

A Perfect Match

Connor's friends loved to talk about the dystopian stories where men lived alone. Jon would rave on about the horrors of even considering not being in a relationship for even one second of his life. Connor would sit in silence until Jon realized the dystopian world he was describing was Connor's reality.

His name was Nick. He was the man whose job it was to do the simple task of assigning pairs before the brain developed. It was a Tuesday when Connor's destiny of being single was sealed. Nick woke up to his wife's snores two hours before the sun rose. The snoring kept him up every night but there was nothing he could do. It was all part of his assigned plan. So Nick sat up in bed and took his morning shower, barely able to keep his eyes open as the weak stream of the warm water pelted his chest for thirty minutes. He stepped one foot out of the shower, feeling around for the towel he had laid on the ground. His right foot met the towel and when he went to raise his left, his heel went out from under him.

Nick opened his eyes to the sight of Liz pointing at him and yelling.

"Quit being dramatic and get up for work," she was saying as Nick regained consciousness.

He felt the lump on the back of his head before he could locate it with his hand. The throbbing sensation continued as he sat in traffic that morning. It was going to be a long day.

Connor didn't get to enjoy whatever it was his friends raved about, but at least he never had to work. His weekly check from the government wasn't enough for him to do much besides enjoy the occasional night out, but life for one was much cheaper than the usual one for two.

"I saw a movie the other day," began Jon, "where the main character's match left him. She just said she didn't want to be with him anymore and walked out the door. Can you imagine?"

"I can't imagine because as you are well aware, that could never happen to me," said Connor.

"Hey, this time I'm not picking on you. It couldn't happen to me either, I was just curious what you think of it," said Jon.

"I think if someone doesn't want to spend their life with someone else, they shouldn't have to. Just look at Ross, he's miserable with Samantha."

"See, you just don't get it. He may seem miserable, but it's all part of the process. You are just negative cause you're so used to being alone."

Connor often found himself lying awake at night in his one-room apartment, looking to the empty side of his bed and wondering what could have been. He would think about what color her hair would have been. How her laugh would have sounded. But then he would hear how stressed his friends were and never knew whether he should hate or love the man who altered his destiny.

Nick got to work that Tuesday morning and immediately ran to the coffee maker. He could barely keep his eyes open and was hoping it was due to Liz's snoring as opposed to any

newfound brain damage from his fall. He was waiting for the coffee to brew when Jennifer came in with an empty mug.

“She snore again?” asked Jennifer.

“Is Jerry an asshole?”

Jennifer nodded in understanding at the mention of her husband and leaned against the gray countertop that housed the coffee maker. It had only been one year since she had come home to find her husband passed out upon the remnants of their coffee table. She nearly sliced her toe off when she ran up to him and discovered the glass was not from the table, but from one of ten smashed bottles.

“Anything special we need to do today?” asked Nick. “Or are we just making more happy matches?”

“Just making more future versions of ourselves,” said Jennifer with a forced smile on her face.

Connor was the first child in eighty years to grow up without his match and no one really knew what to do with him. The sympathetic ones suggested he be put out of his misery before he realized he would be forever alone. The more traditional individuals refused such a barbaric idea, but even they had no realistic plan for his life. Government officials decided upon giving him a weekly stipend until the day he died.

The only single man alive was assigned to his parental units along with Jon and Adeline. His assigned parents, Mark and Maggie, agreed to take in Connor after they were promised his stipend until he turned 18 and all three kids moved out of the house on the same day. Connor

watched his parents teach Jon and Adeline how to be dependent upon one another for a task as simple as brushing their teeth. Connor would look on in confusion at why the two were so co-dependent. He spent his days alone most of the time, riding his bike around his neighborhood and seeing those his age only appear in pairs.

Adeline first told Connor she loved him instead of Jon the day all three turned sixteen years old. For years she would sneak out of her room once Jon fell asleep and go into Connor's room to talk with him about anything. Yet it wasn't until their sixteenth birthday that she shared her feelings.

"I know," said Connor after she told him her true feelings.

"Do you love me back?" she asked.

"Adeline, I'll always love you, but not in that way. I don't allow myself to open up that way because I know it will never last with anyone I will ever love. At no point in my life will I openly be allowed to be in love with anyone. If I am, I might be killed."

That day also marked the last time Adeline ever said more than three words to Connor at any time.

Nick finished brewing his coffee and headed to the lab with Jennifer. He never loved his job, but he still understood its importance. Without him, society as he knew it would collapse. He set his coffee down and looked over the sea of petri dishes that would become the next generation to lead society. He wondered who among the group would take his job one day, hoping they would end up with a better match than he did. He looked over at Jennifer as she put on her white apron and tied her blonde hair up in a ponytail, wondering why it wasn't her who he

was matched with. They were both so alike, yet all they could find the breath to talk about was how awful their lives were at home. Nick decided he would tell Jennifer how he felt on Wednesday, as he was just too tired on that Tuesday morning to articulate any thoughts other than how miserable his life was. He determined that wasn't a great vibe to open up a conversation about how much he loved her.

