

Love in the 21st Century

"I saved my announcement for dessert. It goes down better with my honey-cake."

The speaker was Sadie, aged sixty but whose vitality made her look fifty, which age people tell her she looks and which she does not deny. With her around the dining room table sat her son, Sol, thirty-five, and her daughter, Barbara, thirty-two. Sol is heavysset and his hair is beginning to retreat in front. Barbara, svelte, is less pretty than her mother, yet attractive.

Sol finished off his piece of cake. "No honey-cake like yours, mom."

Barbara nodded her head in agreement. "Your honey-cake is terrific, mom."

Sadie smiled at the compliments. She cleared her throat, about to make an announcement, paused, then plunged on. "Honey-cake and honeymoon go together -- at least word-wise.

The fork holding the last bit of Sol's cake halted in mid-air. "Huh?"

Barbara scrutinized her mother. "What are you saying?!"

Blithely, covering her inner tension, Sadie clarified: "I am getting married."

Both of her children sat in shocked silence. Sol looked at his sister. She frowned back at him, and then raised her eyes heavenward denoting "I don't know any more than you do."

Their mother stood up and gestured. "Didn't you two hear? I said I'm getting married. I didn't announce that I have an incurable illness. Or that I am leaving all my property to a home for stray cats? Show a little happiness. Is a little nachas a crime?"

Barbara, in a weak voice, said, "Great Mom."

Sol wiped a reluctant hand over the thinning part of his hair. "Yeah, good news."

"Show a little enthusiasm," mumbled the bride-to-be."

Barbara sighed. "I had hoped you'd wait until I married first."

"I got tired of waiting. If I had grandchildren . . ."

"I'm working on it," said Sol, "with Sheila."

" Work on it after you marry her."

"I meant the idea."

Barbara, Turned to the open palmed two-handed gesture she resorted to in times of stress, which is to say, frequently, "But, mom, it's not a year since dad died."

"I know. But love intervened. At my age you don't get so many interventions. Besides, Saul was a liberal. And more important, an understanding mensch."

The three were silent with their own thoughts.

Sol broke the silence. "So who's the lucky man?"

Sadie hesitated.

Barbara prompted her. "Yeah, mom, who? Anyone we know?"

"No."

Sol leaned forward and fixed his mother with the steady gaze that had won him many an argument. "So out with it. Throw us a name."

Drawing herself up as much as a sitting position allowed, Sadie replied, "Before I throw anything, there is something you both should know." (Dramatic pause – what's new) "He's twenty years younger than me."

At this, the usually articulate, or at least verbal, Sol neither articulated nor verbalized. He simply groaned and smacked his forehead with his open palm.

Barbara did manage to say something. "Oh Mom." Shakespeare's lines popped into her mind: 'You cannot call it love, for at your age the heyday in the blood is tame.' 'Tame' was the last word she would apply to her mother.

"Don't 'Oh Mom' me," bristled her mother. "You haven't met him. He's charming."

"Probably after your money," mumbled Sol.

"Don't you dare say that. He has more money than I do."

"Well, that's a plus," exclaimed Barbara, spreading her hands on the table.

"Yeah that motive is out," agreed Sol.

Sadie, miffed. "What are you with the motives -- Sam Spade? The motive is love."

"I hope so," grumbled Sol.

"Good for you, Mom," said Barbara in a weak voice.

Sol took another piece of cake from the cake plate. Barbara toyed with her piece of cake with her fork but did not eat.

"And he's not Jewish," Sadie added. "But he is not without belief -- he's an animist."

Barbara nodded at Sol. "An animist."

Sol picked up the cue. "A first. We've never had an animist in the family."

Sadie was on her feet, gesturing widely. "He believes in the rocks, in the trees."

"At least it's ecologically correct," Barbara commented.

"He doesn't really practice it. He just enjoys telling people he's an animist. To get a reaction. Like yours. Actually, he's a very cultured man."

"I'd like to meet him," deadpanned Sol.

"You can -- he's here."

Sol panicked. "Here!" He looked around as if Bin Laden were lurking in the apartment.

