

SHE'S NOT THE ONE, NEITHER IS SHE

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LILI SAID YES. She'd go out with me. I knew she was intermittently seeing someone else – some polished tech type – but I told myself there was no harm in trying. Humans, as I've observed, aren't big on caution when it comes to these things. It's all just go for it. So, I went for it. Even if the so-called rules of dating felt as clear and comprehensible as contemporary art.

We met on the Southbank at 7 p.m., right outside the Royal Festival Hall. I'd picked the place for the outing because it felt sophisticated yet casual, much like the illusion I was trying to sell. We decided to sit outside rather than brave the pre-concert flurry inside. I had secured aisle seats to avoid the crush and make a graceful late entry. Contingency planning.

After exchanging pleasantries, mostly about her day spent coding gene therapy solutions, we fell into people-watching. Lili seemed particularly interested in a woman sashaying past in a dazzling red dress.

'There are so many people in the world,' I said, my gaze following hers. 'It makes me wonder...'

'Wonder what?' she asked, tilting her head.

'Why we bother making ourselves out to be so important. We're just one of millions. Billions. We don't really matter.'

‘That’s exactly it,’ she said without missing a beat. ‘It’s basic signal-to-noise ratio. We have to stand out. Like that woman in the red dress.’

I glanced at the woman again, glowing into the distance. ‘Sure, but... Why?’

‘Why not?’ Lili shrugged. ‘If you can be bothered to look that good.’

‘No, I mean—’ I stopped, deciding it was pointless to untangle my existential crisis right then. ‘Yeah, why not. Try to be special. As long as it doesn’t cost an arm and a leg.’

‘Does not compute?’ she asked, deadpan.

‘Oh, it’s just a saying,’ I said, cringing slightly.

‘No, I get it,’ she said, with a soft frown. ‘There’s always a cost to success. You just have to figure out what you’re willing to pay for it.’

After a pause to digest Lili’s insight, I muttered to her how profound it was and checked my watch. ‘Shall we find out if Bruckner’s worth it? I’m not sure I like him.’

She smiled. ‘We’ll see.’

And with that, we headed inside. The evening was going well, I didn’t feel entirely out of tune.

The orchestra began with Mozart’s 39th. It was ecstatic, otherworldly, the kind of music that makes you feel like life is both bigger and smaller than you think it is. But as the strings soared, I couldn’t stop myself from recalling a

therapy session in which I'd picked this exact piece for a calming visualisation exercise. Back then, I'd imagined myself atop an Alpine mountaintop – a majestic, serene place. Now, though, the thought of a mountaintop filled me with dread. Nighttime had crept into the image, and so had a recent news story about hikers going astray in the Alps. Therapy is an unreliable partner. Never mind, Mozart still worked his magic, and I let the music wash over me, a reminder that healing doesn't always have to be intelligible.

During the interval, I rushed to the bar and ordered Lili a glass of champagne. She'd nodded politely when I asked if she wanted a drink, only to inform me – after I'd already paid – that she didn't drink alcohol. Neither did I, but now I had a bubbling glass of regret in my hand. A nearby gentleman in a purple tie caught my eye. Without thinking, I handed it to him.

'Cheers, good man,' he said, inspecting the glass with an air of satisfaction.

'Nice tie,' I offered, mostly to fill the awkward silence.

'Gift from Gustavo Benecilli,' he said. 'A marvellous conductor.'

I nodded like I knew who that was. I didn't. I doubted he did either.

'Have a mighty, jolly, and dandy fine evening!' he declared, raising the champagne in toast.

Lili smiled. 'I like your tie.'

He turned to her and repeated, with even more gusto, 'Have a mighty, jolly, and dandy fine evening, young lady!'

'I may have given that to the wrong person,' I muttered as the gentleman wandered off, thoroughly pleased with himself.

'I'm just glad you didn't waste it,' she said.

'Shall we get some fresh air?'

'Where?' she asked.

'Upstairs,' I said, leading her to the third-floor balcony overlooking the Thames. It was just as crowded as everywhere else, but the breeze made it feel less suffocating.

'Are you having a good time?' I asked.

'Yes,' she said. 'It's fine. Better than staying at home and reading emails, anyway. Are you?'

'A very good time,' I replied. 'Thank you for coming.'

I stopped myself from gushing further – something about how nice it was of her to finally accept my invitation. Desperation is the opposite of charm, though it's undeniably the petrol that powers most people's dating efforts. She broke my ruminations with a pleasantry.

'I love Mozart.'

'So do I,' I said quickly. 'I adore most classical music. Even Wagner.'

'What's wrong with Wagner?'

‘A lot of people fall asleep. That or they feel too awake – from all the screeching.’

She didn’t laugh. Not even a polite chuckle. Blank. ‘Who’s your favourite composer?’ She then asked.

