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WHAT I LEARNT FROM MY QUEST FOR THE PERFECT 'MEET CUTE'

The 'meet cute' conceit is the ideal story of a couple's romcom-style first encounter. But does it equate to movie-standard enduring love? Brenda Janowitz reflects on whether she has the ultimate first-date story to tell her children



My grandfather asked my grandmother out on a date and she told him she couldn't go because she had just washed her hair.

I was obsessed with that part. "You turned him down because you'd just washed your hair?"

And my grandmother would explain, as if she hadn't done so countless times before, that back then they didn't have hairdryers and a woman simply didn't go out of the house with wet hair.

She would continue: "So, he said, 'Put a scarf on it. We'll sit in the back of the movie theatre where no one can see you.'"

"What did you do?" I would ask, breathless.

"I put a scarf on it."

They were married for 56 years.

It was the perfect "how we met" story. I was completely besotted. And I desperately wanted one of my own. I had a hypothesis: if you had a good "how we met" story, you would have a happy relationship.

My cousin Jeff was living in Manhattan when he met Robin. Whenever Robin mentioned going to Philadelphia, Jeff would say: "Bring me back a cheesesteak!" This banter continued for a while, until Robin decided that she wanted a date. She had a plan: she would bring him a cheesesteak. Only, steak and cheese don't travel well, so she settled on a turkey hoagie. She got a "pity date" for her trouble (a turkey sandwich is no

cheesesteak), and no return phone call. But weeks later, when they saw each other again, Jeff asked her out on a real date. They went out, and then again the night after that. And then the night after that.

Their 25th anniversary was last June.

My childhood friend Kim hated set-ups. So did my friend Kerri's brother. But Kerri and I had a sneaking suspicion that they should be together, so we invited them to my Halloween party and then casually introduced them.

They've been married for 16½ years.

My theory was correct: good "how we met" story, good relationship. It was all I could think about, how one seemingly innocuous event could change your life. Wet hair in curlers. A Philly cheesesteak. A Halloween party.

So where was mine?

I put my theory into practice. I'd put on make-up for trips to the dry cleaner's: maybe my shirts would get tangled with

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his suits? While my friends rolled out of bed for casual Sunday brunches, I'd carefully curate my outfit — you never knew who might be at the diner. I'd even blow-dry my hair for casual nights at friends' apartments. One minute you're walking through your friend's lobby, and the next you're pressing the button for the 11th floor at the same time as your future husband. This could be it, I'd think, as I stepped out of my front door. This could be my moment, my own story.

My mother had other ideas. She didn't care how I met my future husband, only that I get married already. She advocated online dating. Where was the magic in that?

Then I met someone. He was a lawyer at my firm, who told me about our romantic "how we met" story — one that began more than six years previously. He said he knew me from college, but I didn't remember him. He explained: he saw me from afar, one night at his fraternity. "You were dressed as a baby."

"That wasn't me." I dressed in leather for a "pimps and prostitutes" party. I dressed in pinstripes for a cross-dressing social, and I even dressed in a sheet for a toga soiree. But a baby? Unless it was a "sexy baby" party, there was no way the Greek system would allow it. Then it hit me: instead of repurposing our hooker outfits, my friend and I dressed up for a "lingerie" party in flannel pyjamas and

pigtails, carrying baby bottles filled with white zinfandel. It was the “how we met” story I’d always wanted: your grandfather saw me from afar one night in college and only years later did we finally meet!

Yet it didn’t last. It was a relationship that burnt hot and fizzled out just as quickly. He broke my heart after people at our law firm found out we were secretly dating. He broke my heart after he met my parents. He broke my heart so badly, I didn’t think it would ever be fixed.

I dated in Manhattan for nine years and more evidence piled up. There was the childhood friend who I’d always had a crush on; the man I met when we both opened cab doors on opposite sides, at the same time; the friend who brought me to my ex-boyfriend’s wedding. All delicious “how we met” stories. All unsuccessful relationships. Nine years of dating in Manhattan taught me something about how couples meet: it doesn’t mean a thing. I got myself onto three different dating websites.

Then I met Doug.

The story of how we met is simple: we were fixed up. But this wasn’t just any old blind date. Remember my childhood friend Kim? Her mother gave Doug’s mother my phone number. (I suppose she owed me one from the Halloween party setup.) Doug grew up in the same town I did, five blocks away from my house, but we never met. We attended



the same elementary school, junior high and high school, and never once spoke. The boy next door, 20 years later.