The reaction of Barbara was characteristically more rational and also not without a semantic element, befitting to one whose profession was that of editor. " 'Here' as in 'Here in this house'?"

"Maybe in mom's rock garden, or in her dwarf trees," mused Sol.

He's in the next room. I wanted you both to meet him."

Agitated, Barbara sat down. "Today. Now. Couldn't it wait until we digested the idea. Of your marrying him, I mean."

"Judging by your reactions, I was right to bring him here. The sooner you meet him, the better. He's waiting in the next room."

Sol whispered to her. "Why didn't you tell us? We would have kept our voices down."

Barbara: "Yeah, what will he think of us?"

Sadie sat down and lowered her voice. "He's too discreet to listen. He's a gentleman. Besides, he's probably listening to Hindemith."

"Who's Hindemith?" Sol asked.

"The composer."

"I thought I heard some weird sounds coming from the other room," nodded Sol. "But I thought it was the radiator acting up again."

"That's Hindemith. I'll go and bring Solomon."

Sol: "Solomon?"

"So he's Jewish after all," observed Barbara.

"Very funny," Sadie said. "He's a non-Jewish Solomon. His mother was a heavy Bible reader. Wanted to inspire him to wisdom . . . I think it'll be nice to have two Solomon's in the family."

"Fine," agreed Sol, leaning back in his chair. "But who'll be Solomon One and who Solomon Two?"

"He's Solomon -- you're Sol. You never liked to be called Solomon, remember?"

"My teachers called me Solomon -- especially when I was acting too wise."

With mixed feelings of pique, impatience, and curiosity, Barbara encouraged her mother. "So get him, Mom -- your Solomon."

"Can't stand the suspense, eh?"

Barbara and Sol exchanged helpless gestures as Sadie got up and left the room.

The moment that Sadie was out of the room, Sol turned to Barbara. "What do you think?"

Barbara shook her head. "I'm beyond thinking."

Neither of them said anything for a moment. Then Barbara sighed, "In our family -- a mixed marriage."

"What are you talking about -- today a mixed marriage is one between a man and a woman."

Sadie returned with a distinguished looking bearded man, dressed immaculately in a suit. Sol and Barbara looked him over. He smiled at them.

An awkward silence filled the room, which Sadie broke, declaring somewhat formally, ""Sol and Barbara, I'd like to present Solomon."

"Hello," said Barbara.

"Hi," said Sol.

"Pleased to meet you both, said Solomon.

Another silence ensued neither more awkward nor less awkward than the previous one. Again Sadie broke it, "That's it -- finis to conversation? Golden silence reigns?"

Sol did his best to end the reign. "Let Solomon say something -- like in the game we used to play at our Catskill vacations: 'Solomon says'. After all, he's the guest of honor."

"Shh, Sol," hissed Barbara.

"He'll more than 'say something'. Solomon, recite the love poem you wrote in my honor -- he knows it by heart. And so do I."

In a rich baritone voice, Solomon recited the poem. To the surprise of Sol and Barbara, it turned out to be anything but kitsch. Barbara, an editor and quondam lit major, bestowed her accolade. "It's, well, Elizabethan, with a Yiddish patina."

"The Yiddish patina was for Sadie, Solomon explained. "Altogether not a bad performance for a goy, if I do say so myself. Incidentally, goi was also the name of a low official of the fifth class in the Japanese court of the 10th century."

"Probably carried there by one of the Lost Tribes of Israel," Sol remarked.

"Along with gefilte fish which evolved into sushi," Solomon added.

Sol grinned at him. "You know, Solomon, you and I might hit it off, at that."

Approximately a week later, Barbara, Sol and Sadie sat around the same table. The table was cluttered with empty plates. The last of the coffee and cake -- Sadie's cake, of course -- had been finished.

Sol turned to Barbara. "I read a good detective story recently. On second thought, not for you unless your reading tastes have changed with age."

Barbara sighed. "I'm getting to the age where Durrel's 'Alexandria Quartet' is too rich for my blood and I'm not yet ready for Proust's 'Remembrance of Things Past.'"

"I skimmed Proust on the Internet once. Too slow moving for my taste, though one line from it I do remember: 'Albertine slipped into my mouth, making me the gift of her tongue.'"

