

**Plumage From Pegasus:  
Matchmaker, Matchmaker, Make Me a Text**  
by Paul Di Filippo

“In an attempt to give readers some real-life romance, mass market fiction house Dorchester is partnering with the on-line dating service Cupid.com to co-host ‘speed dating’ events in five cities starting next month. Attendees will get copies of Dorchester books, dating tips from Dorchester authors—and, in an ideal situation, a mate, too.”

—“Readers Find Love,” by Lynn Andriani, *PW Daily*, April 13, 2006.

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It just wasn’t working out between Sheila and me. After three years of marriage punctuated by endlessly recurring arguments, accusations and tearful reconciliations, I was finally ready to call it quits.

Speaking firmly but with no hostility, I brought up the subject of divorce one morning at the breakfast table.

Sheila took it well. After all, this particular outcome to our turbulent relationship could hardly have come as a surprise to her.

Staring soberly at her coffee as she tinkled a spoon around the inside of her cup, Sheila said, “Sure, Stan. We could break up. That would be easy enough. But there’s one last thing we could try—if you’re willing.”

“What’s that?” I said, my curiosity piqued.

Sheila looked up at me with a tentatively hopeful expression. “We could call the publisher.”

“Publisher?”

Sheila grabbed a paperback from an adjacent counter. The butter-stained, crumb-sprinkled cover depicted a man and a woman torridly grappling against a background of medieval warfare between peasants and barbarians. The type on the cover announced *Savage Vandal Kisses*, by Faustina Chambliss.

“Don’t you remember? Dorchester Publishing. They introduced us.”

Memories from four years ago flooded vividly back to me.

Sheila and I had met through an on-line dating service, during a special promotion they had been holding in conjunction with a publisher of romance novels, Dorchester Books.

Sheila was a big fan of that genre, although I had no interest in such sappy stuff. Her affection for such reading material had not waned over the years, and I was by now quite familiar with at least the names of her favorite authors, and a little of what went on between those lurid covers.

Back then, Sheila and I became instantly infatuated with each other during our speed date, and marriage followed shortly thereafter. Perhaps too swiftly, given the revelations of our subsequent incompatibility.

Sheila flipped the paperback open to a house advertisement at the back. "Dorchester has just started a counseling service for all the couples who met through their earlier dating program. Who would be better able to help us? And it's completely free—"

"How does it work? Would we have to go to their headquarters? Where are they anyhow?"

"New York. No, there's no travel necessary. They send a counselor to us...."

"I don't know. It all sounds pretty weird...."

"Stan, please? For me?"

Looking at my wife, with her dewy eyes and trembling chin, I saw again what had first attracted me to her. A small, dim spark began to kindle in my heart. Perhaps there was some way to salvage what we had once enjoyed, and to have some happy future together.

"All right, let's give it a try."

I must say that my lateness for work that morning was a good sign of possible improvements to come.

Just a little over a week later, on a Saturday, the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it!" Sheila called out, dashing through the house. I followed more sedately.

There on the doorstep stood a woman whose face I recognized from numerous appearances in various Dorchester newsletters and website links.

Faustina Chambliss.

Faustina Chambliss was the general shape of a fire hydrant, and not much bigger. Beneath auburn curls, her plump, animated face reminded me of a wheel of strawberry cheesecake. She wore a pants suit whose fabric replicated a Henri Rousseau jungle landscape. She held the strap of a large bag slung over one shoulder. She could have been any age from twenty-seven to sixty-seven.

Beside her rested a steamer trunk three times her size. An airport shuttle van was pulling away down our driveway.

“Hello, lovebirds! All your romantic travails are over! Faustina is here!”

Sheila’s expression matched that of a teenager encountering some adored pop star in the flesh. “Oh, Miss Chambliss, I never thought—It’s so wonderful you could answer our request. Please, come in, come in.”

The woman swept past us, waving a hand studded with chunky rings in my direction. “Get Faustina’s trunk, young man, if you would be so kind.”

I was quietly fuming as I manhandled the big awkward trunk into the front parlor. It was obvious that this clownish woman would side entirely with Sheila, employing the common language they shared to put me down as the only villain in this whole affair.

Faustina Chambliss and Sheila were sitting side by side on the couch when I finished my sweaty task. The author had removed a laptop computer from her satchel. She had set the device up on the low table in front of the couch.

