CONNECTION

Stuck Between Rock and a Hard Place

How people meet has changed, and so has how we define relationships. But what if you meet a guy on a dating app, become best friends, and have yet to meet in person? Best-selling author Kristina Grish chronicles a relationship that exists in a category all its own, one that forces us to rethink our definition of friendship.

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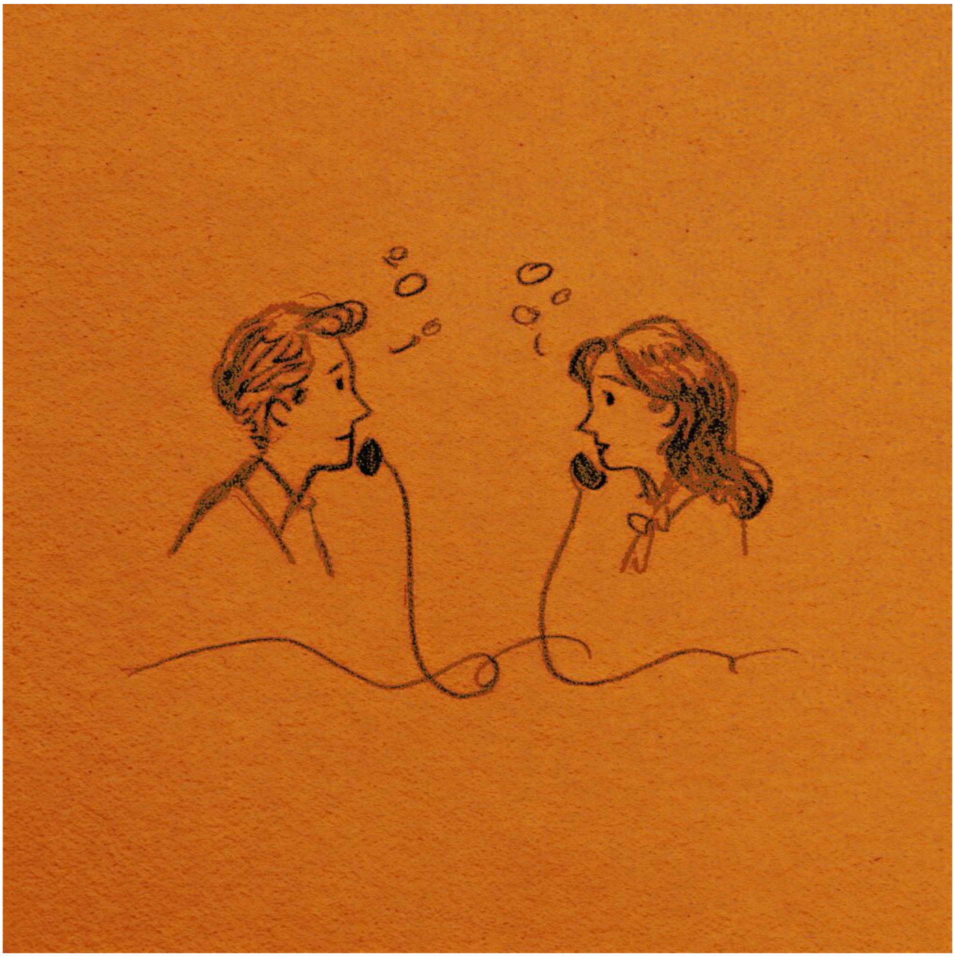

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By **Kristina Grish**

The only dick pic that Rock ever sent me was shocking—but not in a sexy or inviting way.

In a word, it was purple.

“Does this look okay to you?” he asked, anxiously. “I feel like you’d know.”

“I’ll Google,” I said. “But I don’t think your penis should look like an eggplant emoji.”

At the time, I’d known Rock for three months. We met on a dating app, and though we’d sent each other photos—of him, bare-chested and tattooed, and me, fully clothed and only from the best angle—this was the first time I’d seen his man parts.

While it turned out that Rock’s bruised member was the normal aftermath of recent hernia surgery, the fact that he sent that photo, without hesitation or asking, stuck with me. It spoke to our early rapport and trust. It also reflected a boundary-bending chutzpah that comes with feeling a bit anonymous.

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Despite a 1,200-mile gulf bridged only by two iPhones, Rock *could* be bold, since he'd also have the freedom to disappear with few consequences, if he wanted. Then again, so could I. Yet for two years, we've only become closer—and still never met face-to-face.