"Wow, maybe I am ready for Proust."

In the middle of stacking the plates, Sadie stopped to remark, "Yours truly hasn't had time to do much reading lately. Been busy with Solomon, or doing my house cleaning."

"Solomon's your affair," Barbara said. "But how many times have I begged you to get a maid, Mom."

Her mother bristled at her daughter's suggestion. "Sadie Bernstein does her own cleaning. Today, though, I couldn't find any decent music on the radio to clean in time with. I was forced to hum. I'm not the world's greatest hummer."

"Correct," pronounced Sol, raising his voice. "The world's greatest hummer lives in Tibet. He has never left his native land, except to make a guest appearance on the Jay Leno show. You shouldn't have tried to compete with him, Mom, but sung instead of hummed."

Barbara wagged a finger at him. "You know mother doesn't have a voice, Sol."

"Right," agreed Sadie. "I only sing when I want to get rid of people. Your father had a wonderful rich tenor voice. Should have been an opera singer or a cantor. But a socialist opera singer could only succeed in Russia, and a socialist cantor, nowhere. His favorite songs were by Sigmund Romberg and Rudolf Friml."

Yeah, I remember," Sol nodded and began to sing:

"Ho! So we sing as we are riding, ho!
In the night or early morn you know
That the riffs are abroad,

Go, before you've bitten the sword . . ."

"In those days you bit the sword," quipped Sol. "Today you bite the bullet. Progress."

"I always liked the song about the rose--"

"I remember," said Sol, who began to sing:

"Only a rose I give you,
Only a rose . . ."

"That's the one", Smiled Barbara. "And dad would sing to me:

'Come to me, my little gypsy sweetheart,
Come to me when yellow leaves are falling . . .!'"

She trailed off, then added, "Sometimes in the Fall I remember it."

Sadie shook her head. "They don't write songs like those anymore. Songs with melodies . . . not noise."

Sol, who was still standing, sat down. He gave his mother a rueful smile and said gently. "They do, Mom. Once in a while."

"Today they march to the beat of a different drummer," added Barbara in a soft voice to her mother, who replied, "I liked the old drummer -- especially when he played the violin. Like Fritz Kreisler."

"Before he went into the automobile business," Sol said.

"Very funny," Sadie shot back, miffed. "Nowadays anything that smacks of sentiment is kaput. And idealism is double kaput."

"Kaput, kaput," Sol commented. "But it's not good to go overboard in the other direction, either. I had a girlfriend once who was a Marxist critic. She didn't criticize Karl Marx, she criticized literature from a Marxist point-of-view. I loved Huckleberry Finn as a kid, but when she got through analyzing it, the raft was the battleship Potemkin. And her apartment! Done up in what I would call Early Proletarian. No furniture in the living room except two benches from a 1917 Moscow tram. The room was dominated by a frame-less floor-to-ceiling photograph of Leon Trotsky in matching frame-less glasses. A samovar constructed out of Petrograd steel bubbled in a corner. She drank tea sucking it through a lump-sugar in the Russian style. Her place probably once belonged to Emma Goldman."

"You're making it up, Sol!" exclaimed Barbara.

"Only the part about the lump sugar."

"Obviously the relationship couldn't last."

"How could it?" Sol raised his voice. "She would go around spouting the doctrine of Karl Marx while I espoused that of Groucho Marx. we finally broke up when she insisted on spelling the title of the quondam Russian ruler as 'T-S-A-R' and I insisted on spelling it 'C-Z-A-R.'

"Oh come on, Sol!"

"O.K., I borrowed the bit from Woody Allen."

"I agree one shouldn't carry idealism to the extreme. Dad agreed, too. He liked the Wolfson play -- written in the 30's -- about the ferryboat trip of idealists who set out from Brooklyn to sail to Soviet Russia in order to build the Perfect Society -- and who never got out of the bay."

Sadie said in a voice soft with memory's sadness, "Your father said the play pointed out the folly of trying to build a new world elsewhere. The work, he said, must begin at home. A real socialist he was -- but with his feet on the ground."

