

One Step at a Time

"How would you describe your favorite date?"

"Huh?" I looked up from staring into my cooling bowl of shoyu ramen and realized I'd missed a few moments of conversation.

"How would you describe your favorite date?" My coworker repeated. He'd dragged me out of the office five minutes after four hours after office hours ended and insisted that I get a bite to eat as I had been looking "too skin and bones for even a coyote to scavenge my hide." I allowed in my head that was probably true. Wine and instant noodles don't seem to fill my caloric intake and my fitted shirts fitted the way you'd call a smock from art school fitted. Or one of those giant terrycloth robes the hotels have that have sleeves that make you feel like a child wearing his father's shirt.

I blinked a few times. Thinking to myself: how would I describe my favorite date? When was the last time I was on a date?

"Like, a real date? What do you mean?" I demurred, trying to buy myself time to answer the far too broadly painted question. I suddenly felt that the can lighting in the noodle shop was a little too bright and interrogation like. Was Tad the good cop or the bad cop?

The gryphon sitting opposite the table from me ground his beak for a moment before replying. "A date date, yes." His eyes and eartufts sketched a grin even as his beak parted a little. "I don't mean how do you like being thrown on the bed after a date," I tried to remember the last time I blushed while he stuffed ramen into the cavernous beak he called a mouth. I decided it was long enough ago and the blush he made creep up my ears hot enough that he earned a few points in the underwear drawer. Plus the way those amber eyes burned into mine for the brief time we ever met eyes. Predators. Yeesh.

"I suppose that it depends." I rolled my shoulders and stirred my bowl of noodles absently another moment. "There's plenty of things I like to do, it's just a matter of whether or not the other person also enjoys, and if we're comfortable enough in that setting to be comfortable around each other." I brought chopsticks to my lips and stuffed about four pounds of steaming noodles into my mouth. It probably looked silly, but it gave me a few moments of chewing before I had to speak. This wasn't my best conversation, it probably wasn't his either, but Tad didn't seemed to be too bothered about it.

"That's not a terrible answer. You're going to make me dig, I guess." He put his 'sticks down and leaned back, stretching a little. He wasn't built like a gym rat, in fact, as he put his arms over his head I could see a bit of paunch outlined on his shirt. It wasn't unattractive, I decided. He looked like an almost average middle aged guy who did most things well enough to be

healthy, but probably spent just as much time drinking with friends over poker and enjoying making and eating cheesecakes with his wife on Friday nights without worrying about the calories. All the things I haven't been able to do in months. Being a slave to the job didn't lend itself to extracurricular activities.

"Why the sudden interest in my love life, or lack thereof?"

The gryphon added a shrug to his stretch and sat back up, "I dunno. You're normally social enough at work but I don't remember you ever mentioning 'my girlfriend this,' or 'my boyfriend that,' and you don't wear a ring."

I hummed, then tched my tongue against the back of my front teeth. They were getting a little long, actually. I should probably go and file them down this weekend, or grab a chewstick at least. "If you're that observant, you should also know what I talk about for fun. Then you'd have at least an idea of what I might do on a date." I leaned forward and put my chin on my paw, elbow resting next to my bowl of broth sans noodles.

"Or, maybe I have a few guesses but I was curious if you'd give the standard 'oh walks on the beach, movies and dinner,' answer, or something more interesting. I uh," He hummed, thinking. "Oh, fuck it." His hackles raised and flattened as he waved away his reply and suddenly I realized he was nervous. Like, he'd been this whole time but I was so busy trying to remember how to be social enough not to be boring that I'd forgotten to look, I mean, really look at him. Instead of just trying to scope out his happy trail. When I looked up at his face though he was already looking away, eyes shifting to mine and then away again just fast enough to indicate he didn't want to make eye contact, but was still engaged in the conversation.

"I'm sorry," I started to sketch an apology realizing I was probably more than a few clicks of the dial into bitch mode, "I don't mean to be cagey, it's just been a long time since-" then decided I didn't really need to bring past into this. He was a coworker doing a nice enough deed to bring me to dinner and didn't also need to be dumped on.

"It's fine. I'm just not terribly good at being the forward, social type. Even when I want to." He looked over as the server brought the check then quickly dumped some bills on the tray. "Would you like a ride home or nah?" His eyes darted back to mine, holding my gaze for a few hopeful moments.

I ran my hand over my ears to hide them flattening down on their own. I didn't really want him to run away so quickly, but if his limit on one-on-one interactions was done, I wasn't about to push an introvert. I know how that goes. "I'd appreciate a ride. I don't mind taking the bus if you're done for the night though, really."

He shook his head and looked at me again, his ear tufts perking up and big grey and black beak bent into the best semblance of a smile an industrial pair of scissors could. "I'd like to take you home. I'm good for a bit longer, it's not a work night at least."

We stood together and I grabbed my coat. He didn't have one, but with feathers and a snow leopard's dense pelt I imagine he didn't need them. Probably not a blanket either. Did he sleep naked? Not a work night? "Is it a Friday?"

