

## "It Depends"

by  
Catherine Berry Stidsen

*Magica-Date guarantees you at least five names of compatible persons of the opposite sex upon receipt of your completed questionnaire and your cheque for only \$5.00!*

Catherine read the display in the bookstore, reflecting that she hadn't met five compatible men in all her thirty-three years of life. But she took a form back to her desk after lunch, and asked her friend Val what she thought about the possibilities of computerized match-making.

"It probably beats playing with an executive yo-yo," Val tossed off enigmatically.

But then Val was nothing if not enigmatic.

"Look at this lunatic questionnaire," Catherine went on. "Answers are limited to 'For, Against, It Depends'. They want to know how you feel about drinking, sex before marriage, adultery, reading, higher education for women..."

"They mean beyond Grade Eight?" Val wondered.

"The only intelligent thing I can do is circle 'It Depends', in practically every case, because it does." Catherine completed the form and wrote out her cheque.

"It depends," Val reflected.

Six weeks later Val and Catherine arrived at Catherine's apartment after a late movie downtown. Catherine fumbled with the lock to her mailbox.

"Damn that chintzy landlady. This light has been out for three weeks. How the hell does she think I can make it to the third floor?" Catherine whispered.

Through the wall came, "Miss Berry, you're letting the heat escape to the street again."

"Because I can't see if I don't, Mrs. Hagen," Catherine yelled back.

Catherine finally got the box open and there it was. In a plain white envelope with no return address, Magica-Date had come through. By the light of the street lamp Catherine could see that there were ten names on her list.

"Not so special after all, are you, booby?" Val grinned.

"Boy, the last name on this list is a really weird one, Val. It's 'Bent Stidsen'. If that one doesn't call me I'll call him just to see what somebody with a name like that looks like."

Why not read your mail upstairs, Miss Berry?" Mrs. Hagen came through the wall again.

"Because I could die enroute there in the dark at the top of the stairs, Mrs. Hagen," Catherine countered.

Val and Catherine made it to the apartment door. Catherine searched for the lock in the dark and the phone in the kitchen began to ring, eight, nine, ten times. She finally found the lock and dropped everything except the Magica-Date list while picking up the phone.

"Hello."

"Hello – is this heah Cathrin Berry?" drawled the Southern male voice. "Ahm Harv Willan, from Floridah? You know? Ahm on your Magica-Date list of eligibles, hah, hah, hah. And Ah'll just bet you all've got a lot on your list, haven't you, honey?"

"Uh, hello Harvey. It is Harvey, isn't it? I mean, I'm not big on nicknames, Harvey." I sound daft. I am daft. There was a pause at the other end.

"Wall, mah frens do lahk to call me Harv but Ah'll make the exception if you all would like. Lissen, Cathrin, honey, Ah've got to talk fast because Ah've got to get things goin' for this heah weekend. You see, Ah'm flyin' to mah folkses place in Florida and Ah thought you might lahk to come along."

"Harvey," Catherine said, "the folder from Magica-Date suggests, Quote.

For the first meeting one might have coffee or cocktails. If that portion of the meeting is pleasant, one or the other might suggest dinner then or later, and if it isn't suitable, you don't have to make any excuses. Unquote. They don't suggest a weekend in Florida to get things off the ground, Harvey, if you know what I mean?"

Val was in the kitchen now, lighting up a Virginia Slim looking like nobody had come a long way in this particular game.

"But, honey, Cathrin, pet, that's not for swingahs like you and me. Ah've got mah own little pipah cub and – honey, you must be a swingah. Ah mean Ah put down swingin' answers to all that stuff on that form."

"Harvey, it depends. You see, I've got a tennis lesson this weekend I just don't want to miss, Harvey. Call me when you get back." "Gee, honey, you don't sound like mah type at all. And you all are the fourth one on mah list Ah called just tonight Ah think this Magica-Date just maht be disreputable after all."

"Don't despair, Harvey. It depends. "

"And then there were nine," said Val, extricating the gallon of hearty burgundy wine from the refrigerator.

"How about drinks at about 5:30 at the San Martino?" The liquidy voice was oozing into the wires.

"Sounds fine," Catherine agreed. At least this one had read the folder.

The next evening she made her way to the lounge and a rather hairless, but elegantly groomed Alan introduced himself.

"I like the red, white and blue coat," he began. "It really made identifying you easy. Here I'll help you slip it off." He deftly got his hand under her right breast as he did so. "Nice?"