"Aw, Mom," Sol said, "now we're in the capitalist model. The unions nowadays demand a ten-minute fantasy break. That old Marxism was well meant, but not effective. Passe with a capital 'P'"

"Pffft on your passe! Bite your tongue!" answered Sadie. "There are still the poor. The underpaid. Your 'capitalist model' should bend a little."

Barbara spread her hands on the white tablecloth. "Dad liked to quote Rexroth's poem:

'Once we marched in closed ranks,
Today each of us fights off the enemy,
A lonely isolated guerrilla.'

"Now the guerrillas left are in old age homes," opined Sadie. "But not this guerrilla!" She tapped her self on the chest. "I'll die at home."

Sol raised his voice, almost shouting at her. "What's with this talk of dying? You got lots of years in you yet. Nowadays --"

"Nowadays they connect you to a machine after you're already dead and call it living. I prefer --"

Barbara shook her head in resignation. "We know, Mom, you've told us a thousand times. Disconnect."

"Right. Before they clone me into some sort of living fleshy plant. Of course, if they do, face me East. I always liked the morning sun."

In reaction to which, Sol said with a stentorian voice: "'Arise for the day is coming . . .'"

"Sol, stop it," urged Barbara.

"In the civil rights struggle," Sadie said, "your father and I faced the dogs and troopers in Birmingham."

"You were courageous, I'll grant you that," nodded Sol.

"Today people refuse to get involved," an indignant Sadie said.

"Well, I once did bet on a horse called Rosa Luxemburg.

"A reasonable substitute for mounting the barricades," Barbara commented, ironically.

"We were brought up differently," Sadie said. "Or the times were different."

Barbara bristled slightly. "Now there are people concerned with ecology."

Tossing her head, Sadie replied, "We were concerned with people."

"I have given up smoking," pointed out Sol.

"I've given up chocolates -- temporarily," temporized Barbara.

"You can eat chocolates -- when you're pregnant," declared Sadie.

"You mean when I'm married and pregnant."

"Of course."

"Right now there's nothing moving in that direction," Barbara said quietly. "And that's why I decided it's time to adopt the adage, 'change you place, change your luck' . . . I'm going to try Israel."

"In order to find someone?" Sadie exclaimed.

"Precisely"

The lines from 'Othello' came to Barbara: 'I know a lady in Venice would have walked barefoot to Palestine for a touch of his nether lip.'

In Israel, Barbara lived for three months in an ulpan, a school where Hebrew was taught, before renting an apartment. She lived on the second floor; on the first floor a small sign proclaimed: 'Professor Hildesheimer, psychiatrist, expert in nervous and psychiatric diseases.' Hildesheimer's baldness contrasted with a snow white Van Dyke beard. He looked to Barbara like a hoarier version of Lenin. There was more than one occasion in Barbara's sojourn above his office when she considered running down the stairs and seeking his help -- as, for instance, when she had trouble with the kitchen stove and the gas company sent a mechanic who took it apart and then walked out, presumably to get a part (he mumbled something but Barbara's courses in Hebrew did not cover mumbled Hebrew), and didn't come back for two days.

Barbara, however, refrained from seeking the help of Doctor Hildesheimer, not even for the completion of a paper which she wanted to submit to 'Popular Psychology' magazine entitled: 'Problems of Psychiatric Adjustment on the Part of Rosencranz and Guildenstern Caused by Hamletian Dominance.' Perhaps Barbara's reluctance stemmed from memories from her American (pre-Zionist) stage when she had, during a difficult period, opted for group therapy. She had tried Marathon Group Therapy, Body Movement Group Therapy, Group Therapy for Singles, Contact Group Therapy, and video-Tape Playback Group Therapy. By the time she came to Israel, she was ready to be alone for a while. This psychohistory may explain why Barbara's relationship with Hildesheimer was limited to his fixed-eyed, formal, Central European nod -- but even it caused her to feel that he could see clear through her pantyhose, and no matter that he looked her in the eye.

The salon was semi-dark even in summer because of the trees which blocked a good part of the light and caused Barbara to feel that she was living in Finland in winter. She knew it was summer because

jasmine grew in the garden under the window. She liked to fantasize that with a flower in her hair she would sit by the window like some girl in a Lorca story and a handsome passerby would be drawn to her.

