

## Short Distance Romance

*Never think that God's delays are God's denials. Hold on; hold fast; hold out. Patience is genius.*

*~Georges-Louis Leclerc*

I was single and in my early forties. I'd been living in Boston for seven years, after leaving a career that allowed little time for dating. Building a social life was still difficult. The few dates I went on were draining. "Why do you read so much?" and, "Why are you so quiet?" were typical questions men asked me.

I was further discouraged by a shift in the way men I didn't know reacted to me. I noticed it one day as I was getting out of my car at the gym. Across the parking lot, about thirty yards away, a guy who appeared to be about twenty years younger than me paused at the gym's front door, looked me up and down, and grinned. But as I got closer, his grin turned deadpan and his eyes got wide, as if he was witnessing two trains about to collide. He grabbed the door handle and rushed into the gym.

The most stunning encounter came at my adult Sunday school class. A guy who looked to be about my age sat by himself three pews behind me. I noticed that whenever I turned around to hear what someone in the very back of the room had to say and met eyes with him, he had a pained expression on his face. I assumed that he must be younger than me and was put off by the idea of an older woman making eye contact with him.

As the months passed I would naturally meet eyes with the guy three pews back when he was in my line of sight. Each time I would regret that I had turned around. He was usually scowling. I promised myself that I would never turn in his direction again.

I told a co-worker about my Sunday school encounter. She told me to forget about the sourpuss and focus on going places where I could find someone before I aged out of the market. She told me that her sister, who'd turned fifty, joined an online dating site and got few responses, most likely because of her age. Panicking, I joined a site and rolled my age back by four years. I spent weeks communicating by e-mail with potential connections but never went further. I realized that I couldn't meet a man that way. I needed to see a potential date in person.

I joined an online site that organized group events, hoping to meet a number of prospects without the pressure of a one-on-one date. I enrolled in swing dance lessons, which were offered at a church hall near a university. After I paid my entrance fee I realized that most of the participants were college age. I stuck with it anyway. But one day I missed a cue and turned one way while my partner turned the other. The pain in my knee was so severe I had to quit.

I hobbled back to adult Sunday school a few days later. Without meaning to, I met eyes with the man three pews behind me as I folded my coat over the seat. He was grimacing. I became angry. I wanted to ask him what his problem was. But I didn't. I became more determined to get back out there and meet someone.

A girlfriend and I bought tickets to a Boston Celtics game. We made plans to hang out at a sports bar before the game, figuring there'd be lots of men there. However, we got stuck in traffic. By the time we got to the bar it was empty. Everyone was at the game.

I was exhausted. I decided to take a break from my man search. I became president of a literary association and organized events. I had a short story published in a creative writing journal. I sent a copy to my Sunday school instructor who'd read some of my earlier writings. The following Sunday he complimented me on the piece in front of the class. I heard about an open mike night at one of my favorite bookstores and decided to participate, reading a poem about my beloved deceased cat.

Then months later at the end of adult Sunday school, I heard someone behind me call my name. I turned around. He extended his hand and introduced himself. It was the guy three pews away. He told me he'd seen a picture of me posted online from the open mike night, that he knew I had signed up online for group gatherings. He was thinking about joining one himself — for divorced men. He said he knew I was a writer because he was there when the Sunday school instructor complimented my story. He told me that he was a former journalist, like me, and was writing a book.

I felt as if a statue had come to life. It was the first time I had heard his voice or seen him smile. This was the same guy who had sat behind me for years looking mad whenever our eyes met. Or was that just my interpretation?

Over the next several weeks we exchanged e-mails about our writing projects, our childhoods, our respective challenges with shyness. We agreed to meet for our first date on a blustery winter evening at a burger place across the street from an author event I wanted to attend. When I finally got to the restaurant he didn't seem to mind that I was late. We laughed when we placed our orders. The menu offered a variety of delectable-sounding burgers, but we both wanted the Cobb Salad. Six months later he told me he wanted to marry me. The following year we got engaged.

I've asked my fiancé why he took three years to approach me. He said when he began attending the Sunday school class, he had just gotten divorced. When he felt ready to start dating, he hesitated. He was afraid I wouldn't be interested. To find out more about me he turned to the Internet and discovered that we had similar interests. Ironically, my joining activities partly in reaction to what I thought was his rejection of me provided him with the details he needed to feel comfortable enough to introduce himself.

One day, as we discussed our wedding plans, I told him how hurtful it was to look back in class and see him scowling. He said he didn't realize he looked unpleasant. I told him how for years I'd sit in church blinking back tears, wishing I had someone to share my life with, like the couples and families that surrounded me. My fiancé gave me one of his rare but radiant smiles, put his arm around me and said, "All you had to do was look back and say hello. I was only three pews away."

~Lisa Braxton