From Potential Romance to the Mutual Friend Zone

It probably sounds weird to say that one of my closest friends is someone I've never hugged or taken a walk with, much less invited over for drinks or a movie.

But Rock and I felt like kindred spirits from the start. I've had that "shared brain" vibe with female friends, but never a man, not even my ex—so our similar values, late-night talks, and an overall feeling of safety and reciprocation felt rare. It wasn't hard to go from imagining Rock as a boyfriend to connecting as a friend, when I already felt like I knew him from a past life. Having stopped all (okay, most) flirting, our bond grew stronger as we grew more platonic.

Logistically, being friends, instead of more, made sense. He has his hands full with two kids, a full-time job, and a side hustle. I work full-time and have a son. Rock lives in the Midwest and I'm on the East Coast, and there's no direct flight from one to the other. Romance would get costly, with long layovers. So, our friend zone never felt like rejection. We moved on, together.

The Endless Talking Phase

Since then, Rock and I have talked on the phone or FaceTimed nearly every day, sometimes a few times a day—or we can skip days, and neither of us stress out. We gripe about exes, worry over finances, and love on our kids. We talk politics, religion, podcasts, and probable conspiracy theories. I've helped him shop for clothes online, so he looks sharp for meetings. Unlike when you're dating, there are no "Good morning, beautiful" texts, but we have called each other if we can't sleep.

Rock and I rarely run out of topics to chew on, especially since our lives are so different. The man has interests to spare. He's active, adores his dogs, and is an avid fisher. He hates planning anything except his weekly BBQ, and when he went on a solo vacation to Puerto Rico with nothing but a backpack, he mapped his adventure as he went.

Rock loves to cook, and being half-Mexican, he'd add chiles to pancakes if it weren't for the giant holes in his intestine. He's ten years sober but still has his vices—he chews Skoll Snooze Mint and mostly ignores health issues. He drives a Ford pickup and listens to '90s punk and country. During COVID, he grew mushrooms in his basement to sell to local restaurants.

Rock's the guy who's up for anything. When his Scottish co-worker noticed Rock's Scottish family crest tattoo, he offered him bagpipe lessons—and now he's learning to play. And last year, he began raising chickens and convinced his son to build a coop and daughter to feed them. My son and I bought the hens frilly Easter hats. They pop out 30 dozen eggs a month, which he sells for $120—and is putting toward a set of bagpipes.

I, on the other hand, live near the beach and have friends who drive luxury cars and own yachts (though I live in a studio and own neither). I'd spend my last dime at a sunny resort or health retreat. I miss gardening (my ex got the house) and won't let up until Rock plants boxwoods in front of his home. I talk a lot, probably too much, about consciousness and the supernatural—which fascinates Rock, but not as much as my stories about being a mildly slutty magazine writer in the '90s, living in the West Village. I remember a game of Taboo where the answer was "French fries"—and my clue was, "You eat these with red wine at Pastis!" Now I edit books, take gossipy walks with friends, and live for day trips with my son.

I DoorDash most meals, hate eggs and mushrooms, and during COVID, read a stack of books for a two-woman book club. I make obnoxious barf noises when Rock spits tobacco on the phone. The most renegade habit I've ever had was bumming cigarettes outside a bar in my 20s.

What's in a Friend?

My girlfriends harp on the fact that Rock doesn't fit into a neat box—not "Husband," "Boyfriend," "Local Friend," "Friend with Benefits," or "Conventional Other." What they don't get is that talking to him is more rewarding than listening to potential dates initiate unwanted phone sex and call their exes "crazy." They also care too much about making sure *I* know which box *they* want to check.

Perhaps our friendship works so well because we don't overthink it. Yet we still manage to read each other's emotional needs and finish each other's sentences. When I had no Valentine, he sent me candy, and when he lost a bet over whether a guy would call me, he mailed me a jar of my favorite Dubai peanut butter with the note, "Congratulations, asshole."

If he's blue, I'll make a joke that prompts him to make one—and laughing at Rock's jokes is his favorite validation. It comes naturally for me when he compares my thin, angsty ex to the guy in Edvard Munch's the *Scream* or when we laugh until we cry about my religious mom's road rage—both middle fingers up, listening to worship music on the radio.

