

Isolation

Florian Williams

"I stumbled over all the different words I could have said for a moment, and finally spit out only one: 'isolating.'"

- @too-spicy-and-too-queer, on the aromantic experience of intimacy.

There's a unique disappointment found in a dislike for something you've been told you would enjoy. Watching a show that your friends had been raving about and instead finding it lacklustre. Starting a meal that looks beautiful, only to realise that the taste is far less appetising. Reading a critically acclaimed novel and coming out mystified as to what all the fuss was about. These are short term annoyances, easily remedied with a more enjoyable activity, but there are larger, society-wide expectations of things that "should" bring joy and contentment. According to Sara Ahmed's theory, these experiences could be classified as "happy objects"—things which are so strongly and consistently associated with happiness that they've been constructed as a fundamental cause of the feeling, rather than a unique event which may or may not bring individuals pleasure. In addition, we conflate happiness with moral goodness, and in so doing add a level of judgement to a person's engagement (or lack thereof) with the target of our satisfaction. In many societies, the state of being in a romantic relationship has been solidified as a happy object, creating the phenomenon of amatonormativity. This is a term coined by Elizabeth Brake and refers to the widespread assumption that the correct or most fulfilling way of being, is in an exclusive, long term romantic and sexual relationship.



"Friends will disappear after they fall in love / Fall in love and get married / Isn't that shit like, crazy?"

- Jeff Rosenstock, *We Begged 2 Explode*.

Romantic relationships are often positioned as the ultimate end goal. They're built up as something beautiful and monumental, shy looks and coy giggles all culminating in a sudden understanding of what it truly means to be happy. You're in love! You've found your other half! Finally, you're complete! Okay, then why is it so goddamn disappointing? All the procedures have been followed, all the boxes have been checked. Everything's saying that this is it. Those lovey-dovey, saccharine feelings you've heard so much about should be flooding in. They just... aren't. Everyone else seems to be having, well, maybe not a nice time, but certainly a complicated and exciting one. By contrast, your primary emotions are boredom and embarrassment, which is considerably less Netflix original series worthy. It's like you're from another planet, crashing into the world and getting thrown into these confusing Earth customs with no idea what to do. You're alone in your misunderstanding, trying to maintain cover and be a normal human person while everyone else has the chaotic, messy time of their lives. It'll calm down soon, you think. This is the hormones talking. They'll get it out of their systems, then we can go back to behaving in a reasonable manner. You settle in, take notes, and search for anyone like you. You can't be the only alien on this entire planet. It's a statistical improbability, if nothing else. And yet, the more you look, the more you see that everyone talks like that; more stable with experience, sure, but with the same distinctive, inexplicable drive and interest. You stop looking for someone who understands, stop expecting people to get over it, stop waiting for your friends to come back.

Instead you stand back and marvel at this incomprehensible cycle of heartbreak and euphoria that they keep going back to. Apparently, that's just what this bizarre little planet is *like*.

You start to wonder why you're even here. You obviously don't belong; it seems like every other minute someone's breaking up or making up or making out, and you can't muster up a desire for any of it. How? This is the greatest source of joy in existence, and you don't get it? That's freakish. Obscene. You're choosing to forgo the happiness and fulfilment that everybody else is experiencing. Without it, you'll never be complete. Their lives will have meaning because they've known the true core of human nature. Love. Superior, transcendent, romantic love. You have the audacity to refuse this divine gift, then get upset when other people don't understand you? Of course they don't! You're broken. Someday, everyone you care about is going to go out and find their forever, and you're going to be alone.

"If I just can't feel the heat / Is there something wrong with me?"

- Sofya Wang, *No Fire*.

That doesn't seem right though. You don't feel particularly bereft, all things considered. Sometimes sad, sometimes lonely, yeah, but not fundamentally incomplete. Not broken. Why, when there is so much in the world to care about, are people only concerned with this one thing? There's no reason why romance is better than friendship except that we've always seen it that way. We tell people that their platonic relationships will inevitably be superseded by "more important" commitments, therefore no one endeavours to maintain them.



But we don't need to do that. We can choose to step outside the system. Romance isn't the key to unlocking endless satisfaction, that's not how life works. There's no perfect person to come waltzing into our lives already understanding us. Connection takes effort and intention, because we cannot substitute our experiences into a predetermined formulae for happiness. By tying so much of our self-worth to this single definition of success, we're limiting ourselves to an unnaturally narrow way of life. Interdependence is integral to the way we exist, but an amatonormative world has instead isolated us in prioritisation of the nuclear family. Anyone who doesn't end up in one of these units, for any reason, is cast aside. The message is clear: if you don't fit the correct way of being, you are disposable and deserve the pain that is cast upon you. We have to move away from this worldview, and choose to make an open, accepting society. No one has the right to look at someone else's life and decide whether or not they can be happy with it. That's not our judgement to make. Maybe, next time you see someone living in a way you don't understand, ask them about it. Don't assume you know them better than they know themselves.

"That sound you hear, that's the sound of someone realising that sometimes, it's easier to change the world than it is your own life."

- Iain S. Thomas, *The Nature of My Body*.