

## ***Sixty-Five First Dates***

*What you have is a good case of the guilts.* Annie Lachance

“I have a disease,” I practically yelled over the happy hour din. A couple of heads turned in my direction and I flushed red.

Annie took a long drag on her cigarette and exhaled the smoke slowly. “You do not have a disease.” She motioned to a waiter to bring her an ashtray.

“I’m sure of it. It feels like a yeast infection but ten times worse.”

Annie shook her head and smiled. “Did you use a condom?”

“Yes.”

“Then you do not have a disease.”

“That’s what you think. They’re not 100 percent effective, you know. It even says so on the box. I checked, and Web MD says I have the symptoms for at least three STDs.”

“What you have,” Annie paused and took a sip of her Coke, “is a good case of the guilts. Good girl has sex and must pay.”

“It’s not that. I have nothing to feel guilty about.”

“You know what your problem is?”

“No, but I have a feeling you’re going to tell me,” I said.

“What you’re going through at 45 is what you should have been experiencing in your 20s. All of the exploration, the angst, the anxiety? All that should be behind you, but you’re just getting started. You just don’t know it.”

“How did you get to be so wise?”

“I remember being where you are now. Only you went right from university to marrying the first handsome French–Canadian to sweep you off your feet, right?”

Our roles were reversed; who was mentoring who now? “How old were you when . . . you know.” I drew circles in the air with my hands.

“You mean when I first had sex?” Annie mimed the air circles back and laughed.

“Eighteen.”

“Wow. I was 24 and Gabriel was it. I think I have a lot of catching up to do. Still, I’m sure I have a disease.”

“If you’re so worried about it, go get tested,” she said.

“I did,” I offered enthusiastically.

“*And?*”

“Everything came back negative.”

Annie threw up her hands. “Waiter!” She stopped the young man passing our table.

“Bring me some rum for this Coke, *s’il vous plait.*”

It wasn’t karma! Turns out I was allergic to the latex.

I learned a lot about myself that first year I spent dating, besides the fact that I was allergic to latex. I subscribed to two Internet dating services, signed up for the friends-and-family plan of fix-me-ups—i.e., blind dates—and registered for one matchmaking service. Sixty-five first dates later, I had learned two things. First, finding Mr. Right is a numbers game. Second, when you do find Mr. Right and it doesn't work out, don't blame yourself.

My Internet profile listed the theatre as one of my interests, so it was only natural that Richard the Third's (third because he was my third Internet date) introductory e-mail missive opened with a line from Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*.

*Fair Kate/Cat:*

*From women's eyes this doctrine I derive:  
They sparkle still the right Promethean fire;  
They are the books, the arts, the academes,  
That show, contain, and nourish all the world.*

Shakespeare is one of my favorite authors so I was charmed and delighted by Richard's opening lines. We quickly connected by phone and made arrangements for a date at a nearby café, where a short, portly Richard, with facial hair befitting the Bard himself, made his entrance with a flourish. He was wearing a gold-trimmed black cape and a red Kangol golf cap, which he swiped from his head while making a low bow before me. It was an odd combination of Elizabethan pageantry and modern gallantry.

"M'lady," he said.

"Kind sir," I replied.

Wow, this could be fun. But when he insisted on conducting our entire conversation in iambic pentameter, I knew he wasn't the man for me. I should have seen it coming; there is no happy ending to the play either. The princess and her ladies do not end up with their men.

I met man after man who dazzled me with his charms. Could this be him? I wondered. So soon? They were good-looking, wealthy and well educated but they were also cheap and rude to waiters. In the beginning I thought they would improve over time, but that happens only with wine.

Two men flew across the country and two crossed an ocean to spend time with me. In the moment I was flattered. It took all four occasions for me to realize that these were men with more dollars than sense and each one was just looking for a new and unique experience.

Bryan, a media exec, blew in from Los Angeles one fine June weekend. Never married, he was all flash and cash and very full of himself.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I’d feel more comfortable if you stayed in a nearby hotel until we got to know each other better,” I said. I didn’t want to repeat my Peter experience and get too involved too soon.

