

COVER LETTER

THE SQUID AND THE SPACEMAN is an 80,000-word comedic novel that combines the romantic dysfunction of Jonathan Tropper with the racy humor of Sam Lipsyte.

It's 2015 and Boston is being overrun by gender-trenders, biotech hipsters, artisanal pickle shops, and little free libraries. Two fifty-somethings, who are unhappy with the city's transformation, meet and fall in love.

Randall is chronically single. Jackie doesn't date men, she marries them. He's Jewish and she's Chinese-American. One thing they have in common: fear that they're aging out of the local dating pool and that this is their last chance for happiness.

Four months into the relationship, Randall develops insomnia and Jackie develops an ulcer. Because Randall has never been married, they both agree he's the problem. He locates a therapist, Dr. Byrnes, who has a plan for turning him into marriage material.

As part of the treatment, Randall and Jackie attend a fetish conference to resuscitate their middle-aged sex life. Can trust, honesty, respect, acceptance, compromise, commitment, active listening — and a sphincter harness save their relationship? More importantly, how much can — and should — one man change for the one he loves?

I am a writer, performer, and web-marketing consultant. My comedic novel, GOD BLESS CAMBODIA, was published in 2017 by The Permanent Press. To promote the book, I developed a one-man show based on it that was featured at 26 fringe theater festivals in the U.S., Canada, and Edinburgh, Scotland. Previously, I was an executive editor for PC WORLD magazine.

Thank your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

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SYNOPSIS for THE SQUID AND THE SPACEMAN

RANDALL BURNS is fifty-six and worried that he's running out of time, not only to find the right woman but to fulfill his dream of being a performer, a story-teller, the next Spalding Gray.

One night in 2015, he meets JACKIE CHIN when he is performing near his home town of Boston. Jackie is also in her mid-fifties and worried that she's running out of time to find the right man. She's been married three times; Burns never.

Jackie and Burns settle into a relationship but after a few months, he starts to feel claustrophobic. He obsesses about Jackie's aggressive kissing, the fleshy moles on her stomach, and her desire to be married in a year and to dress him in woman's clothes. But he still loves her and, worried that this could be his last chance, perseveres.

Meanwhile, an acting coach convinces Burns to sign up for a big theater festival in Canada to get discovered. Jackie worries that Burns will be tempted by "Canadian theater sluts" and suggests a one-week cruise to secure their relationship before he leaves. He develops insomnia.

On the cruise, he feels even more claustrophobic. He accuses her of being pushy and needy. She accuses him of being commitment-phobic and a deserter. They break up.

His first day at the theater festival, Jackie sends him a bill for the cruise. He pays the bill and wishes her well. She continues to text and he ignores her.

Burns' performances receive mixed reviews and he is shunned by the other performers. He returns to Boston chastened, more realistic about life and its possibilities.

Burns and Jackie reconnect. He finally admits that he missed her, has commitment issues, and offers to go into therapy.

The therapist treats Burns's claustrophobia by slowly increasing the amount of time he spends with Jackie. Once they're up to five nights a week together, Burns returns to obsessing about Jackie's sexual style, her moles, and her clinginess. He again develops insomnia and is ready to bail when Jackie develops an ulcer. He stays on to take care of her, then vows to quit performing and get a normal job. Once she's healed, they attend a fetish conference together.

After the conference, Burns agrees to a domination date in which Jackie exhorts him to be more alpha. He complies by insulting, humiliating, and finally peeing on her. She's pleased but he's confused: Is this how you treat someone you love? The next night, they argue and break for good.

Six months later, Burns has returned to performing; this time at the world's premier theater festival, the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. He's alone but not defeated.

<FIRST 25 PAGES OF MANUSCRIPT>

It's been said that men of a certain age spend too much time in the bathroom. What do we do in here? Right now, I'm reorganizing my medicine cabinet, an exercise I always find calming.

On the top two shelves, I grouped everything for airways, organs, and orifices.

On the bottom shelf are things I haven't used in a while but may need any day, namely the insomnia collection: pills, gummies, extracts, earplugs, nose plugs, masks, and mouth guards.

Since I haven't had overnight company in a while, which means I'm overdue, I decide to hide the good stuff (Vicodin and Percocet) and the embarrassing stuff (which I don't care to discuss) under the sink.

The doorbell rings. I glance at my watch. Joey. I buzz him in from the living room and immediately have to take a piss.

When I exit the bathroom, Joey is sitting cross-legged on my couch holding a script, my script, red pen in hand.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey," he says. "You ready to go?"

Joey is a theater instructor at Emerson College and my acting coach. He's also my first cousin and someone I've looked up to since I was little. Eight years ago, I was laid off from my job as an editor for a computer magazine. Since then, I took a trip around the world and wrote a novel that was actually published. Last year, I decided try my luck as a professional storyteller, though Joey and I both know it's a long shot.

I take my place in the middle of the room, facing him, trying to imagine an audience of more than one.

