

NOTE FROM DIANE:

Pepper Steak and Other Bad Ideas is my chicklit novel. It's the story about a recently divorced, mid-forties woman who never expected her life to end up this way. I've thought about returning to Pepper's world and also about exploring the stories of her close group of girlfriends, because the idea of a group of friends who help each other through difficult times is something that resonates with me.

Enjoy! Xoxo,

Diane



1: The New Beginning

There are events you share with your friends. Things like promotions, hook-ups, and raises. Getting out of a ticket. Getting into a pair of jeans that haven't fit since college. But signing the paperwork to reclaim my name after twenty-two years of marriage wasn't something I wanted to share with the girls. The ink was barely dry on the divorce papers, and I couldn't wait to shed his name and become me again. I knew the girls would be supportive—they'd been supportive through the whole divorce—but this was something I wanted to do on my own. Besides, the girls in question weren't girls, they were women. They were smart, funny, loyal and even the youngest was well into her thirties. The girls were still actively looking for true love. I didn't believe in that anymore. And even though my marriage had been dead for years, now that the divorce was final, I didn't know what to expect from my future. The only thing I knew was that today would be the day I became myself again: Pepper St. James. I didn't expect anyone else to understand the magnitude of my actions.

Today was the day for my one-two identity punch: social security office then DMV. I'd made arrangements to take a personal day so I could tend to my own business instead of my employer's. If I'd foregone marriage and worked like every other woman my age, I'd probably be a VP by now. Instead, I sell designer apparel at a local retail department

store where I get a generous discount and a flexible schedule. It pays the bills and makes good use of all that knowledge I picked up reading *Marie Claire* instead of having sex.

Don't get me wrong; *Marie Claire* was an acceptable bedtime companion. With content that lay somewhere between *Vogue* and *Cosmo*, the magazine kept me knowledgeable about clothes I could actually afford and sexual positions I could actually imagine. After twenty-two years of marriage my sex life had dwindled down to one lukewarm night a month. For that one night, with the lights turned off, I imagined George Clooney and gave as good as I got.

"Excuse me, are you done yet?" asked the woman behind the bulletproof glass.

I looked up from the folder of papers I held and studied the Social Security Office employee.

"Your name change form. Did you sign it?"

I nodded.

"I need it back before we can make it official."

I pushed the form through the narrow opening under the glass. She glanced at my signature and double-checked the judge's decree on my divorce papers. Convinced that I'd done everything needed to return to the name I was born into, she stamped the sheet of paper and initialed it.

"Pepper Mills officially no longer exists. Pepper St. James, welcome back to the world. Congratulations." Her mechanical speech belied the glorious words she spoke.

I know the question on your mind. Why'd I stay in a loveless marriage? The answer was simple. I took those vows seriously. I considered them a promise of a future. And to a person who's afraid of growing old alone, the idea of someone sitting next to you on a park bench helping you feed the pigeons when you're ninety is somewhat soothing. Somehow that image made up for the dying spark and the clues along the way that things had derailed. That and the aforementioned fantasy life.

I pushed all of the papers back into my folder and left. One task down, another to go. I sped through an assortment of green and yellow lights and made good time to the DMV. Even with an appointment I ended up warming a chair in the waiting area. My toe

tapped. My knee bounced. I was bored and antsy and there was only one thing that would calm me down. I needed to make a list.

It's a calming thing, this list making. I have notebooks of lists. Girl of 100 Lists by the Go-Gos? Kind of a theme song.

I pulled a blank sheet of stationery inside my folder. I'd had five hundred sheets of the stuff printed up when I was married. On my first night alone at my new apartment, after two thirds of a bottle of wine, I'd taken a thick black marker and lined out my name and address on each sheet. Now I had a stack of stationery with a set of thick black lines in the upper left hand corner. So basically, I had a stack of scrap paper. I fished a ballpoint pen out from the bottom of my handbag and wrote a heading across the top of the paper.

