

# full grown people

(THE OTHER AWKWARD AGE)

## The Kidney Who Came to Dinner



Photo By Gina Easley [www.GinaEasley.com](http://www.GinaEasley.com)

**By Scott Gerace**

“I just had my third kidney transplant.”

He revealed this fact to me on our second date, as I put a forkful of the *insalata di frisee* in my mouth at the Italian restaurant he’d recommended for dinner.

“I’m sorry?” I said, trying to swallow without appearing overwhelmed by the kidney that suddenly arrived at the table.

“Yeah, I don’t like to get into this conversation so soon after meeting someone. But I wanted you to know what’s been going on with me,” he explained.

Rick, or Rican Rick as he called himself on the dating app where we met, was forty-eight, one year older than me, Puerto Rican, balding, bearded, and four inches shorter than my usual preference in potential suitors. Scootercrunch, my online moniker, was newly single after a two-year relationship that soured, dissatisfied with his corporate communications job, and searching for “the real thing” by finally swapping out drunken hook-ups for serious dating.

I hadn’t expected “serious” to translate to a man who spent most of his adult life on dialysis, dealing with one failed kidney after another.

“What else you got?” I joked in an attempt to unpack all his baggage before the entrees arrived.

“Well, I haven’t really worked in seven years.”

And there it was. This attractive man, obviously thin and dealing with a disease, played his whole hand as my roasted chicken and his pasta nudged in between me, him, his kidney, and his unemployment.

The big revelations in gay dating usually consisted of HIV status, recent STDs, favorite sexual positions, and whether or not one of you suffered a serious porn addiction. On a recent date, a middle school English teacher sipped Merlot and plainly announced, “I like to come home after work, smoke a joint, and watch porn.” I immediately sensed I’d be third in line behind weed and over-the-top orgasms. Now that I was confronted with real life problems, I was unsure how to address my feelings about them.

“This is not the man for you,” said my friend James, when I told him about Rick.

“There are some serious red flags going on here,” said my sister during our weekly phone chats.

“Absolutely not! We’ve already had enough death and illness from cancer, let alone bad kidneys.” That was my brother, who begged me not to take on someone with health problems.

Cancer lurked in the shadows waiting to take the next member of the family—at least that was our fatalistic outlook. First our father from brain cancer almost twenty years ago and then more recently our mother after a brutally quick three-month battle with lymphoma.

Our working class parents weren't the care-giving kind. The sympathy gene never made it to the next generation. You had a cold; you tried your best to go to school. God help you if you stayed home with the sniffles and spent time whiling away the hours watching television.

"If I come home and find you had that TV on, you'll get the belt," assured my father.

And he wasn't kidding. He'd march upstairs to press his hand on the back of the TV to determine if any offenders had snuck into our parent's bedroom and watched afternoon soap operas. The trick? Only keep it on until three p.m. so it had an hour to cool before his arrival home.

When our mother struggled with cancer, my siblings and I badgered doctors, questioned nursing home administrators and attempted to rally my mother out of her own feelings of doom. But we already loved her. She wasn't someone new entering our lives.

I often teased my brother that when we got older I'd move in with him and spend our remaining days as brothers drinking and helping each other to the bathroom. "Look pal, it's bad enough you'll live here when you're old, but I'm not taking in some guy with a bad kidney," he concluded.

For Rick, an ongoing battle with renal failure combined with fear of romantic rejection seemed easily outmatched by my battery of questions and confessions of uncertainty on entering this relationship. In his former working life, he managed a career in the mental health field, so I was on the defensive from his comebacks to my questions.

"What would I do if you got sick again?" I inquired.

"Well, Scott, you could easily get sick anytime too." Touché.

I told him to watch out as both my parents died of cancer, and I was surely the next one to be afflicted. He found my sense of humor troubling.

"What happens when I come home from a tough day at the office and I say you don't understand because you don't work?" I hoped being up front and honest would win me points.

"So it sounds to me like Scott would have feelings of resentment," he suggested.

"What about a year from now when you're still not working?"

"You're assuming things will be a certain way a year from now, aren't you?"

He made valid points as I learned how Medicare and a supplemental plan covered his medical bills and how he maintained a living. What I didn't like was his therapeutic approach in response to my honest hesitations.

When he stumbled once in conversation, I joked, “You’re not stroking out on me are you?” A long pause filled the air.