He gestures with the pen. “OK, Burns, you’re on. Remember: Slow it down and no foot shuffling.”

“Right.” Deep breath.

“Bangkok. Bang...Cock. The name alone sounds skeevy and from the moment I...*ahh*...I...*ahh*...”

“Stop.” Joey throws a hand up. “What’s going on? Last week you had this nailed.”

“I did. You told me to rehearse an hour a day, write it out long-hand, perform it at double speed, then half speed. I did all that. I do everything you tell me to do.”

“Is this about Harriet getting married?” he asks.

I say nothing.

“OK, whatever. Concentrate on the work,” he says. “You need to get this piece down. Bulletproof. Try it with your eyes shut.”

I deliver a few lines, eyes shut.

“Better,” he says. “Now try it standing on one leg, eyes open.”

I deliver a few more on one leg, eyes open.

Joey chews the end of the pen.

I pause. “Is that my pen you’re chomping on?”

“I’ll buy you a box. Now focus. We’ve got a deadline.”

He hands me a pair of headphones. “Put these on and take it from the top, no stopping. If you botch a line, keep going.”

I put on the headphones and hear machine-gun fire, whistling artillery, and a guy screaming.

Joey scribbles as I say my lines, as I imagine him screaming, intestines spilling out.

Ten minutes later, I take a bow.

Joey sits quietly looking at the script covered in red ink. Finally, he says. “I think you’re ready.”

A week later, I am the featured performer at The Harvard Square Story-Telling Hour. The event has been running for fifty years, long before the Moth Radio Hour was a pupa. Spalding Gray once performed here and Boston-area celebs like Mike Birbiglia and Eric Bogosian still pop in to test new material. I’m only here because Joey called in a favor. He was supposed come but bailed at the last minute. Something about family night with his wife and kid.

A half-hour before show time, I grab a beach chair in the great room of the Co-Living Commons, a communal house previously known as The Commons House until it rebranded to be in line with the rest of Massachusetts, where everything is now “co,” “bi,” or “poly.” A few feet away, a woman wearing a flannel muumuu and Texas with wool socks adjusts a mic stand on the small stage. When she bends to add a log to the fireplace, her buffalo-plaid rump assaults my sight line. But, instead of engaging in snarky internal commentary, I remind myself that it’s 2015 and, yes, I skimmed the memo about inclusivity and the new non-standard notions of beauty. I also remind myself she’s probably the MC.

I finger the three Ricola honey drops in my pocket that I plan to dissolve in my mouth at three-minute intervals before I go on. Three is my lucky number; it’s also the number of Red Sox championships since 2000 and the atomic number for lithium, which might have saved my last relationship.

But I don’t have time to dwell on the savagery of middle-aged women because the room is now packed with thirty or so people seated on various couches, bean bags, weight benches,

and tatami mats facing the stage. In the adjacent kitchen, pots clang and a disposal grinds while a few more people wait in line for the open mic signup. Eventually, the MC lumbers into the spotlight, waits for the noise to subside, and announces the event's two rules: One, every story must be memorized, and two, it must be true.

She attempts to warm up the crowd with a story about a Brad Pitt look-alike ten years her junior who couldn't keep his hands off her. Considering what I've seen of her, she's already broken rule number two.

When the first performer takes the stage, a woman who calls herself Herman, I pop a Ricola. By the time I've finished the third one, a half-dozen storytellers have gone, and I can't remember anything about them.

The MC retakes the mic and squints as she reads my bio from a scrap of loose-leaf paper. "Tonight's featured performer is Randall Burns. Randall is a writer, performer, and web consultant. His fiction and humor have appeared in the *Vermont Quarterly*, the *Hockomock Swamp Rat*, *The Bagslam Review*, *Pancreas*, *Bean Flicker Magazine*, *Spooge Review*, *Itch*, and *The Boston Herald*. His short story, "Smells Like Fish," was a finalist for the 2013 Brown-Eye Adult Fiction Contest. In 2014, his novel *Skid Marks on the Ceiling* was published by Sweet Diesel Press. His one-man show *The Chronic Single's Handbook* has been featured at fringe theater festivals in Paris, Maine and Berlin, New Hampshire. Tonight, he is going to tell a story called, "One Day in Thailand." Please give a mindful, heart-centered welcome to Randall."

No matter how many times I perform, my body responds the same way when I'm announced: Leg numbness, intestinal contractions, waves of burning pain, debilitating fatigue, dizziness, fever, hopelessness, paranoia, and suicidal thoughts. But eventually, I find my way on to the stage.

I wrestle the mic from the stand and immediately notice a bearded guy in the front row who seems particularly interested in the zipper of my khakis. Is it just the pants? Or is it the whole package -- cap-toed oxfords and white dress shirt -- while everyone else is sporting flannel, fleece, or camo, ready for panhandling or varmint hunting? There is one exception: a lone Asian woman in the back row wearing a black bowler, fitted suit, and crimson lipstick. She smiles as she sees me looking her way.

I look away to refocus.