10 Categories Of Men I Will Never Consider Marrying

According to my friends, lists like these will keep me attached to the reality of dating and the eventual possibilities of finding a more suitable life mate than the one I started out with. They are convinced that by making lists detailing what I don't want in a man, I am allowing a part of my brain to recognize that there *might* be someone out there who I wouldn't mind so much. Every time I start this list, it fizzles around number four.

1. Men who wear cargo shorts to their knees.

I did tell you I worked in fashion, right? So I'm not being purely superficial here, but I just don't see being compatible with these types. And I do not have it in me to find a lump of clay and try to redesign him in a Queer Eye manner. That project is for women in their mid-twenties.

2. Men with ear hair

I don't think I'm alone on this one. Even the girls, Angie, Nancy, and Alison, toast this one. It's a staple.

3. Men who seem to like other men enough to raise questions about how much they like women.

You'd be surprised how many men fit this category. Or at least by the high concentration of them at my store.

4. Ex-Presidents.

I don't mean of the US of A, though there's a bunch on that list that I'd turn down

too. I'm talking about self-important President of my Fraternity, President of the Glee Club. That sort of thing. Trust me—that title works its way into a person's character. In my experience, once they're an ex-Prez, they look to you to balance out that power position. I'm the boss of me from now on. I don't need anybody to go messing with that well-deserved status.

I didn't have a number five. I underlined the list title and tapped the pen to the right of the G in 'marrying'. The video monitors that kept count of what number was up next indicated that I'd be waiting a loooooong time.

- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

I numbered the rest of the page to entice me to keep going. A waft of body odor hit me from the left as a thin man wearing four layers of flannel passed through the doors.

I can do this, I told myself. I can finish this list. It can be the stupidest list I've ever come up with, and I can throw it out when I leave here, but today is a Significant Day and that means I can take a Significant Step and finish it.

5. Men who wear black socks with sandals.
6. Men with a pet other than: cat, dog, fish. Possible hamster exception.
7. Men who think it's fun to scare women.
8. Men with big dogs.
9. Men who play computer games a LOT.

I was on a roll. I glanced back up at the monitor and saw my number in the pole position. And then it moved to the top spot. I was up.

But I was also only one spot away from completing my list, and for the first time since the girls had suggested it to me, I wanted to finish it. I just needed a number ten. My mind flashed on an inspired bit of brilliance.

10. Men named steak.

Oh, come on. I'd spent half of my life as Pepper Mills and you think I didn't learn anything?

I shoved the paper into my handbag and proceeded to the designated booth. Forty-seven minutes later, I had the papers proving that I was Pepper St. James again. The nice gray haired lady behind the counter punched a hole in my old license, right in the middle of the old last name, and promised I'd have my new one within a week. I smiled ear to ear and left. If there'd been a hat on my head it would have been thrown in the air.

Instead, I headed home. I checked my mail in the lobby of my building and threw the unwanted catalogs into our community recycle bin. I pulled the list out of my handbag, scanned it, and smiled to myself. I hardly thought this list was the key to my emotional growth. I tossed it into the recycle bin on top of the catalogs. I'd write another list tomorrow. A real one. An honest one.

I soaked in the tub and drank a good amount of a chilled bottle of champagne to celebrate and then curled up in bed. I fell asleep in the middle of my relatively new pillow-top mattress, a smile of satisfaction on my face. Look out world, Pepper St. James was back.

The next morning I dressed with care in a red wool-crepe skirt suit, root-beer colored patent leather pumps, and a brown and white polka dotted scarf knotted at my neck. There was no need to fuss with a matching handbag since the store required me to carry a plastic one they could see through. Security measures to make sure no one walked out with the merchandise. My apartment building's lobby has a mirrored wall opposite the mailboxes, and, if I find myself to be alone, I usually do one full outfit scan before going to the garage and driving away. Today I was alone. I faced the mirror and slowly turned to see the back view of my outfit.

That's when I saw my list taped to the wall above the mailboxes.

My list. My 10 things list. My very superficial thrown-in-the-recycle-bin list.

Had I signed it? I hurried over to check it out. It was a copy, not the original. In red marker, in neat block letters, it said: *DID YOU WRITE THIS? IF SO, CALL ME*. A phone number followed.

