

Hang on a Little Tomato

by Eric C. Wat

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In March [2006], my neighbor from the back paid me a visit. Her daughter was playing ball in their yard and the ball was thrown over the fence into my backyard. She wanted to see if I could go back and retrieve the ball for her. “Otherwise, I would have to buy her a new one.” Not wanting to turn down a chance to be neighborly, I said, “Sure” and put on my shoes. As we were walking back, she said that she had come several times but no one was ever home. I said, “If it happens next time, you can always come back yourself and get it. You don’t have to wait for me.”

Then she said, “No, no, no, no, no,” as if I was suggesting something illegal. Again, trying to show her what a cool new neighbor I was, I said, “I don’t care. See, there’s no gate to the back.” Then she fired those no’s at me again.

“Really. I live here by myself. No one is going to say anything.”

Then she looked at me, a little shocked. “Really? You live here by yourself?”

“Yes.”

She went on and asked me what most neighbors on my street had asked me in my first conversations with them since I moved in last August. How many rooms? How much did I pay? She continued to look at me in disbelief. But her looks had nothing to do with what a deal I got. She’s trying to figure out what use I have, as a single person, for a 3-bedroom house and a 30-year mortgage.

The encounter reminds me about my Asian American Sexualities class when we talked about same-sex marriage. We looked at the rhetorics of some proponents of same-sex marriage. My argument in the class goes something like this: Lesbians and gay men have functioned as the deviants in our society. If marriage is a normalization project by which homosexuals make themselves mainstream, someone else would have to be the deviants of our society.

If married homosexuals were just like everybody else, would single people, regardless of sexual orientation, be the new queers of the 21st century?

Perhaps in an attempt to fill up an empty house, I’ve made a new year’s resolution to date more. Some of you might hear me refer to this as “Operation 50 Dates.” (The number is more aspiration than target.) I was doing really well the first two months, amassing 9 dates before the end of February, which put me on par for 54 dates for the year. However, March was the perfect storm,

with classes, work, consulting, and taxes all colliding into one another. Finally, in April, after tax day, I went on date No. 10 -- with a real estate agent who lives and works in Highland Park, my neighborhood. He took me to dinner at a local pizzeria, gave me a tour of Figueroa, and talked to me about smart growth and the shape of things to come in Northeast LA. He's a nice guy and a good link to my community (esp. other gay men in my backyard). But we had very little chemistry. I'm still counting it as a date because, as my friend Deanna said, "You gotta break that double-digit barrier." (Come to think of it, taken another way, that's a little too personal.)

Number 10 must have some symbolic significance like D. said, because sure enough No. 11 followed very quickly. I met this younger Asian guy online and quickly we set up a date for the following Monday. I broke a few dating rules with this guy, probably because he is younger (29), Asian, kinda works in the community, takes public transportation, and laughs at all my jokes on the phone. First, he's the first first date to actually know where I live or see in the inside of my house. Second, I brought him to bowling with my friends from work. Usually, I don't sic dates on my friends unless I feel there is some hope for future dates. And finally - and this one is the most telling - I paid for his dinner, which I almost never ever do. When I pick up a bill, that usually means severance pay.

We were just incompatible before bowling, but the date turned ugly afterwards. First, he asked me to take him to his mother's office "just down the street" to pick up some Noni Juice. Being the doormat that I am, I said yes. He misled me on how far "just down the street" her mother was (12 miles); 12 miles might not be long, unless you were sitting next to a date that should've ended 12 miles ago. On the way, he asked me if one of my friends' boobs were real because they looked pretty perky. We got to the strip mall where her mother's real estate office was. He went inside. Sitting in the car, I had a clear view of him and his mother. I left the engine running at first, then turned it off after 5 minutes but left the radio on. They were still talking and there was no motion of exchanging Noni Juice.

Another ten minutes elapsed, and I got out of the car, went in and asked if we could go soon. They both looked at me and after a pause, he said, sure. I lingered in the lobby, but it became obvious that they started whispering on the account of me being in the next room. I went back to my car, and he came out after 5 minutes with the Noni Juice in his hand.

In the car, he explained to me that he was asking his mother for \$85 so he could pay his car insurance bill (so he wouldn't have to take public transportation, a virtue I had admired), and how his mom refused because she already lent him money for the car already. This was why the whole Noni Juice handover took so long. I didn't ask for any of this information. I had stopped being interested in him for a while now. I just wanted to go home. All I kept thinking was K., the last guy I dated, the recovering crystal meth addict. I was comparing the two of them. It is not a good sign for a date when you compare your date to your junkie ex-boyfriend. I was actually missing K.

Then things got worse.

After he bitched about his mother for another few minutes, he turned to me - and I kid you not - and asked, "You've got pretty good credit, huh?"

I said, "What do you mean?"

"To buy a house, you have to have a pretty good credit, don't you?"

I didn't answer him. I didn't want to hear the follow-up questions. We sat in silence the rest of the way.

And with that, Operation 50 Dates has been shut down indefinitely. I'll be the neighborhood queer for quite some time to come.