

THIS THING CALLED LOVE

I am not good at dating.

Mind you, this isn't just some sudden gloomy thought brought on by an annoying dry spell between thrilling romantic encounters. This is based on the indisputable fact that over the past seven years I have had approximately three dates.

I just never know how it's all supposed to work. My parents, from all accounts virgins on their wedding night, had exactly one date. Even my forebears are no help—my grandmother became pregnant, and I swear I am not making this up, while living in a convent. With such meager experience to draw on, it's a wonder I haven't ended up padding around a trailer in a muumuu while my ex-con boyfriend bellows for another Hostess Snowball and a can of Genessee Creme Ale so he can thoroughly enjoy the breathtaking thrill of *Cops*.

Let us also not forget that I am of the generation reared on the magic of Disney. Countless viewings of *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* as a child left me with the firm impression that all I'd have to do to attain romantic fulfillment was lounge around pining and eventually some handsome man with perfect teeth would happen by and be struck by my lonely beauty. We would then repair to some fabulous castle, accompanied by the chirps and trills of cartoon birds, and spend the rest of our lives being deliriously happy in a generally cheerful, if not sexually explicit, kind of way.

Imagine my horror, then, when I found out the whole affair actually involved the wanton exchanging of phone numbers and trying to fall asleep with my hero's slumbering head making my arm numb. I have a difficult time accepting that Snow White was forced to endure Prince Charming's suggestions that water sports might be interesting, and picturing her going through his drawers while he's out hunting to see what other princesses he's been slipping it to ruins the whole dream utterly.

Walt's lies aside, I am willing to accept some of the blame for this problem of not yet being partnered. My friend Grace says it's because I'm not serious enough. Maybe she's right. With the exception of supermodels and Playboy bunnies—who inevitably list it as the most desirable quality in the man of their dreams—most people seem to rank humor far beneath steady employment and perfect abs. The thought that Naomi Campbell would find me utterly enthralling has its appeal, but on the whole I'd rather have George Clooney banging on my bedroom door.

Nor am I wired for this casual dating thing the carefree queers of the '90s are into. I don't like being around strangers enough to date someone if I don't think that joint checking and

rooms filled with IKEA furnishings aren't a definite possibility. I don't need to sit through foreign films or endless hockey games just so we can get to know one another. I am quite secure in my dys-

function, and do not need to pretend that my life has meaning outside of watching Bruce Willis movies on tape. I have an entire owner's manual already typed up. I simply hand it over on the first

The Date-Free Zone

Nothing in the Disney catalog could prepare one for the grueling, un-fairy tale-like ordeal of finding a mate