I realised she hadn’t heard Wagner. Perhaps introducing her to him would be like a romantic baptism by fire – Lohengrin or Tristan und Isolde to douse her in flames. No, definitely not first-date material. My thoughts spiralled before I remembered to answer her properly.

‘Bach,’ I said, drawing out the *ba* like a lost sheep.

‘Me too,’ she said. ‘I love the Messiah piece.’

‘Oh, that’s Handel,’ I corrected automatically. ‘But a fine choice! He’s my second favourite.’

‘Oh.’ She flushed, embarrassed. I immediately regretted correcting her. Maybe she’d meant one of Bach’s Passions, or a Mass, which both include the figure of the Messiah. Either way, the last thing I wanted was for her to feel uncultured. I slapped my thigh lightly in punishment for my pedantry.

We stood in companionable silence, looking out across the river over at Somerset House, two dreamers orbiting parallel worlds. For a moment, it felt like we might drift closer – until the intercom shattered the moment.

‘Tonight’s concert will recommence in five minutes.’

Just like that, the dream broke, and Bruckner commenced.

Bruckner was a literal blast, and not in a good way. My eardrums throbbed as if the man himself had marched down from the 19th century, trumpets blazing, to remind us all of the triumphantly naive and awkward despair of Enlightenment thought. Who, I wondered bitterly, had decided that an evening of joyful Mozart should be paired with this? Bruckner's 5th: a musical migraine in four movements.

Lili, of course, sat through it calmly, the picture of serene endurance. Afterward, I turned to her with a raised eyebrow that asked, *Well?* She gave me a polite cheek-clench – the universal gesture for, *It wasn't great, but I'll survive.*

'I'm not a fan either,' I said, nodding in solidarity. 'Not even close.'

Still, we agreed it had been worth staying for the second half. We exited the Royal Festival Hall and crossed the footbridge at Waterloo, navigating the crowds in companionable silence. By the time we reached Tottenham Court Road to catch the Northern Line back to Golders Green, I had run out of talk altogether. I would've liked to do something gallant, like offer her my jacket, but it was too mild for that, and it would've only weighed her down.

The tube, as always, was a trial. I covered my ears against the racket, which didn't seem to bother Lili, as she had her own earphones firmly in place. We returned to the house share with no awkward kiss, no lingering goodnight – just a mutual retreat to our separate bedrooms.

'I enjoyed the concert,' she said before vanishing down the hall.

'Tea in the kitchen?' I offered weakly.

'Thanks, but I'm tired. Work tomorrow,' she replied, and that was that.

Date over. Still friends, yes. Lovers? Definitely not.

Had I been an epic failure? Probably. I'd tried to buy her a drink, only to end up gifting it to a purple-tied madman. My heart had raced during the Mozart, and I'd assumed hers had too – until I realised the music, not me, had done the heavy lifting. We'd agreed on the importance of quiet, which I'd taken as a win, but maybe that was just politeness. I'd let her have the aisle seat, though not without some internal mourning; I usually claim it for the legroom and the fire escape proximity. And I'd listened to her talk about her work visa troubles and her frustration at how expensive London is, with her father unwilling to loan her the money to buy anywhere. High expectations. It had gone reasonably well then, so why wasn't there a spark?

Maybe I was being too hard on myself. Maybe house-sharing had killed the mystery. She knew too much

about me already: my breakfast routine (a soggy bowl of cornflakes), my shower schedule, and the toilet; the way the flush reverberates throughout the house and the fan needs repairing every month. Hardly romantic. Worse still, a number of times I'd sniffed her pork stir-fry with regret, with Zach announcing to the entire kitchen that I was a 'kosher Christian,' 'like Christ himself.' It's true I don't eat pork, but I'm not so petty as to rule dietary preferences a date dealbreaker. So no, I didn't hold it against Lili that there was no spark. Maybe it wasn't me. Or maybe it was. Or more likely, my faeces had already flushed the romance down the housemate toilet with it.

Nat, my other housemate, was the opposite to Lili. Rather than calm, she thrived on chaos, her energy a high-pitched hum that made you dizzy just being near her. But maybe that's the key to thriving: a bit of manic energy, a dash of madness.

'Harry,' Nat called over from the kitchen counter. 'When are you taking me out?'

I paused mid-sip of my herbal tea. 'What?'

'I'm joking,' she said with a mischievous grin. Then, leaning closer, she added, 'That said, how was it? Lili likes classical music?'

'She does,' I said.

'That's great!' Nat clapped her hands together. 'So, did you kiss?'

I felt my face flush. ‘How could we?’ I said, tilting my head toward the corridor leading to Lili’s room.

Nat rolled her eyes dramatically. ‘Easy. By the river. On the footbridge with a view of the whole of London. That’s where loads of couples get together. Don’t tell me you didn’t walk her over it.’

‘We did,’ I admitted. ‘But it was so busy. A wall of people.’

Nat slapped me on the shoulder. ‘Next time,’ she said. ‘You’ll do fine. There’s always another chance.’

