

OBSESSION: A Compulsive Love Story

A tricky word. A troubling word. An untrue word.

Nine letters (an odd number) must be neutralised by a three-way split: *obs-ess-ion*. Except that in this case, the syllables don't align with the pronunciation: *ob-ses-sion*. This is, of course, unthinkable: a 2-3-4 sequence is dangerous and itchy (*twitchy, glitchy*), while 3-3-3 - *treble trio! slot machine alignment! triple word score!* - is safe.

As I hurried home after my first date with Hannah, it struck me: *the letters and syllables don't align! They'll never harmonise! They can't be reconciled!*

I was convinced it didn't bode well.

Then again, I reflected, it was the 22nd of April - 22 days after my birthday. (22: two figures fitting together. Auspicious.) She'd brought me a present which, to my alarm, made me feel something approaching happiness (I find the threat of happiness intensely stressful).

"Go on, why don't you open it while I'm hanging up my jacket. That way we can both pretend this isn't awkward. Ha!"

Oh no! A lopsided laugh, hanging in the air like an unbalanced scale. Her hair was uneven, too: a side parting, strands tucked haphazardly behind one ear. Ominous. Her features were beautifully aligned, though.

"Thanks," I managed, muttering an echo of "*thanks, thanks*" under my breath. I winced. Had she noticed the repetition? If not, how long before she'd spot the ones that were bound to follow (*hollow, swallow*)?

Fumbling with the wrapping paper, I pulled out a small box and blinked repeatedly at the word stamped across it: OBSESSION. My mind whirred. Aftershave was a generous gift, of course; but why had she chosen this one, of all brands? Did she know about my condition? Was this a cruel joke? Doubt descended like fog.

Hannah returned, tucking her chair under the table and her hair behind her ear at the same time. *Awkward* is a word I hate because nothing rhymes with it, and she reminded me of it now. The fog thickened.

“So,” she blurted. “It’s great to finally meet you after all that messaging.”

She was gazing right at me - into me. Such symmetrical eyes! The fog lifted a little.

She blinked herself out of her reverie before glancing down and adding:

“You’re one hell of a wordsmith, even over Facebook.”

If she only knew why! Each message I’d sent had been deliberately crafted, scanned for safe letter clusters, alphabetised where possible. I recalled one of our early exchanges, when so much was riding on my responses that I’d only dared reply in multiples of three:

Hannah: Hey Josh! You OK?

Me: I’m fine, you?

Hannah: Bored ha. Up to much?

Me: I’m at work. I fix clocks, watches and stuff. It’s my dad’s business, I just help out sometimes. Slow today, though - feels like I’m just killing time!

Hannah: Ha! Very witty ;)

Me: I thought it was actually pretty shitty, not witty...

Back to the present.

I stared at the aftershave bottle. "I love it," I lied carefully.

"I was just wondering... what made you agree to this date?" She lingered over her words flirtatiously. (Or was it anxiously? Why couldn't I read this girl - any girl?)

"Your name," I replied, hesitant. "Hannah. It's a palindrome. I love... I think palindromes are cool."

Palindromes had always been a balm to my analysis-inflamed mind. Balanced, satisfying, unthreatening. For years I'd dreamed of meeting an Anna, an Ava - or an Eve, to join me in paradise. (Ironically, it was probably "jokes" like this that kept the Eves away and the days at my dad's shop ticking by.)

Her eyes widened almost imperceptibly. Almost. "Right."

She scanned the first page of her menu distractedly, then clapped it shut.

"I'm sorry," she half-whispered, "but I have to get this off my chest now. Mine's hypochondria - you know, health anxiety. What's yours?"

We'd "met" in a mental health awareness Facebook group. We must have covered every conceivable topic in our month of pre-date messages - except this.

"OCD," I managed, my voice catching in my throat. And then: "OCD, OCD." I barely breathed, terrified that she'd heard the last two.

She exhaled raggedly. "Right, okay. That's cool."

I smiled back for the first time.

A waiter approached, his sluggish gait suggesting he'd been on the job for too long - and probably wouldn't be in the job for much longer.

"Know what you want?" he drawled with staggering indifference.

"I just wanted to know..." Hannah began. The waiter sagged visibly. "Is it possible to have the lamb well done? Just 'cause... well, sometimes there's a parasite in rare lamb..."

The waiter sighed, his eyes glued resolutely to his notepad. "Potentially."

"Well... could you check, maybe?" Hannah persisted.

Our surly server made for the kitchen, his eagerness to ensure the quality of the lamb not quite matching Hannah's.

"So," Hannah resumed, "do you mind if we talk about your OCD? I mean... is it washing your hands? Flicking light switches, checking locks...?"

I bristled. Such clichés!

"No, I don't mind germs at all. I... need to make patterns. From words, with numbers..."

I faltered. What would happen if I told her the truth? That I had a morbid fear of all odd numbers except three, my safe number; that too many imbalances made my head hurt; that I feared I was mad?

Instead, I picked up the aftershave and forced a smile. "You know me so well already."

The rest of that evening passed in a blur (*slur, whirr*). All I remember is lying in bed that night, trying to add up all the details of her, all her elements and idiosyncrasies, to see what they amounted to and whether they represented something safe or threatening.

"Tell me more about yourself, Josh. I want to know something new."

It was our second date, just three days after our first. Somehow, despite the fact I'd spent that first night in a daze (*haze, craze*), she'd wanted to meet again - and soon. I wondered when things were going to go wrong.

