Love at Exit 19

He was a tollbooth operator, she was a soprano who sang in Carnegie Hall. Their eyes met at Exit 19 of the New York State Thruway, when he charged her 37¢. The romance that followed was even less likely than the plot of an opera!

Sonya Baker was a frequent commuter from her home in the suburbs to New York City. One day, when she was driving to an audition, she came off the Thruway and stopped at the tollbooth where Michael Fazio was working. She chatted to him as she paid to go through, and thought he was cute. For the next three months, they used to exchange a few words as she handed him the money, and he raised the barrier to let her pass. ‘It was mostly “What are you doing today? Where are you going?”’ she said. They learned more about each other, for example that Sonya loved Puccini and Verdi, while Michael’s love was the New York Yankees. But their conversations suddenly came to an end when Michael changed his working hours. ‘He used to work during the day,’ said Sonya, ‘but he changed to night shifts.’ Although Michael still looked out for Sonya’s white Toyota Corolla, he did not see her again for six months.
When Michael’s working hours changed back to the day shift, he decided to put a traffic cone in front of his lane. He thought, ‘It will be like putting a candle in a window.’ Sonya saw it, and their romance started up again. ‘I almost crashed my car on various occasions,’ she said, ‘trying to cross several lanes to get to his exit.’ Finally, she found the courage to give Michael a piece of paper with her phone number as she passed through the toll. Michael called her and for their first date they went to see the film Cool Runnings, and then later they went to an opera, La Bohème, and to a Yankees game.

They are now married and living in Kentucky, where Sonya is a voice and music professor at Murray State College and Michael runs an activity centre at a nursing home. It turned out that she had given him her number just in time. A short while later she moved to New Jersey and stopped using the New York State Thruway. ‘I might never have seen him again,’ she said.

Glossary

a tollbooth a small building by the side of a road where you pay money to use the road

Carnegie Hall a famous concert hall in New York City

New York State Thruway a motorway

New York Yankees a baseball team based in the Bronx in New York

a traffic cone a plastic object, often red and white, used to show where vehicles can or can’t go

Adapted from The Times