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Men!

Isabel Losada

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Extract

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THE PRE- AMBLE

WHAT WE ALREADY KNOW

This is not a book for women who think that finding a man is the solution to their problems. If indeed such women still exist. Personally, I'm not convinced that they do.

It is 35 years since Germaine Greer wrote *The Female Eunuch* and urged women to escape from their bondage as unpaid and miserable houseworkers, their brains stultifying through being alone with under-fives all day long, their bodies exhausted and their sexuality passive. Those days, for the majority of women, are long gone. We demand more, we are taking over the workplace, we expect equal pay and, where necessary, we have learned to behave as badly as men have always done.

The women that I know – and they do not represent all women, but I believe that they are the majority – are also thoughtful, empathetic and call themselves spiritual. This means, at the least, that they believe themselves to be responsible for their own state of mind; they have followed the developments of what was once called the New Age Movement; they have learned meditation; they have discovered the benefits of yoga; they eat well, taking care of

their own health; they have forgiven their parents for the mistakes of their childhood; in short, they know who they are and they do not look to men to provide answers for them.

And yet – and yet . . . of course . . . we still want the companionship of men. We still want a good sex life, we still want the balance that naturally occurs when men and women work well together, we still want to care for men and – sometimes, to be cared for. Happy women know and accept all these aspects of ourselves. We want lovers, yes – but often more than this we want brothers, friends and playmates.

So I want to be very clear: this is not about looking for a man to 'make us happy' – I know that no such man exists. I know that happiness is inside me and that I'm the source of it. I even wrote a book on this: *The Battersea Park Road to Enlightenment* is about doing whatever we need to do to take full responsibility for our own happiness and enjoying the process. My next book, *A Beginner's Guide to Changing the World: For Tibet With Love*, was about looking outwards, engaging with the world and making a difference, with kindness and with time. And as I became more and more interested in happiness and contribution as subjects – I noticed a very strange phenomenon in London and everywhere I travelled; women alone – intelligent, happy, confident, dynamic, hard-working, radiant women. It may be partly that the men have abandoned them because the women no longer need looking after. But I don't believe that.

Personally, it's not that I know single and available men who are intimidated, but that I simply don't know any single men. Or not any that I or any of the single women I know would want to date. We are not including alcoholics, or men with other serious addictions or those that are forty and have never travelled or left home. We are talking about the men who can be the companions of the confident, joyful women whom I know. Whom we all know.

So this is the mystery. Where are they? And what are women to do about their absence?

THE QUEST

WELL, SOMEONE HAD TO DO IT, DIDN'T THEY?

Well, someone had to do it, didn't they? Someone had to go out on behalf of all the single women and find some men for us.

There is an enigma – all women know this and one of us has to solve it. I've heard the question every day for years, 'Where are all the interesting men?' Are women who ask this question crazy, unreasonably fussy in their expectations or deluded? Or is the lack of interesting men a reality? And if so, what are we to do about it? I'm not talking about shagging. Most women can find a man that they could have sex with if they chose. That's not the problem. The problem is finding a man you'd like to have dinner with. This turns out to be a useful definition of 'interesting'. It can equally well apply to women. An 'interesting' member of the opposite sex, for the purposes of this project, is one who when you meet them you'd like to have dinner with them and, having had dinner with them you are glad that you had dinner with them and you'd like to see them again.

Oh, and there is a second criterion – they should be single. This word also needs to be defined. Single means not

married, not 'separated' from a partner who is unaware that they are separated, and not living with anyone or in relationship with any other person when that other person believes that they are in a long-term, committed and monogamous relationship. Tall order, huh?

I wish I had a clue how I'm going to do it. Which of course I don't. I'll start where everyone is always telling us to start – all those places that I recoil from in the assumption that a life spent with two of my friends who are contemplative nuns would surely be better than resorting to these options: online dating (cringe), singles' events (surely you have to be desperate?), I will go and visit the dating agencies; I'll interview the experts; I'll explore new territories. I want to go and spend time in all-male environments – with the builders, the bikers, the city financiers – anywhere that's 90 per cent men, to see if I can learn anything about these Martians.