Barbara forgot her problems, at least temporarily, and her mood brightened considerably with the arrival of her brother Sol on a visit to Israel. Following a tour of her flat, he sat with her around the kitchen table. The only wall decoration in the kitchen was a Ministry of Immigrant Absorption poster that Barbara had co-opted from her previous room in the ulpan, which poster bore the slogan: 'We never promised you a rose garden.' Although it referred to the difficulties of being a new immigrant in Israel, Barbara mentally applied it to her difficulties in learning Hebrew. The most daunting aspect of the Promise Land for Barbara (honed in communication) was the abrupt lack of it. A step down from illiteracy: She could not express herself in Hebrew. She was safe so long as she had remained on the premises of the ulpan where she could learn Hebrew but speak English -- most of the students being Americans, English, South Africans or Australians: the 'Anglosaxons,' as Israelis referred to English-speaking immigrants. (Which amused Barbara, as none could claim descent from either the Angles or the Saxons, not even immigrants from England, as they were almost exclusively Jewish, unlike the Angles and Saxons.)

Outside the ulpan, the Hebrew language struck at her self confidence. Although many Israelis knew some English, Barbara, for reasons of learning and pride, strove to speak Hebrew. At first, Hebrew had sounded to Barbara gratingly guttural. But as she increasingly heard and spoke it, English began to sound metallic and flat. She reasoned that modern English would so sound to the ears of a speaker of Chaucerian English.

"I'm so glad you came for a visit, Sol," Barbara told him warmly. "You don't know how much you miss family until there's nobody from the family around. Did you have trouble finding my place?"

"It's a small country. I went from house to house. But that was the easy part compared to getting from the airport to your place. The Israeli taxi drivers are like kamikaze pilots."

"Some things you have to get used to over here. It's not always the 'land of milk and honey'. "

" 'Honey' reminds me of mom's honey-cake. I'm not away from it long and already I miss it!"

"In Israel she could make real hamishe honey-cake -- even the bees are Jewish." "

Jewish wasps," contributed Sol.

Sol took in the kitchen with a glance. "Nice little pad you've got here. Not exactly 'Louie the Fourteenth.' More like 'Louie the Bald.'"

"It does lack some amenities," Barbara agreed. "For example, central heating. The other day it was so cold I put a deodorant stick near the heater before applying it to my underarms. But it'll do. Anyhow, I spend most of the day in the ulpan, learning Hebrew. I don't know how much Hebrew I learn, but there I did learn to make 'Turkish coffee', the Middle East coffee most Israelis drink. Would you care to try a cup, Sol, instead of the instant coffee I already served you?"

"No thanks. I'm one of your American urban types. Hooked on instant coffee, as you used to be. Save your Turkish coffee skills in case you meet an eligible Turk."

Barbara explained to him that she hadn't given up instant, but that in the ulpan it was her task to prepare the water for coffee. This duty had devolved upon her, she said, because she had been an early riser -- not by choice, but because the garbage trucks and the empty bins the workers tossed as the consummating part of the garbage disposal process woke her up. So she had been chosen to fill the large hot water container and to switch it on when filled, in order that it would be in readiness for ulpan students and teachers desiring coffee before lessons began or during a break. Whereas coffee drinking was a custom in the United States, in Israel it was a ritual. Derived, apparently, from the Bedouins. At least she didn't have to hold a blowtorch to the side of a huge steel water container, as did the drivers