“Bangkok. Bang...Cock.”

A chuckle from the crowd.

“The name alone sounds skeezy and from the moment I get off the plane, I’m on high alert. I’d read about the deep-fried scorpions, tuk-tuk scammers, and locals who play volleyball with their feet.”

As I clip along, my mind wanders to what I had for dinner, my new skis, my old car, Harriet.

“The airport bus drops me downtown, where the sooty, humid air stings like a lung full of red ants.”

Eventually, I hit cruising speed, switch to autopilot and survey the room: the MC nodding in approval, a guy scrolling his phone, a couple smiling meekly, and one guy staring at me, lips tightened. Is he challenging me? I direct my next lines his way and stare him down.

“I approach a guy with a mossy blond beard growing down his sternum. He’s wearing a wide-brimmed hat with the chinstrap pulled snug against his jowls.”

My challenger looks into his lap, and laughs awkwardly. We know who’s in control here. Joey would be pleased.

The Asian woman catches my eye. She's listening, eyes wide. I send a few lines her way.

"The guy tightens his chinstrap and says, 'I was an MP back in Saigon. One of the last guys out...last guys out. This whole area is built on a swamp. I'm going to retire here...retire here.'"

She responds by peeling off one sleeve of her jacket and then the other to reveal a shimmering black blouse and a slice of collarbone. Her gaze never wavers.

I hear myself stutter. A skip. A lapse. A 404 Not Found error. The blue screen of death. I look at the ceiling, the ground, the muumuu, anywhere but the Asian woman for the next line.

The disposal starts again, and the MC stomps toward the kitchen. I repeat one of the stuttered phrases under my breath, hoping it will catch and restart the feed. Joey always says that performing is about getting on stage, trusting that your lines will come, and letting the audience know who's boss. What a load of crap.

I blow into the mic, *puh-puh*, and repeat the phrase again, this time out loud. A few more words surface, a sentence, not sure where it belongs but I go with it.

"He smiles and tightens his chinstrap again: 'From here, Soi Cowboy is just a few subway stops...subway stops.' Then he exhales into his hands and sniffs his breath."

OK, I've skipped a whole section of my piece, but this has happened before and the audience never seems to notice. Besides, the punch line is up ahead. I deliver it, pause, and let it land.

"In less than two minutes, this guy has confirmed my worst fears about Southeast Asia. This place can do things to you. Permanent mind-warping things. I put on my hat, tighten my chin-strap and walk away...walk away."

Titters. The Asian woman is laughing out loud. The crowd joins in.

Back in my beach chair, I am pleased, relieved and spent, craving a beer, a cigarette, and a nice, long shit.

After the MC's closing remarks, the guy who stared at my fly heads my way. The Asian woman, wearing her jacket, follows.

"I liked your piece," the man says. But before I can say, "Want-to-buy-my-book?" he adds, "I've been to Thailand."

I know this type. He's not interested in what I have to sell or say. He just wants to relive *his* trip to Bangkok. Sure enough, he prattles on about Soi Cowboy, Pat Pong, and the city's other red-light districts, unconcerned that an Asian woman is standing next to him. As he's raving about an all-night backrub at a spa named Tugs, two amber fingers appear behind his head in a "V" shape. The Asian woman winks at me. I wink back.

The guy finally mentions something about going out for a drink with a few other people.

I point to the woman and say, "I'll go if you go."

We end up next door at Paddy O'Wong's, an East-West fusion of reclaimed pine and polished steel, stained glass and Kanji, golf umbrellas and drink umbrellas, part Celtic bar and part pu-pu platter, another institution that's co, bi, and confused.

I grab a seat by the woman still wearing her bowler but get stuck on the other side with Señor Tugs, who introduces himself as Hank, which could be an alias. The MC is there, too, along with a few others from the event.

A waiter pulls up to the table and addresses the Asian woman: "I'm Kim. I'll be your server tonight."

"I'm Jackie," she says, and then gestures toward me. "And this is Randall."

Kim ignores me and continues. “Tonight’s special is a vegan haggis stuffed with kimchee and seaweed.”

“Give me a Beefeater on the rocks with a twist,” Jackie says.

“Budweiser,” I say.

“Is that it?” he asks me.

I look at Jackie. She shrugs.

He shakes his head and continues around the table. Several people order the haggis; others opt for the fair-trade lychee bread, the wellness bubble tea, and the probiotic Irish coffee. Jackie touches my arm and a jolt of oxytocin practically knocks me off my seat. Like I said, it’s been a while. Like months.

“So,” she says, “What was a nice guy like you doing in Bang...Cock?”

I smile and feed her my standard answer. “Oh, that. Eight years ago, I traveled around the world and had a rotten time. Except for Bangkok, Vietnam, and Cambodia.”

She smiles, looks me up and down, and says nothing.

I feel a little exposed, embarrassed, and aroused.

When the drinks arrive, Jackie runs the lemon twist around the rim of her glass. She’s wearing a thumb ring and a slim gold bracelet. “You know these garnishes are a magnet for E. coli and other nastiness,” she says. “The gin kills some. But just in case...”

