

DAVID SHESKIN

THE PLUMP BOAR

AT THE AGE OF 44, Barton Martin, Professor of Mathematics at Princeton University, begins in earnest to search for a wife. In order to ensure the success of his mission, yet at the same time keep it strictly confidential, the professor is told by his psychiatrist to contact a marriage broker in Romania by the name of Hulda Grest, who twenty years ago found him his beloved Nadia. Mrs. Grest is a big-boned, heavyset woman who speaks five languages. Although single at present, she had five husbands who all died of natural causes within eight months of taking their vows. Most of the men she deals with in her role as a matchmaker tell her they are looking for a young, attractive woman. These men, however, are middle-aged or older and more often than not are lacking in both manners and hygiene. Although she often takes it upon herself to instruct such men on how they can make themselves more appealing to women, few have heeded her advice. Yet in spite of this, she can inevitably find most any man a suitable mate.

In their initial correspondence, Mrs. Grest instructs Professor Martin to submit an ad that she will post in a newspaper purchased by women who are searching for a husband. The professor submits the following advertisement:

Attractive and accomplished professional man looking for a woman with whom to share his life. Desired age between 25 and 35. Must be attractive, intelligent, have scrupulous hygiene, and not be burdened by overwhelming emotional problems. All candidates should be able and willing to bear children. I will be in Bucharest during the last two weeks of August and will expect a woman who is agreeable to marriage to return with me to live in the United States.

Upon his arrival in Bucharest, the professor takes a taxi to the Hotel Luna, which was recommended to him by a colleague who attended a con-

ference for mathematicians in Prague years before. His colleague, who was single at the time, commented on how many attractive women there were in Eastern Europe looking for husbands. A year later, he married a lady he had met in Prague. Shortly after his colleague's marriage, Professor Martin ran into the man and his wife, who was nothing short of gorgeous, at a restaurant. Three days later, the professor broached the idea of looking for a wife with his psychiatrist.

When Professor Martin arrives at the hotel, it is not at all what he expects. It is old and run down, and it appears to be the sort of place where, among other things, prostitutes ply their trade. In spite of this, Professor Martin tells the old man at the front desk that he wants a room on the top floor that does not face the street. Upon entering his room, the professor notices that it has a peculiar yet not entirely offensive odour. Although the purpose of the professor's trip is to find a wife, he also has a paper to prepare for a conference in Brussels that he will be attending in December. Because of this he spends his first few hours reclining on the small bed in the corner of his room, trying to sort out the ideas his paper will address. Afterwards he records some of his thoughts in a notebook he always keeps in the inside pocket of his jacket. When it becomes dark outside, he calls Mrs. Grest, who tells him that he should come to her apartment at noon the following day.

When he exits the elevator to go out to find a place to have dinner, the old man at the front desk asks the professor if he likes his room.

"It seems to have a peculiar odour. Not unpleasant, yet unfamiliar and strange."

The old man smiles. "There are many strange odours in Bucharest. I give you something with which to freshen the air. Lay it on the dresser, and the molecules will be redistributed such that they have an air of familiarity."

"That is an unusual way of putting things. I take it you have a background in the sciences?"

"Are you a scientist?"

"A mathematician."

"I'm afraid I'm not very familiar with mathematics. Although I read many books, I really know very little about scientific matters."

"Perhaps you could tell me a good place to get dinner?"

"Two blocks down on the right there is a small restaurant that serves tasty, nutritious food. It is called The Plump Boar."

As he enters The Plump Boar, the hostess greets him with a business-like nod and seats him at a table for two in the middle of the dining room. A minute later she escorts another man to the adjacent seat, who introduces himself as Martin Barton, Professor of Mathematics at the University of Melbourne. This other man also made the long journey to Bucharest from a faraway city and coincidentally, or perhaps not, also submitted the identical ad in search of a wife to Mrs. Grest, with whom he too has an appointment at noon the following day. For a moment the two men are frozen in their seats, staring at one another with the realization that they are looking at their mirror images.

The hostess hands each man a menu and says, "It is called the *EPR paradox*, and it confounded Albert Einstein, among others. Being that both of you are men of science, perhaps you know that it involves a mysterious relationship between two particles that is maintained no matter how distant they are from one another. The *EPR paradox* is so named because of Einstein and two young colleagues of his, Boris Podolsky and Nathan Rosen, who in 1935 published a paper in which they argued that quantum mechanics was incomplete, since it was incapable of explaining how the behaviour of two particles can be related to one another over vast distances. The paradox is perhaps best understood if one envisions two apparently independent particles that drift into space spinning in orbit. At some point we measure the direction of the spin of Particle A and observe that it is spinning clockwise. We next determine that Particle B is spinning counterclockwise. As the particles drift further apart, we measure them again. At this point in time Particle A is spinning counterclockwise and Particle B is spinning clockwise. We continue to periodically measure the spin of the two particles as the distance between them increases. The direction of spin for Particle A varies randomly each time we measure it, but each time we measure the direction of spin of Particle A the direction of spin for Particle B is the opposite. Within the field of quantum mechanics there is no known energy or force field that can account for the relationship between the spin of the two particles."

In this instance, the two particles are Professor Barton Martin and Professor Martin Barton. Although the two men are not related to one another, from the moment they were conceived their lives have been inextricably linked. If one were to possess extraordinary visual acuity, one might detect the slenderest of silver threads connecting them at their navels, yet until today this all but invisible connection has not altered the progression of their

lives. That is about to change. For you see, after the two men share a meal of *ciorbă de burtă* (beef tripe soup), *sarmale* (cabbage rolls), and *cozonac* (sweet bread), the hostess will present each man with a fortune cookie. When the men crack open their cookies, they will find a small strip of papyrus upon which is engraved a cryptic message that only those well versed in mathematics will be able to decipher. Having decoded their messages, only one of the men will keep his appointment with Mrs. Grest the next day. A week later he will depart Bucharest with a new wife, and within the next sixteen months he will have a son, who three decades later will commit a heinous act that will forever change the course of human history. As for the other Professor of Mathematics, he will make his way to the rear of the restaurant where he will discover a door that will open onto a staircase that will convey him into some obscure corner of the universe where an infinity of mirror images rotate in opposite directions until eternity.

Once the two men exit the premises, the hostess says to no one in particular, "It is only at The Plump Boar that the paradoxical laws of physics are reconciled in such a way that some sort of equilibrium is restored, which allows natural events to progress in the manner that is consistent with the intent of the Creator."