

David Kirby

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*Ode to the Personals*

*Reading the English-language classifieds, Florence, Fall 2004*

She says she is 170 centimeters, which sounds like  
a lot of centimeters, though it probably isn't.

But what's the meaning of "with just 33 years already  
for several years executing and influencing worldwide  
very important missions"? If she's saying she's 33, okay,  
but if she's been traveling the world for 33 years,  
unless she started when she was a toddler,

she must have a lot of centimeters on her odometer, so to speak.  
And her "missions" involve "executing," which,  
you'll agree, is a hell of a way of "influencing" somebody.

One ad down, a competitor describes herself simply  
as "Lone lady, 53." Yeah, like "lone wolf."

Scientists say all women lie about age and weight,  
all men about height and marital status.

One romantic seeks someone who "possesses integrity,  
is affluent, well-educated, and marriage-minded,"  
though if they're really affluent, I wouldn't count on them  
being overendowed in the integrity department.  
And most want to "share their life and start a family," which to me  
means all these cousins showing up later,  
ignorant, impecunious narcissists whose sole subject

of conversation is themselves. One woman wants  
a "Caucasian, athletic man of depth, humor and intellect  
between the ages of 43 and 50, who is open to new ideas  
and adventures and available for travel to the U.S.,"  
though it sounds as though his first stop will be the ATM:  
Okay, Whitey, empty that account, because Emma Lazarus  
is waiting for us, knife in one hand,

gun in the other. If you can't tell how tall a woman is,  
 how can you know the contents of her heart? A woman  
 might vow one thing to you and mean  
     quite another, might promise total sexual fidelity  
 and then reveal that she meant she'd only be faithful to you on the feasts  
     of San Valentino and the nativity of the Madonna  
     as well as alternate weekends, for love

is a hotchpotch, as screwy a deal as Guglielmo  
 Marconi's original telephone, on display at the Palazzo Strozzi  
     in this very city even as I write this poem  
     and no beautiful Bakelite affair with gold-trimmed dial  
 and handset, either, but a decidedly after-market cigar box  
     bristling with wires and knobs yet into which enters  
     and from which spews every note in love's long aria,

all the divers billings and cooings, the crab-assings,  
 the lies outright and subtle, the protestations  
     of love pyrotechnic, perfunctory, and Vulcan—  
     I say pick that phone up, reader, and call the woman  
 who is "thoroughly impressed by humanitarian values  
     and loves animals, antiques, ballet" and invite her  
     for coffee and a custard tart at Patrizio Così in Florence

or a coffee and strudel *mit Schlag* at Bazar in Salzburg  
 or tea and a big chocolate meringue cookie at Ladurée in Paris,  
     and she accepts! She accepts! Then it's risotto with white truffles  
     at Dal Pescatore outside Mantova and *Wiener Schnitzel*  
 at Steiereck in Vienna and warm goat cheese on *frisée*  
     at Le Pré aux Clercs in Dijon followed by backpacking  
     in the Cinque Terre and hang-gliding at Interlochen

and windsurfing at Les Sables d'Olonne  
 and ballroom dancing in Bern and Baltimore and Bangkok—  
     any kind of dancing, really, as long as it's to an upbeat  
     tempo so the adept can do the merengue,  
 the less adept the twist, and the totally spazzed-out the hokey pokey!  
     Not to mention natation and equitation and prestidigitation  
     and slipping down back canals in gondolas and junks

and feluccas and caravels and catamarans and canoes,  
and the next thing you know, you're married, and she's throwing  
her legs all over the place as the ocelots  
and greyhounds mewl and bark and topple  
the armoire and chifforobe. And if she turns out  
to be 170 meters or 170 millimeters, so much the better:  
that way she can carry you around or you her.