

“My Date with Neanderthal Woman” by David Galef

I didn't know whether to bring flowers, which don't say much to someone from a basic subsistence culture. But a raw beefsteak might come across as too suggestive and anyway, I'd read somewhere that Neanderthals were supposed to be vegetarians. So I opted for the middle road, a box of chocolates.

I arrived just as the sun was sinking below the tree line. Glena lived in a cave by the edge of the forest and had, I'd heard, a more natural sense of time than those of us dominated by Rolexes and cell phones. Still, she wasn't there when I hurt my hand knocking on the cave entrance.

I tried twice, the second time with my foot. Then, I called out, emphasizing the glottal g I'd heard when her name was pronounced by the TransWorld Dating Agency. She appeared as if suddenly planted in front of me. There she stood, barrel-chested and bandy-legged, not much taller than a stack of tree stumps. Her furry, brown hair was matted with sweat, but she smiled at me in a flat-faced way as I held out the chocolate.

Grabbing the box from my hands, she ripped it open and crowed in delight. She stuffed several candies with their wrappers in her mouth and chewed vigorously. The agency had told me not to waste time with complicated verbal behavior, so I just pointed at her and myself and said, “Glenn, Robert.”

She nodded, then pointed to the chocolate and rubbed her belly. Such a primal response! Frankly, I'd grown tired of modern women and their endless language games. She offered me one of the remaining chocolates from the box and I was touched: pure reciprocity, though she looked disappointed that I didn't eat the wrappers, as well. When she began to polish off the box itself, I shook my head, smiling. I mimed eating and pointed away from the forest. I would take her out to dinner. Neanderthals, I recalled, were often on the cusp of starvation. At any rate, she seemed to understand and followed me obediently as I led her to Chez Asperge, a small, French-fusion-vegan restaurant not too far from the woods.

I didn't know that the place had a dress code. In fact, the little loincloth Glenn wore made me feel overdressed. Anyway, the situation was fixed with a borrowed jacket, which Glenn chose to wear in a charmingly asymmetric fashion.

God, I hate all the introductory explanations of a first date, which is why I was so happy none of that mattered to Glenn. With an easy familiarity, as if she'd known me for years, she spread her arms on the table and scooped up half the mashed lentil dip. It's true: a woman who enjoys her food is sexy. Of course, she offered me some and I showed her how to spread it on pita. But knives seemed to frighten her, and I'm sorry about that scar on the table. Still, we had a lovely meal. She particularly enjoyed the raw vegetable plate.

After dinner, I walked her home along the forest path. Movies and clubs would come later, if at all. I didn't want to overstimulate her. Even electric lights made her twitch a bit. But along the path the moon was out, illuminating Glenna's short but powerful body in a way that was weirdly beautiful. When I reached for her hand, at first she jerked back—different cultures have different rites, the agency guy said—so I took pains to explain that my intentions were honorable. Maybe she couldn't understand the words, yet I think she got the gist. Any anyway, there's a limit to what I can achieve by gestures.

We paused at the entrance to her cave. She smiled, the gaps in her teeth drawing me in. Her earthy aroma was vaguely aphrodisiacal. What came next was sort of a kiss, followed by a rib-cracking embrace that the osteopath says is healing nicely. Soon after, she retreated to her cave. Still, whenever I think about it, I feel twinges. What a woman! I'd like to invite her out this weekend, but I can't e-mail her. Maybe I'll just drop by her cave accidentally on purpose with a bouquet of broccoli.

Yes, yes, I know all the objections. Some couples are separated by decades, but we're separated by millennia. I like rock music and she likes the music of rocks. I'm the modern type and she's Neanderthal, but I think we can work out our differences if we try.