



ILLUSTRATIONS BY JASON LOGAN

A date for Kate: The beginning

First, there was the doctor who couldn't spell. Then one guy said, 'I'll be in your area on Wednesday.' Like he was cleaning carpets. He said, 'I go and visit my mom.' Kate thought she'd let that one go, too. Next came The Musician



This is the first instalment in an ongoing series that will track the adventures of our middle-aged heroine, Kate Gallant, in the world of dating online.

BY WENDY DENNIS

This is what you need to know about Kate Gallant: She is a petite 55-year-old actress and writer with hazel eyes and auburn hair who lives in a renovated Victorian in Toronto's Cabagetown district. She is smart, with an acerbic sense of humour and many wry, pointed observations on the absurdities of life and love.

She was born in Cape Breton, raised in P.E.I. and has a married daughter who lives in Florida. She performed with Second City. She's an accomplished cook, works out regularly and is turned off by tattoos. Sarcasm, on the other hand, works for her. Four years ago, she lost her husband of 18 years to cancer. He was the love of her life.

I met Kate and her husband [Paul K. Willis] some years ago at a dinner party hosted by mutual friends. After Paul's death, we lost touch, but when I saw her recently she talked, among other things, about going online to meet someone again. She'd realized she probably didn't want to be alone all the time.

Kate's a lot of fun, but she's not exactly a poster girl for online dating. For one thing, she's techno-challenged. She doesn't even know if she has a high-speed connection. (She doesn't.) She's so slow with her e-mails on Paul's ancient Apple computer that the time runs out. And other than to receive missives from her daughter Belinda, the only time Kate actually used the computer was to send her mother fudge at Christmas.

What's more, she's a little behind the curve on this Internet dating thing: Until recently, when she began dabbling, she harboured some widdly outdated notions about the practice. But she'd like to meet a decent, funny guy with a pulse and some brain cells to go to a concert with — maybe

even sleep with if the stars are aligned — and Internet dating seems like her best shot.

She has come to this conclusion because nobody sets her up and because bar-hopping is an exercise in masochism.

On a recent night out with a gay friend, she says "Lobby was 12-deep with 12-year-olds, the Four Seasons was "all cleavage and \$300 jeans," and the Windsor Arms was "just sad."

A year ago last Christmas, Kate and Belinda watched an *Oprah* show about match.com. To Kate's surprise, all the candidates were attractive, decent men and women who'd gone online for a variety of reasons, from frustration and loneliness to a desire for intrigue or simply to meet someone after a breakup:

"They had careers, they could speak the Queen's English, they wore nice clothes, they didn't have stuff in their teeth." The show alerted her to the fact that "there were nice people out there."

As I said, Kate was a little behind the curve on this Internet dating thing.

Belinda told Kate she should try it. Kate said no way. Belinda of-

'SPELLING AND GRAMMAR WERE KEY'

fered to do all the work. Kate was skeptical but said OK.

Belinda wrote and posted Kate's profile and photograph on match.com — an attractive head shot suggesting a warm, intelligent, mischievous soul. Belinda billed her mom as a "lovely actress and writer" who'd made a living being funny and who was looking for a bright, witty, financially secure (income \$75,000 and up) emotionally stable, physically fit 48- to 64-year-old man who could "watch C-Span or *Judge Judy* with equal doses of interest and disgust."

Belinda was truthful about Kate's age, but said she lived in Jupiter, Florida. Although Kate

does visit Belinda regularly, that was a bit of a stretch.

"Belinda assumed she'd find me the perfect man in Florida and I'd move down there and it'd all be fine," Kate says. The men responding had no idea they were contacting Kate's daughter.

Belinda screened the responses and forwarded only ones she thought her mom would consider. "Spelling and grammar were key," Belinda writes in an e-mail, "as were photos, interests and writing style. And I'm not going to lie ... income and job played heavy in there."

"The worst? A 60-year-old guy with an eye patch whose friends called him Captain something or other. That would be followed closely by a fiftysomething Harley lover who referred to Mom as kkkatie the pretty lladie."

"Flashbacks from Nam," says Kate. Still, even with Belinda's rigorous vetting, Kate rejected the majority of men sent her way.

First, there was the doctor who couldn't spell. "I said, 'Sweetie, how can you tell he's a doctor?' and she said, 'Oh, you're just being difficult. Of course he's a doctor. Lots of doctors can't spell. I said I think we should just let this one go. I mean, all she wants is for me to be financially secure so she may benefit in some way. She's not really into me finding the love of my life. She says, 'You can't get another Paul, Mom, so just forget that.'"

"Then one guy said, 'I'll be in your area on Wednesday.' Like he was cleaning carpets. He said, 'I go and visit my mom and also Rocky's been sick and I've been taking him to a vet up there.'"

Kate thought she'd let that one go, too.

Next came The Musician, "a classic example of a guy who's never grown up." He showed real interest in Kate, and although she didn't really like his looks, she genuinely liked him, so she stored him in the definitely-worth-looking-up-in-Florida file. They had a delightful lunch in an intimate little place full of overstuffed chairs and jazz and he gave her the impression he really liked her, even talked about accompanying her to a James Taylor concert. But she never heard from him again.

Kate, who's been out of circulation for more than 20 years, is a little naive about some of the harsher realities of modern romance.

"Belinda," she said, "can you believe that?" Belinda said, "Now, Mom, you're all grown up, e-mail him one more time." So Kate wrote him an e-mail, said she was leaving, that she never did hear from him and couldn't help but wonder why. She signed off "All the best, Kate."

Back home, Kate found an e-mail from him saying something about how his daughter was sick, how time had gotten away from him. Kate hit the delete key.

"There was no, 'Sorry I let you down' or 'Nice to hear from you again' or 'Didn't we have a nice time?' These guys simply do not change. It's reminiscent of the first time you got stood up, or the first time a guy left you and didn't have the guts to tell you why or even that he was leaving."

"The only difference is that it was nice to know I've finally reached the stage where it wasn't as demoralizing as it was when I was 16 or 26 or even 36. It had lost its sad lustre. It was like *C'est la vie, c'est la guerre*. It just didn't matter."

Even Belinda was perplexed at the number of men who pursued, then vanished. "There seems to be a strange phenomenon with this Internet thing ... these men

contact you, thus making the first move. They've seen your picture and are clearly interested. Then, when you respond with a wonderfully witty e-mail, they disappear. I guess it's the "e" equivalent of having a guy ask for your phone number in a bar and then never call you. But, why ask?"

Kate heard from 10 men in the end, among them a "really funny" 46-year-old "lantern-jawed Tony Robbins look-alike" who thankfully did not mention his star sign. The fact that a younger man had taken an interest in her was a shot in the arm.

So, despite the disappearing acts, Kate warmed to Internet dating. She enjoyed existing in someone else's head again. One of the best things about going back and forth with The Musician, she says, was coming home and finding an e-mail from him.

He'd have sent a message that said "Where are you? I wanted to tell you this right now and you're not there!" Just knowing that somebody was thinking about her was a forgotten pleasure.

The upshot of dabbling with online dating is that Kate's intrigued. Now she's ready to cruise the sites, post her profile and throw the dice. This time, she'll say she lives in Toronto. Sometimes she wonders whether she should be jumping into this, but if she does go on a date, she figures she'll tell her neighbour or her therapist — in case things get weird. Mostly, though, she's up for an adventure. She says she has standards but she doesn't have any agenda, which is probably not a bad way to embark on such an absurd enterprise. Stay tuned.

■ The next instalment of this series will appear on March 27.

Saturday Post



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