I'm ambitious – I don't want to do this just for me. Of course it would be wonderful if, in the course of writing this book, I meet a man I would like to share a dinner with, my bed with and my life with . . . but I want to do more than that. I want to solve the problem for all of us. I want to be able to tell you, 'OK, so it's true that there are a lot of gay men in our cities (this is great if you are a gay man – but not so great if you are a heterosexual female). But it's no good moaning about it – I've found a place where there are straight men who appreciate women.'

A strange thing happened to me this week. I got on a bus, having made more than my usual effort to present myself, as I was on my way to a professional engagement, and a man smiled at me. Imagine that. I mean, I'm not 21 any more and I have no breast implants. I was confused for a moment, so confused that I forgot to smile back and just walked past in a kind of daze trying to make sense of this extraordinary event. At this moment he turned and said to the man sitting beside him, '*Oh, mais qu'elle est jolie!*' Then it made sense; of course – he was French. I couldn't

remember ever hearing an Englishman turn and say to a friend, 'What an attractive woman.' It just doesn't happen. You may hear a man yell, 'Whoa – nice tits!' but that's not quite the same, is it?

So I'm going out to explore. In a professional and determined way. It's a mission. I shall attempt to demonstrate courage and commitment. I shall be fair and compassionate. I am not anti-men – not at all – but I like them straight, intelligent and uninterested in spectator sports. Am I radical? I will attempt to demonstrate vulnerability and I will practise total honesty. No, I will not practise total honesty – I may lie about my age sometimes. Other than that I will demonstrate total honesty. I shall persevere in the challenge. I will not be downcast. I will keep going until I know where I can find great guys and I can ring up my 99 friends, report to my million readers, 'They do exist girls! Here are the men.'

And – who knows? – I may even be able to pull off the happy ending . . .

Part 1

THE USUAL ROUTES WITH SOME DIVERSIONS

1. YOUR PERFECT MAN IS WAITING TO HEAR FROM YOU

INTERNET DATING AND NOT MEETING GREG

After two days exploring internet dating, I'm ready to abandon the project and research a book on toads. It's absurd. Someone told me, 'Look at Match.com, it's the biggest and best internet dating site,' so I looked. Did I want to send an email to 'Shagamuffin', 'Trev69', 'Monkeyman', 'Bursting41', or 'Ohcrikey' (balding, remaining hair dyed bright orange?) I can tell you that the answer is no.

The whole thing invites judgements. If I feed in that I'd only like to meet people who have been university educated, have no body piercings or tattoos, don't smoke and live within ten miles of London, it informs me that there are no men matching my criteria.

And even then I'm in a bad mood with the whole concept. I don't think any of the men that I've been out with would have matched my criteria on paper. The last man I met that I became really fond of left school at fifteen and a previous boyfriend was bald. But I would never pick a bald man from a picture on the screen. I dated the man because of who he was – so the fact that he was bald didn't matter to me . . . but I don't want to choose a man with no hair.

Listen to me having a rant. These sites are too much. Yesterday – because I have been talking about this research on my website – someone emailed me some links:

www.love.org/christian_dating.htm
www.veggieromance.com
seniorfriendfinder.com
petpeoplefishing.com

I was not happy. I hold my Christian origins very dear to me, but I wouldn't recommend a Christian dating service unless the friend I was recommending it to was part of the Evangelical church, which I am not. The mere idea of it fills me with horror. I almost fell for a Tibetan Buddhist monk last year . . . don't think I'd have met him on a Christian dating site, do you? And then look at this – Veggie romance? They have to be kidding. I am a almost a vegetarian, about 90 per cent, but I do occasionally have some fish or even, if I'm at a friend's house and they have cooked it, some chicken, but the mere idea of a dating site full of vegetarian men makes me want to rush out and buy something dead. I did look – ever ready to be proved wrong . . . but 'Sensitiveman' and 'Naturalguy' were really not going to do it for me. Nor was I going to recommend them to anyone. Are you thinking terrible things about me?

As to SeniorFriendFinder – quite apart from the fact that I don't intend to consider myself 'senior' until I'm well past ninety. Why would I want to define myself that way – but I look and find that 'senior' here means 'over 25' and that the site seems to be mainly for people seeking 'couples or groups'. One day of this kind of research could be enough for me. Steering away from the groups option, I feed in 'male' between thirty and fifty. I am offered 'Bigman': 'Do you need a young man for no strings sexy fun?' or there is 'Hugs37': 'I'm called hugs because I like giving and receiving.' Both have provided photos and, for the first time ever, I can suddenly see a good reason for never having a hug again for the rest of my life.

