



With the demise of toll booths in the late 1980s and the stench of paper mills all but faded from our olfactory memory (sorry, Mayor Hazouri, but sometimes when driving to the airport and the wind is just right, I believe I still catch a whiff), it seemed like *most* Jacksonvillians had run out of legitimate things to complain about.

For single residents over the age of 25, however, there's always been—and continues to be—plenty to gripe about, namely, the dearth of locations and opportunities to meet Mr. or Ms. Right. In fact, a recent national study conducted by AXE Bodyspray ranked Jacksonville number 57 out of 80 major U.S. cities on its annual "Best Places to Hook-Up List" (Seattle, Honolulu and San Francisco topped the list, for the record).

Not being the mayor, I can't do much to mandate extended bar happy hours or regulate the number of married people within the city limits. But what I *can* do, as a single, 30-something magazine writer with too much time on your hands, is test out some alternatives to trolling the clubs or waiting to be fixed up by your married friends and share my own personal experiences in singleness's trenches.

NOTE: Since I, unlike Dr. Phil, am not a paid spokesperson for any particular dating service (a fact which will become painfully obvious in precisely two paragraphs), I do not intend to imply that one dating service is better than another. As such, I have purposely omitted which service I used to meet my potential suitors in the following anecdotes (which, sadly enough, are 100 percent true). The names of said suitors have also been changed to save them the indignation that I will surely suffer as a result of this article.

PERSONAL ADS

It's no surprise that personal ads are favored by the 50- to 60-year-old set since trying to

find a soul mate in the back of a newspaper is about as archaic as arranged marriages and dowries. Despite their waning appeal, personal ads are still around, presumably because they're usually free (for the advertiser, anyway; respondents are charged by the minute to leave a voicemail message or a flat rate to reply by mail).

Daters looking for moral support or advice won't get it from classified staffers. And unless they try to sneak some "explicit sexual or anatomical wording" into an ad, they'll get no reaction at all.

I don't normally agree to dates that necessitate my setting an alarm clock, but in this case I was willing to make an exception. It was, after all, my first date, and I was anxious to get the ball rolling.

on and they can do it for free (a subscription is required to send and respond to emails).

Members create profiles where they categorize their appearance, interests, lifestyle background and values, as well as what they're seeking in a potential mate, and can upload up to 25 photos (if they want to look like a kook, that is).

Quantity isn't necessarily quality, however. As anyone who has ever sifted through the pages can tell you, there are a lot of weirdos and jerks. Not to mention people who can't seem to grasp that 150 pounds overweight does not equate to "about average."

In the world of online dating, you're bound to run across people you know. Just in my short time online, I've spotted a friend from college, several people I used to work with and random

THE dating GAME

words by Kerry Speckman ♥ illustrations by Bruce Cooke

ONE WOMAN'S SAGA OF BEING SINGLE IN THE RIVER CITY.

Charles and I were to meet at a certain ubiquitous coffee shop at 9 AM. I ordered some overpriced tea that smelled like lawn clippings and feet and plopped down in a cushy chair to await his arrival—with an emphasis on the wait part.

He never showed up. Apparently, he forgot. (Gee, thanks.)

When he finally did call, he apologized profusely and offered to take me to "a nice lunch" at noon the next day. Here's how it went ...

By 12:00:01 I knew he lied about his height. By 12:03 I could tell he was just not that into me. By 12:07 I realized he must not own any fingernail clippers. By 1:45 I received the "Good luck with your search" email. By 1:46 I was taking a nap.

MATCH.COM

Considered the "world's leading online relationship site," Match.com says it has more than 15 million members in 240 countries. Lonely hearts can literally search for (and be searched by) potential mates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, in their pajamas, with no make-up

guys I recognize from my neighborhood.

So, it was no surprise that I would happen upon Eddie, with whom I'd gone out a couple of times some years back. What I didn't expect is that he would contact me (after seeing three photos of me and reading my "very Kerry" profile, mind you)—as if he'd never seen me before in his life.

Now, I'm not saying that I'm the most memorable woman in the city (I'm barely the most memorable women in my own apartment). But I'd like to think that if someone liked me enough to ask me out three (count 'em, three) times, he'd freaking remember my face when he saw it.

IT'S JUST LUNCH

Positioning themselves as "first date specialists," It's Just Lunch is a modern version of traditional matchmaking. Potential clients begin the process with a confidential, face-to-face interview with a professional IJL staff member who takes down background info and interests, as well as what they're looking for in a potential partner.

Once a client is accepted and a suitable



match is found, both parties are contacted. If both are interested, IJL sets up the date and shares a few pertinent tidbits about the daters (but no last names or phone numbers). After the date at a “participating” restaurant, they call the daters for feedback, which they use to fine-tune their matchmaking process.

