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I hadn't been on a date in almost 30 years. Then came divorce, sudden singlehood, and the realization that the whole world of romance had changed. Here's how I mastered the new dating universe.

BY JOHN  
SEDGWICK

PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
JAMIE CHUNG

**IS THAT HER? HER FACE IS SOFT AND INVITING, LIKE IN THE PICTURE** but the hair seems—what?—flatter somehow. Still, she is dynamite in that skimpy black dress, and she's coming closer, the dress filmy, revealing. God, it *is* her. Has to be. I raise my eyes in greeting and turn toward her, rising off my bar stool here at the restaurant where we're to meet. Visions of the date flit before me, the small talk over mood-lightening drinks, the lovely dinner filled with laughter and confidences, the stroll along the river while we murmur intimacies in the evening air, and then, well, who knows. The future sparkles with possibility. I'm nearly shivering with eagerness as this sexy thing approaches, the soft folds of her dress seducing me with every step.

But for some reason she doesn't register my gaze. What's this? Doesn't she recognize me from my photo? My eyes latch on to hers. I'm standing now, ready to offer up my name, shake her hand. But, no, she's looking past me, to another man, one at the other end of the bar. Clooney-esque,



B3 50¢ B5 50¢ B7



C3 50¢ C5 50¢ C7



D3 50¢ D5 50¢ D7

sharply dressed, younger than me. He smiles broadly at her. She gives him a joyful shout and hurries to him, heels clicking, leaving me with nothing but a few wisps of her perfume as she passes by. I settle back down onto my stool, take a bracing gulp of my Chianti, and resume my wait.

Here's an idea for finding the woman of your dreams: Lure a total stranger to an expensive restaurant for a cozy tête-à-tête and then, after a decent interval, ask her if, by any chance, she'd be interested in beginning preliminary discussions regarding matrimony. With you, for example. Sound a little... random? Well, that's online dating for you. Or at least for me, as a guy who doesn't consider it just an escort service with a low monthly charge. You have so little to go on! You can't distinguish the women you don't know from the ones you supposedly do. It brings home all those grim sociological truths about our atomized Information Age, in which today's lonely hearts turn to a computer algorithm to help them select the loves of their lives. But it's also just about all that stands between an unmarried man and the endless microwaved dinners of permanent bachelorhood.

This development in standard dating procedure, of course, will come as news only to those who've been married for, oh, let's say a quarter-century. Well, as it happens, I *had* been married for a quarter-century. Until three years ago. Throw in the monogamous premarital run-up, and I was out of dating commission from ages 21 to 50. Which is why I came to the girlfriend store with intentions

did, but only one, hooking me up with a Russian heiress to the largest construction fortune in Moscow. She was bright, charming, pretty, and fabulously rich—all good qualities, surely. But the relationship got snagged on the fact that she barely spoke English.

So I decided to get with it and subcontract my love life out to the good offices of Match.com. I could have gone with eHarmony or Chemistry or PerfectMatch, or any of the higher-end dot-coms that, with their lengthy questionnaires and quasiscientific principles, take more of an engineering approach to the question of boy meets girl. But just about all of my friends were united in their belief that Match.com was the way to go. Indeed, some of these friends had been united courtesy of Match, which made for a very powerful testimonial. Plus, I liked the Match.com approach. Rather than let a computer sift through the candidates, I could use my very own eyeballs, picking out prospects in a manner akin to the old-fashioned way, by checking them out—ogling their online photographs, letting them tell me about themselves in print, and then giving them a whirl (or not).

So, Match.com it was. Or just Match, to us cognoscenti. I have been on—and off—for more than two years now. An old hand, you might say. A survivor, I might say. For these are dangerous liaisons, with plenty of opportunities for deception on both sides. Their identities forged online, potential dates are rarely what they seem. And even if they are, the fact that you are meeting stranger-to-

pushing into a brisk headwind. Nina was so slithery, her tight jeans nearly slipped off her. Her eager eyes lit up the room, and she was all hands when she talked. The maître d' sized up the situation and escorted us to a remote corner table. The waiter had barely filled our water glasses before Nina was all over me, and we were making out like hormonal teenagers while—this being Boston—the other diners averted their eyes. Between kisses, I was tempted to say “But I hardly know you!” But then I thought, *So what?* And so we just went with it, breathlessly, right through our entrées—and then back to her place without waiting for dessert.