From her jacket, she pulls out a pocket-sized bottle of Purell. She shoots a clear gob into her palms, rubs her hands together, and then rubs them all over mine.

“Who knows what you caught over there,” she says.

As she scrubs, I notice the fine lines around her mouth, a hint of eye socket, slightly sunken cheeks, probably about my age. After fifty, it’s either a slim body with a gaunt face or a

plump body with a plump face. My friend Abe, who, like most married guys thinks he's a relationship expert, claims I always go for scrawny women in need of a cheeseburger or an IV drip. He's right. I'll take slim and gaunt every time.

"And what's a well-dressed girl like you doing at a shaggy story-telling event?" I ask Jackie.

"It's the anniversary of my stepfather's death, his yahrzeit. He used to read his poetry in The Village. In his honor, I wanted to attend some kind of literary event."

"You're Jewish?" I ask.

"My stepfather was Jewish and my mother is Chinese. Jewish men seem to have a thing for Asian women."

"I'm Jewish," I say as evenly as possible.

She looks at me over the rim of her glass as she sips.

"You don't say." She pauses for a moment. "So, your one-man show is *The Chronic Single's Handbook*? That must bring the women running."

"It's just a show," I say, "and I'm done apologizing for it."

She raises her nearly empty glass. "I'll second that," she says.

The waiter comes by and Jackie orders another round for us. "This one's on me," she says.

The drinks arrive but before we can toast, a younger guy to her left says something and she turns to him. I lean into her and detect citrus and tobacco. She leans back as if in response. She's probably five-four and no more than a hundred pounds. Under the bowler, she has neck-length black hair with blonde streaks. In an exposed ear, a black stud that could be a spade or a bat.

Hank, noticing an opportunity, is off again telling me about go-go girls in Cuba, bar girls in the Philippines, and hostess bars in Saigon. When Jackie finally turns back, I leave him mid-sentence rhapsodizing about a bar girl who could juggle ping-pong balls without using her hands.

“So...” I say to Jackie, tapping her now-empty gin glass with my half-full beer bottle.

“So, welly-well,” she says. “A nice Jewish boy goes to Bangkok and...?”

“And ...he visits lots of temples.” I sit up in my chair.

“I bet.” She sits up in her chair. “Happy endings are a given, but the real men go for the hot lady-boy action. Did you know a lot of women watch gay porn? The more cocks the better.”

“You don’t say.” I sit back and cross my legs to regroup. Her mouth is slightly open. I catch another whiff of citrus shampoo and tobacco.

“Something tells me you’re not like a lot of women,” I say.

“Well, I’m old enough to remember The Jackson Five but you can still bounce a dime off my stomach. So, yeah, I’m probably not like a lot of women.”

She leans forward and pinches my stomach, testing for firmness. “Not bad,” she says.

No boundaries and no filter. My kind of girl.

The waiter drops off the check. People throw down money and stand to leave. Jackie considers her empty glass.

“Walk me to my car?” she asks.

On Mass Ave, we walk along a row of parked cars.

“Guess which is mine?” she asks.

I gesture to a Range Rover.

“Too small,” she says.

I point to a Mini Cooper.

“Ha-ha,” she says.

I point to a white BMW, then a red Mercedes.

“Too girly, too kraut,” she says. “I only buy American.”

She draws a key fob from her coat pocket and pinches it, rousting a black Hummer spanning two parking spots. The interior lights flood half the street along with Jackie’s face, which is tilted away from me, exposing the sleek underside of her jaw, a length of amber neck, the top of her collarbones.

“OK, not what I was expecting,” I say.

“Oh, really? You were expecting something?” She flexes her eyebrows. “Where’s yours?”

I decide not to tell her “mine” is a bicycle locked to a parking meter near Paddy O’Wong’s’ entrance. “How about I let you guess next time?”

She smiles, takes my hand, folds it over a business card, and then whispers in my ear, “You’re on, Mr. Smooth Operator.”

I sense some sarcasm.

Back in my apartment, I call Joey to report on the show, but get voice mail. I fire up *Pornhose.com* and peruse tonight’s recommendations: “Boston Cream Pie,” “Peleton Housewife Finger and Squirt,” and “Hot Stepsister I, II, and III.”

I’m too wound up to watch and call Abe, who lives around the corner in Boston’s Back Bay. It’s before ten, so even though he’s married, he’s probably still awake.

He answers after four rings: “Burns, what’s up? I’m busy here.”

Through the phone, I hear the chime for *Pornhose* in the background.

“Hey, Abe, shut that crap off. You’ve got a wife to service. And this is important. I met someone at the story-telling gig tonight. Which, by the way, went very well.”

Before he can respond, I hear door knocks on his end and a woman’s voice -- Amy, his wife.

“Abe, why was the door closed?” I hear her say.

“I got Burns on the line. He just met someone. Locker-room talk.”

