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The Practice of Dating

Another landmark approaches. January, 2009, my 45th-birthday month. I survived all that Sweet 16 nonsense by graduating from root beer-flavored Bonne Belle lip balm to real lipstick and wearing a shiny new silver necklace instead of gum-wrapper leis. At 21, I quaffed a beer at Faneuil Hall to humor college gal pals. Two years later, most of my friends were engaged or living with some guy—because it takes two years to plan a wedding, and 25 was the cut-off for being a single girl. Friends, family members, and bare acquaintances began asking, “When are you going to get married?” All of the attractive men I dated were interested in the package-deal of woman and kids, but babies have never been my thing. So, my answer was usually, “Since I don’t want kids, maybe mid-40s, maybe never.”

I managed to slide through my 30s with the same answer, for phrases such as *None of your business* and *I didn’t know there was a law against being a bachelor-girl* were too conversation-encouraging as well as overly rude. Now there have been a few dry dating years here and there that made me start wondering too why I would not turn my happy onesome into a contented twosome; for, although rather solitary by nature, I adore hearing a man I love breathe. I also tend to feel excited when six feet of testosterone sits across a table from me. Mostly, though, my pairing instinct intensifies whenever I lose another galpal to matrimony. Running out of hangout buddies does not seem like a good enough reason to get married.

Yes, I’m a *serial monogamist*—sort of—having had only two real boyfriends, even, in twenty-four years of dating. If there is such a thing as pathologically single, I’m it. Hyperventilation is my response to a lover’s, “Feel free to bring shampoo and stuff over since you sleep here every weekend anyhow.” Not seeing my own sheets from Friday morning until Monday night is one thing. Not having to go home to deep-condition my hair, though, is crazy talk.

New friends always asked how I could afford to be single in Boston with an English degree. Easy! I worked five days per week as a clerical

Wilderness House Literary Review 3/4

assistant, hotel switchboard operator, or receptionist, then went to my actual *career* site two nights per week and Saturdays to teach writing courses. Doesn't everybody? Sundays I kept company with my honeys, the Red Sox or the Patriots, depending on the season, while correcting papers. A *To Be Typed* folder full of creative writing projects grew and grew in its file drawer. Anyone who says she hasn't time to write is not a real writer. Time to type, submit, and edit while working two jobs or raising children, however, is as elusive as a transparent paperclip in a haystack of bills.

There are serious emotional upsides to virtual-dating professional athletes. They always remain fit, sexy, and unpredictable. Some even shave on Sundays. Never does a pitcher drone on about his "bitch ex-wife" while standing on the mound or say, "If we got married, you could quit your job," meaning my teaching *career*, not the mindless switchboarding. At least reception allowed me to learn computer skills on the company's dime, assisting my transition into a new career.

Battle-scarred divorced men in their 30s served as Exhibit A as I pled my case for bachelordom throughout my 30s. My married girlfriends could not pretend the available men to date were particularly tempting, much less worth the cost of a new dress and pink sandals. Besides, most women my age are married to men who support their career aspirations as well as praising their family contributions. Potential mates showed no interest in my first career, the transition to another, or to my artistic priorities.

Now that I am over 40, guy friends are surprisingly very supportive of my lack of interest in men my age. While briefly peering in the direction of 30 - 40ish men, about a year ago I read Jonathan Small's *5 women every guy's gotta date*, and thought that I am all of these women (older, guy's girl, free spirit, brainy, seductress). So, why aren't 35-year-old men kicking down my door with proclamations of desire? Brian, happily paired and teaching at the college level, said: "The typical guy is simple. You're too many types." Dan, a handsome bachelor and international businessman, tactfully summarized: "You're not demure enough." Steve, a long-married poet with sparkling blue eyes and grown kids, was more direct: "You don't look like you'll take any crap. And, really, why

should you?"

All of these opinions and theories make absolute sense; but as the quarter-century-of-dating mark and the midpoint of "maybe mid-40s" simultaneously creep nearer, I am beginning to feel as most of my girlfriends did at 25. If I don't make an effort *this minute – right now* – I might never get married. What's missing from that statement, realization, is a sense of panic. For me, dating has never been practice for anything.

I have learned plenty about relationships and self-love from men I wish I had never met at 20-something and from men I would not date at 30-something. No man I have *loved*, however, was a building block for some theoretically-perfect way of loving Mr. Right if he ever came along. Each man was right at the time—and in his own unique way.

On my way to a poetry reading, I step onto the Red Line train, and a gorgeous stranger in black leather and jeans stares *Wow!* at me. I return the compliment, then we silently flirt like crazy for five stops. It's fun, thrilling, romantic, stress-free, and if he thinks writers are lazy or silly or resents my pro-woman attitude or has no idea who Jim Rice is, I won't ever have to know. My "maybe never" schedule is looking mighty good.