

assisted loving

LOVING

From page 1

buried only a few months ago. Not only does he feel disloyal to her, but he feels as if he's pimping for his dad.

But he eventually calls the women.

And then surprises himself by starting to check out women of a certain age as potential dates for his dad.

"He had more dates than I did, in what I call 'the year of desperate dating,'" Morris says. The elder Morris was dating woman after woman, while the younger couldn't find a man he clicked with.

The whole situation was just too funny and surreal to be believed. And so Morris did what any writer would do: he wrote about it. First, it was columns in the *New York Times* and commentaries on NPR's "All Things Considered." Then a one-man play that Morris performed. And then it transformed into a full-length book: "Assisted Loving: True Tales of Double Dating With My Dad." (Harper, \$24.95)

Morris was, more accurately, a third wheel, and a procurer of dates, rather than a double-dater with his dad. He'd go to Palm Beach, Florida, to visit his dad, envisioning some meaningful father-son time. But infatuated with a woman named Edie, his dad would suddenly leave him in the lurch when she called. (Edie, by the way, was also seeing two other men - both in their nineties.)

The book is funny, wistful, sad, and blatantly honest.

Though well-meaning, Morris's father wasn't the easiest person to get along with. He was loud and impulsive and possessed a tendency to fly into a rage if things didn't go his way. He talked with his mouth full and wore mismatched clothes. He had a tendency to burst into song in public places. He was addicted to playing bridge. When his son would visit, he'd often ignore him, taking numerous phone calls on his cell phone while dining, or watching a baseball game and insisting they only talk during the commercials.

But he had a vitality people responded to.

Morris himself was prickly, negative and critical; he realizes mid-way through the book that he needs to grow up.

"What we want our parents to be and what they are is different," he says.

Morris jokes about the "casserole women" and the "brisket brigade," the women who show up on the doorstep soon after a man is widowed.

"I wrote a column about a woman who called and wanted my father's phone number," Morris says. "I was screening her. She said, 'I'm not young, but I know how to please a man.' We don't want to hear this! Younger children don't want to hear about their parents being romantic or sexual!"

But, there are also women who declare themselves done with marriage once they're widowed. "It's statistically clear that there are many, many, many more women in their 80s who



Writer Bob Morris, left, with his dad, Joe Morris. Joe Morris died in June 2006, at the age of 85.

have rich social lives and don't have any desire to marry again," Morris says. "Perhaps they don't want to be a caregiver [to someone whose health may be failing]. They don't want to subjugate themselves as is the role in their generation."

But the statistics are definitely in the male's favor, Morris writes in his book, noting that "the Census Bureau estimates that 80 percent of all healthy widowers remarry, and many more end up in live-in relationships soon after a wife dies."

Why so soon?

As Morris's father explains, "It worked so beautifully with your mother for fifty years that I'd like to do it again." (His late mom's point of view was somewhat different. As she would always say: "Life with Joe is irritating, but never dull.")

But there's another major reason why so many widowers remarry, Morris writes: "They're incompetent. 'Babies,' one woman called them in an article I clipped on widowers and dating. In addition to being incapable of going to dinner alone (not necessarily the case with their busy female counterparts), men don't like to come home to an empty house or do housework. They're not just looking for love, they're looking for lunch. Senior women, meanwhile, find it liberating to be free of the responsibilities of marriage and caregiving. They are more likely to be good at maintaining social networks that don't even include men. Men who have lost their wives, on the other hand, are less adept at creating new social lives for themselves, after so many years as half a couple. So rather than spend a lot of time mourning, the way widows do, they get busy. As an old saying suggests, when there's a death, women mourn and men replace. After a few weeks of not terribly expressive grieving, the men can be ready to move on."

Retirees aren't doing "what convention tells you to do, but doing what's right for the moment," Morris says. "And the seniors have that over us in spades. They live together. They don't want to [mess] around with their wills and their children's inheritance. The number of people over 90 has increased significantly; it's doubled



A young Bob Morris (holding Mickey) with his father, Joe Morris.

since 1990. So people in their 80s are not that old.

"Add Viagra and Botox, a society that is willing to talk about sex, cell phones that escalate dating, and you have your own little 'Sex and the City,' or 'Sex and the Sunbelt,' as Candace Bushnell said in her blurb for my book.

"There's something that's...very problematic in-between the lines of 'Assisted Loving': the card and discard dating culture I was a victim of. I watched many of my single women friends, in the style of 'Sex and the City' types -ambitious New Yorkers. They seemed to have an almost one-upmanship about how bad the dating can get. It's easier to make quick judgments about people.

"In his own haphazard, Mr. Magoo-

like fashion, my dad amazingly got the truth that when you stop looking for perfection, then it's possible you'll find it."

Morris realized how critical and judgmental he was, both with his own father and with potential dates.

"I found myself so critical of [my father], and so annoyed, and how big of a step is it -well, a big step—to say, 'The guy's hilarious, he means well.' I'm the one who has to figure out how to be with him when my Mom left picture. I was always trying to put up boundaries. But he wanted happiness. Sometimes he was very pushy about it. Parents only want what's best for their kids. Once I was ready to just open my arms up, that's when the relationship took its final, wonderful turn. There was more to share than I even knew.

"How many times in our lives I would say, I'm too busy to talk. Then I found myself saying [to myself], Let's try this. Try saying, 'You know what, you're right.' Even when they're wrong. Out of a gesture of respect. Is it possible in families that nobody is right?"

Morris points out that there's a whole culture of Baby Boomers experiencing the same frustrations while visiting parents in Florida. There's the difficulty of different agendas when different generations get together, he says. The trials of sharing space, disrupting the parents' schedules.

"The kids want to go to the beach," he writes. "The parents, who never set foot on a beach, want them home early so they can take them to early-bird dinner specials. They want to advise their children on how to raise children. Their children want them to butt out... Control, control, control. Other than incest and alcohol, is there anything more disruptive to family dynamics?"

Morris would visit his dad in Palm Beach in the same apartment where his Mom had been for so many years. It felt strange, without her.

"I had a feeling I wanted to have meaningful time with him," Morris says. "Then getting ditched because of this woman who was going out with two other guys! What a glorious thing it was to find out that it's funny, instead of insulting."

And lately, everything seems to be going Morris's way.

He was in Los Angeles last week, taking meetings with TV and film producers. There's interest in making a movie out of "Assisted Loving." And HBO has contracted Morris to write a pilot based on his "Age of Dissonance" columns. Morris says it's about a guy obsessed with manners who doesn't treat people well.

And in-between all his meetings, Morris married the love of his life, Ira. (The two already filed for a domestic partnership in New York a few years back.) As Morris explains in his book, "The man who isn't who I thought I wanted is exactly what I needed...With Ira, it is immediate and total."

"I realized that I cannot art direct my life," Morris says. "I can't manipulate things where they're exactly as I want them."

Now, he says, "I'm willing to err on the side of happiness." ■