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Age, Sex, Location

Written by Melissa Pimentel

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Age, Sex, Location

MELISSA PIMENTEL



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To Katie and Simon, my two better halves.

March

This project was born, like so many things, from an egg. Two, to be exact.

Adrian walked in just in time to see me crack two eggs on the side of the pan and pour them into the sizzling butter. I leaned into him when he wrapped his arms around me and peered over my shoulder at the stove.

'You making eggs?' he said, voice still gravelly with sleep.

'How did you guess?' I said, turning to give him a quick kiss. 'I remembered you saying you liked them, so I thought I'd make them for you.' I gave the eggs a quick flip and slid them out of the pan onto the waiting buttered toast.

'You made these for me?' Adrian said, eyes widening.

'Yep,' I said, placing the plate on the table before grabbing my bowl of granola and yogurt off the counter. I pulled the yellow terrycloth robe around me and looked at him.

'You're not having any?' he said, looking at his own plate with even more suspicion.

'Nope. I'm not a big egg fan.'

'I see. You made these eggs just for me.' I watched his pupils dilate out of fear. 'Right.'

'Christ, they're only eggs. Calm down. Do you want some pepper?'

I could see the wheels turning in his head. Eggs led to Sunday afternoons in antique shops, dinner parties with other couples, meetings with the parents, a marriage proposal, an elaborate wedding, three screaming children, a wife with fat ankles and, eventually, the sweet release of death. In his mind, eggs led to stuff. Scary stuff.

Within minutes of polishing off the plate, the man was up and out like a shot, pulling his shoes on and mumbling something about getting back in time to watch *Football Focus* with his room-mate.

I had scared a man with eggs. I'd scared him so badly that he had chosen *Football Focus* over having sex with me. It wasn't looking good for me or for my vagina.

It had all started so promisingly. Last summer, I had moved into my room in Old Street with a heart filled with hope: that this move from Portland to London would be a fresh start for me, that I would wipe clean the traces of a relationship with the strong-jawed, kind-eyed man I'd left behind, that the job I had nabbed as the events coordinator at the Science Museum would lead to even bigger and better things and, possibly most pressingly, that I would have lots of great sex with attractive Englishmen who were as uninterested in commitment as I was.

I'd seen the apartment advertised on Gumtree just before I'd left Maine and had immediately sent through a request. It looked amazing in the pictures – the bedroom was painted a pale yellow and the furniture was all weathered white wood – and according to Google maps, the location was perfect. The woman renting out the room, Lucy, agreed to reserve it for me until I arrived in London the following week after I sent several pleading emails and the promise of a jar of marshmallow fluff.

When I arrived at the address, I was a little surprised to find a towering council estate rather than the little Victorian conversion I'd expected, but I took a deep breath and pressed the buzzer, images of the bedroom still dancing in my head. I was furry-mouthed with jet lag and essentially homeless; I couldn't afford to write the apartment off before seeing it.

Lucy met me at the door. 'Hello! You must be Lauren. Come on in, babe.' I took in her wide smile, bright blue eyes and head of insane blond curls and felt immediately better about the situation. She led me into the cramped kitchen and put the kettle on.

The kitchen didn't quite match the design standards I'd seen in the photographs. Lucy had obviously made the best of things, filling the countertop with pots of fresh herbs and a bright pink set of scales, but the oven door was hanging at a precarious angle and there was a large hole gouged into the MDF floor. It wasn't exactly *Martha Stewart Living*.

Lucy picked up the kettle. 'Coffee?'

I nodded.

'How do you take yours?'

'Just black would be great, thanks.'

'I don't know how you can drink it like that. I need about eight sugars and three pints of milk in mine. Especially today: I have such a hangover. Anyway, I'm glad you're here and seem normal – the last girl who lived here was a born-again Christian and didn't drink. Can you imagine? After the third time she tipped my bottle of rum down the sink, I said, good luck to you, love, but you're not staying here.'

She handed me a mug and I took a sip.

