

Subtle as a Rhinoceros

It's roughly noon at the community college. I'm sitting on one of the many benches in the central plaza, and my eyes are firmly glued to my phone. As pathetic as this pattern of behavior sounds, it is sadly the norm for young adults my age, especially those who have a Reddit account. The problem with being an adult, however, is the niggling sense of duty that tugs at the back of my mind every once in a while. I let out a small sigh, and dutifully open my text messages to confirm the meeting time. “: When your class ends, wait for me in front of Flint. I'll bring you lunch.”

As far as I remember, Sarah* is the only adult with whom I am on a first-name basis. She certainly isn't the type of person you'd expect me to be acquainted with. While I'm not unskilled at navigating social situations, I am still an introvert whose fear of being an unwelcome intrusion into the lives of others far outweighs my fear of being ignored. Meanwhile, Sarah is about as subtle and delicate as a rhinoceros, which is not a trait you'd expect from someone with genius-level intellect. As she tells me, part of the reason why she took an interest in my life is because I'm essentially the opposite of her eldest son Daniel, who is a functional human being with a strong internal sense of responsibility (these are my words, not hers). The other reason is because she was with our family on the afternoon of my mother's death last year. Were it not for that tragedy, she and I might still be mostly strangers to each other. But now it feels like I have a second aunt.

A rhinoceros rarely successfully sneaks up on someone, and I hear the clicking of Sarah's heels way before I see her strutting towards me holding a handbag and a plain, ominous-looking Styrofoam takeout box. “Hey Adam, how are your classes going? And how long have you been waiting here?” she asks, casually sitting down on the bench next to me. “They're going alright, I

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guess”, I mutter in response, “though I feel like when the teacher assigns short stories, I always end up biting off more than I can chew.” “What do you mean by that? Are you choosing really difficult topics and working yourself into a corner?” I do have a habit of doing that, but that’s not this issue in this case: “She actually assigns the topics and we write about them. They’re supposed to be short stories, but as I keep writing, they shape up to be more like novels, and I end up not having enough time to finish.” Not even bothering with flattery, Sarah matter-of-factly states, “You’re not even good enough at writing to finish a novel. Why not set your expectations lower?”

One thing I learned from dealing with Sarah is that all the courtesy that I use when interacting with strangers might as well go out the window. She is extremely blunt with her words, which is surprising considering that she is obviously smart enough to use the amount of tact that most would consider proper. This wildly different approach to human interaction is part of the reason why I find talking to her fascinating, and I find that I’ve loosened up a bit after she invited herself into my life.

“Anyways, I got this lunch from the Chinese restaurant across the street. I’ve never tried that place before, but if it turns out to be good, then you know where to get great Chinese food from now on.” I tentatively open the container and am greeted by a slightly evil-smelling assortment of brownish-purple squid heads, along with a side of noodles and shredded cabbage. Did she just walk in and order the weirdest-looking item on the menu...?

By most people’s standards, I’m not a picky eater, and Sarah knows this. (Maybe it would have been better if she didn’t.) I love squid, but I typically find that it tastes best as sashimi. Also, one typically removes the guts prior to cooking, and judging by the odor, I’m not entirely sure that procedure was followed. “This doesn’t smell too fresh.” “Adam, I brought you

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a free lunch, so the least you can do is say thank you.” “Um, sure. Thanks for bringing me lunch. Did this come with chopsticks?” She hands me a pair of standard disposable chopsticks, one of those that come in a paper sheath that reads *o-temoto*. I swear that she’s eyeing me with a sadistic grin as I take a bite out of the least lumpy-looking squid mantle I could find.

The squid tastes exactly how you’d expect it to taste from the smell, with an added textural surprise from what is presumably planktonic residue in the creature’s gizzard. Thoroughly disturbing.

“How is it?” “Well,” I say, after slowly chewing and swallowing my first mouthful, “this is the sort of culinary masterpiece that needs to be experienced firsthand. Here, you try one.” So Sarah picks up a squid at random and takes a casual bite. With her mouth still full, she mumbles, “At least we got to experience that together.” The noodles were decent, if a bit greasy, so I finished those in silence.

“Aren’t you even slightly embarrassed at bringing me a lunch that turned out to be a total freak show?” “See, Adam, because I brought you lunch and I paid for it out of my own wallet, you don’t have the luxury of complaining about how it tastes. Besides, everything is worth trying at least once. They could’ve turned out to be excellent! You won’t know until you try.”

I don’t have a witty response to this, and part of me knows that she’s right: everyone, especially someone like me who has a small and heavily restricted comfort zone, benefits from taking minor risks. Still, I can’t help but marvel at this woman who, despite being so invested in me, couldn’t possibly care less about whether I had a negative opinion of her. Clearly, I had much to learn from Sarah and her strategy of barreling headfirst through life, virtually immune to the delicate social considerations that cause many women (and at least one fragile 18-year-old male) to live passive lives, content with their everyday routine.

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