Tad opened the door to the noodle house, giving me an arched eyebrow and ear, head canted, bird incredulous look that I couldn't begin to duplicate even on my snarkiest day. "Why yes rabbit, it's Friday. You know: Friday, Friday, gotta get down on Friday, everybody's looking forward to the-mmph!" My paws wrapped themselves around his beak and held them shut. It was incredibly warm, and I wondered if he was like an alligator or crocodile and if I could hold them shut as long as I needed for him to stop that song. I also realized I was being really forward with him so quickly let go. We were also standing in the doorway, so I quickly stepped passed him, rubbing my paws together in a fit of nervousness and cold.

He looked shocked to say the least, as it turned back to look at him. Then I noticed a flush of crimson across his nares. "Oh my god you can blush!" I couldn't help it, I giggled. It was just so cute. Big grey and blue gryphon and his nostrils turn red when he blushes. Hah.

He huffed, "So do you, your ears turn pink. Anyway." We wandered over to his car. A big white old Chevette or something. I wasn't good with cars. It rumbled to life and we meandered our way out of the crowded parking lot and into the slightly less crowded streets for a Friday night. Tad was quiet as he drove, attentive to his task at driving me to my place. Thankfully, it wasn't far and I could guide him fairly well with such handy ideas as "turn left here," or "hang a right at the stop light," which were met with even more articulate grunts and the occasional "uh-huh."

I kept stealing glances towards him as he drove. Truthfully I knew rather little about Tad. He was relatively new at the firm. I'd say he worked there for perhaps a year or so, whereas I could remember when there were only about 20 attorneys and 15 or so office personnel and knew everyone by name. But that was more than 6 years ago now and a lot had changed. The firm was now 70 attorneys and almost as many support staff, and we'd moved a couple times. The attorney I worked for, a dragon who started the same week as I did and made partner just six months ago, remarked to me as we sat down at a settlement conference that he couldn't remember half the attorney's names now and hardly any of the assistants or runners. I guess it was hard when you're working 32 hours at a stretch with only a few hours devoted to sleeping and fucking your secretary.

"I'm sorry for putting my hands on your beak." I eventually said, breaking my inner monologue before I got depressed. I felt myself itching for a glass of wine just to take the

edge off. I should have had some sake while we were having dinner, but I didn't want to pay for restaurant booze. Ugh, he paid for dinner. Shit.

"Huh? Oh yeah, that's fine." He answered, flicking an ear towards me. I judged that to be a shrug. "It's not like I wasn't crowing the worst song written in the past fifty years so I think I deserved it. Where do I turn next?"

"Just up here at the next right. Second house on the street to the left. Really, I'm not usually that forward, especially without some booze in me and I'm also sorry you paid for my food I'll pay you back I promise." The apology rushed out of me and I suddenly felt like I was 18 and begging my first boyfriend to stay long enough to pay him back for that awkward handy.

He chuckled at that, "It's ok, it was only a few bucks. You can pay me back next time." He turned the last corner and quickly made a u-turn to put the car against the sidewalk in front of my house.

Oh look, I remembered to leave the porch light on this time. Huh. "Next time?" The car burbled as it idled in front of my domicile. A quiet, shaking rumble that made the seat thump every few moments. It sounded like it was itching to be let free to race across a freeway, or up a mountain. Not sitting here waiting for two people to finish their conversation. A bit like how I felt when awkwardly trying to wrap up an evening.

I watched the gryphon's beak work open and close, his ears twitching, nervous. After a moment of fighting for words with himself he turned his head and those bright amber eyes towards mine and with the telltale blush across his nares he finally broke the stretching silence again. "Yeah. Next time. If that would be ok with you?"

My paw was already working at the handle of the door while I was waiting for his reply. I hadn't unlatched it but I was ready to bolt. His shyness and hesitancy made me want to lean back over to him right there and kiss him for some reason. I didn't. The door clunked as it unlatched and I pushed it halfway open before I answered, "I'd really like that. I'll see you later."

He didn't respond verbally, but those eyes brightened more than I'd noticed the rest of the evening, even as he was joking and being blunt earlier and making me blush.

As I walked across the short yard my door and unlocked it, Tad's car didn't move. It wasn't until I unlocked the door, disarmed my security and turned back to face outside did I see his car rumble away, slowly and subdued but with the impression of a predator about to pounce. A compressed spring. Rather how I imagined a gryphon would be waiting to surprise an unsuspecting victim. Or a suspecting and begging victim.

Closing the door I leaned against it and sighed, I was tense from the social time, tense from work, and tense from that gryphon. Tad. Why the sudden interest? I'm not sure if I'm going

to avoid him at work now or will things be not weird? I wonder what my boss will think, seeing me flirt with another person. Huh.

Too much to worry about, I decided. I began to venture upstairs to unwind with some cartoons and wine. I'm pretty sure I had some work to catch up on as well.