

Rosetta Stone Course on Reading a Room

Andy Robbins was the kind of bear cub that had room illiteracy. Technology, the cell phone industry, and Gargoyle Translate had not added "social cues" into their language inventory. This meant that Andy would join up with an informal group of people for an ice cream meet, introduce himself, say something like, "No relation to Baskin," and then sit in silence as the rest of the group cocked an eyebrow and then gave up on finding whatever it was that he just referenced.

A handful of times shouldn't have bothered him, but it wasn't a handful of times. This happened every month for the 3 years he'd started trying to socialize more. This time he'd gone too far. The group he'd joined up with was a coven of bats. He'd shown up dressed as a vampire, introduced himself, and revealed his blood time. "I'm Type O. So I'm pretty sure I've got diet blood."

He didn't get a blank stare this time. The bat who he presumed to be the leader, a scrawny blue guy with pale hair, a leafy nose and glasses, growled, "Nobody's laughing. Are you deaf?"

Andy didn't answer. There was nothing for him to add to the conversation. He didn't belong there. Once again, he'd blown his chances at making new friends. Up until now, his standing with all these new groups had been ambiguous. Nobody had contacted him after he'd eased himself out, but nobody had directly kicked him out, either. This was different. This was the first time someone had directly shown dislike for something he'd done.

The coffee shop was crowded enough. They wouldn't notice if he excused himself to go to the bathroom and then slipped out the front door. The waitress hadn't come by yet - he wasn't waiting on any food or beverage, so it would be no cost to the group. Nobody invited him into their conversation. No. He wouldn't be missed. Everyone was happy.

Except... he wasn't happy. They didn't care if he felt included or not. That was what hurt the most.

He got back to his dorm room. Good - Wandwaver and Macrofuse weren't around, probably in class or at the library. He didn't much know them, let alone trust them enough to let them see his personal feelings.

Another bridge burned before it was even built. Social dyslexia. That's what he had. Another layer of anguish collapsed on him, perhaps the worst aspect of all of it: There was no one he could share this experience with. It was all bottled up like some tortured devil, howling for release. He could try therapy - if it wasn't so expensive. He could try the crisis hotline - but the last few times he called, the receptionist was so dismissive. "Quit worrying about it, it's not that big a deal."

He could practically hear the rolling eyes of his own private consultants, comparing his situation to the homeless, the people living in war-torn territories, the starving. "People have it worse than you. Stop being a baby and get over it."

And yet... the knowledge of harsher circumstances somehow didn't exterminate his depression. He had the power to help other people, but he couldn't help them until someone, anyone, gave a damn about his struggles, just to interact. He just didn't have the power to cope with this himself. If he could just cry it out, perhaps he wouldn't care so much.

He flopped down on his bed and cradled his overstuffed dragon plush, Hamster. And then his bed began to rattle of its own accord.

Andy began to panic. He knew who was on his way up. Toby Gibbleweb was a draconic technodweeb so corpulent that whenever he flew up to Andy's bedroom, all the furniture scooted to the walls. It was a good thing that the apartment was on the first floor - no Earthan architecture could survive that belly of his, even as soft and cushiony as it was.

Beyond the rattling bed, sequences of computer sound effects and the old-fashioned dial-up internet buzzes and beeps heralded his arrival, until with a tympanic, echoing belch, Andy's bed hopped up into the air, and then there was the overfed gourd of a dragon, usually up to issue a shipment of pretzels, popcorn or trail mix; his "coding fuel," as he called it.

No, not him, thought Andy. Anyone but him... if he sees me crying... dammit, I can't hold back... this is humiliating...

Andy lay on his side, trembling, clutching Hamster With all his might. He had his back turned to the roly-poly dragon, but he could hear the big guy yawn and stretch, ushering the bed closer to the closet.

"Sup, Ange. Haven't perfected the size modification function yet, otherwise I'd go myself. I don't guess you'd have any Fritos, would ya?"

There was no saving face here. If Andy spoke or turned his head to nod, he'd choke on his own tears. If he lay there in silence, Toby would think he was snubbing him. Either way, he was about to learn how Toby reacted when he saw someone unhappy.

"Ange? You awake, man?"

He put a pudgy green claw on Andy's shoulder. The thing was big enough to cover up the whole of Andy's torso. The bear cub turned, and there on his face were two burning tear stains.

Toby withdrew his claw in alarm. "Oh geez, did I just wake you up? My bad, man... hey... what's wrong?"

Andy looked up into his visitor's face. He didn't see any trace of disgust - rather, that unshaven, bespeckled guise beneath a black baseball cap displayed curiosity, worry, a bit of embarrassment, and - dare he say it? - empathy.

Andy swallowed. "I had a bad time, and I'm not feeling well."

Going further than that was risky. One wrong word, one careless revelation, and Toby could turn his back on him in an instant. Unfortunately, Toby was not the kind of individual who would settle for "not feeling well."

"A bad time?" He leaned in. "Did something happen?"

The risk wasn't completely eliminated, but there was no mistaking that look in his eyes - Toby was heartbroken to see someone else feeling so down. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Dammit... Andy did want to talk about it. But every time he talked about it, it turned into trauma dumping and scared away his friends. Why did Toby have to have such an unassuming personality?

"I screwed up a friendship," managed Andy. "I told a joke nobody thought was funny, and... I left the restaurant."

Andy closed his eyes. He'd done it. He'd admitted everything he needed to. He didn't need to reveal just how heated the argument had grown, or just how embarrassed he was over his inability to let it go and move on. And having shared it, Andy couldn't hold back the tears any longer. Go on, he

thought. See me for the basket case I really am. If I'm not a likable person, so be it. I suck, and that's all there is to it.

"Oh... man." Toby got even closer. He scooped up the bear cub, to him no bigger than a doll, and held him close to his heart

"Hey man. Nobody has a perfect track record. I know what you're going through. You don't have to hate yourself over it. I know you don't get out much, but I can promise you, even the guys at the top of the 'food chain' muck it up at least a few times a year. I could tell you some real party bombs some of these guys pulled."

Andy, through his tears, looked up into Toby's soft, kind face.

"And this group of guys... well, I don't know who they were, but they've botched up, too. It just might take a while for 'em to realize they've done the same thing, and figure out how to talk it out."

"It was a group of bats... I don't want to gossip, or ruin anyone's reputation," he allowed.

"Oh." Toby lifted his head. "I know a few bats. If it's one of the guys I'm thinking of... yeah, he can be kind of a piece of work. He's got a few anger issues and communication problems - getting along with him can be trick even if you know him well."

Andy could relax a little. He already knew he was imperfect - every social outing he'd attended reminded him of that. Hearing a reminder that other people might share similar imperfections gave him a great deal of comfort.

"If you don't mind my asking, most of these groups you meet with, you don't know anybody all that well, do you?"

Andy nodded. This was true - everything had been a dive into uncharted waters. Now he started to see what the problem was.

"Tell you what - come to one of my lunch meets. You haven't seen awkward until you've met my group. Can't guarantee it'll work out with everyone, but you're sure to branch out there and meet some dergs who can connect you with the right people. It's kind of a never ending journey - no pressure. But we'd all love to have you over. That I can guarantee."

Andy pulled out a tissue and blew his nose. "Toby - this means the world to me. I wish I knew how to thank you."

Toby winked. "Fetch me some trail mix and we'll call it even."