to prepare coffee during a tour of the ulpan students to the Sinai desert, the sound of which roused her each morning from her sleeping bag. And if this sound hadn't woken her up, the sound of the driver and the guide talking would have. Although they were within feet of each other, they spoke in loud voices as though they were calling across a field. It was an inborn way of speaking of many Israelis, Barbara had noticed. And what were the two men discussing so heatedly? -- the proper way to prepare the coffee. "It should be boiled seven times, like the Bedouins prepare it," the guide said. "Not for such a large group," countered the driver. "That system is good for coffee klatches -- we've got to be in Nueba in three hours." In three hours Barbara would have liked to be still in her sleeping bag. That she slept in a sleeping bag at all was a minor miracle. She for whom the sheet on her bed had to be wrinkle-free and crumb-free before she would set body upon it; the pillow puffed up and crisp and cool to her head; the cover covering her feet completely lest they be exposed; the top of the cover close enough to her neck to keep her warm but never touching her neck. The guide knew nothing about these proclivities, and it is doubtful if they would have mattered to him -- he was concerned with short term rather than long term goals. He had already spotted her stirring. "Are you up, sweetheart?" he shouted over. She opened her eyes enough to see, as she lay on her side, the reddish finger of light that broke out in the East, the slate gray sky above it, and the pink and red and dark purple sea. She shut her eyes and feigned sleeping. Perhaps it was the guide who caused her at that moment to suddenly recall that Utricularia vulgaris, or noadid in Hebrew (as she had learned in a lesson) was the only carnivorous plant to grow naturally in Israel and that it boasted the fastest eating mechanism in the world, which enabled it to trap its prey in 2/100ths of a second. The guide had 'started' with her (as the Israelis say) the day before. On hearing that she was into literature, he claimed to be a 'romanticist.' He was a romanticist in the same sense that the wooden horse was Trojan. She had eluded him. As a result, he had given another, more responsive, woman the honor of sitting next to him. Barbara sat in the last seat of the bus, putting as much distance

as she could between them, even though sitting in the back caused her to suffer the bumps of the road more. "All Quiet on the Eastern Front," she exclaimed more to herself than to anyone else.

Sol, who had listened to this recital with a kind of siblingic anthropological interest, leaned back in his chair. "You're learning Hebrew. I'm still struggling with English . . . that's a joke."

"My Hebrew progression is about as successful as my attempts to find a soul mate."

Shaking his head, Sol asked, "That bad?"

Barbara wrinkled her nose at him. "I'm afraid so. Trying to find Mr. Right has been so fruitless that I considered putting an ad in the singles column reading:

Single Jewish female seeks
soul mate who looks like
Ari Ben Canaan and for whom
Henry James is not anathema,
to realize Zionist dream.

"Who's this Ari Ben Canaan?"

"The handsome hero of the book 'Exodus,' played by Paul Newman in the movie version. Henry James --"

Sol grimaced. "I know who he is -- I went through your Henry James stage, remember. Myself, I could never trust a guy with two first names."

"When I get Hebrew burn-out in the ulpan, I scribble ingenious single want-ads, like the one I read you. I even wrote some I composed for men, if you want to see them."

"Why not? When it comes to romance I'm one of your all-time chance-takers. I had so many blind dates in my life that after some years I found myself matched with the same dates I had before. Maybe the match-makers thought they would grow on me."

"I had my share, too. I stopped with them after my last blind date, a dentist, didn't show up."

"He probably fell into a cavity."

Barbara sighed philosophically. "It was just as well. I meet too many sowers."

Sol's forehead furrowed. "Sowers?"

Standing up abruptly, nervously, Barbara began to perambulate around the kitchen, waving her hands for emphasis. "As in sowing wild oats," she explained. "If my dates weren't types continually in overdrive, they were weird. For instance, after I told one of my dates that, according to Greek myth, Aphrodite was born from the foam produced when Cronus threw Uranus' genitals into the sea, my date claimed I had forever ruined for him drinking beer with a head on it. So I've had it with blind dates." She stopped and stood over her brother. "Yet you, Sol, continue to go on blind dates. Why?"

"What doesn't kill me, strengthens me. But seriously, Barb, do you think it's any easier for men to find the right girl? It isn't! I'll give you a for instance. On the plane coming here, I was sitting next to a pretty, dark-haired young woman, trying to figure out how to start a conversation with her. I leafed through the newspaper and came across an advertisement entitled: 'How to Make the First Move.' Under it was written: 'Every day you probably see dozens of beautiful sexy girls you'd love to pick up. The problem is how do you break through that icy wall that always seems to exist between strangers? Our book, HOW TO PICK UP GIRLS, has well over 100 answers -- each one of them absolutely fool-proof!!! You don't have to be rich. You don't have to be good-looking. These techniques work for all men. There is simply no way she can refuse you.' Summoning up courage, I turned to the woman and asked her if she would like to be my guest for a cup of coffee at the airport. She refused me."