"I hope all these people end up in love," said Jennifer as she surveyed the room.

Nick was looking over two petri dishes, one marked "Connor" and the other marked "Sarah" when he went to turn around to respond to Jennifer. He had a thought on his mind but it was quickly destroyed by the sound of the shattering glass at his feet. That sound was replaced by the shrieking coming from Jennifer, who looked at Nick in horror just 24 hours before he was to profess his love for her.

"We have to tell someone," screamed Jennifer as she began to scoop up the few cells that belonged to Connor's match.

"Maybe I should just break this other one too," said Nick as he stared at a petri dish that he believed would become a man lonelier than himself.

"Get away from that dish, Nick," said Jennifer.

"I could just say both broke at the same time," said a distant Nick.

Jennifer inched closer to Nick and grabbed the petri dish labeled "Connor" with two hands and backed away. She set it down carefully behind her and walked up to Nick and put her hands on his shoulders.

"Nick, it was a mistake," she said. "Let's come up with a story to tell Rick."

“I love you,” whispered Nick as Jennifer walked away from him to clean up the mess on the floor. She did not hear him say it, and never would.

The two went to see Rick, the manager of the plant, and shared the details of how they came in and a dish was already shattered on the floor. Rick panicked but came to the conclusion that a rat had gotten in and knocked it over, although he didn't believe it himself. He saw how nervous Nick looked and told him to go home for the rest of the day. It wasn't until the next day that Nick was informed he would be let go due to the clear security footage in the lab. Jennifer called him the next day and told him she knew about the cameras but wanted to calm him down in the moment. She didn't want him to do something he would regret. Nick was about to tell her he loved her when Liz came into the room and demanded to know who he was on the phone with.

“It's Jennifer,” he said, covering up his phone.

“You better hang up now or I'm going to tell her how I feel about her,” said Liz.

Jennifer could hear Liz's voice on her end and told Nick she would talk to him later. Nick hung up and told Liz that he had been let go.

“What did you do now?” she asked.

“I killed someone,” he said.

“It's a shame no one did that to me before I was born into this mess,” she said.

Nick shrugged, wondering why it couldn't have been his petri dish knocked over instead of the woman who would have been known as Sarah.

Connor woke up the morning he was to appear on television to meet the man who made him single for life. He rolled over and saw Denise, one of the countless widows who spent some of her nights in Connor's bed. He saw her as she got dressed and walked out his door. Denise, like the others, still felt wrong about coming to Connor's place, but he tried to tell them there was no shame in trying to be happy for a change. Once she left he got up and realized he had about thirty minutes to get ready before this interview he only agreed to after seeing the money he was being offered. He had never appeared on television before, but people knew about him. Those outside of his friend group would see him walking by himself through town, his hands in his pockets and his eyes looking down, doing his best to be invisible. He got the occasional stare or question if he really was the famous matchless man, but most of the time people left him alone because they felt bad for him. Connor never understood that. It was not like he was living in solitary confinement.

He remembered the first time one of the widows showed up at his place. He was walking back to his apartment after a day at the park and noticed he was being followed. He turned around and saw a woman twice his age.

"You want to come in?" asked Connor.

The woman seemed surprised that he had not said more but she nodded and followed Connor inside his apartment building. The two walked to his door in silence and he motioned for her to sit on his bed, as it was his only piece of furniture. He stood by his mini fridge and grabbed a beer.

"You want one?" he asked the woman.

She shook her head and continued staring at him.

“If you were wondering, I am indeed the guy without a match. But I’m assuming you already know that.”

“How do you do it?” the woman asked.

“Do what?”

“Live all alone. My match has been dead for two years but I still can’t sleep at night. I can barely even get through each day without thinking about him. Don’t you think about what your life would be like if you had a match?”

“What’s your name?” asked Connor.

“Addy,” she replied.

Connor smiled, thinking of Adeline and chalking the situation up to a coincidence. He didn’t believe much in fate.

“I do wonder about it,” he began. “I too sit up at night and think about it and it crosses my mind almost every day. But what am I going to do? Sit around and mope because I have to be independent? I see so many people miserable with their matches and I never have to feel that way.”

Addy began coming over Connor’s place every Tuesday night. The two would talk about Richard, who was Addy’s match before he had a sudden heart attack and died while going on a jog to try to get back in shape after years of ignoring his health. Addy would also ask Connor for life advice, even though she was twenty years his senior. The two never hung out in public, but they would exchange smiles when they passed each other on the street.