PetPeopleFishing.com? I love cats – I love dogs – but would I ever want to join 'PetPeople'? Would I ever want to go out with someone who defined themselves as a PetPerson? If someone asked me to define my personality, I believe I could come up with a long list of facts about myself as a product before I would list 'Cat lover'. . . OK, – here goes:

Things I do:

1. Mother
2. Author
3. Activist
4. Campaigner
5. Speaker
6. Actress
7. Broadcaster
8. Singer
9. Presenter
10. Journalist
11. Workshop facilitator
12. Researcher

Things I am

1. Stroppy (this is the first thing that comes to mind right now)
2. Intelligent (it's all relative)
3. Reasonably attractive (ditto)
4. Active (when not sitting at computer all day long)
5. Compassionate (unless on internet dating sites)
6. Affectionate (but not with 'Hugs37')
7. Kind (have discovered my limit today when looking at BaldKevin)
8. Not hugely overweight (for definition of 'hugely overweight, just look at some of the photos on these sites)
9. Spiritual (but don't want to put this word in any boxes)

10. Sexual (but don't want to do it 'Shagamuffin')
11. Independent (please, no men who advertise 'rescue me')
12. Arrogant (obviously, from the above)

Things I like

1. Silence and stillness
2. Intimacy
3. Sri Lankan food
4. Good-quality conversation
5. Books that make me laugh or think differently or both
6. The sea and swimming in it when it's rough and wavy
7. A piano, and a double bass or a guitar and live music without amplifiers
8. Laptop computers that work
9. Huge old trees
10. Stones
11. Mountains. Of all kinds
12. Dawn, dusk, sunshine in the daytime, stars in the night sky

People I like

1. People who love life and live life to the full. Risk takers
2. People who inspire me because they are funny or skilful or well informed or intelligent or musical – people who make me think 'I wish I could be like that'
3. People who are committed to making the world a better place
4. People who love their work, whatever it is
5. People who are good listeners and well as good communicators
6. People who are genuinely interested in other people
7. People who are curious about life and open to new ideas and new experiences

8. People who understand about personal responsibility and don't blame others for their problems
9. People who continue to be interested in learning, whatever their age
10. People who don't watch TV or hardly ever watch TV

Things I'm intolerant of

1. People who smoke – coz it hurts them – and it costs the NHS £982 million a year[1] to treat those with chronic obstuctive pulmonary disease (brought on by smoking)
2. People who are cruel and think that it's OK to behave like that
3. People who watch TV all the time (coz life is short and there is a lot that needs doing)
4. People who are racist, fascist, sexist, xenophobic, homophobic, ageist, or who in general think of 'us' and 'them' and who have never considered the interconnected nature of existence
5. The world of advertising and its desire to convince us that our lives are not OK without 'things'
6. Waste
7. World government leaders not putting political support behind the Dalai Lama and the people of Tibet

(well, OK I know the list is a bit random but I'm writing in the order that it comes to mind)

8. Football fanaticism. It's a game and an exciting one, but I think making it a religion is missing the point
9. Junk food, bad architecture, boring kids in school by not making education relevant to their lives, companies that pollute . . .

Gosh, the list could get long, couldn't it?

Er – being too critical?

Well, there we are – some lists that include my intolerances, but don't include the fact that I'm a cat lover.

[1] National Institute of Clinical Excellence, UK.

There are lots of sites that invite us to put ourselves in some kind of box:

How about – www.soulfishing.com for the black community? www.gefiltefishing.com for the Jewish community? www.picantefishing.com for the Latino community? Fetish? Chubby? Horny? www.GIfishing.com (Love a uniform? they ask) And then there are 'parents' . . . I am a parent – but don't define myself as such.