I looked over my left shoulder, then my right, making sure I was alone. I tore the sheet down, crumpled it up, and got the hell out of there before someone saw me.

That evening when I returned home and walked through the lobby, a new copy of my list was taped to the wall of mirrors. Along the top of the page, in red marker, was another note: *PLEASE DON'T THROW THIS AWAY. I WANT TO TALK TO THE AUTHOR. CALL ME.*

I snatched the sheet of paper from the wall, balled it up, and shoved the wad of paper into my handbag.

I did it again the next day.

And the day after that.

And the day after that.

This became my routine. Embarrassment shifted to curiosity on day four, and a collection of balled-up copies now rested on top of the Tupperware I'd packed with today's lunch. I thought about telling my friend Angie, but that would mean telling her I finished the list, and that would mean showing her the list, and that would mean hours and hours of wine and theorizing, and you wouldn't have the energy for that either. I might have once, somewhere in my thirties, but that ship had sailed.

On Friday I parked on the second level of the mall parking lot and walked toward the store's entrance. A red sports car pulled into the spot next to me and an attractive blonde stepped out.

"Excuse me," she called to get my attention. "Do you have a moment?"

"I'm actually a little late for work."

She reached into her quilted Chanel handbag and pulled out a sheet of paper. I knew what it was before she handed it to me.

"What can you tell me about this list?" she asked.

"Where did you get that?" I countered.

She took a step toward me, and I took a step backward. She put a hand up and stepped half a step back.

It was evident that I was standing in the parking lot with a woman of means. She was well coifed, dressed impeccably in clothes that were expertly tailored, and her jewels were chic but not gaudy. She extended a hand. "I'm Victoria."

I didn't offer my name just yet but shook her hand all the same. As I studied her, it hit me that this Victoria was quite possibly in her forties like me, but when I'd lost sight of who I was, becoming invisible in my own life, giving up my hopes, dreams, desires, and personality, she had followed her path with confidence. Aside from the not so small fact that she'd just accosted me in the parking lot, there was nothing threatening about her.

"I'm trying to find the person who wrote this list. Do you know who she is?"

"She?"

"It's obvious from the list that it was written by a woman."

I took the list from her hand and looked back down at it. "Yes, I guess it is obvious."

"I know you're the person who keeps tearing it down from the lobby of the apartment building on Driftwood Lane. I've seen you do it twice."

"That doesn't explain how you got it."

"I was visiting someone in the building a few nights ago. I saw it in recycle bin in the lobby when I left."

"You took it from the trash?" I somehow couldn't picture this woman rooting around the recycle bin in my apartment complex.

"Do you know who wrote it? It's important."

But that's the thing—it wasn't. It wasn't the least bit important. I could deny writing it, but I suspected if this Victoria had seen me tear the list down every time she taped it up, she knew I was the person who wrote it, so I said as much. "It doesn't mean anything. It was a joke." I handed it back to her. "It's been nice talking to you, but I have to go."

"Do you work at this store?" She waved her hand toward the upscale retail building behind her.

"Yes," I answered tentatively.

"What department do you work in?"

"Designer Clothing."

"Do you ever set appointments?"

"To shop? Of course."

"I need a few new items. Can I come see you today around one?"

"Um, sure." As a stalker, she left something to be desired. As a potential customer, she was spot-on.

“What’s your name?”

“Pep –” Item number ten on the list stared me down. MEN NAMED STEAK. There was no way I was telling this woman that my name was Pepper now! “—rika.”

Oh My God. My name went from Pepper to Paprika? What was wrong with my brain?

“Paprika?”

“Yes.”

She cocked her head to one side. “I like it. It’s spicy.”

“My friends call me Rika. No—Riky.” Damn, that sounded too *I Love Lucy*. “Ricky. My friends call me Ricky.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Ricky. Like Ricky Lake.”

“Interesting reference. Most women your age would say Ricky like Gervais.”

“But I love Ricky Lake! She was in *Hairspray* with Sonny Bono!” I blurted.

“Another interesting reference. Most people would think of her talk show.”

“I guess that makes me unique.” *Or stuck somewhere in the past*, I thought.

