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How to be Single

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RULE

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Make Sure You Have Friends

How Georgia Is Single

"I JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN! NOW THAT I'M SINGLE I JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN! YOU SINGLE PEOPLE ARE ALWAYS HAVING FUN!! WHEN ARE WE GOING TO GO OUT AND HAVE FUN?!!!"

She is screaming, screaming at me on the phone. "I WANT TO KILL MYSELF, JULIE. I DON'T WANT TO LIVE WITH THIS MUCH PAIN. REALLY. I WANT TO DIE. YOU HAVE TO MAKE ME FEEL LIKE EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE OKAY! YOU HAVE TO TAKE ME OUT AND REMIND ME THAT I'M YOUNG AND ALIVE AND CAN HAVE LOTS AND LOTS OF FUN! OR GOD KNOWS WHAT I MIGHT DO!!!" Dale, Georgia's husband, had left her for another woman two weeks ago and she was obviously a tad upset.

The call came at 8:45 in the morning. I was at the Starbucks on Forty-fourth and Eighth, balancing a cardboard tray of coffees in one hand, my cell phone and this conversation in the other, my hair in my face, grande mochaccinos tilting toward my left breast, all while paying the nice young twentysomething at the cash register. I'm a multitasker.

I had already been up for four hours. As a publicist for a large New York publishing house, part of my job is to cart our writers around from interview to interview as they promote their books. On this morning I was responsible for thirty-one-year-old writer Jennifer Baldwin. Her book, *How to Keep Your Husband Attracted to You During Pregnancy*, became an instant bestseller. Women all around the country couldn't buy the book fast enough. Because, of course, how to keep your husband attracted to you during your pregnancy should be the main concern for a woman during that very special time in her life. So this week we were making the prestigious morning show rounds. Today, *The View*, *Regis and Kelly*. WPIX, NBC, and CNN, so

far that day, ate it up. How could you not love a segment showing eight-months-pregnant women how to strip for their men? Now the author, her personal publicist, her literary agent, and the agent's assistant were all anxiously waiting for me in the Town Car that was parked outside. I held the lifeline to their caffeine fix.

"Do you really feel like you want to kill yourself, Georgia? Because if you do, I'll call 911 right now and get an ambulance over there." I'd read somewhere that you should take all suicide talk seriously, even though I think all she was really doing was making sure I would take her out drinking.

"FORGET THE AMBULANCE, JULIE, YOU'RE THE ORGANIZER, THE ONE WHO MAKES THINGS HAPPEN -- CALL THOSE SINGLE FRIENDS OF YOURS, THE ONES YOU ARE ALWAYS HAVING FUN WITH -- AND LET'S GO OUT AND HAVE FUN!"

As I continued my balancing act toward the car, I thought about how tired that thought made me. But I knew Georgia was going through a difficult period and it would probably get much worse before it got better.

It's a tale as old as time. Dale and Georgia had kids, stopped having regular sex, and began fighting. They became distant, and then Dale told Georgia he was in love with a twenty-seven-year-old whore gutter trash samba teacher, that he met at Equinox. Call me crazy, but I'm thinking hot sex might have had something to do with this. Also, and I don't want to be disloyal, and I would never even suggest Georgia was at fault in any way because Dale is an asshole, and we hate him now, but I can't resist saying, Georgia completely took Dale for granted.

Now, to be fair, I am particularly judgmental about the Married

Women Who Take Their Husbands for Granted Syndrome. When I see a very wet man hold an umbrella out to his wife after he has just walked five blocks to pick up the car and drive it back to the restaurant and she doesn't even say thank you, honestly, it makes me very cranky. So I noticed that Georgia took Dale for granted, particularly when she would talk to him in that tone. The tone that you can dress up and call what you want, but the truth is it's plain old-fashioned contempt. The tone is disgust. The tone is impatience. The tone is a vocal eye roll. It is the undeniable proof that marriage is a horribly flawed institution let out in a single "I told you, the popcorn popper is on the shelf over the refrigerator." If you were able to fly around the world, collecting the tone as it is let out of all the disgruntled married men's and women's mouths, cart it back to some desert in Nevada, and release it -- the earth would literally sink into itself, imploding in sheer global irritation.