Denise began coming over Connor's every Thursday after she bumped into Connor at the park one day. He answered her stare with confirmation that he was who she thought he was, and she asked if he was free that night.

A similar trend began to emerge as the years passed and Connor was the only eligible bachelor in the world. Whether it be through word of mouth or chance meetings, he had at least thirty different women over to his place, even though only ten ever came over a second time.

Connor figured his appearance on television would cause another stream of women to seek him out, although other men may be more wary of what he was up to. Making his identity known to the world was not ideal, but Connor couldn't turn down the chance to make some extra money and move out of the same apartment he had lived in for years. He hoped he could move to another city, one far away from where he was now. He dreamed of getting a dog and living near the water, away from others. He was tired of weaving through couples every time he had to go somewhere. One hour on camera would give him that ability, he just hoped it would all go smoothly.

Nick woke up in a cold sweat the day of his television appearance. He had no intentions of doing it until his name was leaked as the man who forced Connor to be without a match for his entire life. His new job as a consultant for his former company allowed him to avoid the angry crowds outside who were outraged that a poor individual had to live without a match. It was Jennifer who got him the job, as Nick did have great knowledge on the subject of reproduction engineering. He made significantly less money than before, but it was enough that Liz stopped calling him a failure at least once a day.

“If you’re so great at engineering matches, how come there are so many matches who hate each other?” Liz had asked him one day.

“We go off certain personality traits, but the human brain is a dynamic machine,” he said.

When he had his old job he had gone into the records to look up his own match with Liz. The two were paired up due to a mutual prospective likelihood of being laid back and quiet types. He took it upon himself that day to devote himself to his work so no one would have to live in misery like he did. It was why he was so nervous the day of the television appearance. After swearing to help future matches, he had to face a man who was forced to live a life that was worse than having a bad match. He had to live without one.

It was not the money he sought when he agreed to the television appearance, but rather a chance to see how the guy turned out. His thoughts ranged from the matchless man being a homeless beggar to someone who was riddled with rage, living in an institution and hidden from the world.

Nick made his way toward the television studio by himself, as Liz was too ashamed to be seen in public with her infamous match. He was nervous but he was ready to come clean and apologize.

Connor was whistling as he walked down the empty street to the studio. Everyone was packed inside, awaiting his appearance. If only they had waited outside, they could have met him in person. He reached the building and stepped inside and heard the stirring of the studio audience that featured individuals who camped out for days to get a chance to see this encounter. It was the destroyer talking to the victim, a television event for the ages. Connor had no

reservations about letting everyone down with the truth. A woman at the front desk stared at him for a few seconds in shock, before someone came out of a side door and realized who he was.

“Right this way, Connor,” the young woman dressed in all black wearing a headset said to him.

“Do you want any makeup? the woman asked.

“Makeup?” asked an amused Connor. “I’m not here to impress anyone so I think I’ll just go with how I look like normally.”

The woman blushed in embarrassment and led him to a back room. There was a black leather couch against a back wall, with a large mirror next to it. He pictured people coming in the room and fixating on their appearance until everything was just right. Connor simply looked in the mirror and flicked away a piece of dry skin that was hanging from his cheek. The woman in the headset appeared again.

“You’re going on in five minutes,” she said. “Is there anything I can get you before then?”

“Do you have any apples here?” asked Connor.

“An apple? Like, the fruit?”

“That would be the one.”

The woman backed out of the room and came back a minute later with an apple, which Connor finished thirty seconds before the woman came in to tell him it was time to go on set. He tossed the apple core in the trash can in the room and followed the woman, who was saying something into her headset. He saw a man head through a door ahead of him and heard a loud

“boo” come from the crowd on the other side. Connor assumed the reaction would be different when he appeared.

Nick was pacing in his dressing room when a woman in a headset came to tell him it was time to go on set. He looked at her and realized he was breathing heavily.

“Um, are you alright?” she asked without much concern in her voice.

Nick nodded, realizing he couldn't continue hiding from the person that haunted him at night. The woman led him to a door and he could hear the crowd outside. She opened the door and held out her arm as a signal for him to enter. He stepped through the door and was met with more hate than he had ever encountered at home.

“You're a monster.”

“You've stolen a life.”

“Murderer.”

Nick heard it all but he focused his eyes on the host of the show, who was motioning for Nick to come to a chair that was set out in the middle of the room. Nick sat in one chair and the host sat to his left, with an empty chair ready to be filled by whoever the petri dish labeled “Connor” had become.

“Everyone, please calm down,” said the host to the irate crowd. “We must give Nick a fair chance to explain himself. So let's not delay this any further. Let's bring out Connor.”

The crowd fell silent in anticipation of a man they had unknowingly passed in the streets countless times. Some had seen him before but most were too occupied with their match to even consider wondering about anyone else. Nick closed his eyes and waited for Connor's arrival. He

felt sick but it was too late to turn back. He heard a door open behind him and the roar of the crowd. He let out his breath and turned around.

