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The Merry Widower

When the author's mother dies, his father promptly begins dating again.

BY JAMES PONIEWOZIK

BEING wholly responsible for the life and well-being of another person can be joyous, as when parents bring home a new baby. It can be heartbreaking, as when adult children find themselves caring for an incapacitated elderly parent. Either way, however, responsibility for

ASSISTED LOVING

True Tales of Double Dating With My Dad.
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another person is a burden: terrifying, all-consuming, draining.

Meddling, however — the free advice without the consequences — ah, meddling is a delight! Where responsibility tires, meddling amuses and invigorates. Normally, it is the reward of the aged parents of grown children. But in the breezy, sweet memoir “Assisted Loving: True Tales of Double Dating With My Dad,” Bob Morris, who formerly wrote the Age of Dissonance column for this newspaper’s Sunday Styles section, describes a rare inversion: getting the opportunity to meddle in the love life of his 80-year-old father, Joe, when he begins dating again after the death of Morris’s mother.

To be fair, Morris doesn’t see it as an opportunity when it first presents itself — or, rather, when Joe presents him with the personals section of Jewish Week and asks him to screen some potential dates. “Dad,” he responds, “does it occur to you that these ads are called personals for a reason? This is absolutely none of my business.”

There is the simple creepiness of procuring senior hotties for his snowbird dad less than a year after his mother’s death. There is the reluctance of a middle-aged adult son to become so intimately responsible for his newly single father — who divides his time between Florida and Great Neck, Long Island — while dealing with his own problems as a middle-aged, love-handled single man in the youth-obsessed Manhattan gay dating scene.

But there is also the challenge of Joe Morris himself, whom the author draws in loving but hilariously unsparing strokes. “Who is Joe Morris?” his son asks, and answers: a boisterous, exasperating retired judge with the New York State Department of Motor Vehicles, “fully conversant with the idea of happiness, especially his own.” He pours salad dressing on his lasagna and stores half-eaten tuna sandwiches in his car. He is both rude and charming. He is a writer of song parodies and a lover

of corny jokes. (This trait has rubbed off on his son’s prose, as when he describes his father’s socializing with a group of elderly hip patients — “and I don’t mean *hip* in the downtown sense of the word.” Oy.) Above all, from his 19 bank accounts to his multiple bridge groups to his penchant for mixing prescription medications, he is “a man who would rather complicate than simplify.” He is a delight, and a piece of work.

Now Morris is forced to become reacquainted with his suburban dad as a born-again horndog. And he is not alone. “The Census Bureau estimates that 80 percent of all healthy widowers remarry,” Morris writes, “and many more end up in live-in relationships soon after a wife dies. ... Men like my father have the demographics in their favor. There are three women available for every one of them, a virtual sample sale for those energetic enough to shop; and with longevity what it is today, not to mention pharmaceuticals, many are.” Why the American Heart Association is not aggressively using this carrot to entice men to improve their cardiovascular health boggles the mind.

For his part, Joe jumps into the meat market with discomfiting — to his son — enthusiasm. He plays the field, clashing with some women, clicking with others, keeping his dates lined up “like planes overhead, waiting to land at La Guardia.” Nor is he interested in mere hand-holding. One date ends badly when he tells a woman named Honey that “frankly, I was hoping for something

more physical with you from the start.”

Eventually Morris throws himself into his job, undergoing a process of creeping yentification. He judges his father’s dates harshly. This one is too old; this one is too pushy; many, he decides, are not sufficiently well-off or socially well-positioned enough. Morris — a Sunday Styles columnist who is far more concerned than Joe with fashion, status and Hamptons real estate — finds himself wondering what each woman might bring to the table in terms of vacation homes and social connections. On the one hand, he genuinely wants a woman who is good enough for his father. On the other, he wants a stepmother who is good enough for himself. His matchmaking combines parental protectiveness with a child’s rebellion

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against his father’s taste and lifestyle. As Morris acknowledges, he finds that he is a bit of a snob.

Such self-discoveries and Morris’s own challenges make up a parallel story within the story. He goes long stretches without dates, has trouble with intimacy and wrestles with the feeling that — despite Joe’s constant bragging about His Son the New York Times writer — his career has

never lived up to its potential. (Yet as is so often the case in memoirs like this one, he never shows us the moment — which one imagines must have happened — when he realized: “I am so going to get a book out of this.”)

THE more “Assisted Loving” becomes about Morris’s personal life, the more mundane and less interesting it is. But it is to Morris’s credit, and a sign of his ultimate, exasperated love, that he makes Joe so much more engaging a character than himself. Even as Morris gets his father, and himself, past the hurdles in their dating lives, the real love story here is between father and son, as Morris comes to accept their differences — and to forgive Joe for his inattentiveness and unhelpfulness during his mother’s final illness. Joe is what he is, Morris recognizes; in his mother’s own words, “Life with Joe is irritating, but never dull.”

There are a lot of lessons learned and circles completed and people learning what they realize they knew all along in “Assisted Loving,” and despite Morris’s pre-emptive self-consciousness — “What is this, Dad? Tuesdays with Morris?” he asks at one point — it can be a little pat. But then, part of what this funny, good-hearted story says about romance is that, at any age, it comes in part through the willingness to be unembarrassedly corny. And maybe through some well-meaning meddling. Nothing says love, this book tells us, like a good strong push. □



Bob Morris, second from left, with his brother, Jeff; father, Joe; and nephew, Ian, in 2003.

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