Georgia talked to Dale in that tone. And of course that wasn't the only reason for their split. People are irritating and that's what marriage is: good days and bad days. And, really, what do I know? I'm thirty-eight years old and I have been single for six years. (Yes, I said six.) Not celibate, not out of commission, but definitely, fully, officially, here-goes-another-holiday-season-alone single. So in my imaginings, I would always treat my man right. I would never speak harshly to him. I would always let him know that he was desired and respected and my number one priority.

And I would always look hot and I'd always be sweet, and if he asked, I would grow a long fishtail and gills and swim with him in the ocean topless.

So now Georgia has gone from semicontented wife and mother to a somewhat suicidal single mother with two children. And she wants to party.

Something must happen when you become single again. A self-preservation instinct must kick in that resembles having a complete lobotomy. Because Georgia suddenly has traveled back in time to when she was twenty-eight and now just wants to go out "to some bars, you know, to meet guys," forgetting that we are actually in our late thirties and some of us have been doing that without a break for years now. And frankly, I don't want to go out and meet guys. I don't want to spend an hour using one of the many hot appliances I own to straighten my hair so I can feel attractive enough to go out drinking. I want to go to bed early so I can get up early so I can make my smoothie and go out and run in the morning. I am a marathoner. Not in the literal sense; I run only three miles a day. But as a single person. I know how to pace myself. I am aware of how long a run it can be. Georgia, of course, wants to line up the babysitters and start sprinting.

"IT'S YOUR OBLIGATION TO HAVE FUN WITH ME! I DON'T KNOW ANY OTHER SINGLE PERSON EXCEPT YOU! YOU HAVE TO GO OUT WITH ME. I WANT TO GO OUT WITH YOUR SINGLE FRIENDS! YOU GUYS ARE ALWAYS GOING OUT!! NOW THAT I'M SINGLE, I WANT TO GO OUT TOO!!!"

She is also forgetting that she is the same woman who would always look at me with such pity when I would talk about my single life and exclaim in one breath "OhmyGodthat'ssosadIwanttodie."

But Georgia would do something that all my other happily married or coupled friends would never even think of doing: she would pick up the phone and organize a dinner party and scrounge up some single men for me to meet. Or she'd go to her pediatrician and ask if he knew any eligible bachelors. She was actively involved in my search for the Good Man, no matter how comfortable and self-satisfied she might have felt herself. And that is a rare and beautiful quality. And that is why on that Friday morning, as I was mopping up coffee from my white shirt, I agreed to call up three of my other single friends and see if they would go out and party with my newly single, slightly hysterical friend.

How Alice Is Single

Georgia is right. We're having so much fun, my single friends and I. Really. Oh my God, being single is hilarious. For instance, let me tell you about the sidesplitting uproariousness that is Alice. For a living, she gets incredibly underpaid to defend the rights of the impoverished people of New York City -- against callous judges, ruthless prosecutors, and an overburdened system in general. She has dedicated herself to trying to help the underdog by bucking the system, beating the man, and guarding our Constitution. Oh yeah, and every once in a while she has to defend a rapist or murderer that she knows is guilty and whom she often succeeds in putting back onto the streets. Oops. You win some, you...win some.

Alice is a Legal Aid attorney. While the Constitution guarantees the right to a lawyer, it unfortunately can't promise that you'll be defended by Alice. First of all, she is gorgeous. Which, of course, is superficial, who cares. Because those jurors sitting in that drab industrial green jury room with the fluorescent lighting, and that eighty-year-old judge presiding over the general misery of it all, well, they'll take whatever aesthetic pleasure they can find. And when redheaded, sexy Alice talks to you with her deep, soothing voice and her thick, I'm-one-of-the-people-but-much-more-adorable Staten Island-Italian accent, you would drive into Sing Sing and break out every last prisoner, if that's what she asked of you.