I know what you're thinking. If Match is so good, how come I've had to stay on it so long? Because much of that time was taken up by a long, impassioned relationship with Alicia, a brilliant, hilarious, sexy woman who possessed a Harvard law degree—and then was smart enough not to waste it on the law. She'd written a couple of suspense novels with worldwide sales and started a teacher corps in the Deep South. I could go on and on about her. I met her on Match practically the first time I went on it, way back, two years ago. She seemed like a gift from Cupid, done up with a bow. Not only did she have all of my top 10 most desirable attributes, she also lived just three blocks from my apartment. But over time, much as we loved each other, and we really did, the relationship evolved from a matter of passionate intensity into the realm of grade V biohazard, the kind that can take out a small city. And a couple of months ago, we agreed to give it a rest. (I should probably disclose at this point that the names of all of my Match mates have been changed.)

So I returned to my Great Aunt Tillie, as I had come to think of Match, for some suggestions as to other eligible women. In selecting Alicia, I had been a lurker on the site. Meaning, I didn't post a full profile of my own; I merely checked out the profiles of women who interested me and then e-mailed them, offering my Web site if they wanted to see a picture of me. This had worked with Alicia, who was excited to find another writer so close by. But it made other women uneasy about the asymmetry—that they could be seen, but not see me in return. So I decided to go whole hog and post a profile of my own.

A standard profile normally includes a few photographs, ranging from formal to funny. I was smitten with one woman because she posed with what appeared to be an enormous papier-mâché chicken over her head. I took my own photo from a recent

THE MATCHES ARE MUCH MORE RANDOM... ONE FROM HERE, ANOTHER FROM THERE...

AND GOOD LUCK.

to buy: to have and to hold, as my minister put it last time. My ex and I may have failed each other, but holy matrimony didn't. I like everything about marriage, starting with the words *husband* and *wife*. But what I relish is that idea of home—the photo albums, the recipes, the pictures on the walls, the views out the windows. And home is where she and I will be.

But where is she now? How do you go about finding the woman of your dreams? Incredibly, my ex-wife was the third woman I had ever dated. This argues, of course, for increased sampling in round two. But it also testifies to my being fairly clueless in this area. In my ignorance, I had the quaint notion that, in my search for wife number two, friends would set me up. Actually, one

stranger can bring forth your own dark side. Nothing sociopathic, just the usual duplicity and manipulation that are probably always part of the romance hustle. But the whole arrangement can breed a certain looseness.

There's an obvious downside to that, but there's an upside too. I'm thinking of my fling with Nina, a zesty New York fashion editor who had relocated to Boston's Back Bay, not far from me in Cambridge. After we worked our way up from e-mail messages to telephone conversation one evening, she purred into the line so seductively, I suggested we meet at an elegant eatery not far from her place as soon as a cab could get me there. I arrived first, and, from the waiting area, watched her charge through the front door as if she were



book jacket of mine, so it was professionally posed and nicely lit, which was probably unfair. Still, I do wonder why anyone would present a blurry, dark, or tiny image of themselves, as so many do. I went out with one woman just because of the way, in her photo, the light seemed to come up from somewhere beneath her, making her sparkle. (She later told me that she'd employed a professional photographer, who had made use of the sunlight reflecting off a parked car.) The profile is usually accompanied by a few winning paragraphs of self-promotion that most people find torture to compose. In this, I found it better for women not to mention their fondness for moonlit walks or to make any claims to being "a deeply spiritual person." Plus, a string of facts like age, height, body type ("athletic and toned" was a possible choice; "morbidly

obese" was not), rough income level, desired age range (which is problematic, since both men and women tend to seek dates younger than themselves), and astrological sign (incredibly, there are people who will not date Virgos or date *only* Virgos). All this data, I discovered, often bore only a theoretical relationship to the truth.

Others may agonize over a piece of writing that sums up their lives and romantic aspirations in a few paragraphs, but, as a professional writer, I found it a breeze. In fact, I was a little sorry to run out of room, or I could have kept going, describing my quirks and hankerings indefinitely. In this, I was guided by what I thought of as the Playmate principle. Tempting as it was to let all of womankind know what a great catch I am, I remembered that the *Playboy* centerfolds of my youth left plenty of room for a potential

mate to see himself in the picture. So I was careful to say that, while I loved to cook, I loved to cook with someone even more. And I enjoyed walking hand in hand too. I also threw in a grace note or two of gentle irony to cut the schmaltz.