"Just scotch and water for me, please, Alan."

His hand made it up and down the inside of her right thigh twice while the drinks were coming. She crossed her legs in the other direction, and the outside of her left thigh got it "nicely".

"You're really good at this, I can tell," he smiled. "Say, what do you do for a living anyway, Catherine?" Alan managed to give her left breast a tingle via his right elbow.

"I'm an editorial assistant, Alan," Catherine answered. "And you?"

"I'm a lawyer. Have two darling kids. After we had them, I divorced my wife. But I got custody of the kids. Had enough of that marriage thing. Mind you, a guy can't live without kids. Got to have somebody to leave things to. Lots of women around, though. I've a great housekeeper, middle-aged, stays in over weekends for me, if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean, Alan."

"Hey, Catherine, let's dance."

There was a small combo working hard to drown out the minimal attempts at conversation going on in the lounge. They went to the floor and Catherine began contemplating how long it would be before they were both hauled in for public indecency. His hands, his knees, his elbows were everywhere. She couldn't quite figure out what part of his anatomy had made it to her crotch but something had. She was looking over his shoulder as she danced, holding at least one of his hands, most of the time; she was intrigued, wondering what he had used. They went back to the bar at the end of the dance.

"I had an idea you were still some kind of student, Catherine. Are you?"

Alan got her left calf this time.

"Yes, Alan. I'm a graduate student, history and philosophy of religion. "

"A what? Jesus, Catherine, are you some kind of nun or something, one of 'those modern ones?'"

Catherine looked sad. "I'm sorry you caught on so soon, Alan. I am a none (she spelled it this way in her mind) and collecting data for my master's thesis. So you see, we could never go all the way, Alan. I'm really only using you."

Val wanted to know the next morning how the date had gone. "It was handy, Val, really handy Catherine told her.

Saturday night came and there was a small dinner party to which Catherine had been committed for some time. An old boyfriend of her's was going to be there and the hostess thought things might possibly get revived for both of the dear things who deserved each other. Catherine had agreed to go primarily because the hostess was a great cook and served scotch in those glasses that were cocktail-shaker size. She was

leaving in a half hour. The phone rang.

"Hello "

"Hello. Is this Catherine Berry?"

"Yes. Who's this?"

"It's Bent Stidsen. The name is probably familiar to you from your Magica-Date list. I've tried to call you earlier but I got either no answer or busy signal. I gather you're a pretty busy woman."

"It depends." Catherine said.

"You were the fifth name on my Magica-Date list so I tried calling you first but haven't been able to reach you. I know it's late to be asking you but I wondered if we might have drinks and dinner together tomorrow evening." The voice was kind, affirmative, interesting, downright sexy to boot.

"Are you British, Bent? You have an accent but I can't trace it. You sound like you might be from London."

"You've just paid me one of the major compliments of my life. I'm Danish and promised myself at one point that someday I'd speak English so that no one knew I was from anywhere but North America. Thanks. London's close enough. In fact, I studied in London, Ontario."

"Were there only five names on your list?"

"Yes, and frankly I was surprised that there were that many, amazed might be more like it. Or maybe even grateful."

"But if I were the fifth, why would you have called me first?"

"I like doing things that way. It's a kind of twist on what life offers. Is there a chance that tomorrow is a possibility? I'd really like that."

"Well, Bent, I'm going to practice my tennis game tomorrow afternoon and I do have to be at work by 9:00 a.m. on Monday, so it couldn't be too late an evening, but..."

"I promise that it won't be – unless you want it to be. By the way, what do you do, Catherine? Where do you work?"

This'll get him. "I'm a graduate student in religious studies. I'm an editorial assistant now. Next year I'll be teaching religion."

"How unusual! I think of myself as a philosopher of sorts. I teach marketing theory at the University of Pennsylvania. What brought you to the study of religion?"

She began to tell him, easily, smoothly, as though she had been talking to him like this all her life. He told her about himself, his work as a university lecturer, the management consulting he-also did. Forty-five minutes flew by.

Catherine regretted the need to hang up. They decided he would come by for a drink the next evening and then they'd go on to dinner.

On the way to her friend's home she pondered that she and a man studying and teaching business couldn't possibly have anything in common. People in business were all crass and greedy and anything but the white knight kind of type she was after. Still....