Her left hand tightened over my right. To redress the balance, I covered her right hand with my left. (*Paper beats rock.*) She seemed to enjoy this, though the nature of her enjoyment was probably romantic rather than geometric.

Our favourite waiter drifted reluctantly over.

“Hello, us again!” Hannah trilled merrily.

The waiter made no sign of recognition. Or life.

“I’ll have the lamb - *well done*, please,” Hannah added emphatically.

I decided to try something. “You know, I’ve always preferred my lamb medium,” I shrugged. “Juicier than well done, and guaranteed to kill any... parasites.”

Hannah frowned, evidently wrestling with some inner thought.

“Okay,” she nodded. “Medium, please.”

The waiter’s hand slackened on his jotter. “D’you mean you want me to cross out well done and put medium instead?” He sounded exhausted at the prospect.

“If... that’s okay?”

The waiter took the rest of our order in defeated silence before trudging off, a broken man.

Hannah watched him go, preoccupied, before catching my eye and brightening.

“What’s the wildest, most random thing you enjoy, Josh?” Hannah beamed expectantly.

I considered this. “Brackets.”

“Brackets?” She stared. “You mean... shelf brackets?”

“No.” Was she mad? “I mean parentheses.”

No reaction.

“In sentences.”

Nothing. I decided to elaborate.

“They’re symmetrical. Sort of... a question with a guaranteed answer.” Hannah’s face was motionless, so I looked away and continued: “Like bookends. Or alpha and omega. Or your name. And I like the fact that the words inside them aren’t so important. Once something’s in brackets, it’s not overwhelming. They loosen me up a bit. I suppose... they let me live a little.”

Silence followed, broken eventually by Hannah’s raucous laughter.

“Brackets let you live a little! Punctuation lets you party! Oh, Josh.”

She squeezed my hand even harder. I squeezed back.

“Well,” she giggled, “it’s your turn to embarrass me. You haven’t asked me anything about myself!”

I flinched - she was right. I wanted to know all about her, but I couldn’t concentrate for long enough to ask.

“Nah, it’s okay,” she added. “You’re so attentive to everything. In your own way.”

I nodded. It was all I could do.

“I like the bookends thing,” she mused. “Which are you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Which bookend or bracket are you - opening or closing? And which am I?”

On my way to meet Hannah for our third date (two days later), I ran through my inner database of previous relationships. It went something (or, in fact, exactly) like this:

1. Clare Daniels, 3rd April 2013 - 6th April 2013.

Reason for relationship breakdown: Kissing in batches of three was giving her chapped lips.

2. Serena Bianchi, 9th July 2014 - 26th July 2014.

Reason for relationship breakdown: Our summer camp fling was doomed as she spoke almost exclusively Italian. The word patterns were so difficult to understand that I spent our lazy summer evenings in a constant state of calculation.

3. Zoe Spencer, 21st October 2014 - 1st March 2015.

Reason for relationship breakdown: Someone else. I knew nothing about him, except that he was apparently “not mental”.

4. Natasha Joseph, 1st June 2016 - 15th February 2017.

Reason for relationship breakdown: She enjoyed my OCD a bit too much. Bragged about it to her friends, encouraged me to “embrace it” at least once a day.

5. Cecelia Ricci, 4th April 2017 - 19th November 2018.

Reason for relationship breakdown: We were deeply in love, until she witnessed my first (and hopefully last) “episode”. I was studying Linguistics and Cee came home one day to find me pacing the room, repeating word patterns so fast they were indecipherable. What followed was a hazy stint in hospital, somewhere in the midst of which Cee decided she couldn’t handle it.

Five months and one repeat prescription later, here I was on 27th April 2019, hoping I may soon be able to add Hannah’s name to the list. She would bring it up to an even number - double three! Happiness wasn’t so daunting when I could ground it in maths.

As I wandered to the restaurant I pictured Hannah in the role of therapist, leaning across the table and demanding with professional detachment:

“Josh, are you aware that these pseudo-logical compulsions are irrational?”

Of course I am, Hannah.

“And does this awareness stop you from pinning all of your conviction on their meaning and significance?”

Not for a moment.

She was there when I arrived, leaning on the bar. I began to hurry over - but something was wrong. Her head drooped. My relationship rundown flitted through my mind, its sixth entry fading like self-erasing ink.

“Hannah, hi,” I said quietly.

“Josh.” She gazed absently at the bar, a world away. Then:

“I’m waiting for test results.”

“What sort of test?”

Another pause. “A blood test. For cancer. They’re always negative, and I know it’s unlikely that I’d have it, I know that... I just can’t shake the feeling that I do.”

We said nothing for a long time.

“Mental, eh? I suppose that’s it for us, then,” she added, glancing up at me.

I couldn’t understand it. How could I have been so wrapped up in numbers and letters and details, when Hannah had been just across the table, afraid all along?

And then, in my head, out poured the longest string of words I’ve ever produced off the cuff:

“Hannah, everything will be okay. We’re so alike, you and I - not so much that we clash, but enough to understand each other without judgement. I don’t want us to be bookends, or brackets - I want you to show me how to think and feel and live without brackets. And I’ll help

you until you don't feel the need for any more tests. You're not mental - I'm not mental. We're just... us."

As I stood there by her side, I realised all I had to do was open my mouth and speak - not in stops and starts, but fluently and with feeling. Could I do it?

Do it, do it, do it.

"Hannah..." I began.

Word count: 1998