“Marvelous!” Faustina Chambliss exclaimed. “You’ve got a large-screen TV! I had been hoping you would. It will help our therapy immensely. Please—Stan, is it?—could you pop this DVD into your player?”

Muttering, I took the DVD, slotted it into the player, and brought the remote control to Faustina Chambliss. I expected her to start up whatever bit of counseling video she had for us immediately. But to my surprise, she didn’t.

“Please, sit down, Stan. Faustina wants to get to know all about you and Sheila and your recent soul-hardships.”

Reluctantly, self-consciously, slowly, I began talking, describing how our marriage had gone bad. Sheila chimed in at frequent intervals, and our separate monologues actually began to form a dialogue, our first in many months.

“But you never said—”

“How was I supposed to know—”

“That was so foolish—”

“You could have tried harder—”

Throughout our conversation, Faustina Chambliss encouraged us with various positive exhortations. And all the while, her pudgy fingers flew across the keyboard of her laptop.

Finally, as we began to wind down, Faustina Chambliss signaled the next stage of her counseling mission.

“All right, dears, Faustina believes she understands your situation quite well. She now knows just the sequence you need. Please go to the trunk.”

We went to the trunk, and I opened it up.

Inside, on rods, hung dozens of elaborate costumes, more than seemed possible given the space.

Faustina Chambliss directed us with a red-nailed finger. “Men’s outfits on the left, women’s on the right. Find the pirate and heiress costumes. They’ll be on matching hangers.”

Sheila and I took out the designated clothing.

“Now put them on. Oh, don’t be shy! Faustina has seen everything!”

We stripped to our underwear and donned the new outfits.

A DVD menu had appeared on the TV screen, and Faustina

Chambliss was cursoring down it until she hit the line that read *Bride of the Briney Boudoir*.

“Stand facing the screen, please.”

We did so, and Faustina Chambliss tapped PLAY.

The TV came alive with a shipboard scene. The huge plasma screen made me feel as if I were actually there. A pirate captain and an heiress were engaged in a confrontation. Their speech showed up as text, like karaoke.

“Now, play out the scene, please, sweetlings!”

Awkwardly, Sheila and I began mimicking the actors.

“You’re a right hell cat, Lady Fiona! But I’ll shatter your pride—and your maidenhead!—ere we reach Barbados!”

“Nay, Captain Hardmast! For this dirk I clasp ever to my bosom will rob thee of your velvet prize in a gush of blood!”

By the time the scene was over—probably only three or four minutes—I found my heart racing and my breath labored. Sheila and I were locked in an unrequited embrace, faces just inches apart.

Breaking the spell, Faustina Chambliss said, “Well done, children! But no time to indulge yet! Onward! Deep into Faustina’s characters!”

We changed costumes—I was a priest, and Sheila looked like Stevie Nicks—and Faustina Chambliss clicked on *The Witches of West Palm Beach*.

“Why, Father Darling, how could I be a witch? Aren’t I standing ever so close to this big old cross resting on your broad chest?”

“Your kind is cunning. But at the pool I saw the mark of Satan on your—on your shamelessly exposed buttocks!”

“Oh, really? Would you care to confirm that now?”

In short order, we worked our way through *Sagebrush Sorrows*, *Executive Passions*, *Harlot of the Highlands*, *Geishas Never Cry*,

*Minefields of the Heart, Born to Love Rock Stars, Timeslip Temptress, Hollywood Heartaches and Intergalactic Desires.*

All the while, I felt myself growing strangely close to Sheila, as if seeing her in all these permutations had opened up new vistas to our relationship. I knew suddenly that never again would I take her for granted, or be bored with our life together.

For the last-named scenario, I was costumed like a hard-bitten loner of a starship pilot, and Sheila like a privileged princess.

“You nearly got us killed back there!”

“I did not!”

We began throwing wild, ineffectual punches at each other. But the fight soon evolved into a fevered clinch. We fell to the floor, kissing. Shreds of costume flew through the air as I ripped Sheila’s alien bodice open.

During our love-tussle, I vaguely noticed that Faustina Chambliss’s fingers never stopped on the keyboard of her machine, nor did her pleased exclamations.

“Brilliant, Faustina, brilliant! What material! Your next three novels are all right here!”