Why does the whole idea of all these labels make my hair stand on end in horror? I spend my life trying to avoid labels on myself and putting labels on other people. That awful question at parties, 'What do you do?' and the inevitable 'How old are you?' I mean – what does it matter? Some people of thirty or younger are past it. They have made up their minds about things; they have already entered the 'I know what I like – I like what I know' group. They have nothing else to learn and won't learn anything else. Then I have a friend in her eighties who plays the piano like a dream and travels and is full curiosity and has a genuine passion for life and an energy that positively bubbles out of her. She is learning new things every day.

Surely somewhere in the world there must be a good internet dating site, one that attempts to find out who you are rather than just nail you into a kind of label-coffin? I refuse to join any site that sorts me based on my feelings about body piercings, tattoos and star sign.

So, is there such at thing as a good internet dating site? I managed to do a search and the internet seems to think that the leading site in the world is – not surprisingly – one based in America called eHarmony. Harumph – I am still convinced that the words 'good' and 'internet dating site' shouldn't come into the same sentence. Undoubtedly the site reviewing the dating sites is also run by eHarmony. But I thought I'd give it a look. The site offers to find you someone with whom you match up on 29 different criteria and they start you off with a one-hour personality test. As if I can't think of things that I'd rather do with my evening.

But I did say that I wanted discernment – they were certainly offering it.

On every single personal characteristic I had to score myself from one to seven. How warm am I? (7?) How ambitious am I (6?) How modest (1?) How content, humorous, efficient, competitive, self-aware. Hundreds of these questions. What four qualities would friends pick to describe me? Well, if you asked my ex-husband . . .

Then I had the same again but asking about qualities I would like in a partner. Energy level 1–7, Intelligence 1–7 Sex appeal 1–7. Could I just answer 7 for all of them?

Then religion. Which of the world's great religions would I affiliate myself with? I tried to check all of them, but it wouldn't let me. I tried to check just Christianity, Buddhism and 'Spiritual', but it wouldn't let me. So I huffily ticked 'other'.

It was a gruelling session – true or false. 'I dislike some people' (well, doesn't everyone?) 'At times I have raised my voice in anger' – if you know anyone who has raised a teenager as a single parent and never raised their voice in anger please email me on my website. I'd like to meet them.

Interests A–Z. Oh, good grief . . . but does it mean that I won't have to meet people who enjoy 'collecting' and 'car maintenance'? I so hope so – as they would say in the US.

It was exhausting, this questionnaire, but at least it was intelligent. Were they really able to go through my answers and match me up with the perfect person for me, as the smiling pictures of happy couples of all shapes and sizes on the home page of their site showed?

I completed my personality profile, grumpily uploaded a photo, and went to bed. My perfect matches would start emailing me on the morrow.

I opened the email nervously. It didn't really feel like me as, although I had put up a genuine photograph, I had given my mother's name, Elizabeth. But there it was . . . they had found a match for me based on the hour-long personality

profile. The email announced 'Elizabeth and George . . . there is someone we'd like you to meet'. So there I was – part of a couple. George and I had now only to make contact.

I opened George's details nervously. There he stood. My cyber prince charming. On his boat. Or on a boat of some kind. Another picture showed him in shades beside a large motorbike. Mmmm. Very curious. If the boat and the bike were his, I wondered, why would he advertise them? Was he advertising himself or what he owned? If they were not his, then advertising them was misleading. If they were his, then it was unwise. Had he not read that princes should disguise themselves as paupers and, only when they were sure that they were truly loved reveal that they owned a castle. Or a bike or whatever. Still, he lives in California. Things are different in the US. Somehow there it's considered OK – even commendable – to show off about how much money you have. So I'd cut him some slack on this point. Especially as he wasn't overweight or bald.

So now I was to send him some 'closed questions' from a long list they had provided for me. Closed questions are great because you don't have to think. I ask:

'What is your opinion of long-distance relationships?'

'What would you like a lot of: respect, money, fame or power?'

'How many books did you read last year?'

So far so good.

The following day his answers arrive:

'I would think if there is chemistry the two people would want to be together more often than not.'

'Money. But not in a filthy rich way, just enough to be able to travel without concern for having to work.' I smile . . . at least he is honest.

And books? He ticks 'More than 12'.

So far – so good. Then his questions.

'If you met the right person would you be prepared to relocate? Yes, I would.

'How trusting are you?'