They continue back and forth, something about their ten-year-old daughter. I click on a video called “Plumber Chick Cleans the Pipes” and turn the volume up so Abe can hear it. So, Amy can hear it. His voice gets louder. Amy’s voice gets louder. Then silence.

“I’m back,” Abe says. “Amy’s got a tarantula up her ass. Anyway, tell me about the new lady.”

“She’s age-appropriate. Jewish. Well, sort of. From Long Island and drives a big, black Hummer.”

“What kind of Jewish chick drives a Hummer?” Abe asks.

“An Asian one with a Jewish stepfather.”

“Let me guess. She has the bony Karen Carpenter body you like.”

“And no kids or pets. She wears makeup, dresses like an adult, likes foreign movies, drinks gin. She’s over fifty and still parties. She’s an outlier, a renaissance woman. These don’t come on the market very often.”

“Burns, finally, someone who recognizes your genius. Especially since you haven’t had a date in like three years.”

“Abe, it’s only been three months.”

“Has she seen your car?”

“No.”

“Good. What about your bicycle? Do you still cover the seat with a trash bag?”

“I’m hoping she’ll think I’m a struggling artist and want to hang out with the band. Her stepfather wrote poetry.”

“She’s cute and single? Got to be something wrong with her.”

“Like I said, she’s from Long Island. And sells real estate. And has a condo in Brookline. She said she’s trading in the Hummer for a new Camaro. She wears jewelry and watches lots of TV: The Entertainment channel and *Sex in the City* reruns. She’s got JAP written all over her. Pun intended.”

“So what? Amy has a PhD and she watches that crap. What else you got?”

“She’s been married three times. She says she likes being married and would do it again.”

“I knew it. Need I remind you that you’ve never been married and can’t stand to be around anyone longer than four hours.”

“I know,” I say. “This is never going to work.”

There is another silence while Abe and I ponder *Pornhose* on our computers.

“But,” I add, “She likes to ski, has a gun permit, and voted for Reagan.”

“Great. You’ll be perfect together -- two low-information voters. Maybe she’ll listen to your rants about how middle-aged white guys are victims. What did she think about your Bangkok story?”

“She laughed. I mean she really laughed. But who drinks gin these days?”

“Right. That’s a red flag, too.”

I hear Amy again in the background. I check email, half-hoping to see a note from Jackie. Instead, there’s an ad for Asian brides. *Pornhose* must be listening to my phone calls.

“I’m back,” Abe says.

“And get this,” I say. “She talked about sex constantly. Women who do that are usually desperate or prudes.” An ad for lube appears on my screen. I click on it. “I have to stop getting so excited about these things, Abe. They never work out.”

“Amy says all her friends talk a lot of sex trash. Anything else?”

“Middle-aged sex is always a crapshoot. What if she’s a saggy disaster under those nice clothes? What if we have sex and my dick gets finicky? Maybe I should get a regular job and rent twenty-year-olds like Lenny does. How do you do it, Abe?”

“Burns, at our age sex is a chore. You just do it.”

I decline an ad for Viagra. Too scary. With my luck, I’ll be the guy who gets a three-day zeppelin and ends up in the ER, where a sleep-deprived resident has to puncture it with a railroad spike.

“Are you still in front of your computer?” Abe asks.

“Yeah.”

An icon flashes on *Pornhose*: One of my Facebook friends, a guy from Boston with a wife and kid, is on the site.

“Abe, looks like *Pornhose* just added a new feature that recommends videos my friends are watching.”

“What will they think of next? Check out ‘MILF Rub and Tug.’ Some of those women look fine.”

We skim a few videos together. According to *Pornhose*, Abe has given this clip two thumbs up.

“I don’t know, Abe, there’s something I really like about this one.”

The phone slips out of my hand onto the floor. I pick it up.

“Burns, calm down. This chick has a lot of ‘yeah, buts’ so just do what I tell you. Email her in two days, a short note: ‘Enjoyed talking to you the other night, let’s go for drinks.’ Choose an adult place near the T so you don’t have to pick her up in your car. Dating is like performing; your job is just to show up. If she likes you, it won’t matter what you say or do. Amy was just saying the other day that after ten years without a date, you’re overdue.”

After hanging up with Abe, I check the Celtics’ news, my Web traffic, and *Match.com*. There’s a message from “Edgy and Artsy,” a poet from Cambridge.

Randall: Checked your website, impressed you got a novel published. Watched videos of “The Chronic Single’s Handbook.” You are hysterical! Unfortunately, you seem to know a little too much about being single. Good luck with your search!

Her note triggers a visit to the Dark Place.

Who am I kidding? Fifty-six and never married. I’m pathetic. Fucked up. Even Harriet is getting married -- again.

My last shrink, Dr. Moody, tried to help me to accept my reality. “Marriage is no barometer of mental health,” he’d say, suggesting I reread *Solitude: A Return to the Self*, a book about famous people who never married but fell in love with their work.