by Michael Thomas Ford

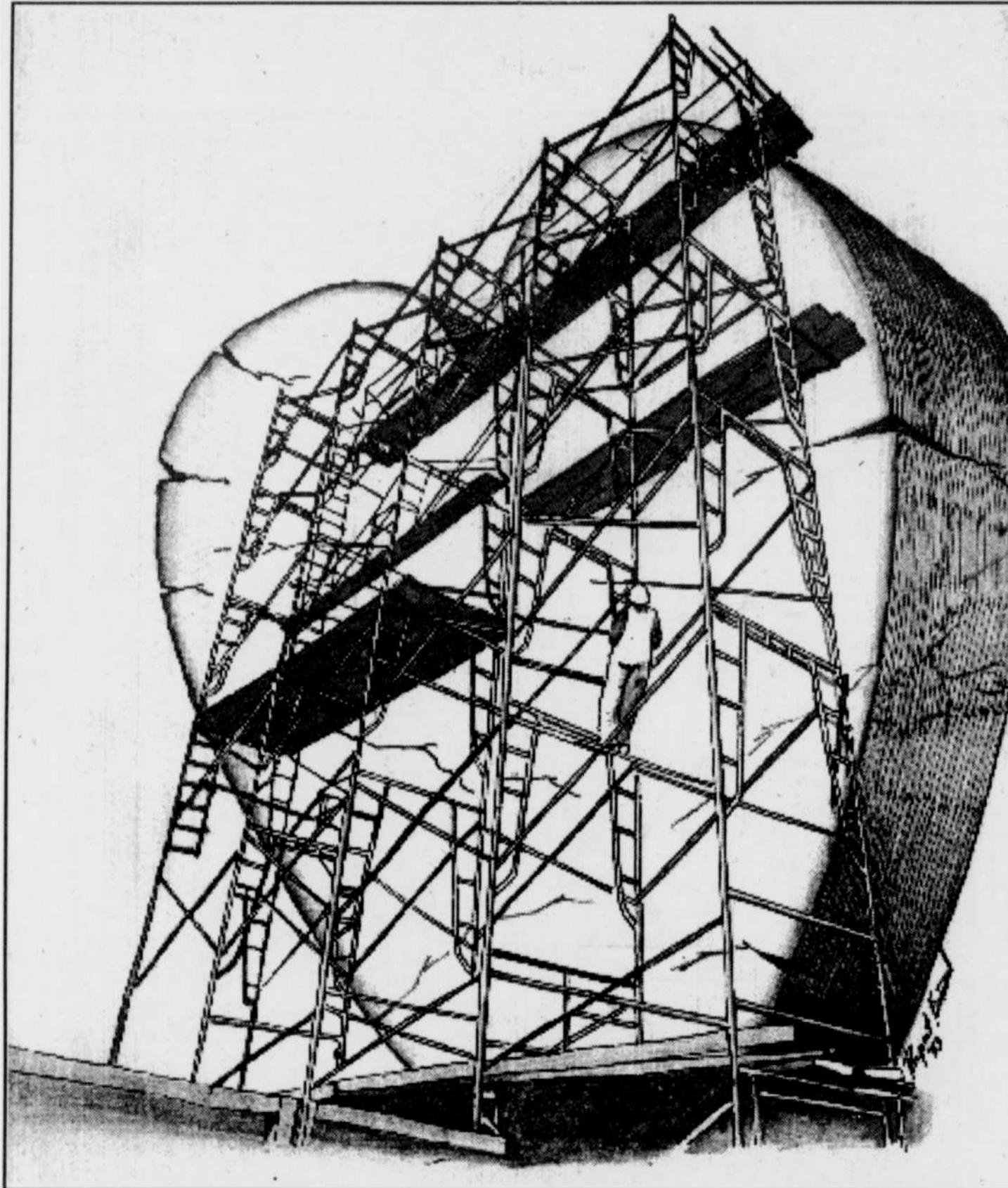


ILLUSTRATION BY RUPERT KINNARD

date and tell him to call with any questions.

This whole notion of casual sex also leaves me cold. In the time it would take me to find someone, discuss who would do what to whom, and do it, I could have eaten an entire Entenmann's pound cake and spent an amusing hour watching *The X-Files*. As for the sex part, I could accomplish the same thing by myself—and without having to take a shower, leave the house, or wonder why there were two toothbrushes in his bathroom and a second pair of glasses on the bedside table.

The problem, ultimately, is that dating involves men, and men are hard to find these days. Oh, sure, there are scads of annoying fellows doused in *Obsession for Men* just lying about for the taking. But the really good ones, the ones who like big dogs and don't care what Madonna is up to today, are fair near extinct. When I do find one that might be interesting, his wife always comes along to spoil it.

When I do, by chance, meet someone who might even possibly be date material, I have developed a remarkable system for going through an entire relationship with the person in my mind in 30 seconds flat. I whiz through dating and the first sexual encounter to moving in together and buying a dog in no time. By the time I've even walked across the room, I already have us fighting over the VCR as he packs his things to leave, making introductions irrelevant because we are no longer speaking. It saves a lot of time.

It's not that I'm particularly fussy. In fact, I don't ask for much. But what I do ask for is hard to find these days—a man who is independent, questions the state of the world and looks very nice in boxers. Unfortunately, these men are almost always either already married to Kim Basinger, or they're career criminals. As my friend Dan cruelly pointed out recently, "Your problem is that your ideal man is the Unabomber." Sad, but true.

Still, ever the romantic, I refuse to stop believing that somewhere out there is a man I can, if not love madly, at least tolerate. So here's the plan: I am having an essay contest, and the grand prize is me. Anyone interested is free to submit. All you have to do is tell me in 750 words or less how you are going to make me wildly excited forever. Essays will be judged on originality, penmanship and ability to amuse me. Presents are also a nice touch, especially cash. The winner will be notified by my arrival on his doorstep.

OK, so it isn't Ed McMahon handing you a big check with lots of zeros. At least you don't have to lick 73 different stamps and put them in the right place to win.

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