“I would say so.”

I was painfully aware that I was acting odd, but Victoria didn’t make me feel self-conscious. She adapted to the situation beautifully.

“I’ll call you Ricky if you’ll call me Vicky.”

“Is that what your friends call you?”

“No one’s ever called me Vicky in my life. Well, maybe once or twice in grade school, but Mother put a quick stop to that.”

“So, why?”

“Because it makes us equals. The same.”

For a moment we stood there, staring at each other in silence. Another person might not have been as quick to understand what she was offering me. I’d lost years of my life, years that could have defined my own confidence and put me in the position she was in right now. It wasn’t lost on me that she’d be the one buying designer clothes and I’d be

the one earning six percent commission on the sale. Yet in that one instant, when we shook hands on our Ricky/ Vicky friendship, I felt a kindred spirit.

She met me at one. I took off my nametag and pretended to have left it home that day. She didn't mention the list while we were shopping, but she spent ten thousand dollars on new clothes.

That's right: ten thousand dollars.

After I'd totaled her purchases and tissueed the garments she wasn't having altered, she hit me with the question when I least expected it.

"I'm sorry that I made you uncomfortable this morning, but that list is very important to me. I'd like to talk to you about it. Please call me so I can explain why. We can meet outside the store if you'd prefer."

"I'm sorry. I can't talk about that right now," I said.

She handed me a business card that listed two work numbers and a personal cell.

"Call me when you can," she said.

I took the card but didn't call. Instead I dropped a thank you note in the mail.

She continued to shop with me every Tuesday,. She didn't bring up the list again and I thought she'd moved on. On the fifth Tuesday I couldn't take not knowing any longer.

"I'm ready to talk about the list," I said, handing her a garment bag filled with last week's alterations.

She smiled. "I've been hoping you'd say that. Are you free for dinner tonight?"

I nodded. We agreed on a time and a place. I wished her a happy afternoon and bee-lined to Angie's office.

Angie is the PR manager for the store where I worked. She's direct to the point of abrasive and accomplishes everything she sets out to do. She also happens to be my best friend, if women in our age bracket can get away with using the term without sounding silly. On paper, we're nothing alike. She's lived in Los Angeles her whole life. I'm from the East Coast. She's in senior management. I'm situated squarely amongst the peons. She's a MAC. I'm a PC. And while I'd made one significant trip down the aisle that had robbed me of half of my life, Angie had made many—in brightly colored taffeta dresses that brides had promised, "You can totally wear again."

Angie was my age but wouldn't admit it even if she was under oath. She had more ex-boyfriends than shoes, and she had a lot of shoes. She was eternally optimistic that the next guy she met might be the keeper. Under normal circumstances, she would have already known about Vicky and the stalking. She knew just about everything that happened in my life the minute it happened. She was there the day the wet ink decorated my divorce papers. I'd kept Victoria's reaction to the list to myself, largely because I didn't want Angie to know I'd finished the list. Angie was the drill sergeant of my life, and sometimes, even when you recognize your drill sergeant only wants to make you stronger, you don't want them to know when you voluntarily drop and give them twenty.

Angie constantly badgered me to get into management, but I wasn't sure it was for me. I'd been bossed around for long enough that I knew how to do what was expected of me, but I wasn't sure I wanted to manage other people. I was tired of confrontation, especially after battling it out daily to get my divorce. Besides, I liked the idea of being responsible for just my own performance and no one else's.

"Hey there Miss Tuesday Number One," said Angie from her tilt-back swivel office chair. It was her new tag for me, since I'd managed to be the top seller in the store every Tuesday since I'd met Vicky. "Your big shot come in again today?"

I nodded.

She pushed a Styrofoam cup and a can of exotic iced tea toward me. "Tell me what you think of this. It's a new sponsor. I think I can get a couple hundred cases for an event if we like it. So, what'd she buy today?"

I was used to Angie's hyper nature; it was one of the things I loved about her. She was one of the few people who made me feel normal and not all screwed up.

"Chanel, YSL, Escada, Tom Ford—"

"How much?"