What work? A degree in journalism, senior editor for a computer magazine for fifteen years. Laid off and no interest in another corporate gig. Cue the solo trip around the world that mostly sucked and a novel that barely sold any copies. And now a one-man show with mediocre reviews at a couple of local theater festivals. Joey’s a mensch for helping me but we both know I’m going nowhere.

A fleeting memory of blonde highlights under a black bowler.

At least I have a date next week.

But it's always good to have backup.

On *Match*, I key in "artsy," "thin," and "aged forty-five to sixty."

The results:

A tall redhead with the handle, "Cares 2 Much."

Her summary: *I adopted a blind kitten, a three-legged greyhound, and an autistic child of color. Family-oriented, daughter is my best friend, love my new grandchild. Cuddly, glass half full, always smiling. Three is my lucky number. Let's be silly together!*

She sounds pathetic and we share the same lucky number. I drop her a note.

"Drop Dead" sounds edgy and has a small tush.

Her summary: *My daughter made me get on this site. Not sure what I'm doing here. If you are a liar, cheater, or would sleep with your girlfriend's cousin from NJ, don't message me!*

I message her.

I skip "God Comes First," even though she looks great in a bikini and has recently quit hard alcohol.

"Ivy Leaguer" is cute but probably out of my league.

"Needs Luv" is wearing a short dress and very high heels.

Her favorite things: Wagyu beef, yacht shopping, polo ponies, and generous men.

I log off *Match*.

This is pointless. Life is pointless. I got nothing: no hair, no fancy job or hedge funds; no criminal record, creepy tattoos, or other bad-boy cred.

If God were handing out report cards, I'd probably get a C- graded as follows:

Material Success: C+

- Had a decent job, have some savings, middle class.
- Current career as writer/performer promises slim-to-moderate success at best.
- But, considering eighty percent of the world goes to bed hungry, I'm doing OK.

Plays well with others: C-

- Love Life: Fifty-six, never married, longest relationship -- two years.
- Family: First cousin, Joey, married with kids. Can't be counted on when I get old. Evil stepsister, mostly estranged. No other close living relatives.
- Friends: Considering I dislike most human beings; I have a fair number of friends.

Health: C

- Mental/spiritual: Believe in God when I need good luck.
- Physical health: Mother died of cancer. Her cousin committed suicide. Whereabouts of biological father, unknown. Stepfather deceased. Various relatives have done time in homeless shelters, mental hospitals, and white-collar prisons.

Prognosis: D

I'm going to die alone like my Uncle Heshie, a shoulder surgeon who had it all -- money, lanky women, Upper East Side address; he probably slept with Needs Luv. He never married, either. My stepsister and I were the only people who visited him in hospice. Where were all the models and nurses he dated before he got sick?

Three days later, I email Jackie and suggest an eight P.M. drink at The Beacon Hill Lounge, which is near the T and the health club where she teaches spinning two nights a week.

She texts back:

What took so long?

I arrive at 7:45 and secure two seats at the bar, side-by-side, my preferred seating configuration for a date, intimate but not too intimate. It provides an opportunity to dip in and out of her personal space, avoids unnecessary eye contact, and offers plenty of built-in conversation fodder: in this case, a Celtics preseason game on the tube, a dip-shit twenty-something bartender, and a mirrored wall for people-watching.

The bartender trudges over, blue hair held in place with a cloth hairband à la Rosie the Riveter, silver lightning bolts protruding from wet nostrils, and a black, untucked T-shirt featuring images of dead rats. His ink: "Team Satan" on the left forearm and "Mary Was a Whore" on the right. How do these kids get through HR?

"What can I get you, sir?" he mutters.

I'm dressed in navy chinos and a button-down dress shirt -- tucked in -- a little equestrian above my left pec, a spray of brown and grey chest hair at my open neck. I'm guessing that calling me "sir" was not a sign of respect.

“I’m waiting for a friend,” I say. “A glass of water would be much appreciated.”

He turns away to his cell phone. My water can wait.

I turn to my little spiral-bound pocket notebook and review the game plan for the evening:

- Be a good listener: If she’s monologing, let her run.

- Keep her guessing: Be aloof one minute and solicitous the next.

- Get that first kiss out of the way early, during the date rather than at the end, when there’s a higher degree of difficulty.

- Try to have fun.

At 8:15, Jackie texts to say she’s running late.

At 8:25, I’m not having fun and order a Budweiser.

At 8:35, the bartender looks up from his phone. Thunder bolts twitch, dead rats flinch. I watch Jackie’s entrance in the mirror.

She’s wearing a black sweatshirt, hoodie up. She looks frisky, like a baby seal. Snug jeans, narrow snaky hips, and red Converse without laces. Scarlet lipstick on smirky lips. The sweatshirt has an image of dead bats with the words “Teach Kids to Worship Satan.”

As she makes her way to the bar, men check her out, women check her out, the bartender checks her out. I want to marry her.

I swivel and stand to pull out a bar stool for her.

“An old-school gentleman,” she says. “A girl could get used to this.”