“Cat, I’m a tall, good-looking man with a lot of money. I don’t have to fly 3,000 miles to sleep with a woman. Just find me a nice boutique hotel nearby, preferably a place with high-thread-count sheets. I’d like to feel at home.”

He didn’t want to sleep with me. He wanted to impress me. Coming from Lotus Land, he wanted an audience, an admirer, not a partner. His on-line profile had read, “Wanted: someone to love and adore.” He’d left off a very important word at the end of the line: *me*.

Unfortunately, I didn’t fare much better with a greasy oilman from Calgary who spent the entire weekend shopping for himself; a wealthy Dutch trader who wanted to go Dutch on everything once he arrived; and a charming Scotsman. I think he was charming but I

can't be sure because his Highlander accent was so thick I understood only every fourth word. It was like static on a radio.

Yes, I confess, in the beginning I made allowances for behavior I wouldn't accept in a friend, let alone a stranger. There! I said it. How humiliating! Was I so needy, starved for attention and lonely that I accepted in a stranger behavior I wouldn't tolerate in my marriage? Yes, I guess I was, but that quickly changed the minute I stopped taking things so seriously. I decided to have fun. I didn't approach every date as if it were my last and every man as if he were my only chance for happiness. In my age group—middle-aged baby boomers—there were plenty of available men out there. I just had to meet them. And I did. I also came up with a law.

“Let me get this straight,” Annie said as she tucked her long legs under her and settled herself on my cream-colored Natuzzi couch. “You've created a law?”

“Yes. I call it the Law of Thirds.”

“You know math was never your strong suit.”

“It's simple math, Annie. If you break down 100 percent into equal thirds, you get 33.3, 33.3 and 33.3 percent. In the first 33 percent—”

“Wait a minute!” Annie interrupted. “What happened to the extra 0.3 percent in each third?”

“Let's put that one percent aside for now. I'll come back to that later. The first 33 percent of the time, you meet a man and think he's great, but he doesn't feel the same way.”

“Yeah, it sure sucks when he doesn't call for a second date, especially if you think the first went well,” Annie said, shaking her head.

“Tell me about it. You know Roberta, right? She and her husband, Sam, fixed me up with one of Sam’s colleagues. It was sort of a double date. According to Roberta, ‘All I had to do is show up in my bitchin’ boots and a skirt, and the rest would take care of itself.’ And she was right.”

“Kind of like a date with training wheels,” Annie said.

“Exactly. But after drinks they left us on our own. It was a wonderful night of good food, good wine and good conversation. We had so much in common I was sure there would be a second date.”

“And he never called back?” ‘

“No, and neither Roberta nor I ever found out why.”

“All I can say is that if he doesn’t know a good thing when he sees one, then he’s not the guy for you,” Annie said.

“In the second 33 percent of the dating pool,” I continued, “he thinks you’re the next best thing since golf and a Grey Goose martini, but alas, he doesn’t do it for you. So you dance around the idea of a next date and tell him you’ll be in touch. Or you let a matchmaking agency take care of it for you.”

“And I suppose you tried one of those?” Annie asked.

I told Annie about my experience with Ms. Match. The name should have been my first clue. I put on my best Parisian accent and gave a perfect imitation of Ms. Match herself, a tall, willowy woman with close-cropped white hair who had peered at me over her bright blue Dolce & Gabbana bifocals and said, “You realize, Madame, we’re not just any matchmaking service. We are zee experts. We guarantee zee results. We have zee best screening system.”

I had squirmed a bit in my chair. I had just completed a battery of compatibility and psychological tests and handed over a hefty check. The song “What I Did for Love” from the musical *A Chorus Line* was running through my head. I hoped she was right.

“It’s very simple,” she had continued. “You go on *zee date*. And *zhen* you speak to me. *Zere* will be no awkward moments. I take care of *zat*. If it’s a match I will let you know. If not, you move on to someone else.”

