

Goose & Cabbage

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Situations in which I am an anonymous stranger adding to a mass of people bring one truth to the front of my mind. Standing underground amongst the other individuals waiting for the number two train into the city, it came to me for neither the first nor last time: I am a human. The ease with which I think of people as observations from a distribution, far from identical and almost surely dependent, is often frightening. A reminder that our existence carries itself further is often welcome, although this idea tends to spar with the thought that I am just another datum.

On this particular occasion I, perhaps due to entertainment provided by the rhythmic individual with the small drum kit in the middle of the platform, I embraced what was in store. I found myself eager to take the short train trip toward a romantic evening. Three days prior, a pattern of half-hearted concerns about time management and recurring responsibilities became acquiescence. A coworker swore she knew the right woman for me, one I had exchanged greetings with at a previous social function. Neither impression could have been negative, as she agreed to the rendezvous. The fact that it wasn't a blind date certainly facilitated my growing excitement for the event, as did not knowing anything about the other individual. Certainly, my brain spent time and effort weighing the risk involved with the scenario, and found the reward to be heavier. Trying to gain a companion for life, this is what we do as humans. Something all of us have observed in our lifetimes, just as I did while waiting.

Couples exchanging, experiencing, and existing in unison. Connected by some invisible aether only the two of them can feel, strong enough to keep them together during the shifting of bodies as the train arrived. The lackadaisical mob collectively focused its attention on the distant noises signaling a nearing locomotive. Some save their spot, some begin to approach the edge of the drop down to the tracks and lean to look in the direction of the gradually brightening lights, some can still be seen coming through the turnstiles. Another reminder, that

we are a jigsaw puzzle with randomly defined inner edges that somehow fit together to form a beautifully complex image. The static backdrop of a dark void abruptly becomes a metal blur that slows to take shape. Those closest to the train have to back up and let others spill out of the tube that's about to hold a new set of passengers. The ceremonial switch left me in a new standing position, holding on to a horizontal sleek stainless steel bar for support. After a friendly reminder to stand clear of the closing doors, the machine began to move and I found myself waiting in a different location. In my field of vision were some of the same couples I observed on the platform, still paired off after the transition. One was close enough to force me into eavesdropping.

"How many stops do we have till we get off?" A mousy brunette girl holding a vertical sleek stainless steel bar with both hands directed her question to the guy sharing the support. One of the other two hands gripping the bar was moved down to grab a phone from a pocket. He looked at it briefly before answering.

"Six, but it'll go fast." I only had four, and plenty of time to get to the restaurant. The route was straightforward to memorize, and I even walked it yesterday to be sure it was fixed in my head.

"And Jackie and them are meeting us there, right?"

"Yeah. I think Tom got off work early, so he saved a table for us." The guy looked at his phone again before putting it back in his pocket. People shifted about at the first stop on my trip.

"Do you know if they have calamari?" She tapped his arm excitedly as she asked this. Good taste came to my mind.

"I'm not sure, I've never been to this place before. I can look it up," he said as the hand went back down toward the pocket holding the phone.

"No, no, you don't have to," she quickly responded, "it'll be a surprise when we get there." A reassuring smile showed a slightly shortened front right tooth, as if part of it had been broken off.

“You think we’ll order the same thing again?”

“Now that one I can’t look up.” He was faced away from me, preventing accurate information regarding the length of his front teeth, but I would infer that he smiled. The train sped off from stop two.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, causing even the opportune eavesdropper to jump slightly, “did you see that new commercial for, what’s it call...that frozen food company. I don’t know why I can’t think of the name.”

“The one with the little girl?” He seemed to understand her train of thought.

“Yes! You saw it?” Excitement filled her eyes once again.

“Oh yeah, someone from the,” and I didn’t understand what he said here, “sent it to me.”

“It’s crazy they let that thing air. I can’t believe they were all okay with using something so offensive!” I now had a better idea of what she was referencing. After all, it was a rather big topic at work. Things like this always are.

“They had to make the commercial, first of all.” One of his hands was being used for emphasis in the sliver of space it could find within such a crowded car. “And then stations had to decide to show it! Someone consciously accepted this, for money.” He shook his head as the free hand flopped down to his side in a motion of discouragement. Not many bodies changed places at stop number three.

