

Three Minute Mark

by Jordan West

I don't know why I thought speed dating would be a good idea.

Okay, yes, I do know why, but that's a long story and not the one I'm telling.

The organizers had rented out a neighborhood bar that was clearly accustomed to being filled with a lot more chairs and much less light. With the rows of two-person tables and the cheerful overhead lighting, it felt more like a showroom floor than a place to meet your soulmate. Sitting at my own table, across from a woman in a bright blue dress, I could picture us as props in an Ikea kitchen, mannequins propped up carefully in a cozy breakfast nook, gathered around silk flowers and lit with false sunshine. She fit right into the whole scene.

Me? Not so much.

"Why the Screens?" she asked, nodding to my glasses with a grin. "Are you checking up on all your dates?"

The words scrolled across my left lens as her mouth moved, half a second out of sync. The lightweight World Screens weren't designed to do much more than basic social media, so I had to turn off all the other functions to run the transcription app. The lag kept getting worse though, which meant it was time for another upgrade. I'd probably be on the meal-cubes-and-no-dating budget for a while after tonight, but I couldn't usually handle more than one round of speed dating every few months, anyway.

Smiling back, I held up my Black Book tablet and punched in a code to request privacy protocols. She glanced down at her own Book, grin turning uncertain, but she hit "accept" and slid on the single-lens viewer, careful not to muss her perfectly styled bangs. The amber plastiglass cast a shadow on her pretty face and turned one brown eye to deep, liquid black.

I waited until she fit in the earpiece and signed, *Sorry. I could write notes, but it would take up the whole three minutes.*

There's always that moment. Every Deaf person knows it. That moment when whoever I'm talking to suddenly realizes that I can't hear them. It's different with different people, but once that moment happens, it tells me exactly how the rest of the conversation is going to go.

For her, it happened as soon as I started signing. To her credit, she didn't default to pity or horror, which was pretty standard. There was just a half second of shock, then she leaned forward on her elbows, all curiosity and interest. "So you've got, what? Like a lip-reading app?"

I shook my head no and signed, *Real-time audio transcription.*

Or rather, I signed something approximating, *Quick sound word write*, which I knew from experience was what the ASL translation app was telling her.

She frowned, confused. "Huh?"

I definitely did not sigh. I used to, but it happened every time, so I had to train myself out of sighing as I tapped my ear and pointed to the microphone in my glasses frame, then pointed to the left lens and held up the sign for *word*.

"Oh! So it takes what I say and writes it out." She pointed to her own lens. "And this takes what you sign and says it." I nodded, and she beamed. "That is so cool!"

Better than charades, I signed, and her smile faded. Shit. I tried again. *Better than acting out everything.*

That must have translated better, because she brightened again. "Can't you just wear hearing aids, or something?" she asked.

I shook my head, signing, *Don't work for me.*

"Right. Sure," she said. She obviously didn't understand, but at least she was trying.

Most of our allotted time was eaten up by questions about my tech, and she looked disappointed when the buzzer sounded. I assumed it was a buzzer, anyway. Not that I knew what a buzzer sounded like.

“It was really great to meet you,” she said, sliding off the viewer. “Most of the people at these things are so boring. It’s nice to talk to someone interesting.”

I couldn’t offer much of an answer, since her translator was off, so I just grinned broadly and gave her a thumbs up. And no, to this day, I still cannot believe I gave that woman a thumbs up, the universal sign for *I am a huge dork*. She waved a little before she signed off, though, so maybe I didn’t look like too much of a loser.

I input a high score beside her number just as her holo image flickered out, leaving behind an empty chair, nothing but a small projection device on the seat. After a moment, the projector blinked brightly, and contestant number two shimmered into being across from me.

With such a good start, I was feeling positive about the evening to come, and my optimism continued when I saw my new companion. He was older, handsome, and well-dressed, with dark eyes and a perfectly cut suit, like a model in an ad for expensive techwear. He frowned briefly at my glasses, but seemed generally pleased with the rest of me. I pushed down a surge of awkwardness as I smiled and entered the request code.

His frown deepened. “The fuck is this?”

I gestured for him to put on his viewer, but he just at his Black Book like it might have razor blades hidden somewhere.

“Is this a joke?” he asked. “Are you some kind of pervert?”

Once again, I crushed the reflexive sigh and reached for my trusty pen and paper. *I’m Deaf. It’ll help us talk.*

“What do you mean you’re deaf?” From the slight head-turns at the tables around us, he must have said it a little too loudly. “You can understand what I’m saying, can’t you?”

I pointed at the lens where his words were scrolling, but he didn’t seem to get it.

“Can’t you just write it down?” He gestured at the paper.