She kisses me on the cheek and compliments my outfit before reaching into my personal space to pet my chest hair. “I like fur on a guy.”

“Thanks,” I say. “Nice threads.”

“Ha,” she says, settling onto her stool. “I just like messing with the millennials.”

She notices my half empty beer. “Sorry I’m late. My class ran over.”

“No problem,” I say, “The Celtics are getting schmeared. I needed a drink.”

Jackie places her phone face up on the bar.

“How was your class?” I ask.

“Sold out. First ten drinks are on me. Let’s get you a real one.”

I roust the bartender from *Tinder* or whatever he’s swiping and order two Beefeaters on the rocks with twists.

Jackie checks her phone and puts it back on the bar.

I glance down at her shoes: “Did the warden take the laces so you don’t hurt yourself?”

“So I don’t hurt anyone else.” She gives my chest hair a little tug. “I’m a stand-your-ground kind of girl. Second amendment all the way, baby.”

She mentions husband number three, something about a silver spoon and a prenup. The marriage only lasted two years, about the length of my last relationship.

“I got reamed in the settlement,” she says. “But got to keep my guns. My ex had a boat and always worried about getting robbed at sea. Now, I live on the mean streets of Brookline. Some dirtball breaks into my place, he’s going to get a taste of the old ultraviolence, *pow-pow-pow*, right in the nut bag.”

Something stirs in my chinos. I collect my drink and my thoughts.

“To the old ultraviolence,” I say, tapping her glass. “I saw just the place for you outside Phnom Penh: Bazooka Joe’s Shooting Range. You can shoot chickens with a machine gun or cows with a rocket launcher.”

“You’ll have to take me for Valentine’s Day.”

Jackie checks her phone again.

And again.

I start to feel myself drift, shifting from participant to observer. My last girlfriend, Ricki, used to complain that sometimes I'd disappear right in front of her. "Hey, Walter Mitty," she'd say, knocking on my forehead. "Anyone home?" Sometimes Ricki was a real dick. Like Harriet.

I sip my gin. "You expecting an important call?" I ask Jackie.

"Sorry. Got a deal pending. Just want to make sure the buyer doesn't flip out on me.

She's done it before.

"Jewish?" I ask.

"Worse. Chinese."

She checks herself in the mirror behind the bar, applies lip gloss, and adjusts her hoodie.

Fine skin, small pores. Tear-drop eyes.

I feel a light tug on my chest hair. "Hey," she says, "You're too far away. I need a big strong man to protect me."

I move my seat closer and kiss her on the cheek. In the mirror, I picture Maury Povich and Connie Chung, Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan.

Jackie smiles and uses a finger to rearrange the ice in her drink.

"You're not one of those Jewish guys with a weird Asian fetish, are you?"

"Me? No. Of course not."

"That's too bad."

I kiss her cheek again.

"Ever been married?" she asks, looking at me out of the corner of her eye.

I tell the truth: "Not exactly but got close a couple of times."

I go on, not sure if I'm still telling truth: "I'm trying to stay open to whatever comes along."

Then I work in my usual talking points:

- I own a two-bedroom condo in Boston.
- Used to have a good job.
- Socked away money so I could quit and try my luck as a writer and performer.
- The gist: I'm on a budget, commute around Boston by bike, and own a crappy car by choice, for my art.

She parries with what I assume are her talking points:

- Works out five days a week and likes a guy who is fit.
- She's ABC, American Born Chinese "with an emphasis on American."
- Looking for a relationship, not a hookup: "I don't date men, I marry them."

The last comment generates a cold stripe of sweat down my back. I glance at the clock above the bar: We've been here an hour and a half, the right amount of time for a first date.

I excuse myself to go the bathroom where I stare into the mirror and reflect. Jackie pulls her weight in conversation and asks questions. She's nice looking, likes the way I dress, and offers to buy drinks. She even made the first move. Is the Universe finally cutting me some slack?

I watch my expression shift.

Yeah, but... A grown woman who refuses to act it. Seems girly but dresses ghetto. Talks about cocks, and then says she's not looking for a hookup. Who is really under that hoodie?

When I come out, the bartender is smiling, talking to Jackie.

I pull up and say, "How about the check?"

“She just took care of it.” He waves the receipt in my direction and heads to the cash register. Little prick.

“Thanks. I’ll get the next one,” I say to Jackie, not sure if there’s going to be a next one.

I hold the door for her as we head outside. As I’m contemplating my next move, I feel two hands on my collar. She pulls my face to hers and whispers, “I’m free next Friday.”

A week later, and the day after another testy rehearsal with Joey, I bike over to Jackie’s place. It’s early November, daylight has been saved, and it’s cold and dark, better for sleeping. I’m decked out in New England old-school: brown leather bomber jacket, burgundy corduroys, and Timberland boonie-stompers that have never seen the boonies.

Jackie lives in Brookline, home to pet psychologists, kosher Szechwan restaurants, and double-digit real estate appreciation. An average two-bedroom condo costs 600k. If she’s had three husbands, she must own her unit and a few others.