“I don’t think I want to buy from them anymore,” she furrowed her brow as she said this, giving off as much resentment as possible.

“Well, I don’t know about that...” his voice trailed off slightly, well aware that what he said disagreed with his significant other.

“What? I mean, it’s so ignorant, right?” She seemed concerned.

“Definitely, it was offensive and in poor taste, but I’ve been buying from them for years with no problem,” he was interrupted by his own quick cough. “They made a mistake, but, I mean, even you’re all about forgiveness, right?” After he said this, I could see that she was in the process of absorbing it. Letting his words sink in to the point of understanding.

“I guess,” she said, releasing the tension in her shoulders. “This is like a first strike for them.” I was surprised by her quick agreeance with an alternate viewpoint.

“I mean, if it becomes a regular thing, then it will definitely be a problem,” he said while he laughed, “but I can’t imagine a company would have a business model based on offending people!”

“There’s that card game, right? And they have success with it too!” she reciprocated the jovial tone. The number two train’s doors opened on the fourth stop and I took my leave. Their conversation was intriguing for sure, as it directly relates my work. Not even that, it’s a source of uncertainty. One found a commercial unforgivable while the other felt a sense of forgiveness. The exact reason people are so difficult to nail down, even on average. Makes my profession seem almost futile, but one must remember that an attempt at understanding is better than perpetual darkness.

I found myself above ground, three and a half blocks from the restaurant. Artie’s, one of my favorites, guaranteed to have their lightly battered yet crisp calamari prominently displayed on the menu. A dining experience that was sure to win the stomach of my date. As I walked over, the conversation I witnessed on the subway was fresh in my mind. Once again, a specific reminder of the fact that we are not identical. There are certain fundamental differences in our personalities that cause a variety of reactions to the situations our universe offers. Exactly why management of this risk is necessary. If we can control for this metastatic response, we can better understand the true effect actions have on our species as a whole.

These were my thoughts as I walked up to the restaurant: on my work. Attention was quickly averted though, because just as I could see the currant-colored, oxford-bordered five letter possessive title of the establishment, I witnessed a famished blonde looking at her phone. Just as if she was waiting for someone. I was punctual, but she was early, and my excitement for the evening peaked.

Checking my own device to see if she had had contacted me, my walking ceased when the empty stare of a digital clock entered into sight. As if this information would change the fact that we were intending to meet at the restaurant, especially after seeing her there. I returned to a slightly slower pace headed directly for her. It took longer, and therefore farther, than I expected for her to notice me. Even had to say her name.

“Cassandra!” Trying to sound as if I’m adjusted to the perfect level of energy. She looked up from her phone, and smiled after an infinitesimally noticeable moment of hesitation.

“Hey!” She put her phone in a pocket of her black dress pants. “I pretty much just got here.” A white blouse and a light jacket, no purse. “You can call me Cass.” Like she was ready for business. “It’s great to see you, it’s been what, two or three

months, right?” She was still smiling.

She didn’t say my name. While I noticed it right away, I only found it strange. There was no way she didn’t know it, as I gave it during our first formal introduction. But, her timeline wasn’t wrong, and the decay of memory is entirely possible. Still, when my coworker set this all up, how could she have not made sure to pass my name along? I wondered what I was listed as in her phone.

“Yeah, that sounds right,” I smiled. “Well, I hope you’re hungry.” Gesturing towards the entrance, I continued, “this place is one of my favorites!”

“And are you one of their favorites?” She grabbed the right side of the double doors just as I began to open the left, and we entered abreast.

“It’s not like I know anyone that works here,” I chuckled.

“Oh, so no special treatment?”

“Treatment is proportional to our worth, Cass.” I smiled at her, and then I gave the host the name for the reservation. Under my last, there was still a chance that she could not know the first. In reality, it was irrelevant. So what if she doesn’t remember my name? That has no bearing on impressions, and I would have no issue giving it to her if the date goes well. I dropped it.

The host brought us to a table, the atmospheric sense of which was spaciouly intimate. At the center of the room, our own personal island of one small candle, cruets of olive oil and balsamic vinegar, and place settings. She took her seat before any chance to employ chivalry, which I strangely entertained. An action that I’d subconsciously learned. We were told that someone would be with us shortly, and the date began.