I reminded myself that patience was a virtue and slapping strangers was frowned upon, even if they weren’t physically present, and I wrote, *Take too long.*

When I turned it for him to read, he scowled, but he finally shoved the lens on. "Fine. How is this supposed to help?"

There's a translator program, I signed, and he jumped, presumably in surprise as the audio translation sounded in his ear.

"The fuck?"

I squared my shoulders and tried again. *It translates ASL to English audio.*

The man made a face. "Explain what? Is it giving me directions?"

That stupid literal translation piece of shit app wasn't worth the credit I wasted on it, but even *explain sign meaning in English sound* should have been understandable to anyone who wasn't being deliberately obtuse.

Getting the man's attention, I signed slowly, *I sign. That says words.*

The conversation didn't get much better, even once he gave up trying to understand how the damn programming worked and focused on what the hell I was saying. By the time the round ended, I was exhausted from having to sign everything twice and frustrated with his apparent refusal to use any kind of higher cognitive functions.

My next date looked a little more promising: a young man with a multitude of piercings and a mass of hair so curly and so remarkably pink, the holo projector couldn't render it completely, and it turned into a vague halo around the edges. He immediately donned the viewer and smiled cheerfully.

As soon as he accepted the protocol, he was off and running. "Hi! You can understand me, right? I've heard about people using World Screens for stuff like this, but I've never actually seen it. I just think it's so amazing, the way it's been adapted to help you live a normal life."

He went so fast that the transcription lagged several words behind, and I had only just caught up to the end of the sentence before he went on at full speed.

"It really is inspiring to see someone with a disability out doing something like speed dating. I mean, it's so silly, but you're just here, meeting people and having a good time. Or

mostly having a good time, I guess. I'm sure some people are just awful, but I think that dismissing someone just because they're different is discrimination. Obviously it wouldn't be easy to date a deaf person, but I think it would be fun getting to learn sign language and stuff like that. Is it normal to date regular people or do you usually stick with other deaf people?"

Every word that scrolled across my lense was another notch up in my blood pressure. He paused after the question, but not long enough for me to catch up and answer. Probably a good thing, since my reply would have been predicated on just how fed up I was with this bullshit.

"I went out with this guy who had an extra toe, once. He talked about how hard it was to find shoes. I know that's not really the same thing, but I guess I like people that are different, you know? If I wanted to go out with normal people, I'd go to a bar, or something. I don't know why I thought there'd be anyone interesting here, but you're here, so maybe I had some kind of instinct about it. Like, maybe I came because I knew I'd get a chance to talk to someone really different and inspiring, and here you are!"

I turned off the transcription app, saving both the battery and my sanity. For the rest of the interim, I smiled and nodded as he went on, perfectly content with his own conversation. While he rambled, I scanned the rest of the room, taking stock of the players I'd met and the ones I hadn't. The woman in the blue dress was at the far end, engaged with another young woman and laughing. The man in the suit appeared to be deep in conversation with a woman I couldn't see beyond her severe haircut. The crowd seemed to be the usual motley collection of young professionals too busy or bored with traditional dating rituals. In some ways, I supposed, I fit in pretty well, just not in the right ways.

The man talked until the signal went off, and he grinned and sent me a private text with his number, which was both technically against the rules and completely useless to me. I smiled politely and hit delete, willing him to vanish.

My fourth date of the evening, another woman, was younger, blonde, and dressed for a much more interesting night than the one she was having. Even before the image had settled, she tapped a message to me into her Black Book, asking, DEAF?

The all-caps and underlining was unnecessary, I thought, but I smiled ruefully and nodded.

Not interested. Sorry, she wrote, and tossed the Book on the table, immediately fixing her attention on a her personal tablet and pretending to that I had already disappeared.

This is the part where I'm supposed to shrug it off, right? This is the part where I'm supposed to rise above it and prove that I'm the better person and just sit here like the nice piece of furniture that I am. Right?

Yeah, how about no.

The Black Books came with small speakers built in, and it was easy enough to type in a nice, personal message for the automated voice to read aloud. Even if I couldn't hear it, there was something immensely satisfying about leaving the Book to repeat "*EAT SHIT AND DIE!*" over and over, for the enjoyment of all the other speed daters.

The bathroom was the kind of dimly-lit-chic required of all trendy bars, but it was big enough to spare me the familiar sense of being trapped, even with the smell of bleach and fake lavender. I've hidden in enough bathrooms, during dates and otherwise, I could probably write a book on the best bathrooms to break down in.

I didn't break down, not this time. She wasn't worth it, and I didn't have time before I had to go back out there and do it all again. Trying not to look too closely at the mirror, I took off the glasses and splashed my face with cold water. Just another jerk. Not the worst rejection I'd ever had. No big deal.