She was so startling in her legal acumen and plain old-fashioned charisma that she became the youngest law professor at NYU. By day Alice was saving the world, and by night she was inspiring yuppie born-and-bred law students to forget their dreams of nice Manhattan co-ops and Hampton summer shares to go into Legal Aid law and do something important. She was outrageously successful. She made insubordination and compassion cool again. She got them to actually believe that helping people was more important than making money.

She was a Goddess.

Yeah. I say was, because I'm kind of lying. The truth hurts too much. Alice is no longer a Legal Aid attorney.

"Okay, this is the only time I believe in the death penalty." Alice, being a fantastic friend, was helping me transport books from my office on Fiftieth Street and Eighth Avenue to a book signing on Seventeenth Street. (The book was *The Idiot's Guide to Being an Idiot* and was, of course, a big hit.)

"The only exception to the rule is any man who goes out with a thirty-three-year-old woman until she's thirty-eight and then discovers he has commitment issues; who gives that woman the impression that he has no problem with marriage and being with her for the rest of her life; who keeps telling her it's going to happen, until finally, one day he tells her that he doesn't think 'marriage is really for him.' " Alice put her fingers in her mouth and let out a whistle that could stop traffic. A cab veered over to pick us up.

"Pop the trunk, please," Alice said, forcefully grabbing a box of the Idiot books from my arms and throwing them in the trunk.

"That was shitty," I conceded.

"It was more than shitty. It was criminal. It was a crime against my ovaries. It was a felony against my biological time clock. He stole five of my precious childbearing years from me and that should be considered grand larceny of motherhood and be punishable by hanging." She was ripping each box out of my hands and hurling them now. I thought it best to let her finish this on her own. When she was done, we walked to opposite sides of the cab to get in and she continued talking to me over the cab roof without taking a breath.

"I'm not going to take this lying down. I'm a powerful woman, I'm in control. I can make up for lost time, I can."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I'm going to quit my job and start dating." Alice got into her side of the cab and slammed the door.

Confused, I sank into the cab. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Union Square Barnes and Noble," Alice barked to the cabdriver. Then to me, "That's right. I'm going to sign up for every online service, I'm going to send out a mass email to all my friends to set me up with any single guys they know. I'm going to go out every night and I'm going to meet someone fast."

"You're quitting your job to date?" I tried to say this with the least amount of horror and judgment in my voice.

"Exactly." She kept nodding her head vigorously, as if I knew just what she was talking about. "I'll keep teaching, I have to make some money. But basically, yeah, it's my new job. You heard me."

So now my dear do-gooder Superwoman, Xena the Warrior Princess, Erin Brockovich, friend Alice, is still spending all her time and energy trying to help the underdog. But this time the underdog is herself: a thirty-eight-year-old single woman in New York City. She's still trying to stick it to "the man." But this time the man is Trevor, who took up all that precious time of hers and has now made her feel old, unlovable, and frightened.

And when Alice is asked what she does with all her newly free time that she once used to help keep young, first-time offenders away from Rikers and imminent horrifying physical abuse, she often goes into this little speech: "Besides the Internet, and the fix-ups, I just make sure I go to everything I get invited to, every conference or luncheon or dinner party. No matter how shitty I feel. Remember when I had that really bad flu? I got out of the house and went to a singles night at New York Theatre Workshop. The night after my hand surgery I took some Percocet and went to that huge benefit for the Central Park Conservancy. You never know what night it will be when you meet the man who's going to change your life. But then I also have hobbies. I purposely do what I love to do, because you know, when you least expect it, that could be when you meet someone."

"When you least expect it?" I asked, during one of Alice's diatribes. "Alice, you have decided to quit your job to dedicate your life to meeting someone. How can you ever, ever least expect it?"

