

LOVE LETTERS
BY MEREDITH GOLDSTEIN

My 'non-dating' vibe

Q. I'm 31, professionally successful, have good friends, and am involved in some dynamic, rewarding hobbies. By all accounts, dating should not be as hard for me as it has been, but it is. I was a late bloomer — didn't date in high school and had my first kiss at age 19 — and I feel like I've been playing catch-up ever since. The more I fall behind, the harder it feels to catch up to where I feel I should be in terms of overall dating/relationship experience at my age.

I've had a couple of relationships that lasted less than a year that taught me a lot, and some first and second dates (mostly online/app originated) that go nowhere, but otherwise dating just feels like the ultimate white whale that persistently eludes me. I fear that at this point in my life, I somehow unconsciously give off a "non-dating" vibe or something that I can't figure out, and I'm afraid that I'm never going to have the kind of fulfilling, monogamous relationship that I want as part of my life.

This fear ratcheted up recently when I met someone at my new job who really draws my attention. He's smart, seems very kind, and I would really like to get to know him better, but I think he is a bit shy. Sometimes we exchange e-mails that turn into friendly, joking banter that will go on

for a few rounds until one of us drops it. I feel particularly nervous as the new person in the office — dating someone from work has always been something I've preferred to avoid. Plus, I'm terrified that he's just being nice, and that if I tried to take it beyond these safe interactions, he would have to awkwardly tell me he's not interested and I would feel humiliated. My limited experience feels very, well, limiting in this instance. I don't want to miss out on a good thing, but I also feel completely out of my depth here. How do I push past my own insecurities? And how do I figure out if these e-mail flirtations are for real on his end or not?

INEXPERIENCED
AND LOOKING FOR LOVE

A. The thing about experience is that it doesn't necessarily give you any answers. People who've had a string of serious relationships might not be any better at decoding flirtation. In fact, those who've spent much of their adult lives with partners and significant others often feel like they have trouble knowing how to be single. Everyone's inexperienced at something.

There *are* some people who've done a lot of dating and have trained themselves to be less afraid of rejection. They know that if someone isn't interested, it's not the end of the world or an important statement about their worth.

Maybe those date-a-lot people are better at giving off a dating vibe, in general. They might be breezier about saying what they want — that they're looking for companionship — and asking for it. You *can* be that kind of person. Once you say something like, "Hey, I'd love to get together after work," and the world doesn't end, you'll feel empowered to try again.

Dating at work can be tricky, but making friends in the office is a good place to start. You can ask this man to join you out after work with others. Group outings are a great way to connect outside of cubicles, and then, depending on the vibe of the night, you can proceed from there. MEREDITH

READERS RESPOND:

There's no chart for this and there's nowhere to catch up to. You are not required to have a certain number of re-

lationship experiences by a certain age. I don't think it's that you give off a "non-dating vibe," I think you give off a "lack of self-confidence" vibe.

SURFERROSA

There are plenty of nice, shy, and maladjusted men working at other companies.

VALENTINO--

^Exactly! The letter writer should think of how uncomfortable it will be to work there, if the guy says he's not interested. Or, they date for a few months, and then one breaks up with the other. But they're stuck still seeing each other on a daily basis, at work. And, hearing about the other's new significant other, when THAT happens.

GDCATCH

A lot of people are suggesting you do nothing about this guy at work, and focus on finding someone outside of work. I don't disagree, but I also know plenty of people who have met their significant other at work. It can work out, and the reality is, we spend more time at work than any other place, besides maybe home. It's natural to meet

people there.

TWO-SHEDS

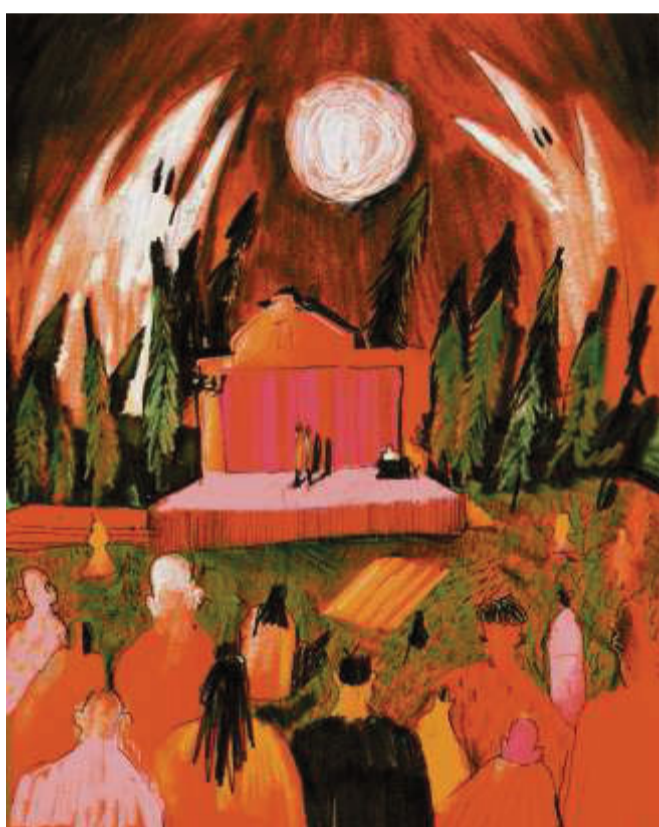
Put it firmly in your mind that this co-worker is just a friend, and then look for opportunities to get to know him more in that role. Coffee or after-work drinks with him and other co-workers, etc. Right now, you know nothing about him really. And it is not worth imploding your job situation over. Think of him as a friend and take things slow slow slow until you have more information to go on.