These questions are easy when the answers are pre-provided. I choose 'I trust people and am able to forgive them when wronged'. But then he asks, 'How romantic are you?' and I have to leave the proscribed answers – all variations on 'very' or 'not at all' to say, 'To be honest I've always had trouble defining exactly what is meant by "romantic".' We are making progress.

The next stage is a list of 'must haves' and 'can't stands' in which you can list whatever you can't live without or with. George says that he must have someone who isn't afraid of risk and who lives life as an adventure; he says that he must have someone who is good at talking and listening. This is all good. But then I scan his interests and in amongst lots that is good and noble I spot 'bird hunting'. Horror. What is this? The search for women or the desire to kill innocent creatures? I skip the next stage and hit 'fast track'. This will get me through all the politeness, if he agrees, and get me straight to 'open communication'. The following day I see he has accepted. 'Good morning,' he greets me, 'This is a little scary. What about music? Let's say you could only choose three artists but you could take their whole body of work – which would you choose?'

'Hold on a minute,' I say. 'Before we move into art and music, I'd just like to ask . . . what exactly is 'bird hunting'? I see you list it as one of your main interests. Please tell me that you don't mean killing creatures that sing?'

Another day comes and goes and he replies: 'I believe loyalists refer to it as "wing shooting". I believe that the Great Spirit designed us as hunters and we were not meant to graze in fields. We are meant to forage and hunt. It is our way. So to be on a spiritual path and also to connect with our animal nature is not such a bad thing, is it? Besides it's not always the bird who ends up disappointed. Trust me, plenty fly away to sing another day.'

I smile. Do I point out to him that a there is a qualitative difference between disappointed and dead? Perhaps I shouldn't be too caustic.

'I'm afraid I think we have evolved slightly from the hunter state. We don't need to kill to eat and "The Great Spirit" in my understanding also believes that all life is sacred (or at least the little bit of the Great Spirit inside me does). How can I think of getting to know you when I know that creatures that sing on a day when you wake will not sing any more because you woke? And, as the Buddhists say "Once you have taken life from a living creature you can never give it back." You turn something that lives and breathes into a pile of blood and feathers?'

He replies with the same energy.

'To be clear – I don't enjoy the killing. I enjoy the traditions of it . . . the eighty year old shotgun, my English setter and I coming as close to full-on communication as man and dog can. I enjoy the briars and thorns. I enjoy the field and the light on it and I enjoy cleaning the birds and eating them. I enjoy using the feathers to tie flies for fishing. I enjoy the adventure of travelling to a place to hunt. I am probably more of a conservationist than most people you know. I live in a wilderness area of incredible abundance and I despise people who hunt for any animals they cannot eat.'

OK, so he is a commendable huntsman. If there is such a thing. Another day goes by and I reply.

'I'm afraid we are never going to agree. In my mind conservation is not what you are doing. If you enjoy being in nature you can shoot things with a camera. I can think of many ways to spend a day . . . read a story to a child, take your dog for a swim, help to preserve the land that you love . . . or, if all else fails, better to stay in bed than to get up and go and destroy something. If I were there with you I'd want to come out with you and your dog and make noise to warn the birds of your approach and if you did kill one in spite of my efforts I would never want to make love to you again.'

I wanted to add a suggestion: 'Instead of the boat and the bike that I can see in your photos, why not post some snaps

of you grinning and holding dead birds?' But I resisted. Instead I said, 'George, we are never going to agree on this. I never even kill ants. I'm afraid we will have to part. This is the end of my first ever cyber relationship. It's been quick, hasn't it?'

He wrote 'Good luck' and next time I signed on he had hit the close button. For the standard eHarmony reason he had chosen 'I feel our values are too different'. Too right they are. I opened my next match and there stood a man holding a large fish that he had evidently just caught as if to say, 'Look what a big one I've got.'

I know I'm being a hypocrite here because I have eaten fish and chicken in my life. On occasion I still do. I eat chicken very rarely and red meat never, but fish, well yes, I do sometimes eat some fish. I know that I could never pull one out of the water myself – I'd have to be starving before I could take something alive from its element and bang it on the head to eat it. But I still order fish sometimes if I'm in a restaurant. I can argue that George is a more honest man than I am. At least he is aware of the death of the creature and knows that its death is at his hands. Whereas I sit in my nice restaurant in my shiny city, totally apart from nature, with my holier-than-thou attitude . . . I know, I know, it makes no sense; either I should get off my high horse or I should stop eating fish and chicken totally. Very well . . . I shall have to give up chicken and fish totally. I've said that I'll try this before and failed, but if I'm going to be authentic at all, then the time, it seems, has come. If I want people to be consistent and have integrity then I'm going to have to demonstrate it one hundred per cent myself. I can cut everyone else some slack.. But in this area it seems I can't cut myself any. And all this from my first two matches on eharmony.com.