'Let me show you the rest of the place.' Lucy led me on a short but thorough tour of the apartment. 'This is the lounge' – an enormous brown faux-leather couch marooned in the middle of four blood-red walls – 'and there's a balcony, too' – a concrete slab slapped onto the side of the tower block with a strip of barbed wire running along the top – 'here's the bathroom' – a microbe's paradise with one of those electric showers us Americans have nightmares about – 'and this would be your room' – a bare mattress balanced atop a metal frame and a dilapidated Ikea wardrobe, the saving grace being a tiny window displaying an amazing view over London.

'Would you mind if I took a look at your room?' I asked. 'Just to get an idea of the difference in size.'

'Of course! Sorry, it's a bit of a mess at the moment.'

Lucy opened the door to her bedroom and – lo and behold – the infamous yellow room was revealed. It looked like Laura Ashley had spontaneously combusted in there – everything was pastel and floral and very, very neat.

'It's beautiful,' I said. 'It gives me hope that I might be able to do something decent with my room.' I had a sudden vision of shabby-chic industrial interiors and reclaimed bookshelves made from old French wine crates, and made a mental note to sign up to Pinterest.

Lucy smoothed an imaginary crease on the pale-pink duvet. 'Thanks, love. Just takes a lick of paint and some elbow grease,' she said. 'Come on, let's sit in the lounge and have a chat.'

I perched on the enormous couch and Lucy drew up a chair opposite.

'So, Lo,' she said, taking a sip from her mug, 'tell me how you ended up in London.'

'I've always wanted to live here,' I said with a shrug. That was an understatement: I'd dreamt of living in London ever since I was little. The childhood bedroom I'd shared with my sister had been covered with pictures of the London skyline, and I'd gorged myself on the Beatles and *Carry On* films from a young age. London was my fabled land and I'd managed to pull myself onto its shores like a shipwreck survivor.

Of course, I knew I had been at the helm of that ill-fated ship and had spent the past few months driving it straight into the rocks. I thought of the look on

Dylan's face when I packed my bags, and the look on my father's face when he dropped me off at the airport, and pushed them both deep down to the dark recesses of my brain where I couldn't see them. I wasn't ready to admit to myself what I'd done, never mind a relative stranger.

I turned to Lucy with a bright smile. 'Have you ever been to the States?'

Her eyes took on a misty quality. 'No, never, but I've always wanted to go. One day!'

'Well, I'd be happy to give you some tips when the time comes.'

'Thanks, babe. Now, what's happening on the man front? Have you got a boyfriend and, if you do, will he be staying often? Is he very loud and messy?'

I laughed. 'Nope, no boyfriend and no plans to have one anytime soon. I just want to enjoy being single for a while.'

'Thank God. I've just broken up with someone so I'm desperate to go out and let my hair down.'

I grinned at her. 'I'm completely on board with that. How's it going so far?' I asked. 'Any exciting prospects?'

Lucy shook her head sadly. 'Babe, it's been grim. I've started looking on Facebook to see if any of my old schoolmates are now attractive single men that I could get off with.'

'That's not a good sign.'

Lucy shook her head gravely. 'It's not. What's it like

in America? I just imagine lots of fit men called Brad or Tyson or whatever, wandering around being muscly and lovely. I bet you've had loads of gorgeous, hunky boyfriends.'

The last thing I wanted to do was delve into my American dating history. 'Not really,' I said with a shrug. 'The whole dating thing is super structured over there; it's all "playing the field" and "three-date rule" and relentless life scheduling. If you don't have a diamond the size of a grapefruit on your finger by the time you're twenty-nine, you're seen as some sort of leper.'

'Grim.'

I nodded. 'It's pretty exhausting.'

'Well, you're here now. I'm sure we can get up to some mischief together. Two single girls in the big smoke.' She scanned over my bedraggled reddish hair, oversized army jacket, ripped skinny jeans and trashed Converse. 'First, we might need to take you to Westfield shopping center . . .'

And that was that. A couple of cigarettes on the balcony solidified us as partners in crime, and I moved in the following day. From there followed countless nights of shoe-borrowing, Jack Daniel's and Cokes (me), Bacardi and Diet Cokes (her), dancing in clubs reeking of sweat and stale cigarette smoke, 3 a.m. rants and morning-after catch-ups. It was unbelievably fun, and just what I'd hoped to get out of London.

