

Dating Dali

By Shirley Goldberg

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“Lizzie?”

His voice rose above the grind of the cappuccino machine, an overloud extrovert’s bellow.

The pungent scent of fresh-roasted beans assailed me and I glanced around, blinking in the glare of the late afternoon sun streaming through the windows. A few millennials on laptops slouched at tables looking out over Chapel Street, which stretched uptown and down, threading its way through Yalie territory.

“Oh, good,” I said in my pseudo-cheery voice as I approached. “You got a primo spot.” Couldn’t think of anything better to say. Hovering over him and a tad self-conscious in my hot-pink scoop neck—worn so I’d be instantly recognizable—and my peep-toe Betty Boop heels for their cute factor.

What a waste.

“Salvador, glad to meet you,” he said and leaned over for my hand, brought it to his lips for a wet kiss.” He settled back into one of the cushy lounge chairs, as the vent from the air conditioner blew his unruly hair, making it stand in wisps. If that gesture was part of his old-world charm, I wasn’t buying. I sat on the chair’s edge. *He looks older than fifty-five. Lied on his profile?*

“This Starbucks wasn’t so hard to find,” he said, crossing an ankle over his knee.

Allowing a sneak preview of sneaker bottoms worn down on one side, as if the man walked on the outer edges of his feet. “Maybe I’ll get that GPS some day.”

“Some day soon?” Trying for polite with a jolt of amusing even as I hung onto my expanding lousy mood.

“Let’s go up to the counter,” he said, rising from the chair. The man moved well for an older dude. He’d be sort of hot except for the mustache. I’ve got a few tats myself, but this guy? He was out there with the waxed mustache bobbing around like it was on springs.

“I’d like a cold iced tea,” Salvador said as we checked out the menu on the wall above the cash register. His hands in his pockets jiggled coins. A few people did double takes, and a group of teenage girls giggled and whispered loudly behind us. I caught one aiming her phone our way, and gave her my death stare before she could click off a photo.

The evening before, our friendly phone chat had morphed into twenty-five minutes spent arranging where to meet—Mr. GPS-less lobbying for his familiar neighborhood Starbucks, forty minutes away. Staying home and watching season one of *Fleabag* with a glass of Trader Joe’s three-buck Chuck sounded more and more appealing the longer we negotiated. Finally, we got on the Starbucks website together so I could emotionally support him through the where-to-meet ordeal.

“Oh, Strawberry Vivianna.” He shifted from one foot to the other, head cocked up toward the board on the wall considering the possibilities. “Who’s treating?” his eyes still on the menu.

“I’m going for hot coffee. And you can treat yourself.” I fished my wallet out of my bag, mentally kicking myself in the butt. “I’ll do the same.”

This internet meet was a mistake, and forty-five minutes was all the time he was getting. My next date would involve abundant conversational charm on the other end, and palpable evidence of warmth.

He gave a little shove with his elbow. “I was kidding,” he said. “Some girls go ballistic when I say that.”

Girls? “No worries, I’ll treat.”

“Now, that’s a first.” He fidgeted with his wallet, slipped it into a back pocket. “If you insist.”

We reclaimed our soft seats by the window, sipping the drinks. “How about that murder in New Haven, huh? Over by the river. You read about that?” He shook his head. “I’d never live here.”

“I live here,” I said.

“Oh. Anyway. How’s it going on the dating site?” His ass burrowed into the seat cushion preparing for a long ride.

“I guess it’s going all right. I’ve—”

“Not for me.” He crossed ankle over knee again, unaware his dirty sneaker bottom threatened my pearl-gray trousers. As I shifted away, his upper body leaned closer. “I’ve met all sorts of weirdoes. Girls with expectations, like buying dinner. Then they end up being thirty pounds fatter than they said.”

He emphasized the word *fatter*, spitting it out, his voice breaking the sound barrier in this, one of the smaller Starbucks. What was it with men? They were hypercritical and we women were supposed to live up to their expectations?

“One wanted me to drive an hour to meet her. I’m a busy man. Got a project going with Disney now. Then this other girl walked into Dunkin’ Donuts with a limp. Look, no one’s perfect. But she could have warned me. Don’t you think I should have been warned? *N’est pas?* About one leg shorter than the other? You’re a girl.”

He leaned forward, his finger stabbing the air a few inches from my nose. “Wouldn’t you warn someone you were meeting? Tell me the truth.”

So many truths to tell this man. “You can’t help how you feel,” the first platitude to pop in my head. “But—” What I really wanted to say was *You’re an insensitive prick, sucking up the air around me.*

I couldn’t breathe. Why, oh why was I here?

I’d set out for this meet almost buoyant. After sharing my tuna sandwich with my Greek student during our lunch tutoring session, and learning from him that *metaphor* was a Greek word. The excitement on his face, teaching the teacher, pointing out more Greek words.

Salvador turned in his seat and tapped me on the arm. “That’s why I devised my little test back there. The one you passed with flying colors.” He laughed, a grating hee-haw.

“Test?” I slid to the edge of the chair, irritated by the arm taps, the laugh and now that I caught him in profile, something else. The man had great clumps of hair issuing from his ears. Didn’t he make use of a three-way mirror?

“That’s my standard line, asking who’s treating. See how a girl responds.” He leaned closer and pointed to me. “Saying we should treat ourselves, though? Very clever.”