Certainly the most personalized dating service in town, IJL has a limited pool of eligibles which sometimes means clients’ basic dating criteria isn’t always met (welcome to *my world*).

I wrote an ad, faxed it in and eagerly awaited its publication. I scoured the pages for my headline: “Tall and Silly” (though, in retrospect, “Taller Than Three-Quarters of the Men in This City and Silly/Immature: You Decide” would have been more accurate).

“Okay, here’s the ‘Women Seeking Men’ section. Mine should be near the top since it’s new...” I said to my friend as I skimmed through the columns of cliché-ridden, exclamation-point-laden headlines (“Live, Love & Laugh!” “Must Love Dogs!!” “Carpe Diem!!!”).

“That’s weird. I don’t see it here at all.”

“Here it is!” my friend said.

“Where?” I said. “I don’t see it anywhere.”

“On the next page ... under ‘Men Seeking Women.’” Seriously, I couldn’t make this stuff up if I tried.

E-HARMONY

Unlike other websites, eHarmony does the matching for members based on 29 dimensions of personality that have proven to be predictors of long-term relationship success.

Those “dimensions of personality” are revealed in an in-depth personality profile (I, for example, am “socially poised” and have an “excellent sense of humor”) and then used to match members with others considered compatible according to their strengths, needs and communication style.

Matches then get to know each other by answering a series of pre-packaged questions and sharing lists of “Must Haves” and “Can’t Stands” before proceeding into the treacherous waters of “Open Communication”—if they even make it that far.

While eHarmony boasts a patented compatibility matching model and claims to be the only matching service founded by a clinical psychol-

ogist, members may not receive as many matches as they’d like and, short of changing their personality, there’s not a whole lot they can do about it.

On paper, Scott was a good match for me: 43-year-old firefighter and small business owner, former military, “decent,” “honest,” “well-read” (by his own account, anyway), no kids, non-smoker and cute to boot. Since he had so many things I was looking for, I was willing to overlook some that I wasn’t, namely, his height (hey, if I were truly shallow, I wouldn’t be able to overlook it, now, would I?), his spelling (sorry, I’m just being “truthfull”) and the fact that he actually referred to himself as a “water baby” (yeah, I had a water baby once: her name was Rub-a-Dub Dolly).

On the phone, it was a totally different story.

Within two seconds, I knew Scott was not the guy for me (two seconds, it seems, is exactly how long it takes to utter the phrase, “Hiya, Gorgeous!”) In the interest of research, however, I ignored the patently insincere, not to mention cheesy, remark and tried to picture him saving a baby from a burning building. Unfortunately, his subsequent calls all began with different iterations of the same phrase and ended with “Night, Babe.” And at least once during every conversation he would have a side conversation with his dog in that ridiculous, sing-songy, high-pitched voice usually reserved for women cooing over babies.

“Does Kaylie want her blankie? Huh? Do you? Huh, Kaylie? ...You want to come lay down next to Daddy? Awwww, such a pretty girl!”

By that point, not even the jaws of life could have saved him.

SPEED DATING

Also known as “The Six [or Eight] Minute Date,” the premise of Speed Dating is simple: Cram as many quickie dates into an evening as possible.

Often hosted by restaurants or bars, the process entails men rotating around a room and spending a prescribed amount of time with a woman. A bell rings at the end of the “date” and they move on to the next table and the next woman. Both the men and women are given a score card of sorts where they jot down comments about each person and surreptitiously indicate if they’d like to see the person again or not. After the event, the organizer collects the cards and sends emails to participants indicating any matches.

Fans of the fast-paced dating juggernaut laud its efficiency (when’s the last time *you* met 12 potential dates in one night?), but others criticize its reinforcement of first impressions. Plus, eight minutes can seem like an eternity when

get
Involved.



get
Results.

By getting involved in the Jacksonville Regional Chamber of Commerce, you will gain access to area business and community leaders. Making these connections with potential new clients offer you the opportunity to grow your business.

Join the other 4,000 businesses who see the benefit of being a Chamber member. Get Involved. Get Results.