"Fifteen. She threw in an extra suit after I agreed to meet her for dinner."

"What?!"

"I'll tell you everything, but first I need you to do me a favor." I pulled Vicky's number out of my pocket. "Can you look up her charge and see what we can figure out about her?"

“Gladly.” She clicked through a couple of screens and punched in a sixteen digit series of numbers.

“Oh My God. Pepper, you have no idea, do you?”

I didn’t like that reaction. “What? Tell me.”

“Your little Vicky is Victoria Metzger.”

Clearly that was supposed to mean something to me. “Duh, I know. It’s on her credit card.” I blinked a couple of times while I tried to figure out what she was trying to say. “Why? Who is Victoria Metzger?”

“The daughter of Roger Metzger? Owner of about two hundred radio stations? She moved to California last year when he gave her KWHY? You know, the AM station that used to be country but changed to all female topics now? The one that has the dicey debates like The View, only on the radio?” It was unnerving the way she doled out information in the form of a series of questions.

“I don’t listen to the radio. It depresses me.”

“I forgot. You listen to the Blues Brothers boxed set.”

“How many times do I have to tell you that Booker T and the MGs existed long before the Blues Brothers movie? And seriously, Steve Cropper was hot in his day.”

“How can someone named Steve Cropper be hot? Wait.” She smacked the palm of her hand down on her desk. “That’s a breakthrough. Six months ago you wouldn’t even acknowledge that a man could open your pickle jar and today you said someone was hot. High five!”

We went through this regularly. I high-fived her and rolled my eyes.

“You’ll be back to new in no time. Pretty soon you’ll be able to finish that list.”

“That’s it! That’s gotta be it, right?”

“Okay, you lost me. What’s it? Steve Cropper isn’t it. Trust me. I don’t even know who he is, but he cannot be it.”

“I’m going to tell you something, and I do *not* want you repeating it. Can you do that?”

“Megan!” She bellowed. No one answered. “Okay. Megan’s not here. You have a secret. Oh my God. Victoria Metzger is a lesbian, and she’s been hitting on you. That’s it,

right? You are so not a lesbian.” She reached across her desk and took my hands. “People are born gay. They don’t turn gay because of crappy marriages.”

I shook her hands away. “Would you shut up for a second?”

She sat back in her chair, verbally bitch-slapped by my sudden authoritative tone.

“I finished the list a month ago. It was a joke. I was stuck at the DMV and I just wanted to get to ten to show I could do it.” I scooped a bunch of paper balls out of my lunch bag and dumped them on Angie’s desk. I’d been carrying them around for weeks because it was the only way to know they wouldn’t get rescued out of the trash.

“What are these?” Warily, she jabbed one with the eraser of an unsharpened pencil.

“I threw the list out. Someone found it and made copies and has been taping them up in the lobby of my apartment building.”

“That’s weird.”

“I know. So I kept tearing them down and balling them up, hoping the whole thing would go away. Then I was confronted in the parking lot by Vicky.”

“Wait. Vicky–Victoria Metzger, owner of the super soupy KWHY radio station is your *stalker*?” Her head jutted out about two inches while her eyes bugged out. “What does she want? She’s been buying all of this stuff to gain your trust. Oh my God--she wants to buy your list. Shit, Pepper, she wants to turn your list into a radio show. That’s gotta be it!” By this time she was out of the chair and leaning forward on the desk like a television defense attorney. “You’re going to be *famous!*” she yelled.

“*Sit down!*” I yelled back. She slowly eased herself into the black leather chair. “Ange, that can’t be the truth. The list was a joke. Look at it.”

She picked the ball that was the least tightly wadded and gently smoothed it out. My original list stared back at her.

10 Categories Of Men I Will Never Consider Marrying

1. Men who wear cargo shorts to their knees.
2. Men with ear hair.
3. Men who seem to like other men enough to raise questions about how much they like women.
4. Ex-Presidents.

5. Men who wear black socks with sandals.
6. Men with a pet other than: cat, dog, fish. Possible hamster exception.
7. Men who think it's fun to scare women.
8. Men with big dogs.
9. Men who play computer games.
10. Men named steak.

