

This is as Good as it Gets, Fellas

By Gretchen Mannix

Since I became single many years ago, I have experienced almost a dozen episodes of amnesia. I forget how things happened, so I make stuff up. These spells come over me about every three years. During them I think only fondly of men I have met through Internet Dating sites, and spin tales to myself about pleasant and fun times that we had. In this frame of mind I actively wish for a partner. I decide to try again.

I buy wrinkle cream, get my hair done, take pictures and venture into cyberspace, posting a profile sure to attract the perfect Match. I put on my rose-colored glasses, drift through profiles and pictures on my computer and send emails. I just know that if I do it right I will find a jewel in one of those emails. This year's episode began on June 19th, and seven men later it seems to be over. I have removed the rose colored glasses; it is time to review my choices. I look through my calendar:

June 22nd: Lunch with **Merv**, a 65-year-old retired banker who is recovering from everything. He was miraculously cured of a cancer that had spread to every part of his body. He then entered a four-year depression, during which he didn't leave his home, gained 100 pounds, and wore a bathrobe the

entire time. He is therefore understandably proud of his now "very youthful body," which he attributes to recent stomach reduction surgery. He does acknowledge, though, that he is unable to perform certain acts while his recently-fused vertebrae heal.

Merv had been happy that he had a million dollars when the bank asked him to retire. But the recession and heedless online spending during his four years on the couch eroded that sum. He now lives on unemployment, saving what little is left in his 401k. (How he earned unemployment benefits after four years on the couch is not clear.) Merv was dismayed that I have less than he, but still generously ordered extra food for me to take home. "I can't eat that much; my stomach is much too small now," he said with a wink.

Smirking a little, Merv suggested that I might not want it either, since I am, after all, not exactly "athletic and toned" (the highest achievable rating on Match). I took the food. We haven't communicated since.

June 27th: Coffee with **Jack**, an honest to goodness Ad Man from the 80's. You can imagine what he thinks he looks like. This man ignored the fact that he had lied, not about his age, but about his height, of all things. And it certainly seemed he had underestimated his weight. But that was okay; I am short and sort of round, too. He had, however, decided that any woman less than ten years younger than he would be too old for him, since he is in great shape, still sexually active, not to mention magnetic. That was not okay. I asked why ten was

a magic number. He had no answer; he had thought he was being broad minded in setting 53 as the maximum age for a would-be date. To Jack's credit, he swallowed his bias this once to meet me, an older woman. He is 63. I am 62.

We - he - talked about his exploits. He also highlighted a trip to Alaska and spoke admiringly of the ex-governor - the hockey mom - who can dress a moose, catch salmon, shoot wolves from an airplane and is "sexy as hell, to boot." Now, I lived in Alaska for many years. I just couldn't help myself. I pointed out that there, every woman's sons play hockey. Women routinely catch 30-pound salmon and much larger halibut. Some hunt deer and moose, but the smart ones let the men dress out the animals. But I didn't stop there, I fear. **Jack** gave me a ride home in his bright yellow Hummer. I haven't heard from him since.

July 2nd: Visited **Frank**, who is stuck in the 70's. Frank recently sold his business and is searching for wife number five. He built his A-frame on the beach in 1972 when he and his first wife opened their crafts store. He loves his house; I have been to hippie haven before.

Frank's cedar home is just as it was in 1972, only a little faded. I sat low in the original couch that is slightly smoky from fires in the pot-bellied stove. The spider plants are now huge and droop to the floor, the oriental rugs worn. Stained glass hanging in the windows keeps the house dim inside, but allows just

enough sunlight to penetrate so that the photos covering every inch of wall space have grown pale.

To be fair, although he thinks it is 1978, Frank has found footholds in the 21st Century. While he enjoys a pipe on the deck, rolling joints and smoking dope, Frank also spends hours on a computer. He is writing a book of course, posts news on a blog, and looks at porn. The last item consumes most of the day.

July 9th: Visited **Derek**, who lives in another place I have been. It is the 60's, where certain things are intense and everything is serious. In 1963 Derek began traveling - mostly to Asia and the Middle East. I don't know why. He intended to travel for a year, but somehow just kept on going for many more. During these travels he bought beautiful carpets, which are now his only art and furniture, except for some small tables he made himself. The tables truly are works of art, but not very comfortable.