When the radio eased her into the day on Sunday she remembered the scotch and good steaks and broiled grapefruit dessert and not much else of the previous evening, but every word of Bent's call. It was too good to be true. There had to be a catch.

Val arrived at one for the tennis practice. "How was last night?" she queried.

"It depends on which part. The food was great but you know who was as emotionally bereft as usual. But before dinner I had a phone call that was too good to be true. Remember the guy with the weird name? Well, he called and I made a date for dinner with him tonight, but I'm going to quit while I'm ahead. He left me his phone number and I'm going to call it off later. "

"Alan really got to you, didn't he?" Val grinned. "Shut up, Val. Let's go."

Val and Catherine batted the ball around for most of the afternoon practicing what they had both learned earlier in the week. During breaks, Catherine worked out again and again why she was canceling the dinner that evening. Val smiled a lot. Val's sister picked her up at the court and Catherine went home alone. She waited until it was within a half hour of the assigned dinner time and called Bent, pleading fatigue.

"The time just got away from me," she lied. "I didn't have my watch on at the court and it's much later than I expected."

"No problem, Catherine," Bent's mellifluous voice reassured her. "I'll just call the Downingtown Inn and cancel there and make a reservation closer to home. That way you won't be pushed."

Bent had just named one of the most elegant dining rooms in the area. She was a clod.

"Give me an hour from now, Bent. I'm on the third floor."

When the bell rang, she remembered the hall light that was still out and shouted encouragingly down the three flights of stairs. "You can make it, Bent. The street lamp helps with the first flight. Memorize it, and then close the door. I'll leave my door open here so you can see most of the third. You'll only have to run blind on the second."

"You're heating the sidewalk again, Miss Berry," came through the wall. "Rather than mangle my date, Mrs. Hagen," Catherine shouted from the top.

A head of blond hair emerged first, then all of Bent Stidsen, perfectly turned out in gray suit and vest and blue and red University of Pennsylvania tie. She estimated at a glance, he was about six feet, 200 pounds and it was all gorgeous.

"Come in, Bent. We'll assassinate my landlady as we leave."

"How about another option? If you get a light bulb, I'll use one of your kitchen chairs for a ladder, and replace the one that's out. I'm gentle of heart." He did, and he was.

They had sherry together and she felt as though he had always been there; there was no game-playing. There was calm, serenity, good humour. No bells were ringing but at her age, maybe that wasn't so bad anyway.

They dined nearby, elegantly. At her suggestion they continued talking, walking along the nearby river until 3:00 a.m. The door to the street was open when they got back to her apartment she was glad she hadn't been locked out. She wanted to say it had been the most beautiful first date of her life. She wanted to tell him he really was everything she had ever dreamed about and hoped for and that she knew this deep down in the core of her very being. She loved him already.

"The door's open again, Miss Berry."

"Not for long, Mrs. Hagen." Did that woman never sleep? She put out her hand and said "Good night, Bent. Thanks a lot." She ran up the stairs like an early adolescent.

On Monday, Val said, "And last night's golden boy?"

"That's just what he was, Val," Catherine admitted. "That's just what he was."

By Monday evening Catherine was sick of herself. She went over the dinner conversation, and the walk along the river, and remembered every word of it. Bent admired her for wanting a career of her own and not wanting to live vicariously through a husband. He was glad she was opinionated and could be dominant and aggressive when she needed to be. She could feel his approval and delight in her. It was much more than his words. Why the hell had she thrown that ice water via the handshake? Why had she played games? She prided herself on being open and honest.

She went through her mail and noticed the announcement of a lecture she was interested in the following week. She moved to her desk. "Dear Bent, as one interested educator to another..."

The week was busy as usual but there was an emptiness. On Thursday evening she felt reasonably sure he'd have had her letter, but there was no call. On Friday, when she got home, there was a thank-you from him! He said all the kinds of things in it a woman wants to hear about herself from a man she loves but thinks she never will hear. He ended by saying he hoped she wouldn't stand on those girl-never-calls-boy-stuff formalities. He really wanted to know her and felt she had a capacity for knowing him. She went to the phone. Just then it rang.

"Hello."

"Hello, Interested Educator. I just got back from three days away and found your letter. Why wait until next week? Are you doing anything tonight?"

"It de No, Bent. I'm not doing anything but waiting to enjoy the evening with you. Come as soon as you can. And give Mrs. Hagen my love on your way upstairs."