Nat and Zach had been on a mission to pair me up with Lili ever since she’d moved in 6 months ago. I needed to get them off my back, which was all the more reason to keep trying to fall in love. Fall in love. The phrase alone nauseated me.

A few weeks later, Lili and I went out for noodles. Generous portions, warm broth, a faint scent of soy sauce and ginger in the air. I let her pick the restaurant to show my trust in her taste. She was pleased, which made me feel vaguely optimistic.

Zach’s advice had been simple, and confident: Be frank. Just find out what she wants. Don’t waste her time. Is she going to be your mate or not?

‘But don’t use the word *mate*,’ he’d said, on a serious note.

‘Then what word do I use?’ I asked.

‘Sweetheart,’ he’d replied sweetly.

The moment arrived between courses, our bellies satisfied from the mains. I took a deep breath and braced myself. ‘Lili. Can I be your sweetheart?’ I blurted.

She blinked, clearly confused. ‘What’s that?’

The move had landed with all the grace of a rogue dumpling making a splash. Thinking fast, I pivoted. ‘Oh, it’s... It’s a dessert,’ I said. ‘Like a sweet in heart shapes. They probably don’t have it here, though. Never mind.’

She burst out laughing. ‘You’re so sweet,’ she said, smiling. ‘I know what you meant. I was just teasing you. Sorry, that’s a bad habit of mine.’

‘Oh,’ I said, unsure whether to feel relieved or humiliated.

Before I could recover, she interrupted me. ‘Just ask me if I want to be your girlfriend. But... Actually, don’t ask me.’

‘What?’

She sighed. ‘I’m sorry, I’m not ready for that. I hope you can understand.’

‘That’s okay,’ I said. ‘But how long is the waiting time?’

She didn’t laugh at that but replied evenly, ‘I don’t know. But I am enjoying going out with you. But there is something I have to tell you.’

‘OK.’

‘I’m not here for much longer.’

‘Are you going to Jupiter?’ I asked.

‘No, China.’

Same thing, really. There was no way she would be my sweetheart from that distance of land mass and sea. The matter was closed, then. At least there was clarity. We continued sporadically going out for a few months, but the seemingly inevitable happened: Lili had to move back to China.

‘We can stay friends, of course,’ she said, her voice kind, her eyes full of pity.

I cried the day she left, though I kept it private, choking back sobs as I watched her vanish towards the tube. Her gaze had been unreadable – sympathy, perhaps, but no light of a future together.

Zach told me Lili was just troubled by love. ‘It’s all down to experience,’ he said. ‘Don’t worry, we’ll get someone new in.’

And indeed, someone new did come to lodge with us. Her name was Khatia – a pianist from Budapest, no less. She moved in to take Lili’s room and quickly became good friends with Nat.

‘Just a heads up,’ Nat said, tossing her green scarf over her shoulder. ‘Khatia’s had a bad experience. She’s not looking for love, so don’t get any ideas, whatever Zach’s told you.’

By this point, I had to admit that love seemed overrated. It inspired fear and confusion far more often than joy or

gratitude. So I resolved to keep my head down and stay out of it.

But then Khatia had a spare ticket to a lunchtime recital at the Wigmore Hall.

‘I can’t go,’ Nat said.

‘Why not?’ I asked.

‘Audition,’ she replied. ‘You go.’

And so, I went.

Khatia was chatty. Endlessly, effortlessly chatty. She told me she’d come to London to study at the Royal College of Music. I wondered if she was too much younger than me, it could be at least a decade, a glaring reminder of my own mortality.

We sat in our seats as the silence settled, in anticipation of great art. But Khatia wasn’t one to spare a moment of quiet.

She turned suddenly to look me up and down and said, ‘You’re handsome.’

I blinked.

‘But I don’t date housemates. Been there, done that, you know?’

‘Oh, don’t worry,’ I said, fumbling. ‘I’m just here for the good taste in music.’

The second it left my mouth, I regretted it. She turned her chin up like I’d just insulted her entire self-worth.

‘If you want to know why... Well, it’s a long story,’ she said dramatically, and without noticing whether or not I was willing to listen, which I pretended to be. ‘But my ex was a bastard. Total bastard. He was my landlord slash bf, you know?’

I nodded. I did not know.

‘You know he was charming at first,’ she continued, ‘but then, you know, like so many men, he turned out to be borderline mad, you know, the eagerness to get me into bed...’

She kept saying *you know*, as if I actually did know. I didn’t have a clue. But this was the lingo of youth, and I decided to let her vent. It felt oddly flattering to be the chosen receptacle for her woes.

But I was glad by the time the recital began, and I’d forgotten entirely that I was with a female companion. The music – delicate, transformative – swept over me. For a moment, I was free of all distractions, all longings, all awkwardness. It struck me, then: I was happiest just being me.

And if nobody else was going to be the one, maybe I could just settle for myself.