She buzzes me in and I climb two flights. Her door is open. The Allman Brothers’ “Whipping Post” is blasting from two large floor speakers. *Sex in the City* is muted on a large-screen TV. There’s an iPad and a laptop, both switched on and scattered on the couch. Entertainment multitasking, the sign of a lonely person.

I hear the jingling of glassware coming from the kitchen. “Be right out,” she says.

The room is sparsely decorated, though she said she’s been here for five years. The paint scheme is Boston Rental: off-white walls with glossy white trim. The upholstered furniture is beige, neutral, and unlikely to offend. Where’s the European walnut, New Zealand wool, top grain hides, and brushed nickel she must have collected from her marriages? Is this place being staged for sale?

The most distinct pieces in the room are three hat racks in the corner. Floor-standing jobbies, a hat on every spindle: bowler; Stetson; pork pie; beret; OJ Simpson black watch cap; Red Sox, Patriots, and Bruins lids; a furry mad bomber; coonskin; pith; and some girly-looking toppers with flowers and feathers. One hat has a button that says, "My Heart Is an Idiot."

Jackie emerges with a serving tray holding two shot glasses, a flask, and a bottle of Jack Daniels, the hazing choice of frat guys everywhere.

"Cigars, cigarettes, Tiparillos?" Jackie asks, parading by me. She places the tray on the wood-inspired coffee table that probably required some assembly. We sit on the couch. She pours two shots and gives me one.

I tap her shot glass and say, "*Ganbei*."

"A clever boy, who can even toast in Chinese," she says, as if narrating the scene for a third party, possibly her good friend Carrie Bradshaw.

We do our shots.

"Yummy," she says.

"Hardly," I say.

A queasy silence ensues.

I look around the room. "Nice pad," I say. "Where do you keep your guns?"

"In the bar, next to the bourbon." She laughs. I laugh.

She's wearing her black bowler, a black turtleneck with hint of breast, olive fatigues with a hint of tush, and black paratrooper boots. Her make-up is delicate, light on the eyes and lips. Paramilitary yet girly.

"I found a quirky French film at the theater around the corner," I say.

"After my day, I need a laugh. How about *A Clockwork Orange*? It's playing there, too."

She shifts her black bowler to my head and considers me for a few beats. Her eyes grow large, soft, and wet. I want to hold her, rescue her, own her.

She smiles approvingly. “Want to catch a buzz before we go?” From behind her ear, she produces a nicely-rolled doobie.

I haven’t smoked in months.

“Sure,” I say.

We each take a few hits, and then she slips the stub into a pack of Newports, the cigarette of ghetto ass-kickers everywhere. She picks up the flask from the tray, fills it with Jack Daniels, and stashes it in a thigh pocket of her fatigues before grabbing another bowler for herself. I watch as she slips into a zippery motorcycle jacket and think, You are the coolest woman in the world.

A warm feeling washes over me. This could work.

On the walk to the theater, she talks about her day. A little of this and a little of that. I listen for a few minutes and start to drift.

Once in a while a fabulous woman locks on to me for reasons I never understand. Last year, I swore if it ever happened again, I was going stick it out, no matter how bored or crowded I got. If the relationship was going to end, she’d have to end it.

Why am I scrolling ahead like this? I just met this girl.

This weed must be good.

As we turn the corner, I realize Jackie is still talking about her week.

I’m not a fan of women who yak.

Yeah, but what’s a little yakking, when it means no more online dating? I imagine the things we’ll see and do: skiing in Vermont, double dating with friends who thought I’d be single

the rest of my life. No more praying for a girlfriend to St. Jude, the patron saint of lost causes and hopeless cases -- more great advice from Abe.

Maybe it worked.

If someone asks about my show, I'll be able to say, "*The Chronic Single's Handbook* is about a middle-aged goose-egg who can't get a hot woman." Then I'll point to Jackie and say, "In other words, it's not about me if that's what you were thinking."

I glance sidelong at Jackie, her jangling leather motorcycle jacket, her smooth athletic walk. Just being next to her feels good. A knot loosens deep inside my chest.

In the theater parking lot, I catch a guy checking her out. She doesn't seem to notice because she's looking at me, smiling. I smile back. She pulls out the left-over joint and lights it. We finish it off, and then share a cigarette. Everything feels natural, as if we've been doing this for centuries.

I'm thinking of kissing her when she peels back her jacket and thrusts out her chest. "How do you think I'd look with D-cups?"

I'm guessing Jackie has B-cups now, which work for me as I prefer small and tight over big and sloppy. And implants can have unforeseen consequences: Ten years ago, Ricki got a boob job and promptly dumped me.

Jackie's eyebrows are raised. She's waiting for a response. This is a test.

I lean over kiss her cheek and whisper, "I think you're perfect just the way you are."

"Lying dog," she says, laughing.

The theater is half full. We grab two seats by the aisle and take turns swigging from her flask as we watch the previews.