

## MATCHBOX

By Pamela Gwyn Kripke

Sometimes, I wonder what would happen if Brad's wife died. Early, I mean, not when she became old. It is a terrible thought, I know, but the idea enters my head anyway. It's not that I wish for this to happen, for her to engage a parasite on an overseas trip or suffer a stroke or careen down a mountain on a scooter, because who would wish that for another person, particularly someone loved by the person you loved. Or love. Who knows which. Brad told me in a phone call during my divorce that had he not been married, we'd be a pair, within seconds. Nanoseconds. So I think about his being married and what an annoyance that is.

Other times, I think that I will just wait until his wife does die. At the natural time. The older time. This is the more respectable way to think, and I feel like a better person thinking about it like this, though it does present an enormous swath of time in which to twiddle one's thumbs. Brad and I will be 90, maybe. She is of good stock. Hearty. An athletic upper body, I can tell from the holiday cards. At 90, we will combine households, share toasting ovens and fingertip towels. We will set up framed photos of our children on bookshelves and mantels. We will walk to town, wearing hats. We will be old but will not think that we are.

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Meantime, my friend Sally wants me to go out with a man she knows. She says that he is the kind of man whom I would like: honest, brainy and handsome. Who wouldn't like a man like that. I know, though, that even honest, brainy and handsome men have needs and wishes that require attention from a woman, should that woman decide to have more to do with him than have a Cobb salad in a restaurant. I am too busy waiting for Brad to deal with all of that, a meal, a second date, an intermingling of any kind, and I think that even talking with this man would simply be unprincipled. Sally says that I should go and just have the salad.

"This is not a moral decision," she tells me.

Sally works with men and farms them out to her friends who actually want to meet them. Plenty of women want to do this. After the fourth time that she mentions it, I agree to go out with the man, Alan. My daughters also urge me to go out with Alan. I'm thinking that they, as teenagers, think that it will be amusing for them if I go through with it, though they insist that the date will be good for me, whatever that means. Good. Insane term.

"And wear a dress," Sally says.

"A what?"

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The man has a stunning and tiny car, I see through the window, not that I care about cars or know about them. But this one is like a baby toy. I don't know how I will fit, and I am quite small.

I open the front door.

"Hello," I say, noting the tan dress pants. Man pants, at a moment squealing for khakis.

"Gwen?" he asks.

No, Susanna. Wrong house.

I can't figure out how to get into the tiny car. It feels as if I should go head first, like a dive from the side of a pool. I am an incompetent swimmer, and I dive only from the side of a pool, never off the board where the earth sags. I put my left foot on the floor but think it an unwise stretch for my right anterior cruciate ligament and draw it back onto the curb. Alan waits, holding open the door. I smell gardenias, or jasmine, coming from his torso, and a heavy dose at that. One summer, I had a job selling men's accessories in a department store and had whiffed many a sample vial of cologne while no one bought accessories. Alan's scent may have been a hybrid.

"One sec," I say, switching my bag to my other hand and shifting my weight.

"Sit first," he says.

Oh, assistance.

"Then swing your legs in."

I am tempted to end the date there, bent in half, my rear end searching for the seat. I hold onto the roof and the armrest and feel the surface underneath me, finally, grabbing with my third hand onto my head for cover. Fortunately, I don't take Sally's sartorial suggestion and instead, wear jeans. Alan shuts the door and walks around to the driver's side. Positioned so close to the pavement, I can see his calves through the window. In one choreographed and well-honed movement, he curls and swivels his tall body into the seat, contracting involuntarily like a jellyfish or a Martha Graham dancer. To look at him, and his ample midsection, you wouldn't think he'd be able to fold himself and enter his own tiny car so effectively. He must have inhaled to reduce his girth, taken a huge breath on the street before crumpling up. He grabs the wheel, flashing a weighty gold watch and teeth to match his snowy locks. He does have pretty teeth, I must say.

"You all set?" he asks.

I balance my purse on my knees and do not answer his question. My nails are painted the same pink as Brad's wife's nails are, in the New Year's card. I determine the aroma to be the gardenia, after all, the flower of the Mafia. The engine revs up and instantly, the microscopic car zips out into the street. The world seems cockeyed from the passenger seat. My neighbor's house looks purple and misshapen, a home for faeries. The oak canopies now make faces and reach at me. This will be my one and only date with Alan, the Alan who is not Brad, I decide by the end of the block. Not even the end of the block.