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The Lure of Love

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Searching for the fish in a modern dating sea.

I am well past 25 years old, yet I am single. OK, so I am at least two-times-25, and I am single.

If you are not in my age group, let me educate you. People treat this combined condition — advanced age plus the lack of a spousal unit — as if it were some manner of grievous social sin for which penance ought to be assigned.

As though there are scores of erudite fellows outside my door, standing there with orchids and copies of the Rockwell Kent-illustrated edition of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* under their arms, yet I stride past them every morning, my nose in the air.

As though all married persons are content and self-actualized, kind to strangers and gentle to dogs, never driving erratically down I-43 or taking up two parking spaces at Mayfair.

As though my single status were a kind of political statement. Wait. Maybe it is, because in Wisconsin, I've been forced to date a lot of men who voted for ... no, wait. Never mind. I digress.

Perhaps because of this single-minded social oppression, perhaps because I was bored, perhaps because my ex started seeing someone roughly the age of my daughter, I signed up for an online dating service a while ago, and was educated in the peculiar culture of romance in Milwaukee as an "older" person.

Online dating can seem a bit too public for an old romantic like me, a sort of billboard advertising things that I'd just as soon keep to myself (though I am, clearly, willing to share them here with anyone who can read). But apparently, this is how everyone who remembers Rod McKuen does it now, so I gave in.

Once I started thinking of online dating as if it were shopping for shoes at Zappos, it became less daunting. You choose a size (hey, you really do – height and weight are apparently essential criteria to finding a soulmate), pick a color (ditto), choose an income, and just order up people according to someone else's idea of what determines compatibility.

After you check all the little appropriate squares and lie about your age, then your inbox begins filling up with digital missives from persons who should, if they play the game well, be attempting to charm you.

Instead, I got:

"*Hello.*" Most men wrote nothing but that single word. Hard to come back from that with a witty riposte, but it does help weed out the lads who would be absolutely no fun on a long road trip.

"*I don't want any drama.*" Any man over 50 ought to know that any woman over 50 is on to this piece of disingenuous claptrap. What these Barcalounger-dwellers really mean is: "Don't talk to me while the Packers are on."

"*Do you like Nietzsche?*" That's one fellow's first (and last) note to me, in its entirety. I'm not sure if he was talking about Ray or Friedrich.

To be fair, it's no easier trying to start a conversation in person. I was recently at Sendik's in the checkout lane ahead of a fellow who kept looking at his shoes and mumbling. I couldn't tell if he was offering commentary on my bold dinner plan of a cheddar wedge and one of those City Market cinnamon rolls, or if he was trying to start a conversation with the floor. Finally, as I reached for the orange juice on the bottom of the cart, he raised his head as high as my left hand, saw no ring, and said, "So. You're not married."

"Nope," I said, trying to sound as if that was not a character indictment of the lowest order.

Then he said, "Huh." And that was the end of that.

Hence the online dating.

I suspect that posting photos to a dating website is more natural for people under 25 who have spent half their lives selfie-shooting every meal they've consumed and every view upon which they've gazed. They have an Instagram library from which to choose, a spate of witty snaps of themselves jogging without sweating and laughing while glamorously dressed at friends' destination weddings.

I Facebook, I tweet, I am social with my media, but I am camera-shy, and I'd much rather take photos of other people than of myself. The last pic of me at a friend's nuptials is from 1972, when I stood in some field outside of Madison wearing flowers in my hair and trying to not swallow bugs while singing that Judy Collins song that I can't remember the name of now.

Forget that. I spent the last few decades raising children and not traveling, but in a drawer around here somewhere, I have a fading Instamatic print of me in front of Mt. Rushmore. Will that work? And, oh, score! Here's this Polaroid of me at 10 months pregnant, about to deliver my oldest son. That'll reel them in.

This dilemma is apparently shared by middle-aged men, who rummage through their desk drawers, scroll through their iPhones, peer at what's stuck to their refrigerators, and then choose ... a shot of themselves sitting in a boat, wearing a baseball cap, holding up a fish. Yes, a fish.

The courting behavior of the Wisconsin male seems to universally require a display of something finny that may or may not have been in season at the moment that he and his buddy (the one holding the camera) decided to immortalize the critter. Most of these shots focus on the gills, not the guy, so a girl is left wondering what the fellow looks like, but can clearly identify the species of crappie.

Don't get me wrong. I like to fish. I do. I have researched and written many a magazine article about lures, guides and boats. I long to hook a muskie one day. I am not puzzled by fishermen. I am puzzled by why they woo with walleye. And let's be honest, no one has a good hair day in a boat, especially a boat that smells like beef jerky and beer. Take it from me, this is not a courtship technique used in many other parts of the country.

So on my dating site, I did not post a photograph of myself with a dead thing – I used a shot from the jacket of my last book. I listed my favorite restaurants, I wrote something about liking the opera, and was invited to dinner by some truly lovely gentlemen. It was not at all like those silly scenes in romantic movies in which the heroine speed-dates a series of increasingly bizarre subcreatures. These men were accomplished, well-mannered and delightful. The worst that could happen did happen: I met interesting new people whom I did not care to date. And I lived right through it.

Then one day, I drove to a little patisserie halfway to Oconomowoc and met a fellow for tea and croissants. Wisely, he had not posted a photo of himself with a fish, though he is a hunter and a fisherperson, and his eyes lit up when I said catching a muskie was on my to-do list. He can field dress a moose but also write in iambic pentameter, sing the blues and charm my grandson. None of those qualities were listed in the online checklist, but sometimes fate is wiser than the keyboard.

Now, at the approach of Valentine's Day, I consider Cupid's new digital digs. Years ago, people sent each other letters. Now, 25-year-olds text each other kiss emojis, and the deeply committed spring for the talking e-card of the Chihuahua dressed like a strolling guitar player.

But sometimes the medium is not the message, it's just the medium. "Do you like Nietzsche?" is only a signal, inexpertly conceived, but its message is bold and lovely. It has resilience and valor, that message, and it is readily spotted and always touching.

Brave hearts. Brave, brave hearts.

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