“Excuse me.” I sprang up, almost tripping over his splayed legs, headed to the restroom in back. Once inside I locked the door and leaned against it. A flash image of my last date, a guy named Aidan, who’d invited me to the Yale Art Gallery. We’d meandered past the Pollocks, a few Klines, de Koonings, and stopped at a Dali, “The Phantom Cart.”

“I don’t totally understand this one,” he said as we stood before a sort of landscape with a town in the background.

“It gives off a creepy vibe,” I said.

“Dali had this thing he named the paranoiac-critical method. There’s a photo of him around here, and you can tell by the look on his face, the man was definitely paranoid.”

Aidan Craul, adorable in an unselfconscious way, unaware of his sex appeal, especially when holding forth on Dali, pointing out details in the painting, reading from a printout.

“You researched before meeting me?” Hard to believe he’d gone to so much trouble.

“Figured it was the least I could do. I got a lot of ribbing from my buddy. He couldn’t believe I was taking you to an art gallery for our first meet.” His gaze shifted to the floor and then back up to me. “I’m enjoying myself. I hope you are.”

We'd gone for Thai after the gallery visit, shared spring rolls, noodles with peanut sauce and a curry. I salivated thinking about it. He'd told me about his mom's gall bladder surgery, but not in a too-much-information sort of way. I thought we'd clicked, which doesn't happen that often.

He hadn't called me back.

Which is why I was Starbucking it with Mr. Wierdo Mustachio.

I applied lipstick and walked slowly back to the table.

"Have a seat. Tell me about teaching. Do you like your students?"

"I love my kids," I said. "Today I had lunch with Petros, my Greek student. From Crete. He told me—"

"It's important—essential to love what you do. I am passionate about my painting. It is my life. Today I started a new painting. I've been into clocks for a while, since I was twenty-seven to tell the truth. But now, with the internet and technology, time is not the same concept it used to be."

"Interesting," I said. "My Greek student was teaching me how to say numbers in Greek. He even—"

"I'm working on a major political piece now, but I can't talk about it. I would much rather talk about my upcoming coffee table book on my mustache. Does that sound silly to you? A book about my mustache?"

“Everyone should have a book about his mustache.” *This guy isn’t interested in me.* A prickle of irritation crawled up my arm. Why did I care anyway? I didn’t plan on seeing him again?

“I’m thrilled you approve. As a painter, I get criticized wherever I go. Yesterday I attended an exhibition at…” and I tuned him out, eyeballing a couple in the corner immersed in their phones. Sal’s gaze swung around the room, as if he got inspiration from the bags of coffee beans and mugs displayed on shelves.

I shoved my hand in my bag for my phone. Tinder was tempting. A little harmless swiping—he wouldn’t notice—while this guy jawed on and on about his muse. I didn’t even try to hide the phone in my lap as I searched for my next date, scrolling and swiping. Muses—was that the correct plural? Whatever. Muses came in all forms, and right now, my muse would be the first cute guy who swiped right and yanked me away from this Starbucks and onto a nice happy hour Pinot Noir.

I looked up from my phone. The guy was still blabbing, something about the clocks again. “Excuse me for saying this, Sal,” I interrupted. “Not one stinkin’ question. You haven’t asked me one question about myself. And yet I know a lot about you. More than I’d like to know. Sorry if I’m rude. You aren’t all that much fun.” I sounded more like an eighth-grader and less like my fifty-year-old self.

“*Pardon?*” He said this in French, probably to impress me. “I certainly did not mean to—”

“You should be dating yourself,” I said, interrupting him again. I checked my watch as he wound his mustache around and around his finger as if it were the tail on his pet monkey.

“I really must be off,” I said, aware I sounded like the dowager from Downton Abbey. I stood, my head a giant bowling ball, lolling on my neck. “I’ll leave you alone with your favorite person.”

“Are you serious?” His expression one of disbelief that shifted to annoyance. “You have got an appointment you forgot about?”

I backed away. “Sorry.” *No, I’m not.*

“After I drove all this way.” I watched as his gaze traveled from my face to my chest, his hands balled into fists in his lap. “Hell, I’m not that bad a guy.”

As I headed out the door, my phone rang.

I escaped into the fresh air where the scent of fall hung over Chapel Street, clean and fresh, mixing with bus fumes and barbecue from the eatery on the corner. My hand made contact with my phone, and I stepped around the corner and leaned against a shop window. “Hello?”

“Hi. This is Aidan.”

“Aidan?” *Aidan from a month ago?*

“We met at the Yale Art Gallery? Sorry I didn’t call sooner. The thing is my mom had some complications.”

“I hope she’s better.” Internet dating is tough. It’s always best to move swiftly from one disappointment to the next.

“It wasn’t a good time.” His voice had a heavy feel to it, and I could read his worry between the lines.

I waited, not wanting to interrupt.

“Now it is. A good time, I mean. I’d like to see you again. Dinner? Will you come out to dinner? Is tonight...I know I should have given more notice, but it’s been so long and I want to see you. It’s my fault. I should have let you know what was going on.”

“Aidan, it’s okay.”

“It is? Really?” I detected joy in his voice.

“I’m glad you called.” Something rose up in my chest and squeezed, and I smiled at the teenagers with ice cream cones, the beggar a few feet away, the two Yalies walking arm in arm. Everyone smiled back.

“You’ll come to dinner? Tonight?”

“Aidan.” I paused, drawing out a breath. “Yes. Yes, please.”