“Don’t tell me you’ve had a stroke before?” I asked.

“Well, they’re not sure what it was,” he replied.

“Are you kidding me?”

He wasn’t.

During my last relationship with a guy six years my junior, we were dating only a few months when an evening of Mexican food resulted in him rushing to the restroom repeatedly with stomach cramps.

“You’ve got a sensitive stomach,” I proclaimed, chalking his boo-boo belly up to the spicy salsa we just ate.

“No, this is not salsa pain. It’s something more serious,” he said.

“You’re fine. Gosh, what are you going to do when you hit your forties like me?”

My poor attempt at a belly pain diagnosis backfired. The next day he summoned me from work as they wheeled him from the ER into the operating room to remove his swollen appendix. All the while he glared at me with an unspoken “I told you” from underneath the silly surgical hat crammed on to his head. Any ache or pain announced during the rest of our two-year courtship immediately ignited my fears, and I quickly encouraged him to see a doctor or head straight to urgent care.

Our love story already had begun taking shape when the appendix appeared right after that chips and salsa appetizer. And, that was not a chronic illness defined by stages and the possibility of failure. My former boyfriend’s appendix wasn’t making a comeback. Kidney failure, on the other hand, remained a possibility for Rick.

I started to question my goodness and whether I was a bad person for wanting to pass him over because of his maladies or lack of current career mobility. As a grown adult I confessed to ending brief affairs of the heart by ignoring calls or texts or coming up with transparent excuses. It was hard to hate yourself for following a dating blueprint adopted by millions of others. But meeting a truly genuine and honest person confronting real-life struggles and dismissing them outright seemed cruel.

I agreed to another date.

In between our meetings, Rick wondered aloud about sex and when we'd explore physical affection. I kept things strictly above the waist and insisted that somewhere between date three and date ten "something surely was bound to happen."

But it didn't.

Sunday brunch and casual shopping served as our third date's agenda. He arrived fifteen minutes late, a pattern I noticed once the kidney and career conversations took a back seat. Before settling on a selection or deciding on a non-purchase, he subjected every waiter or retailer to a multitude of questions and follow-ups. He complimented my good skin repeatedly as if nothing else interesting about me stood out. My humor, Rick pointed out, wasn't always necessary, and I needed to listen more and talk less.

I wasn't a bad person, simply someone on a bad date ... a third one of my own making. Forget the kidney, and possibly a stroke. No burning romance ignited inside my heart. There was a sense of emotional availability for sure; we certainly talked about his feelings and what he needed. What my brain forgot was why I started seriously dating again in the first place.

I yearned for a true meaningful connection with another man who complimented my late forties skin, yes, but also my wicked sense of humor and my ambitions. I didn't need analysis—and while the thought of dialysis didn't exactly excite me—I did need some stirring below the waist to know that sex wasn't going to wait until date ten.

I agonized over how to tell Rick my heart just wasn't in it. Friends told me to get over it and rip the band-aid off now, and early, before feelings took shape or sex slipped in to fill the expected next step I swerved to avoid.

We met a final time a week later, having already purchased theater tickets in advance. I waited between nervously devouring the guacamole and paying the bill to tell Rick that this felt more like a friendship than a budding romance. He listened, of course.

"How do you feel about it?" I prompted him.

He paused for a few minutes before replying. "You know. I think we have very different communication styles."

It felt like the first real connection and mutual agreement we had since meeting.

After the show we chatted briefly on a cold, windy street corner and hugged goodbyes, promising to stay in touch. We haven't. I watched him confidently walk down the street, moving on to the next adventure life held in store for him, and I did the same.

I was hung up on his physical ailments and lack of a job too quickly, which delayed my discovery of the real issue—our incompatibility. It wasn't so much about health or career. Of course they mattered when taking in the whole of a potential mate. And yet, it really did come down to the fact that we simply had no chemistry. Rick wasn't right for me or I for him. Someone needed to say it and save us both from grasping for companionship so blindly rather than patiently staying single.

Truthfully, the kidney mattered too. I wasn't ready to love someone who brought renal failure as a possible third wheel in our relationship. But with Rick, I hope I did my best to take care of his heart while I practiced stretching mine.

SCOTT GERACE is a corporate writer by day and an essayist by night. He currently resides in New York City. His essays have appeared in *The Washington Post* and *Purple Clover*.