

Rumors of My Life are Greatly Exaggerated

by Sarah Barnett

It's mid-afternoon and Starbucks is practically empty. I find an easy chair in the back with a view of the door and sit down to wait with my latte and the *Times* crossword puzzle. If Wally doesn't show, at least I'll have exercised my brain cells.

I'm already regretting this adventure. I'd rather be home watching *Dancing with the Stars*. Two years ago I found myself single for the first time in twenty-five years. No problem, I thought. How hard could it be to find a replacement mate? That was my first mistake—treating the situation as if I were looking for parts for my vacuum cleaner. Alex, my ex, had no trouble meeting and marrying a woman fifteen years his junior. I'll show him, I thought. But I wasn't quite ready for the dating scene. *Then what am I doing here?*

You know those commercials you see on TV, maybe for hair color or some new diet product? A woman of a certain age is getting ready to go out on a date. She tries on one great outfit after another, brushes, then fluffs up her hair, slips into a slim dress and opens the door to this gorgeous male with just enough gray at the temples and crinkling around the eyes to let you know he's age appropriate? Well, that's not me.

I'm fifty-two years old and invisible. I once stood at a bar for twenty-three minutes waiting for the bartender to take my order. All around me couples were sipping exotic beverages, men ordered martinis, but I stood alone and ignored. I made a game of it. I called it "waiting with growing patience"—as if patience was something you could grow like begonias or zucchini.

I joined a singles group oxymoronically called "Happily Single." It was a good concept. Put a gender-balanced group of people in a room and encourage them to discuss topics such as "Date is a Four-Letter Word" or "I'm Dating my Ex in Disguise," and pretty soon people get to know each other and well, you get the idea.

I learned a lot from the more experienced singles around me. First, in order to fully recuperate from a failed marriage, you were required to have a transitional relationship, which seemed to mean dating someone you could torment in precisely the same ways your ex had tormented you.

You also needed a checklist, a compilation of those things everyone wants in a person of the opposite sex—sense of humor, honesty and an understanding of how to buy jewelry—plus those things many people consider deal-breakers—smoking, teen-aged children and a catch-all category called "emotional baggage." Armed with your list, you could easily disqualify someone as inappropriate, unless, of course, he was so magnetic you couldn't help yourself, and then you checked your check list at the bedroom door.

I developed my own three-part test.

1. He had to be age appropriate defined as my age plus or minus five years.
2. He had to be available: divorced or widowed and interested in a long-term relationship.
3. I had to talk to him for ten minutes without thinking, *I know why you're divorced*. This method saved a lot of time, but it also meant I didn't go out on a lot of dates.

In my abundant free time I became fascinated with those classified ads titled "I Saw You" or "Missed Connections." Someone spots a possible romantic interest in a restaurant, on the Metro or even in a passing car. A spark kindles and hope is born followed by an ad that reads something like: *Tues. April 1. Clyde's, Georgetown. Our eyes met; we didn't. Let's have coffee and see what develops.*

Call me crazy, but when I read these ads, I can't get the idea out of my head that someone is looking for me. Maybe he saw me at the supermarket picking out a pineapple or comparing soup labels. "She's the one," he thinks. "I'll just find her by posting this ad." Insane? It gets even stranger when I contemplate what such an ad might say.

Brunette in trench coat, Reeboks and in a hurry. You were crossing 16th St against the light and I almost ran you down. Let's meet for real.

I know I have a better chance of conceiving triplets than of meeting someone this way, so I move on to the "In search of" ads, where people get to spell out exactly what they're looking for. That is, if you know the code. For example: *DM (divorced male) seeks fit, attractive, intelligent F (female) for possible LTR (long-term relationship)*. "Fit" is synonymous with "thin," preferably very thin. "Attractive?" No one of average looks should consider applying. And "intelligent" is code for: "You should be smart enough to appreciate

how smart I am.”

I never scraped up the courage to respond to a personals ad, but one day a rather lengthy one caught my eye:

DM, Handsome, exciting, dynamic, passionate, outrageous, intense, software entrepreneur, author, designer, gourmet cook, Jefferson kindred spirit, fit, runs, lifts, sails and skis, funny and adventurous. Desires attractive, exciting F, under 37, 5'7" and size 8 for expressing, caring and sharing joy forever. Bring a smile, high heels, short skirt, silk blouse...

Somebody needs to tell this guy a thing or two, I think. I open my laptop and tap out the following:

Dear Handsome, exciting, dynamic, etc... (or should I call you Mr. Jefferson?):

I've never answered an "in search of" ad before, but I just had to write and find out more about the owner of all those amazing adjectives.

I read your ad several times but can't figure out why Mrs. Jefferson was foolish enough to let you go. Maybe her cheeks hurt from smiling, or she exhausted her intensity laundering her silk blouse collection.

I suppose it's more likely that you found Mrs. J. lacking in some respects. Did she allow dust balls to accumulate in the balls of Monticello? Maybe she wasn't able to squeeze into her miniskirt, or perhaps she kept falling off her high heels. Is it possible that she was so thoughtless as to turn 38 when you weren't looking?

You probably want to know more about me. I think I meet most of your requirements. I have the shoes—black suede pumps with 6" heels—and they're size 8 too (how did you know?). The skirt, blouse and smile are no problem, but in that outfit I'm not sure I'll be able to keep up with running, sailing and skiing, not to mention software.

Write back soon.

That felt good. What felt even better was clicking on “send.” Imag-

ine my surprise when Mr. J. responded the same day. Wally (his real name) liked my sense of humor, acknowledged that his ad was a little over the top (it was his first attempt) and asked if we could meet for coffee. After a few more e-mails in which we discovered a common interest in Russian literature, I agreed. He asks me to carry a copy of *The Brothers Karamazov* so he'll recognize me, while he decides to arm himself with *War and Peace*.

Now I'm really confused. Who is Wally and why did I agree to this? And the biggest question: Is this a date? A date, that is, with a capital D. I should be up on this because I attended a Happily Single discussion a few weeks ago on this very subject. There were lots of ideas about who asks, who pays and clothing, both outer and under. None of this is helpful.

I'm at the coffee shop twenty minutes early so I can check it out. I'm sitting far enough back so I'll spot him first. I've chosen an all-purpose outfit—black turtleneck and jeans. I'm pretending I'm in a Left Bank café wiling away the afternoon before going off to French class. I've gotten to the part where Jacques, the waiter/struggling artist, strikes up a conversation, when I think I spot Wally.

It's him all right, carrying a fat paperback under his arm. He's shorter than I imagined and older too—gray hair and mustache. He's wearing chinos, white shirt, brown sports jacket, but I can't see his eyes. Like me, he's wearing sunglasses.

Now what? He hasn't spotted me yet, in the semi-dark rear of the store. *Invisible*, I think, pretending fascination with the paper in front of me. Wally scans the room, probably looking for the blue silk blouse I was supposed to wear. I freeze. *Don't give yourself away. It's not a date...It is a date... But, if it is a date, it's all wrong.*

Wally removes his sunglasses, and while his eyes are adjusting to the light, I slip my copy of *Crime and Punishment* into my newspaper and walk nonchalantly out the door.

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