

full grown people

(THE OTHER AWKWARD AGE)

Cannonballs in Brazil



Photo by Robin Ulset/Flickr

By Scott Gerace

He watched me float on my back naked in the pool, ignoring bar patrons a hundred feet away, sipping vacation cocktails. My new Brazilian friend, Alex, ten years my junior,

hesitated after removing his shirt and shoes. He debated whether to finish disrobing and dip his toes into the aquatic path to passion I'd charted for us.

"Get in. The water's so nice," I urged.

"I come to you," Alex said, with a heavy Portuguese accent.

Since arriving in sun-soaked Key West for ten days of escape from the dating doldrums of New York City, I'd exploited all my bad behaviors—excessive boozing, random hookups, and eating with abandon. But in the chlorine-saturated, clothing optional pool, I started to unravel the rules I often let dictate my adventures in dating.

It had been almost eighteen months since I'd severed a two-year relationship that failed to ignite beyond glorified dating. My ex-boyfriend was a digital journalist, six years younger than me, who'd had only one long-term boyfriend in his thirty-eight years. I toiled away as a financial corporate communications writer, amassing few boyfriends myself by my mid-forties.

My ex Ernie and I met cute via an online dating app. Our first meeting turned one cocktail into three and one date into one month. Dinner dates and flirtation followed. I easily let passion be outplayed by hand holding and perfunctory making out. Soon we were introducing one another as boyfriends at social functions. I met his parents visiting from Costa Rica.

"You must learn Spanish," insisted his mother.

"I know a little from high school and college," I responded.

"Good. Then you will come to Costa Rica."

That trip and my Spanish skills never materialized.

We'd quickly moved from make outs to old married couple, and like many hopeless romantics before us, we soldiered on like dolls controlled by unseen hands acting out romance and contentment.

In our second year, New Year's Eve served as our final act. Nothing during the celebratory night camouflaged my discomfort as I darted from friend to friend with declarations that I was finished—it must end. I deserved a different ending in love, and this wasn't it.

When Ernie leaned over to kiss me the next morning, I said, "Don't ... I want to talk to you. I'm not happy with our relationship."

"Okay," he muttered, then silence. We both lay half-dressed under my covers within inches of each other, clutching our pillows as barriers against an impending war that never

materialized. Ernie wanted time to process. Within fifteen minutes he left my apartment for the last time with an agreement that we would be friends. I gave my boyfriend back to the world, and I gifted myself singlehood during a time in my life when being alone seemed freeing.

After a week of binge-watching Netflix shows and endless dinners by delivery, I embraced the new solo me—searching for love, again—in cinematic New York City where tripping over gay men was as easy as finding a slice of pizza at four in the morning.

Except it wasn't.

An English teacher in Brooklyn seemed like a safe choice until he revealed that his only two great loves, besides his cherished French bulldog, were smoking marijuana and nightly porn viewings. A promising drink with a quiet and cute Buddhist turned into four dates debating how to deal with his third kidney transplant.

Most recently, I forced myself to stay out until 3 a.m., going home with an eager thirty-year-old who I specifically informed was not getting in my pants.

"I'm trying a new approach. No sex the first night," I said.

He agreed to meet the next Wednesday, even asking if I had any dietary restrictions before he selected the restaurant. Then he went AWOL, disappearing into the Bermuda Triangle of men, before resurfacing days after the date that never was.

"What are you up to this weekend?" the thirty-year-old texted.

"Still wondering what happened to Wednesday," I texted back.

"I worked later than expected, so no need to wonder."

I refused to respond.

That's when the argument with my close friend Kel right before the Key West trip bubbled up my unseen rules.

"What did you expect?" Kel said when I described the man who conveniently disappeared on the day of our planned date. "He only wanted to sleep with you."

"He sounded eager to go out and began picking out a restaurant," I said.

Apparently I misread dinner as code for doing it. I started to bemoan my lonely fate.

"Your problem is you have too many rules!" Kel declared.

Hot tears formed at the cusps of my eyelids. I demanded to know my "rules."

“You tend to nix people who embrace their bodies or who expose too much skin in the daylight,” he said. “It’s like you discredit others for being themselves.”

He had a point. It was an approach borne out of my own body image issues, having been an overweight kid who struggled with my weight most of my life. Now as a slimmer adult, the lingering remains of my “yummy tummy” had me quick to resist those who showed real confidence by throwing off their shirts at gay pride events or sunbathing at the beach.

“You refuse attention from men, who, let me say this delicately, aren’t from the U.S.,” Kel continued.

Ouch.

“That’s not quite an accurate assessment,” I protested.

Yes, I did steer clear of the sexy, foreign men I longed for from afar. My personality was self-deprecating at times, and my wicked sense of humor often caused miscommunication. I recalled countless occasions talking in a loud club or even on a quiet date, saying “No, that’s not what I meant” to no avail, as I tried to make a point or crack a joke past language barriers.