I open up the new match from 'Russ' in Ohio with his very large dead fish trophy and hit 'I don't believe that our values are compatible'. I mean, it's rather sweet that he thinks he can impress a woman with the size of the fish he's

caught. But hasn't he noticed that it's not in any list on the website of qualities that women look for? I go to the next match. Ah – here is a man photographed with a guitar. That's a bit more up the Battersea Park Road to Isabel's heart . . . but then I look at his requirements . . . 'Must want to start a family'. Ah, alas . . . been there, done that; it would take a lot to persuade me to consider having any more babies, much as I love them. And this man has it as a basic requirement. There are so many women out there looking for a man who wants to have children. One of them must have him . . . not me. Do I want to date an electronics salesman who lives in Ohio and doesn't supply a photograph? Nope. Do I want to date 'Randy' from Boise in Idaho who lists as his main interest 'recreational hockey'? No matter how fair I try to be, I just can't see it happening. I can't see me standing beside the hockey pitch shouting, 'Go Randy!'

And there it is again, the problem with all this choosing by label. Of course, if I were to love him first, I'd be very happy to go and stand by the pitch and support his desire to run around in circles, but I wouldn't choose this any more than I would choose a hunter or a 'real estate director'. So maybe we are narrowing it down. Maybe, in theory, I want a man who lives in a city and works in the arts. But that doesn't sound like what I want at all. And what do all the other women that live in cities want? We complain that we don't like city types, but do we really want men that live in the countryside? Can women who watch subtitled films date men who leave blank the question 'What was the last book you read?', presumably because they never read one? Could you live with a man who never reads books? It is all very confusing.

Then one day 'Greg' arrives in my in tray as a perfect match for me. His personality and mine have been put through the rigorous personality profile of eHarmony and they have decided that if Greg and I were to fall in love it would be

'for all the right reasons'. Greg lives in Los Angeles, California, is 6 feet tall and gives his profession as 'translator and filmmaker'. But – wait for it – Greg is good looking. I almost typed god looking. Yes – not too many marks to Freud here. Greg has two head shots . . . obviously proper, professional studio head shots. What is instantly noticeable is that he has hair. And he looks confident but slightly cheeky. He has a strong bone structure, perfect teeth (of course), smiling brown eyes and a general 'don't you want to spend the rest of your life with me?' look about him.

I scan down the personality review. One of the questions Greg has had to answer is what he most passionate about. He says that he is passionate about movies, skiing, languages, travel, theatre, art, reading and eating out. The most important thing that he looks for in a person is 'intelligence'. Interests that their matching system has decided that we share are live music, friendship and conversation. The things that he can't live without include 'challenging projects that I feel passionate about', good friends and 'physical activity', ha ha. Suddenly I'm paying attention.

In fact, I'm in a panic. I look at the photo I've uploaded and quickly upload two more. I even upload the photo of myself shaking hands with the Dalai Lama. Well, I figure I'm allowed to be proud of it. I think – well, there can't be many photos with His Holiness (HH) in them. As I sit looking at his photo in stunned disbelief at how gorgeous he is and wondering what he's doing on this dating site, my friend Mark, who is staying, walks by. 'He's a good-looking bastard,' he says.

'Mmm, I'm looking forward to his first communication.'

'He won't email. He's clearly not real and let's face it . . . if he was, he wouldn't be interested in you.'

'What? He's real. He's a film director. eHarmony says we are a perfect match.'

'Then he'd be dating film stars ten years younger than him. You're too old. You're frumpy. You're not in Greg's league.'

'Too old????'

'If you go to the fruit stall in the market you aren't going to look at the back where all the wrinkly, mouldy ones are. Well, are you? You're going to pick the fresh, plump, juicy ones at the front.'