We look out for the other person's well-being, as much as we can. Rock's the first I called for support after my custody hearing, and when he got tinnitus, I found him a doctor, and he put me on his HIPPA form. He's also dug around for studies when I had health issues and even contacted a researcher in Mexico for insight. Rock's an engineer, a problem-solver by nature, so he loves a good puzzle—whether it's about neuropathy or my noisy washing machine. We gently help with the kids, too. When his daughter got her first period, he frantically called on his way to CVS. I sent screenshots of what to buy, plus a heating pad and pretty toiletry bag for her purse.

But it's not all rosy. We don't get along perfectly, which isn't realistic anyway. Rock can be argumentative and gruff, while I lean feisty and sensitive. But debates can make us think bigger. We mostly bicker over politics, since he's red, and I'm blue-ish. My son was adopted, so I know a lot about our country's negligent foster care system, which pried open Rock's thoughts on abortion rights. And his POV on illegal immigrants, explained through the lens of an ex's cheating habits, affected my opinions on open border policies. Quarrels de-escalate quickly—then we're back to mocking how I slur on sleep gummies.

Love vs. *Love, Love*

The only time we got stuck was when Rock fell hard for a woman for the first time since we'd met; he didn't know how to give us each the attention he thought we needed. So, he gradually disappeared for three months. I spun out. And for the first time, I wondered if I could possibly *love, love* Rock, leading me to tease our friendship apart in therapy.

He came back when his fling fizzled out and by then, I'd realized that missing my person wasn't the same as being in love. So, when *I* began dating a few months later, I modeled (thanks to aforementioned therapy) how to have Rock and another man in my life so he wouldn't feel like I did. Rock's dalliance was a nice dress rehearsal for the dating boundaries we've had since. And we always close our phone calls with, "talk to you soon/later," so neither wonders if the other will vanish.

So, Now What?

I've admittedly wondered how long we can keep up our routine from afar, without needing to deepen the connection with sensory cues like me touching his arm when we laugh or him smelling my lavender shampoo when we hug hello. I don't love that tech has normalized spending less time with people in person, even if it's convenient. And I do think it would be cool to eat tacos on the beach or spy on my friends during yacht parties like a couple of teenagers.

But then, the journalist in me perks-up at the beautiful quantum entanglement going on. Think of the landmark 2013 study out of University of Virginia that used a fMRI to show that when we're close to someone, our brains don't distinguish between "self" and "other." They become hardwired for empathy, allowing loved ones to become deeply integrated into, and a literal part of, our identity.

I suspect that feeling content about our relationship's limits and depth is a divorce thing, too. We've talked about what we miss about marriage and bring aspects of that into our relationship. It's refreshing to connect so well with a man, after feeling so misunderstood by my ex. It's also comforting to be asked about the little things, like what's for dinner or how a meeting went—and genuinely care. We partly fill the role of a partner, without naming the emotional obligation.

The few times I've felt insecure, like when Rock disappeared, I did question whether our bond was unhealthy and not to be trusted, if we ever reunited. But once the smoke cleared, I realized that we do show up for each other.

We're here for the amusing and hard stuff, but with space to meet our need for independence and ability to navigate busy schedules. We're like the friendship version of Goldie Hahn and Kurt Russell. Plus, being a divorcée in 2025 isn't like when we were young; co-parenting is more interwoven, and children's feelings and priorities are central to rejiggered families.

The other night, Rock and I calculated how long before our kids set us free—four years for him, six for me. It's enough time for our GLP-1s and Korean face masks to work, for us to build up our 401ks and design our dream homes. We implied that we'd do these things for, or with, our next partner, but who knows? Maybe when Rock's kids fly the nest, he'll instead share a duplex with me. Or when we finally meet up, he'll smack me on the tush and give romance another try.

What I do know is that, for now, we work. Meeting Rock in the tatted-up flesh is the last thing I'm worried about—though my 50th birthday is soon, and he promises to fly out so he can sing karaoke with my mom. Romantic or not, in-person or not, Rock is, in many ways, my better half. I just don't have access to his purple penis—which, all things considered, is okay with me.

Kristina Grish is a New York Times best-selling collaborator, writer, and editor, living in Connecticut with her son. She's also the author of five of her own books, including F*ck You Haiku*—breakup poems to help readers vent and move on. She's written for most national women's magazines, was a contributing editor to* Marie Claire*, and wrote columns for* Cosmo, Martha Stewart Living*, and* WomensHealth.com. *She recently launched a Facebook support community called Chapter 2 for divorced women managing illness. For more, visit KristinaGrish.com.*

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