ENJOYEVERYSANDWICH

^Agree with this; don't think of it as dating, just an opportunity to get to know someone better outside of work. Even if he declines for some reason, it's not the end of the world. While in conversation with a guy at work, I suggested we get together when he mentioned a common interest. He didn't respond. I took that as my answer and it never affected our relationship. I also asked a guy who I met at a friend's party if he wanted my phone number, he said yes and called me. We have been married for 30 years. Sometimes it doesn't work out, but sometimes it does.

GJEL

Column and comments are edited and reprinted from boston.com/loveletters. Send letters to meredith.goldstein@globe.com.



MY INSTAGRAM

Brendan MacAllister

By Chris Triunfo
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Brendan MacAllister (@buzz_macallister) has a lot on his plate. The 25-year-old illustrator spends most of his time working three jobs. During his free time, he's still hard at work. He divvies up his time as a line cook at a restaurant, a custodian at a senior center, and an assistant to Boston-based artist Jesse Khan. From his home in Beverly, MacAllister travels down to the city as much as he can to help Khan, an artist and professor who works with light, fiber, and time. Khan also teaches at MacAllister's alma mater, the Montserrat College of Art. When it comes to his own art, MacAllister spends his time making the illustrations found on his Instagram.

Q. At first glance, your art is incredibly dreamlike. What are some sources of inspiration for your work?

A. My work definitely features a lot of elements that you could also relate to subconscious dream stuff. I'm really into [Sig-

mund] Freud, Carl Jung, and all that stuff. I definitely also just let symbols manifest themselves in my mind, and I'll just suddenly have the urge to paint something. Once I get started, it'll slowly gather more and more meaning. But yes, you're absolutely right, my art is very dreamlike. And it's a lot of fun to make, because I just let my mind draw from anything. I watch a lot of films and read a lot of books, and that all really helps.

Q. A lot of your art deals with and depicts different aspects of the human face. What is it about drawing faces that appeals to you?

A. I think a face is something that can be very easily identified. It just makes any piece of art more approachable. People can look at it and relate to it. Maybe they'll see an expression they've made before or see someone they recognize. It just makes it more relatable. So when things get weird or abstract, like my art usually does, putting a face in there kind of helps to alleviate that a little.

Q. What is your preferred medium?

A. Well I usually switch between traditional graphite or pastel paintings, and then I also work a lot with digital art. Whether I can't make it to the studio or if I don't have the necessary resources, I make digital art as well. But all of these ultimately end up converging and so it's all kind of up in the air with me.

Q. You had a painting recently featured at Nahcotta, a gallery in Portsmouth, N.H. Can you tell me a bit about that piece?

A. So that was a show based on narrative. Every artist featured in that show was given the chance to make a painting based on their favorite story, book, or fairy tale. The first thing I thought of was "Lord of the Flies" by William Golding. So the image I made is a depiction of one of the main characters from the story, Piggy, who was obsessed with bringing fire to the stranded kids for survival. That made me think of Greek mythology, something I also love very much. More spe-

cifically, I thought of Prometheus, who is also known for stealing fire and bringing it to humanity. So the idea of fire and how it relates to this character's arc is very prevalent in this painting.

Q. You're a young artist. Would you say that you have found a set style that you like to work in, or are you still exploring new things?

A. I can't say I'll ever find my style. I feel like that's something that I never want to find. My art is essentially a diary. It may manifest in murky ways, but it's a diary. It's something incredibly personal, so the way I approach it will be very different every time. While I have my tropes, like the use of faces, and the use of particular colors, I always like trying something new. I try drawing from my life and the people in it. I hope my style will always be changing.

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