From the corner of my eye, I saw the door crack open, and a head with short, greying hair and laugh-lined blue eyes appeared through the crack. I didn't recognize the person, one of

the dating service staff probably, but they smiled shyly and held out a notepad, keeping all but their head and arm firmly on the other side of the door.

Sorry. Wanted to make sure you were okay?

Goddamn concern trollers couldn't leave me alone for one goddamn minute. Aloud, I snapped, "Fuck off."

I don't know what my voice sounds like the rest of the time, but I'm sure it wasn't very pleasant right then. The person just gave an apologetic grimace and disappeared back through the door, mouthing *Sorry! Sorry!* as they went.

In the mirror, my reflection glared back at me, a pointed reminder of all the failed dates before and all the future failures yet to come. Dating is hard enough when you speak the same language, and the Sign-to-English barrier was just one more hurdle to jump. Sometimes that hurdle seemed just a little too high.

I checked my watch. The three minutes was up. Time to go back out and face the next challenger.

Heads turned as I emerged, but no one seemed anxious to approach me. The young blonde woman was nowhere in sight, and I couldn't help but hope, a little meanly, that she'd shout down her holo connection out of embarrassment. Or better yet, had been evicted by the organizers for being a rude little shit.

Date number five was just as bad. Date number six was worse. By the end of the night, I'd spent three minutes each with a dozen dubious samples of humanity, and the only one I would have considered even associating with again was the woman in the blue dress. I fed my scores into the matching app as directed and... nothing. She'd picked someone else for her first choice, and the only person to put me in their top five was the young man with the pink hair.

So just another night out, then. I didn't sigh as I pulled off my glasses, and the rest of the players started to pull out personal devices, messaging their matches with relief, now that the pressure of time was gone. I was nearly to the door when a wave caught my attention. The

service staffer who had come to check on me in the bathroom was standing off to the side, smiling shyly, and I reminded myself that rolling my eyes would be disproportionately rude.

The person, whose gender wasn't immediately evident, grabbed a card and pencil off of a table and quickly scribbled, *No luck?*

I shook my head, shrugging, and they frowned. *Can I buy you a drink to make up for it?* they wrote.

It's weird to say that I hate getting free stuff, but I hate getting free stuff. The handouts I've gotten from middle managers desperate to avoid a discrimination suit are unbelievable, and I'd seen enough of those to know that this was different.

Seeing my hesitation, they added another note. *Promise I'm not a stalker?* it said, and I snorted.

Funny and considerate with legible handwriting? The general failure of the evening was hardly an excuse to pass this up. Slowly, I nodded, and they grinned brightly, gesturing for me to sit at the bar. Instead of sitting next to me, I was surprised to see them duck behind the bar and hold up two glasses with a questioning look, asking what I'd like.

Pulling out my notepad, I scribbled down my answer, and they nodded, still grinning like I'd made their night. Caught up in the good mood, it wasn't until there was a drink in front of me that I remembered to pull out the Screens so we could actually talk. They viewer I offered them without hesitation and joked, "Testing one, two, three?"

The words scrolled in front of my eye, and I nodded, then signed the same words back.

A startled expression crossed their face, followed by a short laugh. "Oh, wow. That's unsettling."

It takes some getting used to, I signed and waited tensely for the inevitable confusion and frustration.

Their brow furrowed, and they mouthed whatever nonsense the translator had given them until sudden understanding broke with a broad grin. “Getting used to. Yeah. The voice is a little...” They frowned, wiggling a hand by their ear. “Digital?”

I shook my head, frowning. I’d only ever used the app for dates, and no one had ever said anything, besides the fact that I had no frame of reference for what “digital” sounded like. My new companion seemed to realize this and thought for a moment before grabbing the notepad again.

“It’s like natural voices sound...” On the paper, they wrote, *...sort of like handwriting*. Gesturing to the glasses, they went on, “But this is more like...” The next line was written in heavy block letters. ...**LIKE THIS**.

Oh. Well, no wonder all my dates sucked, if that’s what they had to listen to. Hesitantly, I signed, *You don’t have to use it*.

They took another moment to mouth through the transliteration to get at the meaning, then they shrugged, still grinning. “I’ll adjust. Besides, it’s faster than writing notes.”

I blinked, surprised. Finally, with a grin of my own, I signed in reply, *I kind of like your notes*.

Understanding arrived faster, this time, and with it came a flush that went right up to the tips of their ears. I couldn’t help but laugh, and the red blush deepened.

That date lasted a lot longer than three minutes. So did the one after it and the one after that. We still needed the glasses sometimes, but most of our conversations were glances and gestures. When words were necessary, we used scribbled lines on pieces of paper and tablet screens, handwritings alternating like treble and bass on a printed score. It was slower, sure, but we had all the time in the world.

Speed dating was a terrible idea, anyway.