"By staying busy. By doing interesting things. I kayak in the Hudson, rock climb at Chelsea Piers, take carpentry classes at Home Depot, which you should totally do with me, by the way, I made an amazing cabinet, and I'm also thinking about taking this sailing course at the South Street Seaport. I'm keeping busy doing things I find

interesting, so that I can trick myself into forgetting that I'm really just trying to look for guys. Because you can't look desperate. That's the worst."

As she is telling people this, she often comes across as a little deranged, particularly because she's usually chain-popping Tums as she says all this. Her indigestion problems stem, I believe, from a little acid reflux condition called "I'm terrified of being alone."

So, of course, who else would I call first when I needed to go out with a bunch of girlfriends and "have fun" than Alice, who is basically a professional at it now. She now knows all the bartenders, doormen, maitre d's, bars, clubs, out-of-the-way places, tourist hangouts, dives, and happening scenes in New York City. And naturally, Alice was ready to go.

"I'm on it," she said. "Don't you worry. We'll make sure tomorrow night, Georgia has the best time of her life."

I hung up the phone, relieved. I knew I could count on Alice, because no matter how Alice's life might have changed, she still loved a good cause.

How Serena Is Single

"It's too smoky, no way."

"You don't even know where we're going."

"I know, but it's going to be too smoky. Every place is too smoky."

"Serena, there's a smoking ban in New York; you can't smoke in bars."

"I know, but it still seems too smoky. And it's always too loud at these places."

We are sitting at the Zen Palate -- the only place I have ever met Serena at in the past three years. Serena doesn't like to go out. Serena also doesn't like to eat cheese, gluten, nightshade vegetables, nonorganic vegetables, and pineapple. None of it agrees with her blood type. If you haven't guessed, Serena is very, very thin. She is one of those very pretty, waiflike blond girls you see in yoga classes in every major city across America. She is a vegetarian chef for a New York celebrity family, about whom I'm not allowed to speak due to a confidentiality agreement Serena made me sign so that she wouldn't feel guilty about breaking the confidentiality agreement she signed with her employer when she gossiped to me about them. Really. But let's just say for the purposes here, that their names are Robert and Joanna, and their son's name is Kip. And to be honest, Serena doesn't say anything bad about them at all; they treat her really well and seem to appreciate her gentle spirit. But by God, when Madonna comes over for lunch and makes a dig about Serena's cooking, Serena has to be able to tell someone. She's only human.

Serena is also a student of Hinduism. She believes in equanimity in all things. She wants to see divine perfection in all of life, even the fact that she literally hasn't had a

date or sex in four years. She sees this as perfection, the world showing her that she needs to work on herself more. For how can you really be a true partner to someone until you are a fully realized human being yourself?

So Serena has worked on herself. She has worked on herself to such an extent that she has actually become a human maze. I pity the man who ever attempts to enter the winding corridors and dead-end tunnels that are her dietary restrictions, meditation schedule, new age workshops, yoga classes, vitamin regimes, and distilled water needs. If she works on herself any more, she will become a shut-in.

Serena is that friend you always see alone; the one whom no one else knows. The one who, if you ever mention her in passing, prompts your other friends to say, "Serena? You have a friend named Serena?" But things weren't always like this. I met Serena in college and she used to be just like everyone else. She was always a tad obsessive-compulsive, but back then it was a quirk and not a lifestyle choice. All through her twenties she would meet guys and go out. And she had a long-term boyfriend for three years as well. Clyde. He was really sweet and was crazy about her, but Serena always knew he wasn't the one. She sort of settled into a nice routine with him -- and if you haven't guessed, Serena does enjoy her routines. So we encouraged her not to lead him along -- never dreaming that he might be the last real relationship for the rest of her wheat-free life. And after Clyde she still managed to date -- not aggressively so, but whenever something came up. But around thirty-five, when she never found anyone who truly interested her, she started focusing on other aspects of her life. Which, to be fair, is what many of the self-help books that I help publicize tell women to do. These books also tell you to love yourself. In fact, if you had to boil every self-help book down to two words, it would be "love yourself." I can't tell you why, but this irritates me immensely.