When I glanced over the profiles of my fellow lotharios, it struck me that they weren't trying to woo prospective dates so much as they were trying to show up their fellow guys with all of their studly accomplishments. "I am a successful businessman," boomed one CEO-type in a power suit, "financially well-off, and tall (6 feet 2 inches)." Another declared he was moving to London to run a "US VC office." Well, okay! But, um, wouldn't women think he was permanently unavailable? Another boasted of his ability to subdue wild animals. "I love Animals, especially Dogs and Wolves," he wrote, the capitals presumably for emphasis. Woof, woof. All I said was that I was a writer who wanted to take a nice girl out for some fun.

As in the stock market, you can see on Match just how well you're doing in real time. And my little romantic IPO skyrocketed. I don't think any piece of writing of mine has ever been so closely scrutinized or so widely appreciated. Women quoted it back to me, like it was holy writ. They wanted to know what I liked to cook, or, seeing I was a writer, told me they wrote short stories or tried to impress me with the books they'd been reading.

Two months into it, my profile had been clicked on by nearly 600 women. Or 598, to be precise, and Match is very precise. Of course, not all of these window-shoppers bought, which hurts. But I was contacted by more than a hundred of them, and that's not nothing. Okay, a small percentage sent only a "wink," a befuddling piece of nonverbal Match communication that basically means "I have some vague interest in you, but I can't be bothered to say what it might be." Unless they were unbelievably cute, I couldn't be bothered to find out.

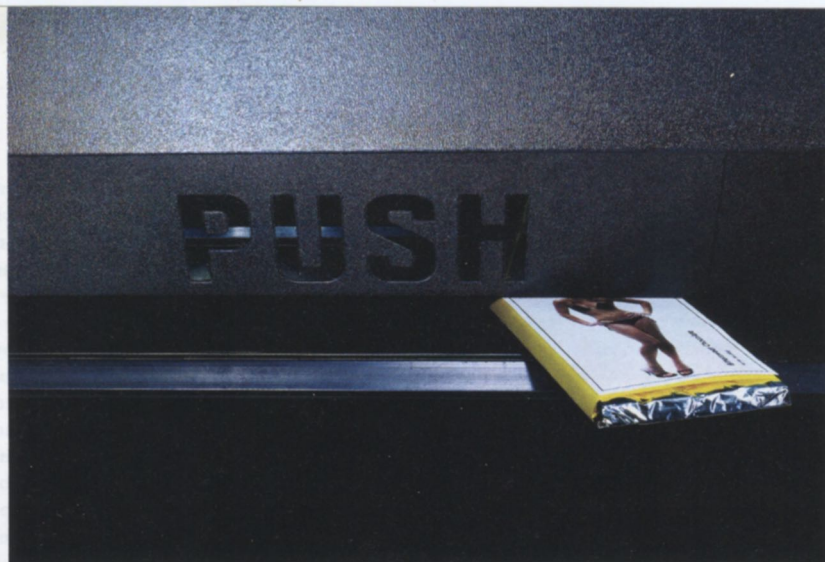
One of the first responders was a woman writer in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, who, starved for literary company, tried to lure me down with her cooking, offering me a combination of "star fruit and papaya with balsamic vinegar as thick as molasses." Smitten by the recipe, and the vision of domesticity it evoked, I immediately responded with an offer of marriage. She didn't know me well enough to know I was teasing. As a matter of policy, I don't consider matrimony until I have actually met my potential mate. She merely thought my offer hasty. Still, she did

distribute my profile to her friends for their opinions, and then sent me her phone number and said she would be home that evening, awaiting my call. I never did call. That was when I discovered that online dating can release one's inner cad.

Truth was, I was quickly becoming overworked. Nothing on Match is quite as enticing as a newbie, and women pounced. There was the round-faced hausfrau in working-class Brockton. No. The blond, unmarried

child psychologist in adjoining Brookline—"favorite" her, hold her in reserve. The foxy-looking triathlete MD, with unspecified "media connections." Yes, absolutely. I wrote back to her right away. And so on.

While I was busy sorting out all the incoming queries, I was in hot pursuit of Marla, a very fetching 44-year-old blond dancer from my very own Cambridge. A neighbor, I wondered? I'd tripped over her profile maybe a week before, in a last gasp of lurkerdom, and we worked through the tentative early phase of e-mail courtship and into the more openly lusty ones of the mature phase of vocal communication. After the abstraction of e-mail, voice is music, with pitch, timbre, rhythm, and *breath*. She was quite a talker, and we had many spirited telephone chats. The most memorable one was conducted by cell phone aboard the Acela as I hurtled toward New York City. As part of the getting-to-know-you campaign, Marla said she wanted to read me the details of my personality, based on my astrological sign. I told her I thought that whole astrology thing was flapdoodle. She insisted this wasn't some newspaper column. This was a *book* that went by your birth *day*, not just birth month. And then she started to read, and my God, it was uncanny. She had me nailed so perfectly I will not divulge the contents here. "See?" she said finally. It was queer: The woman knew me inside-out, but she remained elusive, in a way that went beyond coquettishness to CIA-type evasions. She would reveal hardly anything about herself, including her last name (I'd told her mine almost right away),



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AND THEY WERE YOURS TO KEEP.