It was the “meet cute” I’d always wanted, only I didn’t want it any more. These stories didn’t mean anything. They didn’t matter. I acted accordingly. Doug was just like any other guy I had met before. None of them worked out. Why should this one be any different?

I almost stopped seeing Doug on our third date, when he confessed he didn’t eat condiments. No ketchup on his hamburgers, no mustard on his hot dogs and certainly no syrup on his pancakes. There was, strangely, an allowance for barbecue sauce. I found it so odd, this limited ban on condiments, and I told him so. He then confessed that he also

didn’t eat vegetables: a paediatric cardiologist who didn’t eat vegetables.

“Does he make you laugh?” my mother asked.

“Yes.”

“Is he nice?”

I told my mother that, yes, he was nice. But nine years of living and dating in Manhattan had proved that just because a guy seems nice doesn’t mean that he really is. If it looks like a duck and acts like a duck, it may actually be a lion, ready to tear your heart out and rip it into a million pieces.

On my fourth date with Doug, I was churlish and rude. I rolled my eyes when he told the waiter he’d forgo the condiments. I made a point of ordering extra vegetables. After dinner I decided that I wouldn’t see him again. Our cute story was only that: a cute



story. A relationship couldn't be made out of one.

The following day, I went to a baby naming. It was a room filled with happy couples, many of whom had babies of their own. There were women who had met their spouses online. There were women who had met their spouses at work. There were women who had met their spouses through crazy, fun "how we met" stories and there were women who had not. The only thing these happy couples had in common was that they had given each other a chance. They didn't care about how they had met, they cared about whether or not they had found a good person, someone who wanted a relationship. They took a chance and they were happy.

I couldn't stop thinking about Doug. He was a good person. He wanted a relationship. He was smart and he was cute and he made me laugh. A lot. Why wouldn't I take a chance on him? Just because we had a cute "how we met" story didn't mean that the relationship wouldn't work out, any more than it meant that it would. Dating is a giant coin toss. You can't control the way you meet someone. You can't control what another person is really like, if they are who they appear to be. But you can control yourself — you can worry less about whether or not you've met that mythical one and concentrate more on having a fun date. Getting to know another person whose

company you really enjoy.

I went home, called Doug, and apologised for the way I had acted. As I was about to ask him if he would give me another chance, he asked me out again.

Three months after first dating, he proposed. Now, 12 years after that fix-up, I have a husband, two children and the thing that always eluded me: a happy relationship. I still like hearing about how couples met, but I no longer think that a "meet cute" portends a happy relationship. But in my case, it certainly hasn't hurt.

[@BrendaJanowitz](#)

The Grace Kelly Dress by Brenda Janowitz is out now (Graydon House)

TRUE STORY

Five Sunday Times writers share their own tales of chance encounters and real love

JONATHAN DEAN, SENIOR WRITER, CULTURE

I met my wife at the Cannes Film Festival, at a champagne party on a roof overlooking the sea. We really liked each other, but the problem was we were both seeing other people. So nearly two years, some tears and bad relationships, a strange walk on Hampstead Heath and God knows how much texting later, we finally got together. Has it been as

glamorous as that rooftop since? No — we have two kids. But what a relief I went to that bash, rather than the other thing in my diary that night: an arduous Serbian drama about farming.

LORRAINE CANDY, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, STYLE

My husband and I met at an Oktoberfest beer festival in the East End of London after being set up on a blind date by a newspaper colleague. Neither of us drink beer or have Germanic roots. It was a fluke of timing and location. We've been together for 26 years and married for 20 this year. We have nothing, absolutely nothing, in common.

ROSIE KINCHEN, ASSOCIATE EDITOR, NEWS REVIEW

I met my partner thanks to Style — sort of. I'd written a column about my house rabbit, which my landlord read and promptly gave me an ultimatum: the rabbit or the flat. I chose the rabbit and started to pack up. That night I went to the pub to drown my sorrows with a girlfriend. My partner, a friend of hers, joined us later and tried to keep a straight face as I told him that I had been evicted over a small, grumpy pet. The rabbit still lives with us by the way — as well as two children.

HANNAH SWERLING, ACTING DEPUTY EDITOR, STYLE

I met him during the first week of university and we quickly