Derek is most serious about his meals. He keeps records of which recipes he cooked on what dates, and when and how he modified the recipe. He spends much time chopping fresh herbs and mixing spices that will compensate for lack of salt. "Cooking healthy dinners for myself is a primary activity", he wrote in his profile.

Although he has tried on many religions and philosophies, Derek has become disenchanted with all, and continues to search. He even showed up at my very traditional church last Sunday. The widow women stared. He talks at length

about his travels, and inserts poetry verses into his email messages. I enjoy that. But his bookshelf (one) includes a single book of poetry. It is new - a collection of verses by the only poet I had mentioned to him. The shelf also holds three travel books on Asia and the Middle East; they are also brand new. I think he might be a spy.

July 12th -18th: Brief encounters with Hermann and Philip, both of whom quickly dismissed me. **Hermann the German**, as I have come to think of him, signed his first email “Vader.” Next it was “Brian”, then “Obi Wan”, and finally, “Hermann”. After that spate of emails in which he asked ever more intimate questions, Hermann announced, “I AM ENDING THIS NOW. IT IS OVER BETWEEN US!!!! YOU ARE NOT TRUTHFUL OR FORTHCOMING! We had never met or spoken on the telephone, and I didn’t know his name.

Philip ended our relationship 15 minutes after he picked me up for a coffee date. We had exchanged a few bantering emails, and wanted to meet. But Philip was worried about secrecy, since he is an attorney with high social standing. “I will pick you up on the corner by the movie theater. I will be driving a black Mercedes.” He did and he was. He dropped me off on a corner less than 20 miles down the road when he learned I am not rich.

July 26th: Visited **Billy’s** country place. Finally - a man with few demands, and who had never entered the 60's or 70's or 80's, as I had known

them, so couldn't be stuck there. "Aha!" I thought. But I hadn't considered the 50's...

Billy drives a restored convertible that is now brilliant blue. We drove to the beach with the top down to watch the kite flying contests. It was fun. I even went dancing with him, and I don't dance. A pretty good rock and roll band was playing, and we could remember the words to most of the songs, although a few were before my time. It is true we didn't talk much about anything, and it is also true that he has a slight backwoods accent, which I associate with logging camps and truck stops. That was okay; I like loggers and truckers; I have lived among them.

Billy talked a lot about his home on an acre of farmland, with a granny unit, a horse, roses, dogs and more. He just knew I would like it, and I stopped by for a visit. I realized I have been there before, too. It is country, pure and simple.

Especially clever is the old gate, laid flat on the ground and weighted down by a bathtub filled with chunks of logs. Billy tows it around his property behind a vintage Ford pickup, to squash horse droppings and smooth out the surface of the ground. That way, when you walk around on the dried horseshit, there are no big clumps to trip over. It just lies flat, like a carpet on the dirt.

A large birdcage with six little finches sits on the front steps where he had cleaned it, along with that which he had cleaned out. The three miniature dogs

have an oversized kennel and run and are tidy harmless little creatures, their incessant high-pitched yapping notwithstanding.

The outbuildings were, I'm sure, lovely at one time, with paned glass windows, pretty white shutters and climbing roses. However, after Billy's wife ran off with the plumber 30 years ago and left him to raise the three kids, no one patched broken windows – or latched a door, or swept leaves off a floor. Each building is now filled with treasures, ranging from empty paint cans, broken chain saws, and used doghouses - to tents, propane barbecues, broken kites, and other detritus that campers abandon in the parks. His 48-year-old daughter has moved back home, together with her horse and motorcycle. A nephew lives in Billy's camper in the driveway, and uses the bathroom in the house. Vehicles (several) can't stay in the garage, because he lost the keys to the car that lives inside, and the garage door doesn't open anyway.

Billy wants to know when I'm going to come to stay for a couple of days, to help me decide when I want to move in.

And that's it. If there were to be a choice, it would have to be hippie haven, ascetic illusions, or the country reality show. I don't want to choose - you can vote. I'm going to go work on a website for my new little business. I know what to do with that. I don't know what I would do with any of these men.

I may go on the Audubon Society bird walk with another truth seeker next Saturday. If I do it will not indicate serious interest on my part. I just want to

know if I can speak profoundly about woodpeckers for a significant length of time.

I mean no disrespect with all of this. My goal is only to remember my experiences as they really happened. Then in another three years when amnesia sets in, I'll be able to resist the sneaky distorted memories of dates gone by. Rather, I'll look at *myself* through rose-colored glasses and happily announce:
“This is me at 65, and this is as good as it gets, fellas.”