So Serena started focusing on other things, and thus began the classes and crazy diet stuff. Unlike Alice, at least in terms of dating, Serena decided to go quietly into that good night. It's a slippery slope, the decision just to let go of the dream of love in your life. Because if done well, it can make you relax, enjoy your life, and actually allow your inner light to shine brighter and stronger than ever before. (Yes, I am talking about someone's inner light -- we are dealing with Serena right now, after all.) But in my opinion, that strategy, if followed incorrectly or for too long, can make your light go out, slowly, day by day. You can become sexless and cut off. Even though I think it might be extreme to quit your job to start dating, I don't think you can ever just sit back and let love just find you. Love isn't that clever. Love isn't actually all that concerned about you. I think love is out there finding people whose lights are burning so brightly that you could actually see them from the space shuttle. And frankly, somewhere between the high-colonics and the African dance classes, Serena's light went out.

But still, she has a calming effect on me. She is capable of listening to me vent about how much I hate my job, with the patience of Gandhi. Besides the books I have already mentioned, I have helped publicize such tomes as *The Clock Is Ticking! How to Meet and Marry the Man of Your Dreams in Ten Days*, *How to Know if Your Man Really Loves You*, and the runaway hit *How to Be Lovely* (it's supposedly the secret to all feminine happiness).

I grew up in New Jersey, not so terribly far away, just a bridge or a tunnel from the city of my dreams. I moved here to be a writer, then I thought I might be a documentary filmmaker, then I even took a few courses in anthropology, thinking I might move to Africa and study the Masai warriors or some other almost-extinct tribe. I am fascinated by our species, and loved the idea of reporting on them in some way. But I realized I inherited a strong practical streak from my father. I liked indoor plumbing, and knowing I had health insurance. So I got a job in publishing.

But now, the novelty of being able to afford groceries had definitely lost its initial thrill. And throughout all my complaining, Serena listens quietly.

"Why don't you just quit?"

"And do what? Get another job in publicity? I hate publicity. Or be unemployed? I'm too dependent on a steady paycheck to be that freespirited."

"Sometimes you have to take a risk."

If Serena was thinking I was in a rut, I knew things must be really bad. "Like what?" I asked.

"Like -- didn't you always say you wanted to write?"

"Yes. But I don't have a big enough ego to be a writer."

In my professional life, I was a bit stuck. My "voice of reason," so relied on by others, only caused me to talk myself out of pretty much everything. But every Friday, Serena would listen to me bitch about my work frustrations as if it were the first time I was bringing it up.

So I thought, why not? My friends have always been curious about her. Why not try to convince her to go out?

"The chances of any of us going out tomorrow night and meeting the man of our dreams is practically zero. So why bother?" Serena asked as she took another bite of her tempeh burger.

In terms of the facts, Serena has a point. I have been going out at night in the hopes of meeting the one guy that's going to adore me for the rest of my life. Let's say I've been doing this for two or three times a week for, oh, fifteen years. I have met men and dated, but clearly, as of today, not the guy that gets written down in my big book of life as "The One." That adds up to a hell of a lot of nights out not meeting the man of my dreams.

I know, I know, we weren't just going out to meet men. We were going out to have fun, to celebrate being single and being sort of young (or at least not yet old) and alive and living in the best city in the world. It's just funny how when you finally do meet someone and begin dating, the first thing you both do is start staying home to

snuggle on the couch. Because going out with your friends was simply that much fun.

So I couldn't really argue with Serena. The whole concept of "going out" is somewhat flawed. But I continued my plea. "We're not going out to meet guys. We are just going out to go out. To show Georgia that it's fun to just go out. To be out in the world, eating, drinking, talking, laughing. Sometimes something unexpected happens and sometimes, most of the time, you just go home. But you go out, you know, to go out. To see what might happen. That's the fun of it."

The argument for the benefits of spontaneity and the unknown was usually not the way to Serena's heart, but for some reason, she agreed.