NOPE.

background, living situation. Still, as we chatted, she let slip enough details that, once I got to my hotel and onto my laptop, I could feed them into Google for the full scoop. I discovered she was 55 (not 44), living in Portland, Maine (not Cambridge, Massachusetts), and was on academic probation for four instances of plagiarism from the university where she ultimately acquired her PhD.

When I called her to ask about the second of these discrepancies, the only one I felt I could mention without sounding too nosy, Marla laughed it off, saying everybody lies on Match, and come on. She asked me to visit the next weekend. Portland was only a couple of hours away. I told her I'd think about it, and then followed that with an e-mail saying it was too far. "Your loss," she wrote.

In reviewing the applications for the girlfriend position I had available, I considered the profiles, the written responses, and then the photographs. In that order. Then I came to my senses and inverted it. If I had relied solely on the writing, hardly anyone would have made the cut. A stunning picture, on the other hand.... Still, an image takes a man only so far. And, inevitably, the subsequent e-mail exchanges yielded essential data, like the woman who tried to wow me by referring to a grammatical goof she termed a "dangling preposition." A dangling *proposition* was more like it. Or the one who was surprised to learn that the *Washington Post* had somehow been involved in bringing down Nixon.

Character mattered. I was amazed what a stickler I was about a bygone virtue like

honesty. It wasn't just the astrologist who misrepresented herself. Others had to be discarded because they, too, didn't live where they claimed, or lied about their age. Still more were ditzy, vague, or unresponsive. One potential Match said she was busy nursing a sick puppy from the pound, but days went by, and neither the puppy's situation nor hers improved. Others had the audacity to reject *me* for vague reasons that left me brooding for weeks. After a few rounds of e-mails, then voice, I was down to a baker's

dozen of actual, bona fide potential dates.

As a consumer proposition, the thing that is so difficult about the Date is that it's a transaction that goes two ways. You and she are both buyers and sellers, simultaneously. It's like buying a house that is also considering buying you. So the whole time, at every stage, from the first tense hello to the final good-bye kiss on the cheek, lips, or air, you're not just thinking, *Do I like her, do I like her?* you're also worrying, *Does she like me, does she like me?* So you keep switching from offense to defense: charming, then evaluating, then charming again. All the while pickling yourself in alcohol. It's easier to twirl dinner plates while riding a unicycle across a high wire strung above Broadway.

The mutual nature of this came home to me right away, when I had a drink with Diane, a lissome Yale graduate who had gone into divorce law first as a provider and then as a consumer. A charming, shy person, with silky hair that seemed to invite a hand to comb through it, she was quietly enticing, and I nattered on in a fashion that I considered infinitely amusing, yet sensitive too. Not a bad performance for my Match debut. But Diane sent an e-mail in the morning that ended with "sorry." I was stunned. Then I realized I had forgotten the first rule of dating. Don't tell her all about you, idiot. Ask her about *her!* I wrote back, promising reform, but too late! She wanted me only as a "friend."

There were plenty of other dates after that. The three hours spent massaging the

bare feet of the dreamy Rachel, a Cambridge jeweler, while we sipped black currant tea and gazed out at the snow falling on the birches in her backyard. Occasionally my hand strayed to her calves, muscular from cycling, but, with her children about, rose no higher. The rounds of microbrews with Louise, a skittish, redheaded Sox fan who, after I walked her from the restaurant to her car, ducked a good-night kiss by bowing her head, jamming her chin against her chest, and making her lips inaccessible. The tapas with Pauline, a brilliant, helmet-haired neuropsychiatrist who spoke in a humorless Freudian growl until I happened to amuse her, whereupon her face lit up, briefly, in childlike delight. That evening ended with a handshake. The duck shared with Faith, a 49-year-old child psychologist who was such a veteran of the dating scene that she referred to our date as a "meeting." She wrote me afterward that she was up for a "second meeting." But I was not.