“High five number two.” I met her raised hand. “But you totally phoned the rest of list in. And I don't get number ten.”

“I spent the last twenty-two years of my life as Pepper Mills, and you seriously want me put myself in the vicarious position of potentially falling in love and getting married and having my name be Pepper Steak? Are you kidding me?” I said.

She spit tea back into her cup. “You are so not ready for the world. There is much more work to be done, Grasshopper.”

“Anyway, now that I know, there's no way I can let Victoria Metzger use this on her radio show. I'll look like an idiot.”

“As if! You're right. You will not let Ms. Metzger use this on her radio. You will let the very wealthy Ms. Metzger *buy* this material for her radio show. And you'll look like an idiot all the way to the bank, and then we'll go shopping.”

“So now I know why she's so keen on talking to me.”

“There were a couple of updates to the vocabulary after you got married in the ice ages. People don't say 'keen' anymore.”

“Whatever, Miss Thing. I have a bigger problem than that.”

“Using 'keen' in a sentence is going to be a pretty big problem when you're finally ready to get back into circulation, but whatev.” She held her hands palm-side up and cupped her fingers repeatedly. “Tell Miss Thing what your problem is. I'll try to help you.”

“She doesn't know my real name.”

“You wear a nametag. Wait, where's your nametag?”

“I took it off. I told her my name is Ricky.”

“Like Ricky Gervais?”

“Sure, if that's who you like,” I said, folding my arms across my chest and not making eye contact.

“You can’t work indefinitely without a nametag. That’s going to be a problem with Mr. Bill.”

“Does Mr. Williams know you call him Mr. Bill?”

Mr. Williams was the store’s general manager. He was a turtle of a man with a bald head and tufts of white hair growing out of his ears. Out of respect for his position, everyone in the building called him Mr. Williams, but when he wasn’t in the room, Angie had given him the very covert nickname. She’d even given him his very own ringtone that said *Oh No!*

“No he does not, and nobody here is going to tell him. But nametags are a big deal right now so you’re going to have to figure that out. Why Ricky?”

“You don’t want to know. But it was a very long story, and now I’m stuck with either Ricky or something worse, and sooner or later someone’s going to know me and call me by name, and it’s been like a month and a half, and now it’s way too late to tell her that I lied.”

“Why exactly did you lie? You just got your name back. I thought you were proud of it?”

“I am. It’s just that number ten on that list is really, really silly. And I had no idea why the list was so important to her, so I wanted to protect my identity a little. I thought she was going to go away if I just told her I wrote it, but then she started shopping with me, and she’s so nice, and now we’ve got this dinner ...”

“Isn’t there a sales associate in cosmetics named Ricky? In Estee Lauder?”

“I don’t know. I can’t keep track of that department.”

“Hold on.” She picked up the phone and punched a couple of buttons. “Margaret? It’s Angie. I know. I know. I know. Listen, didn’t someone from cosmetics go on maternity leave a couple of weeks ago? Oh, Clinique. What was her name? Ricky Martinez? Fine. Do you have her nametag? Great. I need it. No, somebody lost theirs and I told them I would get them one to wear today. Can you stick it in my mailbox? Fantastic. Thanks.” She hung up the phone. “Problem solved. When Victoria shops with you, you wear Ricky Martinez’s nametag.” She was very pleased with herself. “Wait. She told you to call her Vicky?”

“Yes.”

“I have never heard of anyone ever calling her Vicky.”

“She said that.”

“She’s trying to be your friend. That’s what these big power negotiators do. That’s why she’s spending so much money with you too. She’s going to lowball you with an offer, expecting you to say yes because you feel like you owe her. Do you know if she’s worn any of those clothes? She might be planning to return them.”

“She altered them. I don’t think she’s going to leverage a couple of Chanel suits against me.”

“A couple of Chanel suits is a lot to leverage. Okay, that’s it, it’s decided. You need me there. I’m going to go tonight, and you’re going to call me your agent.”

“Agent for what?”

“I don’t know. I’ll come up with something. But you can’t do this alone or you’re going to get totally screwed.”