This was beyond the pale. I looked at his age. Four years younger than I am. (You may remember that I have refused to tell you my age on grounds that I will incriminate myself.) But I have been honest on the site. Shit.

'He won't reply for the same reason that you don't want to date a man ten years older than you.'

'I wouldn't mind. And anyway, I'm only four years older than him. I'm looking for an interesting single man to have dinner with. I'm in New York in a few months. We could email and then meet for dinner, for goodness sake. I might make him laugh. Or something.'

'That's not the point. You won't hear from him.'

I ignored him and sent my closed questions. I decided I'd be a little bit girly and avoid the 'Do you prefer, respect, money fame or power?' and asked some more demure questions. 'When in a relationship, how much personal space do you generally find you need?', 'How many books did you read last year?', 'What is your opinion of a committed long-distance relationship?' and 'What is your opinion of traditional gender roles.' The closed questions are a little bit naff, but I didn't want to look too keen and press 'fast track' right away, which would have led me straight to emailing. Besides which, I could have fun doing closed questions with Greg. Don't want to be hasty.

'Anyway, I don't believe he exists,' Mark taunted me. 'You don't have a cat in hell's chance of getting an email from him that says anything apart from 'piss off, weirdo'.

So, a vote of confidence from my friend Mark, then. But I'm ever the optimist. I chose to believe that he did exist. Maybe he works as a translator in LA and is bored of drop-dead gorgeous women ten years younger than him. Maybe he was looking for something 'interesting'. Sigh.

So, I waited. Greg became a celebrity in the house. 'Has Greg emailed?' Mark said every time he called. I minded at first. After all, the other matches had all replied. I had 'requests for communication' from Tom in Charleston, Dan in Denver, Michael in Coppell, John in Delroy, Hubert in Mansfield, Norm in West Chester, Wayne in Honolulu, William in Tallahassee, Mehran in Vancouver and Randy in Lancaster. (No 'matches' at all from eHarmony from anyone this side of the pond.) But if all those men could reply, why not Greg? I would wake up in the morning and find myself checking to see whether Greg had emailed. No Greg. I'd go out for the day and come home in the evening, hope springing eternally. No Greg. He looked at me from the matches list – his gorgeous bone structure taunting me from among the very overweight characters with baseball caps and sunglasses carrying cats or cuddly toys. But no email from Greg.

I wanted to prove Mark's cynicism wrong and I felt that it was only fair that Greg help me with this by getting in touch. Perhaps if I pressed 'send/receive, one more time, an email would appear. But no email from Greg. I'd go away for the weekend and then come back. But no email from Greg. So there it was in my first two weeks – a microcosm of the entire dating world. An abundance of men that were fifteen years too old for me and listed 'my back yard' among their interests – literally I mean. A reasonable man that I could have considered but who I had 'irreconcilable differences with' and one who I'd really love to meet but who was evidently never going to reply. And, despite Mark's scathing comments, I moped – my photos really weren't *that* bad.

Then one day I signed on and found that Greg had communicated. He had 'closed' the matching process between us . . . as I had done with so many of the others. There were standard boxes to tick and he had ticked two of them: 'I have too much going on in my life right now' and 'I am pursuing another match'. Mark laughed, 'You bet he is – one who is ten years younger than you are.'

And the strange thing is that I minded. I minded about a rejection from a man I'd never met on the other side of the Atlantic. I'd stuck up his photo on the pinboard and his name had become familiar in the house as an example of all that was most good and most bad about internet dating: I was supposed to be 'experimenting' with internet dating and 'doing research' but I still minded. I sat for a while and thought about all the women who had not had children and had never been married and who wanted to meet men more badly than I did.

This internet dating had a faceless cruelty about it that I didn't like. I didn't like being selected by age before any other criteria – or selecting men that way, either. I didn't like rejecting men who looked too old when maybe, if I met them, they'd be lovely. I didn't want to do this any more. I had two friends who had spent months trawling the UK sites, so I spent two weeks playing with those, too. But it's more of the same, isn't it? Absurdly time-consuming and rather grim. In this way it goes against my key philosophy that it's important to spend our time joyfully – internet dating sites just aren't fun. I wanted to find a different way to meet men . . . that would involve actually meeting men.