She was right, though: the man situation wasn't quite as rosy as I'd hoped. It's not that they were assholes or

anything. On the whole they were perfectly charming and, with me being relatively new to the country, their accents immediately bumped up their attractiveness quotient by several points. My new neighborhood, Hackney, was filled with slightly fey-looking guys wearing plaid shirts and smoking roll-ups, all theoretically ripe for the picking.

But there was a problem. As upfront as I was about not looking for anything serious, they refused to believe me. Deep down, they thought it was all an elaborate ruse on my part, a trap set to ensnare them into a life of suburban fidelity. One by one, they'd each fly off into the night after a few weeks, never to be seen again.

I was starting to think I was going about things all wrong: that by being upfront about what I was looking for (or, rather, what I wasn't looking for), I was somehow flicking the panic switch in every man in London. It was infuriating, and such a terrible waste of sexual promise.

And then I met Adrian.

It was at a Christmas party filled with people I didn't know. I was new to the British Christmas party tradition of getting blind drunk, flashing your underwear at everyone and making out with someone completely inappropriate, but I took to it like a duck to water and made it my mission to attend as many as possible. Which is how I ended up in the middle of Kensal Rise with a bunch of my colleague Cathryn's former schoolmates, who had gathered for their annual Christmas

reunion. I had come prepared with a pack of Marlboro Lights and wearing a top that was masquerading as a dress.

I saw his excellent pompadour from across the room and nudged Cathryn.

'Who's he?' I said, topping up her drink.

'Who, him?' she said, putting her hand over the top of her glass and pointing incredulously to the bespectacled object of my attention.

'Yep, the Buddy Holly-alike. Who is he?'

'With the glasses? That's Adrian.'

'Adrian, eh? What's his deal?'

'Ugh. I couldn't stand him at school. So full of himself. Wanted to be a journalist, I think. Last I heard, he was working as a subeditor in Sunderland. Ha.'

'Well, he's here now and I like his glasses. I'm going to make eyes at him.'

'Seriously? Adrian Dean?'

'Christ. Yes, Adrian Dean! I'm not asking *you* to make eyes at him!'

The eyes worked and soon he was bumming cigarettes off me as we smoked in the alley behind the bar, the condensation from our breath mingling with the smoke as we grinned at each other over our cigarettes. By midnight he had kissed me. By 2 a.m. we were in a cab on the way back to my place.

It was three great months of sex on tap with someone I didn't mind spending the before-and-after periods

with – exactly what I wanted. And then came that foolish morning when, in a rush of post-coital goodwill, I committed the grave error of making the man eggs.

Even Adrian, who I thought understood me, ended up convincing himself that I was trying to tie him down.

I thought that dating was meant to be easy; fun, even. Sure, I didn't have all that much experience playing the field, but I'd managed okay in college. Clearly my current seduction methods were failing me. I needed guidance.

And then a plan began to form.

I remembered all those 'Ten Ways to Make Him Yours' articles in *YM* and *Seventeen* when I was a teenager. They were always depressingly similar, encouraging you to share his interests ('If he loves cars, why not take a mechanics course?'), flirt like a madwoman ('Pass him a note in PE asking if he's wearing boxers or briefs!') and generally change your entire personality and appearance around what a fifteen-year-old boy wants from a girlfriend. Tip number ten was always 'Just be yourself!' though how you could manage that while flicking your hair around and brandishing a wrench, I could never figure out. Really, at the end of the day, a fifteen-year-old boy wants a girl with blond hair and large breasts, neither of which I have or will ever possess (which goes a long way to explaining my teenage dating record).

Surely, all those dating guides in the bookstores were

the adult equivalent of teen magazine top-ten lists? They promised to get you your man, no matter the cost, but would their advice actually work? Or would I be left looking like a lunatic? Most importantly, would following these guides result in me having frequent sex with people who were not known psychopaths?

