

Makeover

Off on the wrong track.

James L. Cambias

I stopped by Hub Hobbies down on Broad Street, and literally bumped into Mike LaSalle on the way in. He put out an arm to keep me from falling over, then broke into a grin.

"Stephen! How've you been?"

"Oh, fine, fine. I'm here to drool over some of the rolling stock. Did you see that really sweet brass Allegheny they just got in?"

"Nope. I'm selling today, not buying."

"Really? What are you getting rid of?" Mike had some amazing stuff — being both a lawyer and single he could buy pretty much any model he wanted without having to live on ramen and tuna, the way I did.

"The whole thing. I just worked out a consignment deal with the store."

"Everything? Your whole layout? How come? Are you switching to N-scale?"

"I'm cured. Giving it all up. I'm selling the house and getting a condo in the Warehouse District."

"What? How? Why?"

It was starting to rain so we moved inside and stood between the theft detector posts while he told me.

"I signed up with MatchScan. Are you on that?"

"No, I met Stevie before that got big. I never used dating services anyway."

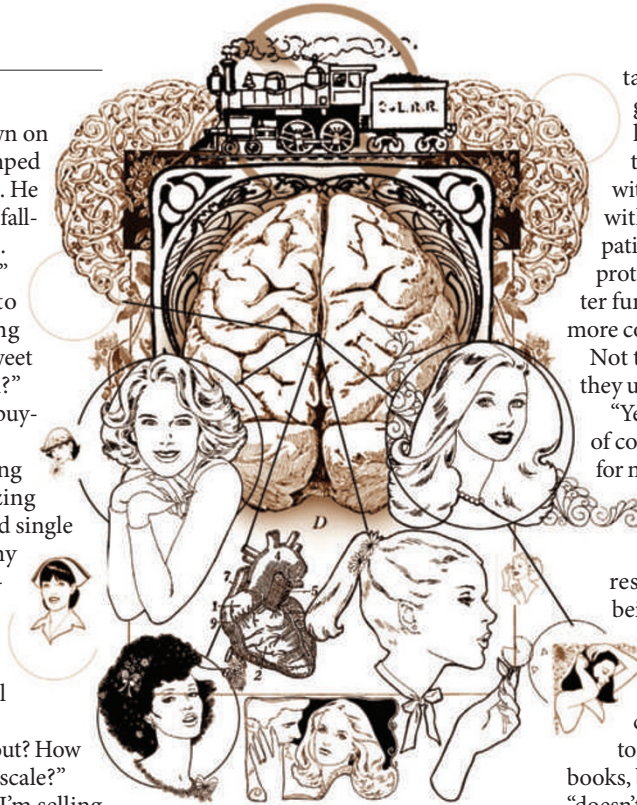
"It's more than a dating service. They actually read your brain. You put your head in this gadget called an fMRI, and then they show you a bunch of images and video clips. It reads how your brain reacts and builds up a personality profile. Tells what kind of person you're attracted to. Then they just match up people with compatible scans. Lots better than filling out questionnaires."

"No lying."

"Exactly. They've scanned thousands of couples to find out what personality types match up. I know some people who got together through MatchScan — they said it was love at first sight."

"But what does that have to do with you selling your trains? Is it expensive?"

He waved his hand dismissively. "I can afford it. No, the trains were the problem. The MatchScan people said it made me an 'outlier'. Any woman I find attractive would hate being with a model railroader."



There are times when I'm really glad I'm gay. Stevie and I both like trains. He keeps the locomotives running and handles the electronics, so I can spend my time painting rolling stock and building terrain. A match made in Man Heaven.

Something puzzled me. "Wait a second — getting rid of the trains won't help. It's all based on that brain scan, right? Even if you don't have a single inch of track in your house that MRI will still tell you like them."

"That's right." Mike looked smug. "That's why I signed up for the advanced programme."

"Which is?"

"It's a step beyond profiling. They actually modify your brain to make your profile more appealing."

"What, they put you in a chair and show you newsreels with your eyelids clamped open?"

Mike's not a movie buff so he looked puzzled. "No, it's not like that. They use NMT. Neural Marker Therapy. Doctors use it to treat people with addictions."

I dimly remembered Stevie talking about it. They give the patient a marker protein which binds to brain cells, then they expose him to material linked to the undesirable trait — alcohol, nicotine, child porn, whatever. I guess for Mike it was playing with trains. A couple of hours later the patient

takes an antagonist drug, and then gets exposed to a bunch of unrelated stimuli. Once it's all done, only the part(s) of the brain concerned with the undesirable habit are marked with the protein. Then they give the patient a drug that binds to the marker protein and suppresses neurotransmitter function and blood flow. I expect it's more complicated than it sounds.

Not to mention kind of creepy. "Don't they use that in places like Syria to —"

"Yeah, and Burma, too. Probably a lot of countries. The FDA won't approve it for non-medical purposes here. MatchScan has a referral deal with a clinic in the Bahamas. It's a nice place; there's a little beach resort you can stay at while you're being treated."

"Did it work?"

"Absolutely. All this," he gestured at the shelves of model rail cars, miniature building kits, track, tools, paint, power supplies, reference books, bags of green sawdust, balsa wood, "doesn't interest me at all any more. It's like being in a vegetarian restaurant. Or a jewellery store. Some of it's kind of neat, but I just don't care."

"Jesus, Mike. You used to love running trains. You said once you'd been in love with model trains since you were four years old. Is it worth it?"

"Yes," he said, and I was surprised at how intense he sounded. "Yes, it really is worth it. I'm tired of being alone. Of six-month relationships. Of seeing really nice girls going around with these complete jerks and wondering why they didn't like me. Now I've got a list of potential matches two pages long. It is absolutely worth it."

There's not much one can say in a situation like that. I wished him luck and turned to go pick through the boxes of train loot he'd left behind. He went out and almost bumped into another customer coming in. She stepped back to let him pass. He nodded absently at her, then headed for his car.

She looked a couple of years younger than Mike, a little chunky but with an intelligent smile. Her eyes lit up when she saw the gear he'd left on the counter. ■

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