“I’m glad we’re getting to do this,” I said with a smile, which she reciprocated.

“Me too! I don’t usually go out when people try to set me up, but Karen is relentless.”

“I feel the exact same way,” I laughed, because it sounded like something I would say. “But the two of us agreed, that’s the special treatment.”

“Yeah.” I noticed a decline in her excitement. She was looking at the table, more specifically her side of it. Should I be inspecting my own? Thankfully, I knew enough about first encounters to keep the focus on important things. I was about to ask her the next question in my arsenal when we were visited by a busboy bearing menus and water.

He told us that the waiter would be with us in a moment as he tipped out the mixed states. I watched as some of the water was weakly attracted to the pitcher, pouring out perpendicularly to the

glass. No one seemed to mind this. A little butter on the lip of the spout, and the water just falls. I sipped the freezing liquid and she opened her cloth-wrapped present of silverware as our reminder to hydrate departed.

“Have you ever had calamari?” I asked as I opened the menu. “They fry it here and get the batter to stay perfectly light. One of the best I’ve had.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever tried it. What is it?” She had the menu in her sights as well, and I noticed her fork was near the edge of the table.

“Squid.” She didn’t seem to have much of a response. “Are you a fan of seafood?”

“Not really, but I don’t have it a lot.”

“I’ll definitely get an order, and we can split it. It’s some good stuff!”

“You sound like you had your mind set on ordering it already.”

“I also had my mind set on sharing it with you.” She laughed it off and rolled her eyes. The word to describe how she looked escaped me, or maybe the feeling caused it to flee. For a moment, I was entranced.

The spell was broken by words of the waiter. He took our drink orders and rattled off the specials. After a unanimous decision that we needed more time with the menu, I placed the appetizer order. With a thank you he was almost off, but my date hindered him.

“Excuse me,” she said, causing him to pivot back toward the table. “This fork is a little bent, would I be able to get one that isn’t?”

I’m not sure how the waiter received this request because I wasn’t looking at him, but rather her, experiencing a slight state of bewilderment. The utensil appeared to have no issue, but maybe the tines were out of kilter. The waiter took the fork and promised to return with an improvement. My mind failed to understand why someone would put themselves in that situation, and could only think of how trivial her issue was. At this point, I knew things had to move on.

“So,” I drew her attention back to me, “what do you do?” One of the oldest questions in the book.

“I work with kids,” she seemed excited at the prospect of answering a question as the words began to spill out, “pretty much elementary school age. At the community center down in the park, I’m part of the daycare center.” I nodded and slipped in an exclamation of approval before she continued.

“It’s great, I love working with children. I learn so much from them, and in return I get to share

all of my knowledge with them. I even started this program where we take them to events at the community college. I always want to teach them that they should learn about as much as possible. That's what I think is one of my best qualities, and more people should act like that."

The way she would inhale at the end of every sentence, as if all breath was expended on the previous but the next carried greater importance. The sound was sharp to me, and made me think of a singer that doesn't move away from the microphone.

"I completely agree," I said regarding the mentality toward education, "the desire to learn is a fantastic perception to instill in a child." The meaning of 'the park' was clear, but 'community college' was not well-defined. "What kind of events do you take them to?"

"Most of the tame ones, like the poster sales or major fairs. Those are my favorite, because the kids all get to find something that they like and learn about it. Very different from the school they're used to." More statements I agreed with. Her program was a great idea. On the hunt for some intelligent conversation, I decided to bring up my own work.

"Have any of your pupils shown interest in actuarial science?"

"No. What is that? Is it what you do?" she said after a pause.

"Yeah," I was disappointed that she wasn't familiar with it right away, but maybe it was the nomenclature. "Math and statistics for the stock market, life insurance, things like that," realizing the ambiguity in the statement toward someone who doesn't understand actuarial science as soon as it left my lips.

"Life insurance?" She focused in on the words. "Like, figuring out how much someone's life is worth?"

"Well, yeah." Her face expressed that the ears were attempting to vomit.

"And you're okay with that?"

I understood that my affirmative response, while a naive simplification of what an actuary really does, had rubbed her the wrong way. It made the most sense to try and better explain my position.

"A more accurate way to put it is that we use probabilities concerning the human lifetime to figure out a fair price for life insurance. It certainly changes from person to person, because everybody has a different lifestyle, and thus, a different lifetime."

