

LOOKING FOR A RAT -- OR AN OLD SWEETHEART? RAT DOG CAN HELP

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WHEN Fay Faron's Sausalito houseboat sank six weeks after she bought it, she sued the rat who sold it to her.

Only problem was, she needed a witness to prove there had been water in the hull. And the only witness was the previous tenant -- a sitar-playing Breatharian named John.

"Well, this was Marin," says Faron, pictured at left.

When Faron managed to track him down two days later -- in Texas, with a new name -- her lawyer was so impressed he asked her to find three ex-clients who owed him money.

She found all three within a week. And Faron, the television producer, decided to become Rat Dog Dick, private investigator.

Rat Dog Dick?

"Someone told me about a guy who finds leaks in a roof like a rat dog finds rats," says Faron. "So I decided to call myself Rat Dog."

In the 10 years since she started the Rat Dog Dick Detective Agency in San Francisco, Faron has tracked hundreds of rats, and advised the rest of us how to do the same. She's written a book, "A Private Eye's Guide to Collecting a Bad Debt," appeared on "Larry King Live" and "Good Morning America," and written a column offering her professional private eye's advice in the Marina Times, her neighborhood newspaper.

Now the column, Ask Rat Dog, is nationally syndicated. Starting today, you can read it in the Sunday Living section on Page 2L -- and write to Rat Dog with questions of your own.

In the column, which reads like Sam Spade meets Dear Abby, Faron tracks down deadbeats and ex-flames, and gives handy tips on how to:

(box) pressure the jerk who rear-ended your car and won't pay up.

(box) check out suspicious excuses given by a husband on a "business" trip. (box) figure out if someone has been in your house.

(box) find high school sweethearts.

It's all in a day's work for Faron, 44, whose office is also the Marina district apartment she shares with her boyfriend. She works on about 10 cases at a time, generally locating either people or money.

"I really enjoy finding people a whole lot more than finding money," she says. "You can always find people, but you can't always collect on a bad debt. And you get right in the middle of someone else's business."

Faron has become something of a compulsive investigator. Though she doesn't admit checking out her current boyfriend, she does tell about the time she pretended to be apartment hunting to check out the "bad roommate" story another man told her.

"I'm always like, 'Oh, uh huh. We'll see about that,' " she says. "Sometimes I just can't help myself."

To get information, Faron has posed as a genealogist, flower delivery woman and reunion committee member. But usually the truth works best.

"When you're after lowlifes," she says, "nothing works better than to call someone and say you're after the same scumbag they are."

Her cases generally begin with a telephone call. If she decides the caller isn't a mental case, doesn't have bad motives and can pay her \$50-an-hour fee, she starts asking questions: Do they know their old honey's birthday? The scumbag's Social Security number?

If the person was ever married she can get his or her driver's license number, parents' name, birth date, occupation and married name from the State Index of Vital Statistics.

Those in professions can be found through associations such as the medical board. Those who have been in trouble are in the criminal index. There are real estate records, old telephone directories, genealogy libraries, old newspapers . . .

"It's pretty amazing. You can find someone in the United States in a couple of days most of the time," she says. "You can run, but you can't hide."

She won't take any case that sounds dangerous, and doesn't carry a gun.

"That's a complete misconception," she says, laughing. Another misconception: That she solves cases. "We just work 'til the retainer runs out."

Business has been good. She thinks the recession, for one thing, is behind that. Collecting large debts is suddenly more urgent for a lot of people.

"And it's the '90s, and everyone's gotten sentimental about their old girlfriend," she says, "which is cool, except that they're never happy."

She's seen it happen over and over: Middle-aged guy in an unhappy marriage gets wistful about his high school girlfriend. Only he thinks she's still 18 after all these years. Or, maybe worse, when he finds her she is exactly the same.

"They have a romantic story for a while and then the same things that went wrong before go wrong again," Faron sighs. "Doesn't matter, though. We still charge the same amount."

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

Tonight, private eye Fay Faron will be giving free advice on the Gene Rusco Show, 5 to 6 p.m. on KGO-AM (810).

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