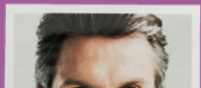


MELODIE
CAMPBELL



WORST DATE EVER

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MELODIE CAMPBELL

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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ONE

One day I am going to write a book. It is going to be called *A Dummy's Guide to Men*. It will include all sorts of useful tips, such as how to find Prince Charming in a sea of Prince Ronalds.

I am well qualified to write about this subject. This is because I have recently met a lot of Prince Ronalds. I met them all through an online dating site. I blame my friend Angela for pushing me into online dating. She also gave me the idea for the book. It started like this...

“You signed up?” said Angela. She plunked down onto the plastic chair opposite me.

I nodded. “Yup. E-Galaxy, here I come.”

“It’s time.” Angela cradled her coffee mug with both hands. “It’s been two years, Jennie. Two years since Greg died. It’s time you started dating.”

She could say his name now without me bursting into tears. So I guess time had done some healing. But it had been such a shock. Who expects their husband to die of a heart attack at thirty-four?

I forced the thought from my mind and instead filled my mouth with coffee.

It was Sunday evening. We were seated in the Original Coffeehouse, a cute little coffee bistro on Main. It was close to my new apartment. Angela said they had the best coffee in town. Better than the chains.

It was cheap and cheerful. Not dark and expensive like some of the uptown bistros that aped New York. I felt comfortable here, enveloped in the aroma of freshly brewed, rich coffee. Is there any better smell in the world?

“You need to get back on the horse,” said Angela, pointing a perfectly manicured finger at me.

“Don’t be a nag,” I quipped, putting my mug down.

Angela was my best friend. I’d known her since high school. She and Zack had met each other three years ago. Now she was happily married and wanted everyone else to be. That’s the sort of nice person she was. But she could also be kind of pushy.

“You have to tell me every detail,” she ordered. “Of every date you go on.”

“Of course I will!” I said. No I won’t, I thought.

Angela is a great pal, but she works as a hair stylist. I know better than to tell her all the gory details. That hair salon thrives on gossip.

Of course, Angela always looks fabulous. Perfect hair, dyed a fashionable blond, with a great cut.

My hair is pretty ordinary, long and chocolate brown. I can't complain, because Angela gives me a great deal on cuts. And I like my natural hair color. It matches my eyes.

We are different in other ways too. Angela is outgoing. I'm more quiet. Angela is like glamorous Ginger on *Gilligan's Island*. I'm a Mary Ann.

"Let's call this Operation Prince Charming. I like that," she said, obviously pleased with herself. "Operation PC for short, in case anyone is listening in."

I grinned back at her. "Cute. Sort of like we're on a secret mission."

“You’ve taken the next two weeks off?” Angela pushed a stray lock of golden hair behind her ear.

“Yes.” I work as a customer-service rep in a bank. “I’m on vacation. Ryan is in school. I thought it would be better to blitz this. Meet as many men as possible in two weeks.”

She nodded her approval. “That’s smart. Meet them during the day, and not after dark. But I bet it’s more than that.” She skewered me with her look. “You want to do this before your parents come back from Florida, right?”

I laughed at that. “Guilty as charged.” It was early April. Mom and Dad own a trailer in Florida. Dad has retired from his job at the steel plant and has bad arthritis. They winter in Orlando now to avoid the cold. They would be back by May 1.

My parents had been wonderful when Greg died. They were great with Ryan.

But you didn't want your parents looking over your shoulder when you were dating.

"You'll need to take off your wedding ring," she said.

I looked quickly down at my hand. "I will. Tonight."

A man in a barista apron appeared at Angela's shoulder. "Long time no see. How are you doing, Angela?"

"Dave!" She gave him a big smile. Then she turned to me. "Jennie, Dave owns this place. You should get to know him."

Dave raised an eyebrow. I blushed fiercely.

"What I mean is," Angela continued, "Jennie's a widow. She just joined E-Galaxy. I've told her she should meet her dates here, where it's safe."

"Angela, shhh! You're embarrassing me," I said.

"Why?" She looked surprised.

“No need to be embarrassed about trying to find someone to share your life with,” Dave said. He had a nice low voice. And then, more quietly, he added, “I’m sorry about your husband.”

That was a kind thing to say. I took a longer look at him. Dave was of medium height, with dark-brown hair. His face was pleasant but not what you would call handsome. Too angular to be cute. Just an ordinary guy.

“You’ll look out for her, right?” my friend said. “Some of these guys might be creepy.”

“ANG!” I scolded.

“Sure thing.” He gave me a big smile. “I’m here most of the time. Just signal if you want me. Now I’d better get back to the counter.” He saluted like a soldier, then turned and walked away.

“What a nice guy,” I said, watching him leave.

“Yeah,” said Angela. “Too bad he’s married.”

Of course he was. I finished the rest of my coffee.

“So back to E-Galaxy. Have you seen their cool ad on television?”