"But still, you are giving a dollar amount to someone's life, right? A life is worth more than something we should be able to buy and sell."

"It's not so much the life we are putting a value on, but the risk of death." I think this was lost on her, because she continued on morality.

"I don't think we should be ignoring the seriousness of losing a life by giving it a number." Blindsided by contradiction.

"I disagree. Working toward a near perfect understanding of when death will occur so that it serves a purpose in our life is the exact opposite of being flippant." This is my goal, not just my career. To understand aspects of the world for the better.

"That's short sighted," she scoffed. Both this and the roll of the eyes that complemented the sound effect were far from endearing. I gave myself a mental reprieve, and searched for what to say next. There wasn't a fleck of understanding where she wanted this conversation to go, so I knew it was time to move on.

"Well, I don't do that anymore. An actuary can work in a lot of different fields, and life insurance is where I began." A sense of relief was made clear with her body language, as if the building pressure was vented in a safe direction.

"So, what do you do as an actuary now?"

"I work for a risk management company," I said before sipping my water again, "primarily hired by big businesses for various reasons. It's enjoyable because, just like you said, it gives me the opportunity to learn about many different things." An attempt at retaining a happy atmosphere.

"How do you exactly manage risk" she asked as if the two words could never exist adjacently in a meaningful way.

This is a difficult question to answer, regardless of how many years of education you've experienced. Humans can't even decide on the best way to accomplish this task, and often settle for confident approximations. More specific to that evening, it is difficult to explain these methods to someone just learning of the field. But I had to make the attempt, because successfully explaining a topic is one of the final steps toward true understanding.

"In the most general sense, we try to predict the future. A list of possibilities and their probabilities gives people information toward better decisions." She seemed unhappy with the answer. I wasn't sure if I had said something inappropriate again.

"But you can't really tell the future," she said with a slightly whimsical look. I did not expect her to hang on that part of the sentence.

“No, of course not,” stating the obvious, “but coming up with a large set of what might happen gets us close.” I worried that the explanation was from the wrong perspective as I watched her flip to the next page of the menu.

“What risks do you manage?” The way she said this made me think I had misunderstood her original question. This was a slightly easier interpretation.

“I’m on a team that focuses on modeling the risk of human reaction.” This seemed to strike a chord, as her eyes met mine. “Getting an idea of how people will respond to different decisions, ways to mitigate the effect of negative scenarios, it’s all...”

“Don’t companies already do that,” she cut me off, “like with focus groups and product tests?”

“Well, that’s pretty much an earlier version of it, but now we have better ways to collect and use data.”

“And data is human reaction?” I could hear the dash of disgust in her voice.

“Yeah, we want to understand how people interact together when provided with new information, abstractly, so that it can be applied to many different settings.”

“That just sounds impossible,” she said as her menu flipped closed. It almost sounded like a challenge.

“It certainly is a complex problem, but there are ways to make it manageable. Like clustering people, grouping them into homogeneous collections and using that to our advantage.” This was a straightforward explanation of a very basic statistical concept, one I honestly believed she had heard before, and accepted as most others do. She paused and appeared to think about my words.

“So, you’re saying that you stereotype?” This should have been my first sign that something was going wrong. Thinking it was a joke, there was a slight chuckle that accompanied my response.

“We can’t get information from every single person. Not even close, so there has to be some generalization.”

“But it simplifies the free will of individuals, that won’t make any sense to apply to anyone else.” I didn’t quite follow what she meant, but thought that she was misinterpreting me. Effective communication is in my nature, so I continued to try and dispel her imperceptions. A part of me also didn’t want her to believe my career, my passion, was evil.

“There are patterns among people that are empirically true, and they should definitely be addressed when we try to understand our species.”

“I’m saying that it can’t be understood,” the inflection in her voice reminded me of an earlier part of the conversation, “there is too much variety.”

“So, because it’s difficult, no information is preferred to any amount?” I was a bit more abrasive with this phrase, because it hit a personal note, a pang in the subjectivities held at my core. One, complexity is the spring from which interest flows. Two, difficulty has no bearing on the initiation, continuation, or conclusion of an attempt to overcome and obstacle.

