

# A Long Way from Lupercalia

## Ellen Waterston's column on ageism and ageing is back with a special Valentine's Day edition

By [Ellen Waterston](#)

If you think the history of Valentine's Day is all about cupids, roses and chocolates, think again. Though the origins are obscure, what is known is they had more to do with bacchanals and blood.

Blame it on the ancient Romans, who, for centuries, annually celebrated the fertility festival of Lupercalia on Feb. 14. Randy male revelers ran naked down the street wielding strips of rawhide from the hides of the dog and goat sacrificed for the feast day. Young women lined up to be whipped, believing it would make them more fertile. The fete concluded with a matchmaking raffle. Maidens placed their names in a big urn and the self-proclaimed bachelors drew one to pair with for the duration of the festival or longer if the match proved a good one.

The ancient Romans are also credited with beheading two saints, both named Valentine, both on Feb. 14, both during the 3rd Century A.D., but on two different years for two different reasons—one for protesting the emperor's prohibition of young men getting married, figuring they made better soldiers if single, and the other for helping Christians escape from the nasty Roman prisons. By the time the 5th Century rolled around, Lupercalia had been outlawed as un-Christian by Pope Gelasius and, toward a more subdued substitute, the martyrdom of the two saints Valentine was lionized with the declaration of St. Valentine's Day on Feb. 14.

By the Middle Ages the celebration of love begins to look more like the current Valentine's Day. Poet Geoffrey Chaucer penned a Valentine poem in 1375:

"For this was sent on Seynt Valentyne's day whan every foul cometh ther to choose his mate.

William Shakespeare followed suit.

Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day, All in the morning betime, And I a maid at your window, To be your Valentine."

During the Victorian era direct expressions of one's feelings were discouraged so the new ready-made card helped, though some pent-up feelings were better left unsaid:

To my Valentine

'Tis a lemon that I hand you

And bid you now

"skidoo,"

Because I love another –

There is no chance for you!

And today— jewelry, lingerie, flowers, gift cards and greeting card purchases total roughly \$21 billion in the USA alone! As Valentine's Day is observed by most countries around the world, what's spent globally on wishin', hopin', thinkin' and prayin' has to be astounding.

But you don't have to spend to celebrate your love. One affordable, delicious and intimate option is to cook a meal together...and not just any meal. The last one hundred pages of Isabel Allende's "Aphrodite, A Memoir of the Senses" are dedicated to dishes claimed to have an aphrodisiac effect. The recipes are ones Allende's mother cooked for decades but have been spiced up by her daughter based on Allende's research of the history of food as love potion, from hors d'oeuvres ("...tickles and nibbles") to desserts ("the happy ending"). The fun-loving author dedicates "these erotic meanderings to playful lovers and, why not? also to frightened men and melancholy women."

But hold on! For many, one is not the loneliest number. To reinforce that message, Feb. 15 has been designated as National Singles Awareness Day, a day to raise a glass to yourself in celebration and confirmation of being more than enough.

But if you're determined to find a mate, best get with the social media program. There's a slew of online dating sites for 65 and older, a slew of reviews. Talk to friends and find out what their experience is, which site they favor. All, regardless of age, seem to agree on one thing—it takes determination, conviction, staying power, intention, a nose for nonsense and a sense of humor. Anecdotal regional polling turns up a few entertaining takeaways. Women joke that men west of the Continental Divide favor images of themselves holding a large, freshly caught fish. There's humorous speculation about what the subconscious message might be. Size matters? I'm a cold fish? I'm into catching and releasing or clubbing over the head and devouring? Both men and women seem to favor posing with their pooch. Apparently, there's bad advice circulating about how to take a good selfie. What is it about bathrooms? So many photos of lonely hearts with a toilet in the background or a sink strewn with all sorts of undesirable information. Having said, those who don't post a photo apparently don't fare well. Those who don't fill in all the blanks of information also trend poorly. Honestly, if you're going to pay for the stress and trouble, might as well go for it!

Yes, the online dating process is more roulette than kismet. But happily single or desperately seeking Susan, we can say we've come a long way from Lupericalia...or have we?