I nodded. “*E-Galaxy—Our Matches Are Out of This World!*”

“Don’t knock it,” said Angela. “My cousin Tara met her husband on E-Galaxy. He’s a great guy. They got married last spring in Vegas.”

I smiled over my coffee mug. “I’m just poking fun at the concept. They call it E-Galaxy. Like you have the whole galaxy to choose from, not just earth.”

“Haven’t you heard, Jennie? Men are from Mars.” Angela always made me smile.

“I hope they’re not all on Mars,” I said.

TWO

I logged in to E-Galaxy as soon as I got home. Operation Prince Charming was off to a brilliant start. The E-Galaxy program had matched me with over two dozen men in my age group. At least eight had commented on my profile already. Six had asked if they could meet me that week. You had the choice of emailing back and forth first. I phoned Angela to ask her advice.

“Meet them in person,” she said. “You don’t want to get attached to anyone by email and then find out they are losers in person.”

Losers in person? I wasn't sure what she meant by that. But I followed her advice anyway.

On Monday evening I decided to come clean with my son, Ryan.

"What would you think if I started dating?" I said to him. We were having a quick dinner of hot dogs in the kitchen before homework time.

He was silent for a few moments, munching the last few bites. Then he looked up at me with Greg's eyes.

"I think Dad would say it was about time," he said solemnly.

Sometimes Ryan took my breath away. It wasn't only the way he resembled his father. Ryan had a maturity that was way beyond his age. Grief will do that.

"But what do *you* think?" I asked.

He picked up a paper napkin and wiped his mouth. "Mom, I'm nearly thirteen. You can't expect me to be around forever.

I can't keep you company when you're old. Of course you need someone."

His cell phone buzzed from over on the kitchen counter. We had a strict rule about no cell phones during meals. Ryan looked up at me hopefully.

"Go," I said, waving a hand.

He launched himself from the table and snatched up the phone.

I sat back and looked around the cozy kitchen in the apartment that had become our new home. It was a nice bright unit, in a good neighborhood close to Ryan's school. We each had our own bedroom. We were comfortable here. But it wasn't the house we had shared with his father. I had sold that when it became clear that my modest salary wouldn't cover the mortgage.

No, Ryan wouldn't be here forever. He was hardly here even now. My heart swelled, thinking about what a good kid he was. Greg would have been proud of him.

“Just watch out for creeps.”

“What?” I said, coming out of my thoughts.

“There are a lot of creeps out there,” said Ryan, still staring down at the phone. “You’re pretty innocent, Mom.”

“*What?*” I said again. My twelve-year-old son was calling me innocent?

“You and Dad got married young. You don’t know what it’s like out there,” said Ryan. He pocketed his cell phone. I watched his lanky form disappear into his bedroom.

Jeans are getting short, I thought. He’s growing again.

I logged in to E-Galaxy while Ryan did his homework. I did a lot of responding to prospective dates. Two more men had expressed interest in meeting me. I looked at the eight available and chose six. It was surprisingly easy to eliminate two. Or at least to postpone meeting them.

For instance, Daniel. Daniel said his hobbies were guns and hunting. I was puzzled that we had been matched at all. I wasn't into either of those things. But then I noticed he'd said he liked kids and dogs. I had mentioned that on my profile too. He was the right age. So maybe that had been enough to match us.

The other match I decided not to act on immediately was Timmy. First of all, I had a problem with a grown-up man who would call himself Timmy. It made me suspicious that his mother still did his laundry. On his profile, he said that his hobby was model trains. It appeared to be his only hobby. I had nothing against model trains. But I hoped to find someone who had interests that intrigued me.

So I ended the E-Galaxy session with six coffee dates lined up. That was a lot of dates for one week. Surely at least one of them would be a nice guy.

Later that night, in the privacy of my bedroom, I took off my wedding ring.

I'd done it before, once, a few months back. Experimenting. It felt weird. Hard to explain why. It's sort of like when you take off your clothes at night and you can feel your nakedness. Your skin is cold. You need a blanket around you to feel secure.

My finger felt cold.

Would I ever feel secure again?

AUTHOR'S NOTE

One of the bad dates in this book actually happened to me. Can you guess which one? See www.melodiecampbell.com to find out.

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Billed as the “Queen of Comedy” by the *Toronto Sun* in 2014, **Melodie Campbell** achieved a personal best when *Library Digest* compared her to Janet Evanovich. Melodie got her start writing stand-up and has since been a banker, marketing director, college instructor, comedy writer and possibly the worst runway model ever.

Winner of nine awards, Melodie has been both a finalist for and a winner of the Derringer and Arthur Ellis awards for crime writing. She has over two hundred publications, including a hundred comedy credits, forty short stories and twelve novels. Her work has appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, *Star Magazine*, *Flash Fiction*, *Canadian Living*, *The Toronto Star*, *The Globe and Mail* and many more. Melodie lives in Oakville, Ontario. For more information, visit melodiecampbell.com.

Melodie Campbell has also written the Gina Gallo Mystery series, books that are really capers more than mysteries.