

Creative Nonfiction

Notes on a 50-(ish) Summer Romance

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It's early evening on a perfect Wisconsin June day, and the two of you are sitting at a round metal bistro table in the pocket-sized yard of his post-divorce rented house, sipping chardonnay in companionable silence, feet propped up on the same chair. You smile at the contrast of your slender size eight feet nestled next to his sturdy size thirteen ones. In the background, you hear the splashes and shouts of children playing in a pool on the other side of the fence and, faintly, from a few blocks away, the soothing hum of cars on the main road.

You've been dating six weeks; enough time to be comfortable with each other, but still new enough to one another to appreciate the excitement of unwrapping each nugget of personal information like a miniature present. (We both subscribe to *The Economist*! We both lived in the north side of Chicago at the same time! He worked in a motorcycle repair shop in high school!) Newly single, he's navigating his way after a marriage that unraveled after twenty years, pulled apart by the stresses of dual careers and parenthood. He moved here recently, about an hour's drive from where his ex-wife and youngest child live, to get some distance as he tries to rebuild his life.

You never married and are wryly aware that you've slid into the stereotype of an unmarried woman of a certain age: lived in the big city for years, never found *The One*, and eventually washed back up on the shores of your Midwestern home town. (Returned to help widowed father, found a little house close to sister, and decided to stay.)

Today was a lovely day: a stroll through the farmers market, followed by a drive to admire the elegant Victorian homes on a street overlooking Lake Michigan, and then eating Italian beef sandwiches at a little gem of a place he recently discovered, and now, this, an afternoon respite,

leading, possibly, perhaps, maybe to later physical delight.

You glance at him. He seems content, eyes closed, face tilted toward the afternoon sun. He's still emotionally beaten up from the end of his marriage, and this, of course gives you pause. You've been down this road before with divorced men and know how it goes—their pain, their fear of getting hurt again, their tendency to bolt if things move too fast.

It was a surprise, this romance. "I think I have a date" you texted your sister, tickled and bemused, after the college alumni club dinner. You'd been to many of these dinners before, loyal as you are to your alma mater—Go Big Red—and even at the age of fifty-(ish) you knew you'd be ten years younger than everyone else in the room. Nonetheless, perhaps in a pique of rebellion against the invisibility of older women, you'd taken off the faded, stretched sweater you'd thrown on simply because it was school's color, and changed into a soft top that clings to your (somewhat ample) curves, and topped it with a dressy black cardigan. Better, you think, as you apply a little rose lipstick.

And there he was at the table, looking like a movie typecast of a CEO: thick, straight salt-and-pepper hair, square jaw, massive shoulders, deep-set gray eyes. No ring (you always check, but since many men don't wear them, you assumed there was a wife ferrying a teenager to a basketball game at that very moment). Because you were sure he was married, you made only cursory conversation with him—yes, health care reform is an interesting topic, the speaker was excellent, the chicken was okay, when did you graduate (turns out three years ahead of you).

As you gather your purse and fuchsia pink raincoat, he says, "You seem really nice. Would you like to have dinner with me sometime?"

"Of course," you stammer, shocked and delighted that this man has noticed you, is interested in you, wants to spend an evening with you.

It's drizzling as you drive home, a cold rain, car heater on in early May, but despite the miserable