

Nora Ephron and Lonesome George

When Nora met George

Nora Ephron, observer of sexual behaviour, died on June 26th, aged 71. Lonesome George, habitual abstainer, died on June 24th, aged perhaps 100

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THE first story Nora Ephron had to write for the *New York Post*—the one that made the guys on the city desk fall around laughing, got her the job, and launched her on a career of witty, wise writing on surviving modern life—was about a pair of hooded seals at the Coney Island aquarium. They were not only not mating, as they were supposed to, but also refusing to have anything to do with each other.

Lonesome George could relate to that. Though he was probably the last surviving example of the giant Galápagos tortoise *Chelonoidis nigra abingdonii*, he too refused to perform. Scientists, tourists, journalists, conservationists and the government of Ecuador all waited for two decades for him to mate successfully or, indeed, get it on at all. He wasn't playing. In 1993 two females of a slightly different subspecies were put into his corral. He ignored them. When at last he decided to do his duty, in 2008 and occasionally later, the eggs failed to hatch. Clearly, he was a slow burner. Possibly he was gay. He refused to be turned on even when a female Swiss zoology graduate, smeared with tortoise hormones, gave him manual stimulation for four months.

At which stage Ms Ephron might have asked, couldn't he at least have faked it? Women did that all the time. The most famous scene of her highly successful screenwriting career—which included “Sleepless in Seattle”, “You've Got Mail” and “Julie and Julia”—was the one in “When Harry Met Sally” (1989) in which Sally faked an orgasm over lunch at a deli on New York's Lower East Side. After she had reared, moaned, gasped and shouted “Yes!” for what seemed like five minutes, the elderly lady at a nearby table told the waiter: “I'll have what she's having.”

George couldn't. But then he didn't have the advantage of living, like Ms Ephron, in Manhattan, where something was almost bound to happen to you if you simply stepped outside, and if it didn't happen you could pick up the phone and order it. He was living in a volcanic field on Santa Cruz island 500 miles off the coast of Ecuador, where you couldn't find a decent bagel if you tried: in fact, a place a lot like Washington.

Besides, he was no looker. Ms Ephron, though striking and svelte all her life, worried in the niggling way of women that her breasts were too small, her neck too *crêpy* (“I Feel Bad About My Neck” was the title of one book), her skin dry and her purse just *wrong*. George, whose neck was three feet of scrag and whose skin would have made several dozen purses, all thick, dry leather, didn't care two hoots. His one concession to fashion was a shell in taupe. Ms Ephron preferred black; but taupe, especially on a couch, didn't show the dirt.

Couches arose because they were part of the extra-domestic arrangements of her second husband, Carl Bernstein of the *Washington Post*. (Hence her Washington exile.) He left her when she was pregnant with their second child, falling for a woman whose neck was approximately as long as George's and whose feet were splayed. Ms Ephron triumphantly got over it by turning the saga into a bestseller, “Heartburn”, in 1983, and then into a screenplay for the film, in which she was played by Meryl Streep. (“If your husband is cheating on you with a carhop, get Meryl Streep to play you. You'll feel much better.”)

Her problem, she admitted, was falling in the first place for a priapic Jewish prince (*Homo princeps judaicus incapax*)—the sort who asked, “Where's the butter?” when he meant, “Get me the butter.” She would hardly have done much better with George, whose neglected and expendable paramours were called No. 106 and No. 107, and whose rear-end shoves of his female companions were not, as scientists first thought, a playful invitation to sex but an order to quit the mud wallow, now, and leave it to him. The wallow was where *El Solitario Jorge* spent much of his time, smiling inanely and with the odd bit of food trailing from his mouth. All he needed was a copy of *Architectural Digest* to look like someone she knew.

To get her own back at Mr Bernstein, in a way befitting her love of food and her urge to cook, Ms Ephron in her book threw a key lime pie at him. She also provided the recipe. An erring tortoise would need sterner treatment. For tortoise soup, take one reptile, eviscerate, remove skin and all fat, remove shell. Simmer with lots of vegetables for two hours. Serves eight. This soup is illegal outside South Carolina.

And that was precisely how George had attained his solitary state: fishermen and sailors had eaten his tribe, goats had competed for the sparse vegetation, pigs had devoured the eggs, until he alone remained on Pinta Island, where a Hungarian looking for snails had discovered him in

1971. On his new island, he wasn't truly alone: what with 180,000 tourists a year, 20,000 other tortoises, a team of scientists watching his every move, and journalists fighting on the bridge beside his pen. He was just the rarest creature in the world.

Equally, Ms Ephron—though she became the model of the defiant single woman—was not alone for long. She surrounded herself with blaring, cornucopian Manhattan, plunged into her work and then, in 1987, discovered the “secret to life” by marrying an Italian. But she was rare because, being very hurt, she got over it by making the world laugh at and with her.