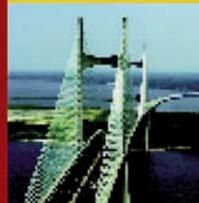
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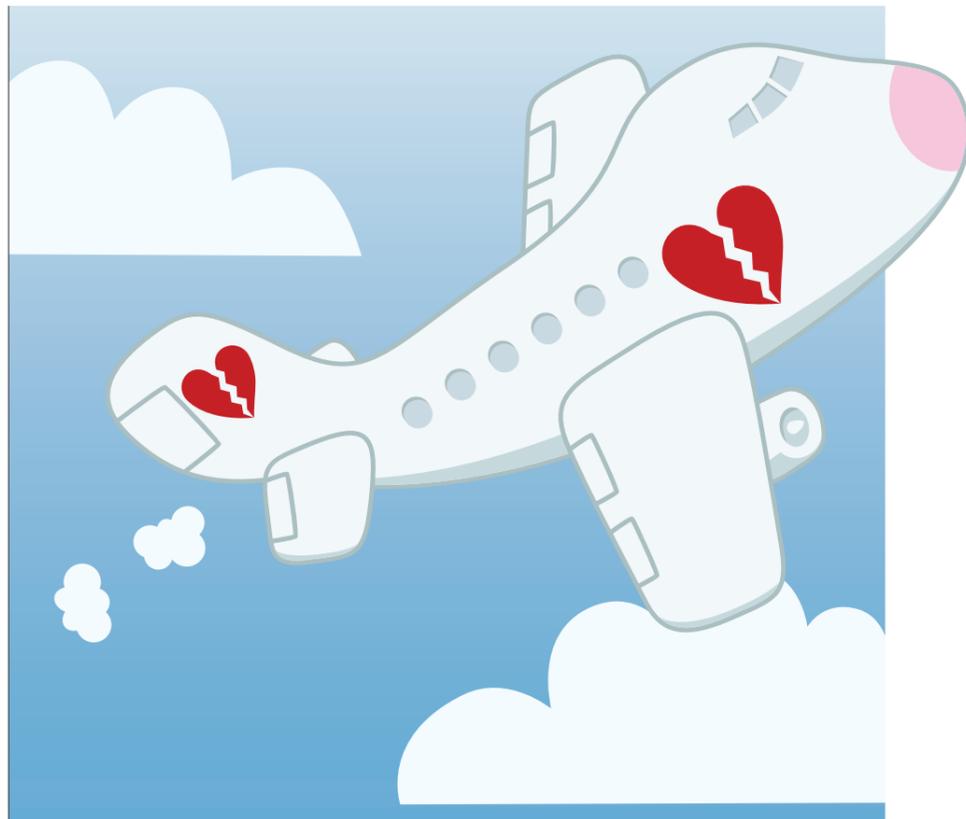
Create
Visibility



Enhance
Credibility



Make
Connections



you're stuck talking to a 42-year-old guy who square dances and lives with his mom.

I knew I wasn't interested in Matt from the get-go, but I figured I'd give him a chance. Stranger things have happened. Literally.

We were going to try and meet for a drink one Friday night, but when it didn't look like it was going to happen, I left him a message saying that I was meeting some friends at a neighborhood bar and we'd try it again some other time.

Not 30 minutes after I got there, I noticed a guy wandering around like he was looking for someone. It was Matt.

I pretended like I didn't see him since: 1) I didn't invite him; 2) it wasn't exactly the ideal situation for meeting someone for the first time; and 3) I didn't invite him. He eventually spotted me, but instead of walking over and introducing himself, he decided to stand against a wall 25 feet away from my table and stare directly at me. After 10 minutes, he left—or so I thought.

A minute later, I felt a tap on my shoulder. "Excuse me, are you Kerry?"

I invited him to sit down (did I have a choice?) and hoped the encounter wouldn't be as awkward as I was envisioning. He, on the other hand, wasn't uncomfortable at all, mainly because he was already about five sheets to the wind.

Two beers later, he decided that he should go since, "I'm really [bleeping] drunk," then he left... and stiffed me with his bar tab.

I had just about given up on this whole dating experiment when Tom came along. I didn't know much about him except that he was 35, originally from Cincinnati, worked in sales and was "freakishly tall" (six-foot-six, to be exact).

We met at a restaurant in Riverside one Tuesday night, and I could tell right away I was going to like him. (And no, romance fans, it was not love at first sight. I don't roll that way.) He was outgoing, chatty, intelligent and very funny. Okay, I'll admit it; he was downright adorable. In a nutshell, it was as good a first date as I'd had in a long, long time.

By the end of the evening, he had already asked me if I had plans for the weekend (alas, I was going out of town). The next day he called to tell me again what a great time he'd had and that we'd get together when I got back. When he did call the next week, it was to tell me that he was heading to Phoenix for a week for work and to not run off and get married while he was gone.

As fate would have it, one week turned into two, then three. We talked and emailed a few times, then he called to say his company wanted him to relocate to Arizona. A month later, he came back to Jacksonville, packed his things and headed west.

I never heard from him again.

Which is just as well, I guess, because if I learned nothing else from this experience, it's that love is like a paper mill.

They both stink. ❖