“You just don’t let yourself go. You eliminate so many possibilities by wanting things to be perfect,” Kel said. And then to toss a bit of humor into his harsh, judgmental assessment, he added, “And then there’s the ‘no sitting on your duvet’ thing that drives everyone crazy.”

This was well known and true among my circle. I lived in a nice but cozy Manhattan studio, so with the bed as part of the room I demanded it stay maintained like a fine piece of furniture. No getting on top of the duvet cover was a standard rule.

I walked home battle-scarred, sad to think even my friends were looking at me and “tsk tsking” failure they felt I brought upon myself. Back at my apartment, I hovered over my pristine bed until I jumped on top of it in an act of defiance, letting my tears dry on the now crinkled pillowcases I’d want to iron in the morning. Waking up later and seeing what I’d done, I pulled the duvet tighter around me, believing it took baby steps to loosen the grip my unwritten rules had encased around me.

Brazilian Alex became my giant step.

We met at a dark bar midway through my vacation. He brought the brawn and the affectionate smiles. I responded with humor that made him laugh and an openness to letting him put his big hands on the small of my back as he seduced me. Electricity traveled through my body as low rumbles of distance thunder and lightning burst through pockets in the starry night sky.

When I suggested we try the bar across the street, he gleefully followed, taking my invitation as a sign of genuine interest. Confronted with the nude swimming pool at our destination gave him pause and me heart palpitations. No one was more shocked than I when I pulled off my shorts, shoes, and socks. Following a brief hesitation in removing my tee-shirt, I took a plunging leap into nude swimming at this men's-only establishment.

Soon Alex slid off his shorts and underwear in one stealth motion. I turned and swam to the other side. Eager to check out his goods, I felt it was more gentlemanly to give him privacy and leave his manhood reveal as a second act surprise.

"Now!" he yelled.

Out of the corner of my eye I watched Alex tuck his stocky frame tightly in the air and crash into our small oasis like a thrill-seeking cannonball out to cause trouble.

The force of his explosive entry sent a pool tsunami over the back of my head, and I dove under the water to escape. Like a heat-seeking missile, Alex pulled me back up from the deep end, wrapping his beefy hands around me and pressing against my back. My second act surprise was rising from the deep as well.

"Where you go?" he said.

"I'm here ... with you," I said, turning around as he cupped my face and kissed me.

"Yes, you here and I no let you go." And he kept his word.

In order to dry off, I needed to get out of the pool and go to the bar for towels ... naked. While I stood there dripping wet amid the clothed people, modestly trying to cover up with my two hands, he smiled at me from the water, mouthing sweet sentiments on how great I looked.

Once we slid half dry back into the security of our everyday attire, we stood at the bar to get a drink as that late night thunderstorm blew in, showering our Technicolor vacation postcard moment in shades of muddy gray. The tiny awning around the bar did little to shelter us from the driving rain, and I started to feel uncomfortable with a wet tee-shirt sticking to my body.

"It's okay. I protect you," he said.

I wasn't sure what rules I had left to break that night, from the naked swimming to my own wet tee-shirt contest, to finally allowing Alex, this stranger from Brazil, to come to my rented condo, giving into his advances. Taking a chance on him without any hesitation and misplacing my silly mental checklist of dos and don'ts paid off. Somehow he got my sour

sense of humor and my body, and I slept soundly amid his light snoring with his husky body tangled around mine.

Afterwards we met one last time for a drink before departing from our island adventure. I told him, “No sex,” and he said, “No problem, I just like to see you.” A rule, yes, but one we both wanted to follow.

Back home, instead of talking to men on dating apps, I chatted with Alex on Whatsapp. It was how we maintained a daily connection from our respective countries. Our vacation romance remained suspended by memories of moonlight swimming, thunderstorms, the Atlantic Ocean—and over seven thousand miles.

Alex recently sent me links to photos of gorgeous Brazilian beaches dotted with tiny cliffs. People leapt into the teal and bright blue sea. He also reminded me of our time in Key West. “Was like a dream there to me,” he texted. “You are my special crazy American guy.”

He promised to come to the U.S. to visit me soon. Maybe he would. While I can’t quite contain this unexpected excitement, it’s the hardest rule to break—expecting things to be so perfect instead of taking a leap of faith, even if this dream of joining our hearts might never materialize. I’ve leapt into love before and drowned in the process.

“I’m still talking to Alex,” I announced to my friend Kel recently, our tense conversation packed away like many uncomfortable moments among good friends.

“The guy from Brazil who you met on your vacation? Where’s that relationship ever going to go?”

“Who knows?” I responded. “Anything’s possible.”

And in my dreams, it’s more than possible. It becomes reality. When I close my eyes at night, I picture myself perched on the edge of a tiny Brazilian cliff. “Come. The water so nice,” he yells. Alex is waiting there for me, floating in the bluest of oceans. I run and jump high into the warm, heavy air, tuck my legs inside my arms, hold my breath, and wait for the big splash.

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