I started to get excited about the prospect. I'd follow a different guide every month and log the results in a journal (this very one!) for scientific posterity. It would be a sociological experiment. Jesus, after a few months of scientific study, I'd practically be Margaret Mead! Maybe not quite, but at least it would be interesting. Much more interesting than scaring off men with eggs and being passed over for *Football* fucking *Focus*.

I immediately texted Lucy.

Me: Have you ever used a dating guide?
Lucy: Why?
Me: Just asking.
Lucy: Why are you asking?
Me: Just tell me!
Lucy: Maybe.
Me: Maybe?
Lucy: Maybe. Yes. Am I a saddo?
Me: Maybe.
Lucy: Fuck off.
Me: Which one?
Lucy: The Rules. Don't judge. Was at low point.
Me: No judgment. Have a new life plan. Tell you when I get back. Xx

I ran to my favorite bookstore, a little gem tucked behind the tube station at South Kensington. It was owned by a sweet, kindly, white-haired man with a Scottish accent so thick you could stick a fork in it. He'd become one of my best people in London, always pressing wonderful books into my hands and mumbling incomprehensibly about them. The bookstore itself was amazing: all tiny nooks and crannies, with a little attic space reserved for used books. I spent most of my lunch hours curled up there, searching for hidden treasure.

I got there ten minutes after closing, but the door was still open. I could see the owner tottering around inside, arranging a table of Seamus Heaney books and singing along to the radio.

He greeted me with a warm grin and a burble that I assumed was a hello.

'What can I do for you, love?' he said. 'Come back for more Austen? Or perhaps some Thackeray?' He started pulling books from the shelves into a pile for me, as usual.

'No thanks, Hamish. I'm actually looking for something a little different today. Do you have any self-help?'

'Ah, love, you don't seem to need any help! What's it for, DIY? You should get yourself a strapping fella to do that!'

'No, it's not that.' Christ, this was embarrassing. 'It's . . . dating. I need dating help.'

He straightened himself up on his cane and gave me

a kind smile. 'I'm sure that isn't true. You're a lovely lass! I bet the boys are falling over themselves to take you out on the town!'

'Not quite,' I mumbled. 'Anyway, it's for research. Scientific research.' I tried to say it with more conviction than I currently felt.

'Ah, I should have known! You working at the Science Museum and all. I think I've got some of those books tucked away in the attic. Give us a shout if you can't find them and I'll go on the hunt.'

I thanked him and ran up the steps to the attic room, which was filled to the rafters with perilous towers of used books. I found the right corner, blew off the dust and sifted through the titles: *Men Are from Mars*, *He's Just Not That Into You*, *Why Men Love Bitches* . . . lovely old Hamish had a great selection.

I heard him clear his throat and call up the stairs. 'Sorry, love, but my seat in the Chandos is getting cold . . .'

'Be right there!' I yelled.

Found it! I pulled it from the stack and ran down the stairs, brandishing it and a ten-pound note triumphantly.

I returned to the apartment, my copy of *The Rules* in hand, and explained the plan to Lucy.

She was silent for a moment, clearly overwhelmed by my shrewd scientific mind.

'Babe, are you bonkers?' she said. 'You're going to use your love life as an experiment?'

'That's right!'

'But . . . that's mental! What happens if you end up seeing someone for more than a month?'

'I can't really see that happening, but if it does, I'll have to change tactics and follow the new guide! So suddenly my behavior will TOTALLY CHANGE and I'll document how that affects them!'

'What happens if the book tells you to do something really weird? What if it says you have to let them wee on you during sex? Or do lots of Japanese bondage or something?'

'Lucy, it's a dating guide, not fringe porn.'

She clutched my arm. 'Lo, I've heard some of those guides tell you to' – her eyes widened – '*stop having sex*.'

I arranged my face into a Zen-like expression. 'I'll just have to draw on my reserves of inner strength.'

'Hmm.' I could tell she was wavering. Her eyes brightened suddenly. 'What happens if you fall in love with one of your test subjects? What then?'

I rolled my eyes. 'I've had enough of that love shit to last me a lifetime. This, my friend, is for the advancement of single women everywhere!'

'In that case, I'm all for it!' she cried, and we raised our glasses to toast.

'To science!'