

Exercises for the Romantically Challenged by Jen Chau Fontán

I open my eyes and pick my head up while keeping the rest of my body still. The first thing I see is a framed picture. It's right in front of me, centered on the flowery wall-papered wall. A black and white print of a silhouette laughing. And not just any laughing but throw your head back, wind-in-hair laughing. Neck fully extended and teeth bared. I think, "What's so funny, I wonder." And italics underneath that I squint to read without my glasses - ah, it's an advice-giving directive, suggestive of the tone that this place is going to take:

"Treat today like no one is watching."

It's attributed to no one and it sounds familiar, though a little off. Dance like no one is watching? Is that it? Instead it's "treat today." So...more of a way of being? This makes me laugh sarcastically and drop my head back down on the pillow, my chestnut hair spilling around my head. I get a chill. This message is a little creepy considering this place has cameras on us 24-7.

For that split second before I understood the difference between dream and reality, I had hoped this place was just a nightmare. "I've been watching too much sci-fi, post-apocalyptic nonsense and it's been affecting my brain," I thought. I could see how this would turn into some story that ends in a twisted lesson about how the main character couldn't find true love without freedom. Or a scary plot where the narrator was being chased by a shadowy figure only to realize that she was being chased by herself. I shut my eyes tightly and hold my warm palms pressed onto my eyes. Deep breath.

I roll onto my side and give a side-glance to the maniacal laughing again. Yea, I remember that from last night when I checked in, though I don't think I took in the details. This place is real. I catch a botanical scent and I narrow my eyes at the side table. A small glass vase with two pink roses, stems almost intertwined (seriously?) shine their blooms at me. I rub a pink petal between my thumb and pointer and close my eyes. Maybe I can find the beauty in this. Maybe I can find a way to forgive her.

Ding. Ding. Ding! Good morning, guests. Please join us for breakfast. It may be the first time you meet the one. Should a stranger catch your attention from across the room, don't hesitate. Take a chance. Ding. Ding. Ding!

I squeeze my eyes shut, take another deep breath and throw the sheets off of my body. Time to meet the one. Groan.

I open the door, half surprised that I had the ability to unlock it myself. Under the cheery veneer, this place is about control. I peek my head out before I let my body depart. Women on the left in

flowery patterns and pastels; men on the right in colorful polos. Everyone walking eerily lockstep with smiles plastered, in silence. I only hear the sound of heels clicking on the bright floor. I make eye contact with a woman who almost swipes past my forehead and she looks right through my head with vacant eyes. What is this place?

I bring the rest of my body out and french tuck my tank top into my jeans. I run my fingers through my hair. Combed. Was I supposed to bring a uniform? All the women are in dresses and heels and I only brought my Converse. I have no idea how I got here so I can't be responsible for bringing the wrong fucking shoes. Eh, who cares. Let me find my way to breakfast.

I walk down the sunny corridor, following the sunlight on the beautiful white marble floors. Every now and then I see sweeping shadows of beautiful trees and look outside - the grounds are expansive and I've never seen so much green. I realize that I am in a small part of this complex. Hundreds and hundreds of smiling dresses and shirts are funneling into a dining hall.

Soon the pale pink walls turn into mahogany and I walk into a massive room with high ceilings, chandeliers and long tables. I pass by a sign that says, *Please sit with someone new. This is your chance!* What urgency. What pressure. Definitely good circumstances in which to meet the love of my life. Am I going to last the day without rolling my eyes? Where did Penny find this place?

I slowly scan the tables and take in the faces. People are shaking hands, greeting each other. There are some pockets of extreme awkwardness -- stilted bites of lunch and then looking up at the ceiling. There are also pockets of giddy flirting -- a lot of laughter. Hands reaching across the table to touch other hands. The awkward turn to look at the giddy, jealous. Yearning for the same.

I get my lunch and find a seat at a table where others are just sitting down. All six of us look at each other without speaking. We smile and nod and sit. We take up our forks, place our napkins and start eating. An uncomfortable voice at the other end starts, *So, how did each of you get here?*

2: What do you mean? Like, bus or train?

1: No -- [laugh] -- what brought you here?

2: Ohhhh... well, I'm already 30 and I haven't met the one, so...

3: [interrupts] YES! Me too. I just turned 30.

4: Ditto!

5: Same.

1: Yea, me too!

6/Me: Uhhh... I also just turned 30 and my sister sent me here as a birthday present.

1: [Probably noticing my discomfort] You mean, you didn't want to come?

Me: Well, I'm happy. I'm not missing anything in my life. But I don't want to be ungrateful, so I am here! [I force a smile and look at my lap]

2: Oh, I have heard that this place is amazing. I have 6 friends from college who all came here and found their husbands. I'm the last one. Haha - they finally convinced me to come.

3: My buddies did the same thing - this is the place to meet a nice girl!

Me: Whatever happened to meeting people at work? Or hanging out at the library? Or at the park?

4: You still go to libraries?!

All: laugh

Me: Yes, I still go to libraries. I also believe that I don't necessarily need a man... a husband... in order to live a happy and fulfilled life.

All: [silence....I notice the eyes of the woman across from me dart to the guy across the table and smirk. He smirks back]

Wow, I think to myself, I am really making fans here. But just because I am here doesn't mean I'm not going to be myself. I have very low hopes that this is where I am going to meet my one true love. This is so contrived. I just have to make it through the month. Why is this thing so long?? I can't believe I took a leave at work to do this. AH.

Penny has always been my favorite cousin and I don't want to disappoint her. I appreciate that she's trying to be supportive and loving. And usually she's not pushy, so....I am going along with this. Hell, even if I get some rest, that will be worth it. Work has been exhausting lately. I rejoin the conversation...

5:...What are you all looking for in a partner?

Hmmm. He's pretty cute. I noticed his eyes immediately. A beautiful brown framed by very long and thick lashes. That always gets me on guys. That and a good pair of dimples. But the thing is -- his eyes are kind and I feel like there is something real behind them. Not this vacant desperation that is behind most of the others. I smile at him.

#1 pipes up -- I want someone to travel with.

2: Yes! And I really want to have a family.

4: I want a partner who can make me laugh.

5 is listening and nodding politely.

3: I want someone with a good career.

5: What about you? He's looking at me.

6: I want a partner who makes my life better. I do a lot of work on myself and have built a lot of happiness for myself. A partner isn't someone I need. A partner should only be in my life if they are making it better. I would ask myself - can we teach other things? Build things together that either one of us wouldn't be able to build alone? Can we be there for each other in ways that really support and uplift each other?

All: watching in silence again. Is it my fault that others are so simple in their answers? Everyone is welcome to explain but everyone apparently speaks in headlines here.

- CHALLENGE _ PAIR UP!
I pair with 5. What the fuck.