Barbara, who had seated herself once more during this recital, shook her head sympathetically.

"And there was the time I took a blind date to the zoo," Sol continued to unburden his heart. "I worked enough courage to take her hand. She did not grasp mine firmly in return as I had hoped, nor did she pull her hand away as I feared. What she did was worse -- she let

it hang limp and heavy, and I carried this thing, this hand of Frankenstein, from cage to cage. Then I abandoned the effort and let go. She didn't fall to earth as I had hoped due to sudden loss of balance, but maintained her cool. The memory of that date has soured me on zoos ever since."

Sighing, Barbara remarked, "Sol, we could spend the rest of our lives swapping blind date or failed date stories."

"You're right. But don't get me wrong. The maidel does not have to be beautiful to attract me. Once I was sitting across from a girl in a library who was sorting index cards. I had a pile of sports magazines in front of me and so the last thing I was interested in at that moment was a member of the opposite sex. But of course I gave her a cursory look before plunging into my magazines. Her face was not pretty, but her arm! What an arm! Arms come in all sizes and skin textures. Her arm was small, with skin of a dark hue, laced with soft brown hairs, and with two birthmarks placed deliciously about two inches apart. She appeared to be a bit stupid, but who cared! Her brain was unimportant -- the arm seemed to justify the brain rather than vice-versa."

"You are apparently prone to arm fetishes." She suddenly folded her arms to cover them. "You remind me of a blind date that one of mom's relatives once fixed me up with. 'He's very artistic,' mom quoted her relative. He was artistic alright -- but in a perverted way. His life was one great quest. The quest after the perfect woman."

"What's perverted about that?"

"What's perverted is that he wanted to extrapolate his perfect woman from the choice of the finest paintings and sculptures of women of all time. He studied every painting and sculpture with 'woman' in the title: Soutine's 'Woman and child,' Lipschitz' 'Woman with Gazelles,' Fontanesi's 'Woman at the spring,' Rembrandt's 'Woman bathing in a Stream,' are just some examples. Only then did he begin to catalogue in his mind the archetype of the perfect parts of the female form -- the lips of the girl drying herself in Renoir's 'Bathers,' the breasts of Adele in Rodin's 'Torso of Adele,' the legs of the girl in Buren-Jones' 'The Depths of the Sea', and so forth. And these attributes are what he

wanted to find in his perfect woman. Of course, I failed to meet his standards on all counts -- well, he did say that my left ear might meet the test, if he could examine it more closely, but I told him where he could put it."

"Adele's breasts reminds me of the time a blind date I had invited to my place, suddenly took off her top to reveal her breasts. 'These are yours if you want them, she said, dramatically. I replied: "I can't afford both, I'll take one.'"

"You're the kind of guy who goes to a Japanese Tea Ceremony and orders coffee," his sister admonished him.

"Yeah, there's something to that."

"What is worrying is that if one does succeed ultimately, finally, blessedly, in finding someone and does get married, there's no guarantee that it will last."

"By the time I get married, my friends will be on their second wife."

If she heard this comment, Barbara gave no sign of it, but continued, caught up in the subject dear to her heart. Dear to anyone's heart who is single and fears missing the love-boat. "But still, one must persevere. And, Sol, don't forget what the Hebrew expression says: 'Whoso finds a wife, finds a good thing.'" And here Barbara's erudition kicked in. "Edgar Allan Poe, of all people, conjectured that the expression actually had an erasure between 'wife' and 'finds' --and that the missing word was (in his opinion) 'good,' so that the expression should read; 'Whoso finds a good wife, finds a good thing.'" She paused and then said, as if uncomfortable with sustaining an over serious approach to the subject, "I'll go get the male point-of-view-looking-for-a-mate ads I promised to show you." She went to the Salon, rummaged inside a table drawer, and returned with a sheet of paper. Standing, she read in an over dramatic humorous tone:

Ex-UJA schnorrer (male) seeks
female schnorrer to share life
of begging from the same bowl.

Sol made a disparaging face.

