

SPEED DATING AND SPIRIT GUIDES

Rod M. Santos

"I can do this," I told my squirrel. If Babycheeks—my totem and spirit-guide—answered, it was lost beneath the bar's raucous gabble of small talk and pick-up lines.

A hostess with shiny teeth and a clipboard approached. "Are you here for Insta-Date?"

"Yeah." My voice squeaked. "I pre-registered. Joseph Ahanu."

"That's a pretty name. Hawaiian?"

"Algonquin."

"Go ahead and sit at table H." She pointed to a room with two dozen mini-tables configured in an oval.

At table H, a brunette chatted on her cell phone. She sat sideways, as though the 90-degree angle would grant privacy. Her totem—a cat made of shadows—coiled scarf-like around her neck.

A girl's totem speaks volumes about her. My second sight was useful; totems were usually invisible, even to the girls themselves.

The hostess tapped her microphone, rupturing our eardrums with feedback. She explained that we'd have five minutes for each "date," which began when the bell rang. At each subsequent ring, the men moved to the next table.

The brunette shut her cell phone. The bell rang; the horse race began.

"Hi, I'm Joseph. Bachelor number eight." We wore numbers to keep track of potential matches.

"Elise." Her handshake was a dead fish, and she reeled it back immediately. Her arms crossed over her stomach, as if to keep an alien from bursting out.

"You look like Kirstie Alley," I blurted.

"My ex used to say that." Her shadow-cat's hackles rose.

"I meant before Jenny Craig. I loved Cheers." I scrambled to shut my brain's babble-faucet.

"Never watched it."

Babycheeks reminded me we'd rehearsed "safe questions" yesterday. "Have you done speed-dating before?"

"No, my friend dragged me, but she left for an emergency. She probably browsed tonight's menu and lost her appetite."

Ah, passive-aggressive.

Her cat leapt onto the table, claws out, a feral light in its eyes as it gazed at Babycheeks. I realized then that Elise didn't want a date. She just liked seeing men squirm.



I slapped the table, hard. Both cat and girl jumped.

"Why'd you do that?"

"Spider. Black widow, maybe."

Though I wanted to give tonight a real chance, to find *one* nice girl in this city, I wouldn't be anyone's entertainment.

She noticed the change in me... and found my assertiveness alluring. She tossed her hair, crossed her arms, though this time to lift her bosom. Her cat lowered its head, raised its tail.

The bell rang. My getaway left skid marks.

At the next table was a lovely blonde in a gray suit and pink shirt.

"I'm Regina. Do you mind if I eat a power bar? I had no time for dinner." From her Louis Vuitton handbag she excavated something labeled *Pro-chieve*. She ripped open gold foil, unwrapped what resembled a turd in need of Zoloft.

More revolting was her totem, a ball covered with spiky stalks. A pufferfish? No. A flash of memory took me back to college Bio, and I scowled. A virus.

"What's your Lifeplan?" she asked.

"Lifeplan?"

"Average male lives 75.6 years. You're what... twenty-four? You still have 51.6 years. What's your Lifeplan?"

I swallowed my first response, a joke. I said, "Find a soulmate."

"Yeah, what else?" She bit into the turd.

When I hesitated, she asked, "How do you spend your time?"

I wondered how many espressos she'd had. "On Saturdays, I go to Central Park. I let squirrels climb me, then I spin round and round, whirling them through the air."

"That's funny," she said. "You see, part of my lifeplan is to find a man who knows when to provide and when to back off. I don't need a love-sponge."

Love-sponge? I pictured Regina finding a broken heart at her feet, punting it away, then wiping the floor with a love-sponge.

She barraged me with questions. Babycheeks took a nap. When the bell rang, I felt like I'd interviewed for a job I didn't want.

"Nice meeting you," I said.

She cupped my hand in hers. "Look, I don't think it'll work out." She patted my hand as if consoling a funeral attendee.

The third girl, Ivy, was as stringy and dull as her hair. When she laughed, her totem—a praying mantis—fell out her mouth.

Dates four, five, and six went downhill. The seventh depressed me; she had no totem at all, not even a shadow.

By the time I reached Sarah, my patience was as worn as my voice. She, too, had no totem I could see.

"Can I be frank?" I asked.

"Can I still be Sarah?" She ran a hand through mousy-brown hair.

I smiled. "Just don't be offended. I'm not sure why I'm here. This city's congested with users, over-achievers, and walking attitudes." Babycheeks winced at my tactlessness.

Sarah's clear brown eyes didn't blink. "And which of those are you?"

Webbed paws rose onto her tableside, and up peeked the sleek, adorable face of an otter. Its concerned look was comical... but sincere.

Sarah continued. "I'm sorry, but don't judge someone you don't even know."

I studied the otter. "You're carefree, clever, playful. You're... a swimmer?"

"And you're a squirrel."

Babycheeks' head went up.

"How—?"

"The same as you, I'm guessing. Which is to say I don't know. I *do* know you're glancing at Skwidgie. And I'm not offended. My night's been filled with scorpions, hyenas, and peacocks. A squirrel I'll take, even a frustrated one. It's the only cute city animal that still lives free."

"Maybe I—did you call me *cute*?"

She ignored me. "I have this theory I've never shared before. The city is alive, tries to seep into us. Graffiti, pollution, sirens invading our eyes and nostrils and ears—"

"Wait. Don't list any more orifices."

She smirked. "You're a wiseass."

"I know." My lips curled. "I just... I need to make people laugh."

The bell rang, but I didn't move. We stared at each other, quietly curious, completely still. When Sarah smiled, my squirrel ran across the table and high-fived Skwidgie.



ROD M. SANTOS



Rod M. Santos was born in Manila, raised in the Bronx, and is currently lost in Yonkers. Like many people, his lifelong dream is to train squirrels in the ways of the Force. He claims to work in human resources for a non-profit company, but when pressed for details, he quickly changes the subject.

His writing fluctuates between dark and lighthearted fantasy, with occasional stops throughout the speculative continuum. This past year has been a breakthrough period for him; his first published stories appeared online at *The Town Drunk* and *Dragons, Knights and Angels*, as well as the anthology *Philippine Speculative Fiction, Vol. 3*. He is a proud member of the Liberty Hall writing forum.

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