“It’s better than bad information!” While true, she said it as if my explanation had led her to believe that this is the only thing actuarial science can produce.

“Of course there are ways that we can be wrong, but there are methods to control the many sources of error, and using actual human experience only improves things.”

She began to respond, but was stopped by the return of the waiter. He announced the arrival of my companion’s replacement cutlery and carefully positioned it on the table in front of her. We had reached the crucial step in the restaurant procedure: putting in for the main course. I had it stuck in my head that I was going to get the veal parmesan, another favorite of mine from Artie’s. With where our conversation had taken us there was no chance to talk more about the food, which was what I had planned for the beginning of our time together. I was eager to hear the decision when the waiter turned to her first.

“I need some more time with the menu, actually.” Both the waiter and I were surprised by this, but he was the one who got to take leave. I wanted to ask her if something was wrong, but she beat me to speaking.

“What do you mean by actual human experience?” She leaned forward and placed her elbows on the table.

“We use historical results to improve our inferences. Even though perceptions of groups of people change, they do so gradually, and these patterns are something we try to predict as well.” This was one of the most intriguing things about my field, so I wanted to say more. “So it’s more than...”

“And you have ‘historical results’ from people,” she cut me off again, “where do you get that?”

“Well, it’s always been there, we just didn’t have an efficient way to make sense of it for quite some time.” She looked puzzled by this, but was certainly devoted to the conversation. “The internet. Ever since social media brought the advent of sharing opinions and reactions in real-time,

we've had actual experience concerning humans from around the world. Truly Big Data."

She did not respond right away. Maybe she was absorbing my words, or gathering her own. My uncertainty of her next move was great enough to prevent me from speaking more. Eventually, an old accusation returned.

"You're still generalizing." Our wheels were spinning. "You don't know that the people you follow on the internet will buy something or not."

"It's not about the purchase, it's about exposure." I chose to ignore the comment about how internet data is collected, and continued, "if it offends one person, sharing it with a negative opinion influences others continually." She sipped her water, and this time I seized the opportunity to speak more. "Also, I want to make it clear that we try to represent real life as accurately as possible, we aren't just making numbers up for profit."

"Well I still don't get it. You say that you want to be accurate, but how can you be when you're only looking at a few people?" Either she didn't understand what I had meant by Big Data, or how many people use the internet. Her question was once again difficult to answer, as the way we use the hordes of internet traffic is complex, but my will had yet to waver.

"At its core, it's a combination of text mining and evolutionary algorithms. We extract someone's path from their online behavior: what sites they visit, what they post for others, opinions they share, things like that. It's a fairly fantastic representation of a personality. But since, like you said, we don't have everybody, we simulate other people from those we've collected."

"What?" The tone in her voice was abrasive. "You simulate people?"

"Yeah," I realized that could sound strange to non-statisticians. "That's the evolutionary part of it. We model other possible paths by combining and mutating the original set. The method does well at approximating an enormous population of personalities, which I think is because the principle of evolution accurately depicts how ideas form and expand."

"That sounds sad," she responded. It was my turn to ask:

"What?"

"That sounds sad," she said again in a slightly slower and crisper tongue. I took a mental step away from the conversation. The atmosphere of the restaurant quickly enveloped me. The clangor of utensils and dishes along with the white noise cloud of other patrons' conversations returned as

the host brought a party of at least five past our table. I had the thought that the conversation was getting difficult, which often comes to mind when someone responds to me with vague phrases.

"What about it do you think is sad?" I tried to make this sound as innocently curious as possible, because I sincerely wanted to know.

"That you need a computer program to understand the world."

Taken aback by her response, I had the thought that she was joking. Poking fun at my nerdy career, being playful. This idea dissipated just as fast as it formed, based on her body language. She was upset with my explanations for some reason. I felt the pressure to return this date to a buoyant state, and decided that I was approaching it from too formal a perspective. A story was in order, and I knew an example that I was sure she could appreciate.

"It's necessary. We want to account for how people will respond or be affected by possible outcomes." She looked at me with an expression that had to be one of skepticism or contempt. "For decades, people used cut and dry algorithms for decision making. Back then, if the method gave an optimal solution, it would most likely be used. Sure, there were some people involved in the consideration of secondary impacts, but they can never be foolproof. There was actually an instance where a huge company used a widely accepted technique to make a choice, and it ended up featuring latent discriminatory aspects. Turns out, there was an identical solution in terms of costs and resources that would have been significantly less upsetting. Thus, the need to formally consider human reaction risk was realized." Getting through the story without any interruptions was a relief.