And these, sadly, were the best prospects, the ones culled from the culled pile. I did go back for second dates. I saw the sexy and impetuous Nina a few more times, and I kept up a lengthy phone and e-mail correspondence with the massaged Rachel before it gave way under the strain of trying to keep it all going. And there were one or two others that likewise withered on the vine. In the end, the relationships never quite bloomed into Relationships. Perhaps it was because I didn't give them enough time. I had somehow had the idea—erroneous as it obviously is—that

Matches were items you pulled off the shelf at the girlfriend store and they were yours to keep. Nope. Matches are hard! Certain elements made a woman more promising. After experimenting with older vs. younger, experience vs. vigor, I settled on age 48, five years younger, as the sweet spot for me. And I needed a generous sprinkling of creativity because of my own peculiar line of work.

But the key ingredient was a quality that didn't show up on Match at all, since people were generally so loath to reveal any potentially identifying particulars, and that is the prospect of a shared world—common reference points, overlapping backgrounds, a sense of familiarity to take the edge off the fact that your date is a total stranger. Traditionally, people have met in college or on the job or in the neighborhood or through friends. But on Match, the matches are much more random, one from here, another from there, and good luck. No wonder so many of the women I encountered were skittish as wild fillies, twitchy when touched. They had no way to size you up, to certify you were not, as several said, "an ax murderer."

Plus, all the mixing and matching got to me after a while. The clever queries, the witty banter, all the badminton-like back and forth of the dating game can be exhausting. But, as my relentless wooing went along, I realized there was another factor holding me back. Unconsciously, I was comparing these women with my Alicia. In the blur of drinks and dinners with one beautiful stranger after

another, I had trouble remembering what the quarrel was that had led to the meltdown of our relationship. Something I said? Did? I remembered her as I last saw her, in the hallway of her apartment, waving to me as to a passenger boarding a train. She was my very first Match date ever. Would any subsequent Match match her? Some might be funny, but were they as funny? As pretty? As smart? As engaging? It came over me in a rush of despair. I didn't get as far as feeling I was making a terrible mistake—because another more urgent feeling took over, of wanting to call her. And so I did, and we talked, and I went over to her place with some flowers, and she let me in, and I stayed the night. And we picked up where we left off, or just before it. The triumph of experience over hope.

My return to Alicia wasn't a rejection of Match, obviously. Rather, it was a confirmation of Romance 101—that it's all about compatibility, that foundation of mutual understanding on which a lasting romance is built. It's the feeling *for* that precedes the feeling. Our love for each other, Alicia's and mine, had been banged around, but it remained intact largely because our lives fit together as well as our bodies did. It's easy to find someone to sleep with, harder to find someone to be with. For relationships can't be purchased with a mouse click. They're created by the people in them, by that wonderful, improbable merging of dispositions, backgrounds, and desires. A Match may produce a flame, but you build the fire. ■

**A Guide to Dating a Divorcée** When you're looking for love the second time around, you're probably meeting women who've been through the wedding mill themselves. What you need to know when you've both been there, done that...but want to try again.

**She Might Still Be Married (in Her Mind)**

Obviously, if she is regaling you with tales of her ex, she's not over him or ready for you. But watch for subtler signs. For instance, "If you forget to call once, and she gets really suspicious and jumps to the conclusion that you were with someone else, this might be a red flag that she hasn't worked through issues having to do with an ex," says Emily Harrell, a licensed psychotherapist with the Berman Center, in Chicago. Another telling clue: pictures of the two of them in her home.

**You Could Be a Backup for TV & Takeout**

Some divorced women may string you along because a night with you is better than the alternative: an order of sesame chicken and *Late Night With Conan O'Brien*. "These are what I call I-don't-care daters," says Debbie Nigro, a founder of FirstWivesWorld.com, an online community for divorced women. If you don't get anywhere within four or five dates, it's time to move on. "She'd rather be with you than doing nothing," says Nigro, "but she's not saying what she's feeling, which is nothing."

**Hotel Trysts Aren't Just for Ladies of the Night**

If she suggests heading to the local motel after a few dates, don't be too shocked by what appears to be a forward gesture. "Hotels aren't just for affairs. It's a good, neutral space, especially when you have kids at home," says Nigro, who says to be cautious with your heart if all she wants to do is sleep with you and she doesn't introduce you to anyone in her life besides the hotel concierge and the bartender. But if you're happy with a sack-centered relationship, by all means, enjoy it.

**Her Past May Weigh Heavily on Her Heart**

According to a study from the University of Texas at Austin, divorced women are 60 percent more likely to develop heart disease than women who have never divorced. Unfortunately, proposing to her won't help. That sad statistic seems to hold true even after remarriage. Take care of your new amour by encouraging her to take care of herself, and make sure you both have health insurance.

AMY LEVIN-EPSTEIN