The arrangement had appealed to me: no messy endings for me or the date, and I’d have a definitive answer one way or another regarding a next date. I hated being put on the spot when I didn’t feel like meeting the gentleman in question again.

The matchmaker had found Pierre. An actuary, he studied statistics at Concordia University. After all of those compatibility tests I was a bit disappointed that *zee service* matched me up with a numbers guy. Positive thoughts, I had said to myself as I walked into the restaurant. It’s important to remain open. He may have an interesting hobby.

Pierre was a bit nondescript, except for his clothes. He wore a navy suit that was slightly rumpled, a white shirt and a red tie. I’m struggling hard as I write this to get an impression of his face, but he left none—at least none that I can remember.

On the bright side, even though he was another French–Canadian, I had been led to believe he spoke English. Communicating was hard enough; I wanted someone who was comfortable in English from the get-go. In reality the only English words Pierre knew were numbers. And so we spoke French, which wasn’t so bad considering that he was a “*oui/non*” man. No matter how open-ended the question, he answered either yes or no. Luckily I was adept at keeping up both ends of the conversation.

“The agency mentioned you just returned from vacation,” I had started.

“Yes.” Pierre turned his head slightly to look past my right shoulder.

“Where did you go?” I asked, leaning on my right elbow so I could slide into his field of vision. I hate it when someone doesn’t look me in the eye.

“Whistler,” he answered, still staring past my shoulder. I turned and looked. There was a wall behind me.

“Really?” I asked. “I’m going to take a flyer here, but since it’s February I’m thinking it would be safe to say that you went . . .” In the ensuing pause, I filled in the blank for him while he still stared past my shoulder. “*Ski-ing?*” I drew the word out as my elbow slid farther still and fell right off the table. I jerked myself back in front of him. He didn’t seem to notice.

“Yes.”

I wanted to cup my hand under his chin and turn his head so we could be face to face, but I resisted the temptation.

“Skiing in BC. That must have been a great experience. I’m not much of a skier. How is it different than skiing here in Eastern Canada?”

“Less icy.”

Less icy? All I could think of was that this was the tip of the iceberg of one long, chilly conversation that I feared would never end. But it appeared my probing questions and witty repartee were enough to make Pierre want to prolong the conversation.

“Can I get you another glass of wine?” the waitress asked.

We answered at the same time. Me: “No.” Pierre: “*Oui.*”

I had then proceeded to cover a whole host of topics I thought might be of interest to him. I once worked for an insurance company and was able to ask questions about his job. I told stories and poked fun at myself about some of the interesting situations in which I had found myself while traveling. I did my best to make it an entertaining conversation. But by the end I was exhausted; I'd never worked so hard in my life. It was obvious to me that Pierre needed someone a bit less animated and perhaps more reserved. Maybe he was the type who liked to sit in companionable silence?

We had said goodbye in the vestibule of the restaurant. I resolved to call Ms. Dolce & Gabbana in the morning and give her a piece of my mind. There would be no second date. Humph, *zo* much for zee screening system. Love, I concluded, could not be calculated by a questionnaire.

"This was fun," Pierre had suddenly said. "I know I'm not supposed to ask but I'd like to do this again. Would you?"

"Wait a minute! He was breaking the rules *and* putting you on the spot," Annie interrupted.

"Tell me about it. He caught me off guard, and I blurted out a vehement 'No!'"

"Well, at least you were honest," Annie said.

"The last 33 percent is the easiest," I concluded. "You both can tell the truth without having to worry about hurt feelings. You can relax and have fun, and you might even end up with a friend."

"So in this last scenario, neither one of you feels there's any potential, so you've got nothing to lose, right?" Annie asked.

“That’s it. That’s what happened with this guy from Spokane. He looked like a blond Pillsbury Doughboy with sandals. He moved to Montreal along with his electric bike. He was all about peace and love and recycling. ‘Cat,’ he said halfway through our cappuccinos, ‘you’re very nice, but I really don’t think this will work.’ He was right and that was the end of that.”

“Yes, but where does all this dating leave you?” Annie asked.

“It leaves you with that elusive one percent where the feelings are mutual.”