"Ok, here's another," she said, and read:

Single Jewish male intellectual,
published in Commentary, Midstream,
seeks equivalent publishing recorded
Israeli female for intellectual
discourse, possible publication of
joint bibliography. Menage-a-trois
with competent translator a possibility.

Sol chuckled and, caught up in the swing of things, remarked, "An ad tailored to me would have to read:

Remarkably desirable sports enthusiast,
fond of cinnamon toast, seeks mate
for equivalent munching and for
long-distance marathon called life.

Barbara, for whom editing was never far from the surface, added.
"In your case, I would substitute: 'for high hurdles called life.' "

"Maybe I should opt for simplicity with an ad that reads:

Mensch seeks wench.

Without warning, Barbara bent down and laid her head on his shoulder, sighed, and exclaimed, "Well at least you and I have each other to lay our perfect mate dreams upon."

Gently pushing her head off his shoulder, Sol replied,
"Temporarily. Pretty soon I'll be heading back to the States."

Barbara began walking around the kitchen, gesturing animatedly,
"We are a pair of global village siblings: you live in America, and I live in Israel -- at least for the moment."

"Yeah, a real spread-out duo. Wide flankers."

Barbara sat down with a thump. "Must you continually define everything in terms of sports imagery?"

Sol was on his feet. "If I define everything in terms of sports imagery, you, sis, are big on psychological imagery. You like to play one-on-one with Sigmund Freud."

In an injured if emphatic tone, Barbara replied, "I've stopped analysis, Sol."

"Coming to Israel is cheaper. Anyhow, you still define things that way."

"I guess you're right. Any way you define it, of the three of us, mom is the happiest."

"But she always was," Sol said. "Even in the tough economic times with dad."

"Sometimes you surprise me, Sol. You're right. I never thought of it that way. Maybe she was born optimistic."

A silence ensued which was broken by Barbara's sighed question, "So what now?"

"What do you mean?"

Barbara's voice almost broke. "How do we achieve 'being optimistic'?"

"We have to find the right person. I have to find a gal who likes sports. And if she's from around here, one who speaks English."

Barbara pouted. "At least you know what kind of partner you want."

"So do you -- a combination of your singles ads: a publishing house editor or professor of lit who looks like Ari Ben what's-his-name. Except you forgot to ad: "And has finished with analysis." Your past dating record reached its low point with guys-still-in-analysis. Especially when you were still-in-analysis at the same time. It would have been easier to mate the two shrinks."

"Don't overdo it."

"I overdo everything. That's my problem."

"No," Barbara corrected him. "Your problem is that you need to find somebody. You said so yourself."

"You sound like mom," Sol observed.

A note of desperation crept into her voice. "I need to find somebody."

"You'll find somebody, you'll find somebody," Sol tried to reassure her. "Take it easy. Marry one of those Israelis who wants a green card."

"You are so romantic, Sol."

"Just kidding, Bar. Hang in there. We can even do a package deal: Ari Ben watchamacallit for you and his sister Batsheba for me."

Barbara laughed.

Sol joined in.

Barbara began to cry.

Sol went to her and hugged her. "What's the matter, sis?"

"I just thought of it: Mother's had her second time around, and I haven't had my first!"

Helpless, Sol was silent for a moment, then he brightened. "At least you've had your share of guys."

Barbara stamped her foot. "It's not the same thing! I'm talking about a husband. Love." She leaned forward and added in a voice on the verge of imploring, "You do believe in love, don't you, Sol?"

"Sometimes," Sol said. "When I'm optimistic. When I think of mom and dad. Or mom and Solomon."

"You're right. We have an example in our own back yard."

"Right -- that's something."

Half hopefully, half ruefully, she said to Sol (she was also trying to convince herself): "Maybe I'll find Mr. Right in Israel -- like Ruth on the threshing room floor."

Sol cocked his head at her. "How's that?"

"From the Bible."

"What was she doing -- separating the wheat from the chaff?"

"Metaphorically, perhaps. Anyhow, she became the great grandmother to King David."

A doubtful expression formed on Sol's features. "I don't see it happening in your case. We are a family with a distinctly proletarian heritage."