Connor walked through the door and was met with a standing ovation from the crowd. He saw tears flowing among those who were clapping, all there with a match. He saw the man he was there to confront and realized just how terrified the man looked. Connor smiled at him and took his seat as the crowd continued to applaud.

“Connor,” said the host as the crowd finally sat down, “I want to start off with a simple question. How important is this meeting for you?”

“It’s not really important to me at all,” said Connor.

The crowd roared with laughter to relieve the nervous energy but stopped once Connor did not respond with laughter of his own.

“I mean, isn’t there anything you want to say to this man who caused you to be without a match? To sleep alone every single night and wonder what could have been?”

“I don’t sleep alone every night,” said Connor. “In fact, I haven’t gone one week in the past two years without a woman spending the night.”

The crowd gasped as one and so did the host. Nick dropped his feelings of dread and looked up at Connor with a grin on his face.

“But,” began the host, “it is forbidden for a woman with a match to be with anyone else.”

“Oh, I only sleep with widows,” said Connor as the crowd gasped even louder this time.

“Widows?” screamed the host. “They are supposed to mourn the loss of their match and reflect on the great times they shared.”

Connor shook his head and looked at Nick, who was staring at him attentively.

“This is the problem with everyone,” said Connor. “You all wanted to see me come out and talk about how miserable I am and about how the man across from me sentenced me to a life of solitude and sadness. Instead, I want to thank him for giving me a life where I am able to live free from the will of any other person.”

Connor heard a few people crying in the audience as the host scrambled through the cards in his hands to search for something to say to save the show.

“Nick,” said the host as a card fell to the floor, “what is your response to this?”

“You’re welcome,” said a smiling Nick to Connor, who answered with a nod and a smile of his own.

People in the crowd began filing out the exit doors after two minutes of the scheduled hour-long show.

“I’m sorry to be a disappointment,” said Connor in the direction of those leaving. “But what did you expect from the man without a match?”

The host watched the crowd file out and stood up.

“Everyone, I apologize for what has happened here today.”

“I better still get all my money,” said Connor as Nick’s laugh roared in the background.

Connor and Nick emerged from the studio an hour later after the crowds died down. They entered an empty street, as everyone who had watched went home with their matches, holding each other tight and swearing they wouldn’t end up like that lonely fool. Connor led the way back to his apartment and cracked open two beers.

“So you are happy?” asked Nick, sitting on the floor next to Connor’s bed.

“I’m happier than you are,” said Connor without any hint of sarcasm.

“That’s for sure,” said Nick as he took a sip of beer with the happiest man he had ever met.

“I know all matches aren’t miserable,” said Connor, “but I’m kinda glad I get to figure out life on my own. All of you have to stay with one person, yet I meet interesting people all the time.”

The two talked late into the night when Nick finally left. He was smiling as he walked home, and held the emotion even as he entered his house and was met by an angry Liz.

“What the hell was that?” she screamed at him.

“Do you even remotely like me?” he asked her.

“It doesn’t matter how I feel, we are a match,” she said.

“But if you had the chance, even for just an hour, would you want to be with another man?”

“Nick, you need to stop this nonsense. I’m going to bed and I don’t want you to even think of coming upstairs tonight. Sleep on the damn couch.”

She stormed upstairs but Nick remained calm and walked over to his phone. He remembered what Connor had said to him as the two laughed in the messy studio apartment.

“If you truly love this woman, you should tell her. Damn the rules and damn Liz. If you never tell her you will be more alone than I ever was.”

Nick felt inspired so he picked up his phone and dialed Jennifer's number. He had not spoken to her in months, but he was sick of wasting away with his so-called perfect match. He dialed her number and heard a man's voice answer.

"Who is this?" said the man.

"It's Nick, is Jennifer there?"

The man was Jerry, Jennifer's match.

"I figured you would call here after that scene you made," said Jerry. "You think Jennifer never told me about how you felt about her? You think she never knew? Oh, that's just sad."

"Can I please speak with her," said Nick, who was growing impatient.

"The answer is no," said Jerry. "In fact, you can never speak to her again. She never wants to hear your voice so don't try calling again. And if I see you ever get near my house, I'll beat your face in right in front of her."

Nick went to say something but realized Jerry had hung up the phone. He held the phone in disbelief as he heard Liz stomp down the stairs.

"Nick, have a spine and come upstairs," she said before she stormed back up the stairs.

"Ok," Nick mumbled in response as he began walking up the stairs. He opened the door and saw Liz laying with her back turned toward him. He got in bed next to her and laid on his back, staring up at the ceiling.

"I'm sorry," he said to her.

"Oh Nick, please shut up I'm trying to sleep," said his perfect match.