"If their decision caused so many problems, how could the people not see it beforehand?" For yet another time, I felt that she had missed the point of my words completely. I wanted to explain how this concept was introduced to protect people from the dangers of generalization.

"That's exactly my point! It happened, and it does happen, so we had to put a better system in place." I saw our waiter talking to another table and the calamari came to my mind.

"It sounds like you're just a fancy publicist," she said facetiously. It seemed as if she was trying to fit everything I had told her underneath some label or a simple one-liner, but this isn't the nature of actuarial science, and far from the nature of reality as well.

"Not really," I let an exasperated sigh slip through, "we only provide information on possible

reactions a decision might bring about in the public, not guide them toward a certain perception. What the company does with our results is up to them.”

“Wait,” she quickly interjected, “are you saying that you don’t tell companies not to make offensive decisions?” My brain shifted gears parsing her question.

“No, it’s not our place. We only aim to provide more information toward a better result for the clients.”

“How could it not be your place?” She sat up straighter and her eyebrows tilted inward ever so slightly.

“We aren’t hired to make decisions for them.” I was uncertain about what she didn’t understand. A new employee doesn’t get any authority when they start a job, and the bosses want to stay in their position.

“Are there companies that do offensive things even when they know about it?” She wasn’t going to like my answer. I could see that far into the future.

“Well, there’s always going to be someone that ends up unhappy, and you’ve heard the saying that there’s no such thing as bad publicity.”

She acted like she couldn’t believe what she had heard, and recycled another old question: “And you’re ok with that?”

“It’s a...fact.” I had to search for the right words once again. “Understanding the need to model human reaction spread everywhere. It’s a common constraint in most programs, and there’s a tolerance for it, just as with all risks.”

“I can’t believe that someone could tolerate that,” she said while shaking her head.

“It’s about finding the optimal solution for themselves.” I was nearly out of ways to continue talking about this. It turned out she was ahead of me in this pursuit.

“No, what you do!” Anger saturated her side of the table. “You enable some real horrible ways of thinking in this world!” She was about to continue but took a breath, and my expectation was she would count to ten. But just as I was about to speak, her words bubbled over.

“And you just accept them and say ‘that’s just how the world works.’ It’s like you even think it’s a cool thing to do!” At least my passion came through.

“There’s no convincing you that you’re doing something bad,” she continued, “you are hopeless.” With that, she pushed her seat back and stood up, catching the eye of nearby tables, or rather, the

people seated at them. The situation had escalated faster than my comprehension could follow, and showed no signs of slowing.

“I don’t want to be associated with someone as,” she paused and pushed in her chair, “evil as you.” I couldn’t form a coherent sentence before she walked past me and out of Artie’s. I sat there, now alone, slightly confused.

The date went much worse than expected, particularly because the other party found the explanation of my line of work offensive. I think it was a long string of miscommunication on both of our parts. But she had said ‘there’s no convincing you.’ Was that how she saw our interaction, as a debate that she needed to win? I hope that’s not the aura I expressed, because my only goal was her understanding of a new topic.

“Tough night?” the waiter said as he placed my drink and a plate of calamari down in front of me. The beverage Cassandra had ordered was not in his possession.

“This is what I was really looking forward to anyway,” I tried to say with a smile, but was still lost in reflection. “I’ll take the check when you get the chance.” The waiter nodded and began to turn when I had one more thought.

“Was that fork from earlier actually bent?” The waiter laughed.

“Just look at it, I gave the same one back to her.”

I returned a true laugh and picked up the fork across from me, which looked fine. I even used it to enjoy my calamari. See an opportunity to relax, trying to make the best of plans gone awry, I was reminded of one truth yet again. I am human. So is Cassandra. We act with volatility in response to the decisions of others. It’s the risk we must consider when interactions are accepted, just as with a date. Some may see the outcome of this particular evening as bad luck, but I took it as historical experience. The offense she took placed itself nicely in my collection of data on human reaction. Next time, I will be able to make better decisions.