be like my parents, forever working on and grappling with those glaring differences that make our edges rub against each other. So I went into the date feeling ready, or so I thought.

I remember trying my best. I remember trying to make conversation. I did what I usually do, I felt for his energy and tried to mirror it, to create a shared experience where we could laugh at ourselves and at what it was like to be sitting there as perfect strangers. But my usual strategy wasn't working. He basically seemed uninterested and I'm not one to chase after someone. If they don't like me it's not my job to change their mind. What really surprised me – what annoyed me – was that he kept looking at his phone. And not just a little bit. In the silences he would look down and scroll rapidly, as though he was bored of me. What was I supposed to do, tell him off? Take out my own phone? I was shocked. Who was this rude man I had travelled all the way to Old Street for?

Then there was a chink of light. He mentioned being Lebanese. I thought, I'm from an international family, I'm from a semitic culture – there should be plenty of opportunities for us to find common ground. Maybe this topic would tear him away from his screen. I had some sense that Lebanon was important to him. Some clue, perhaps from his Instagram, that his connection with his homeland was more than incidental. I'll admit, too, that I fancied him. So I gave him another chance.

‘I've been to Israel,’ I said. ‘Israel-Palestine.’

He didn't make much of a response.

‘I spent half of my gap year there,’ I continued.

More silence from him.

‘It was kind of a rogue place to go, if I'm honest,’ I said.

His next reactions are a bit hazy in my memory. I don't remember him saying much.

‘Yeah, it was a strange gap year programme,’ I laughed, trying to bring some life to the conversation.

‘Most of the time I was living in the North of Israel – the Galilee – right near Lebanon, actually.’

There I was, expecting him to be interested in what I had to say, expecting him to reach out and make some kind of connection. Here it was, I believed, the thing we could connect over. I was dangling it right in front of his nose.

‘I wasn't really expecting to be there, to be honest. We were setting up a youth program for the synagogue in this town, it was quite a wealthy town. The group of us from London all sort of thought – why are we here? I guess we thought we were going to do some charity work or something.’

At some point, while I was talking, I became aware that I had his attention, finally. But it wasn't the kind of engagement I had been hoping for. He looked up from his phone screen, sure, but it was a cold gaze. The look of a man making judgements.

Of course, I should have left by this point. I had tried to get him to talk about himself. But he had given me very little to work with. He said he worked in tech and that he hated it. I

sensed he didn't want to talk about it. He said he had lived in London for quite a while but he didn't like that either. So I had chosen to talk about myself, to keep the energy artificially high in that noisy white bathroom of a bar.

'It was a weird experience to be honest. It was such a boring little town and we went a bit stir crazy. Although we did get bombed once. That was wild. Some rebel group from Lebanon shot rockets into the town. I was going for a walk with my friend and we heard screeching and explosions. The new synagogue was destroyed, the one we were working for.'

As I said it, I knew that I had dropped a bomb. The tone shifted. He behaved as though I had confirmed to him what kind of person I was, as though his suspicions had been correct. I tried to clear it up, to clear up the mess. I asked about him, about living in Lebanon. He mentioned, briefly, the war with Israel. He alluded to the danger and the loss of life. He told me about his family and that they had suffered. I sat there, shamefaced, a tourist in his sadness and pain. I knew that I had failed. Meanwhile, he seemed more comfortable at this point than ever before.

I left soon after, knowing I would never see him again. I was embarrassed but I also felt strangely aggrieved. He had broken the rules, failed to honour the contract. He agreed to meet me. He was willing for me to travel all the way to him when he didn't seem remotely interested. So I positioned myself just south of the border and I tried to force him to engage. How unfair of me to use what I could read of his culture, of his history, to try to build a romantic connection – or just a connection of any sort. Perhaps he thought me some kind of imperialist. I was wrong to have expected any more than bemusement from him when explaining the strangeness of Zionist youth projects. I thought – wrongly – that we could laugh about them together, that we could agree they were a special kind of madness. Instead I left frustrated and he – triumphant? vindicated? as morose as ever?

Although we will never meet again, something is left behind. That evening revealed to me something about my attitude. I'm used to the play of hiding behind the masks provided for me by society, growing up queer and foreign in a world of many prejudices. I'm used to the arguments and frustrations that come from irreconcilable beliefs. I'm used to the surprised look as I tell people I'm not even a British citizen. I'm also used to the rather revealing remark, 'I thought you talked a bit funny,' when I say I was born abroad. Still, what a shock to be reminded that I will always also remain the one on the other side.