"Fine. But I don't want it to be anywhere too smoky or too noisy. And make sure they have a vegetable plate on the menu."

How Ruby Is Single

And then, there's Ruby.

It was Saturday, at two in the afternoon, and I had come over to Ruby's apartment to try to recruit her into going out that night -- and because I knew she might not have gotten out of bed yet.

Ruby opened the door in her pajamas. Her hair was severely matted, almost in a predreadlocked state of knots.

"Did you get out of bed today?" I asked, worried.

"Yes. Of course. Right now," she said, offended. She proceeded to walk back into her bedroom. Her apartment was impeccably neat. None of your cliché telltale depression signs, such as moldy ice cream cartons, half-eaten doughnuts, or weeks of dirty laundry strewn around. She was a very tidy depressive. It gave me hope.

"How are you feeling today?" I asked, following her into her bedroom.

"Better. When I woke up he wasn't the first thing I thought about." She crawled back into her very fluffy, downy, flowery bed and pulled the covers around her. It looked really comfortable. I was starting to think about taking a nap myself.

"Great!" I said, knowing I was about to hear much more than that. Ruby is an adorable, long-haired brunette, a perfectly curvy, feminine creature of soothing tones and tender words. And Ruby likes to talk about her feelings.

She sat up. "My first thought this morning was 'I feel okay.' You know what I mean -- that moment before you remember who you are and what the actual facts of your life are? My first thought, in my gut, in my body, was 'I feel okay.' I haven't felt like that in a long time. Usually, you know, I open my eyes and I already feel like shit. Like in my sleep I was feeling like shit, and waking up was just an extension of that, you

know? But this morning, my first thought was 'I feel okay.' As if my body wasn't, you know, housing any more sadness."

"That's awesome," I said, cheerfully. Maybe things aren't as bad as I thought.

"Yeah, well, of course, once I remembered everything, then I started crying and couldn't stop for three hours. But I think it was an improvement, you know? It made me see that I was getting better. Because Ralph can't stay in my memory so strongly, he just can't. Soon I'll wake up and it'll take me three whole minutes to start crying about him. And then fifteen minutes. And then an hour, then a whole day, and then I'll finally be through this, you know?" She looked as if she was going to start crying again.

Ralph was Ruby's cat. He died of kidney failure three months ago. She has been keeping me updated on the physical sensations of her profound depression every day since. This is particularly difficult for me because I have absolutely no idea why anyone would pour all their emotional

energy into something that can't even give you a back rub. And not only that, but I feel superior about it. I believe anyone with a pet is actually weaker than I. Because when I ask somebody why they love their pet so much, they invariably say something like, "You just can't believe the amount of unconditional love Beemie gives me." Well, guess what. I don't need unconditional love, how about that? I need conditional love. I need someone who can walk on two legs and form sentences and use tools and remind me that that was the second time in a week that I yelled at a customer service person over the phone when I didn't get my way and I may want to look into that. I need to be loved by someone who can fully comprehend that when he sees me get locked out of my apartment three times in one month, that that may very well be the Thing About Me That Is Never Going to Change. And he loves me anyway. Not because it's an unconditional love, but because he actually truly knows me and has decided that my fascinating mind and hot bod are worth perhaps missing a flight or two because I forgot my driver's license at home.

But that's not really the point right now. The point here is that Ruby refuses to step out for a cup of coffee, go shopping, or even take a walk with me, because Ruby is a disaster at handling disappointment. Particularly of the romantic variety. Whatever good times she has with some fellow, it will never be worth the amount of pain and torture she puts herself through when it doesn't work out. The math of it simply doesn't add up. If she dates someone for three weeks, and then they break up, she'll spend the next two months driving herself and everyone around her crazy.

Because I'm an expert on the emotional MRI of Ruby, I can tell you exactly what happens during her descent. She will meet someone, a man, say, as opposed to a feline. She will like him. She will go out with him. Her heart will be full of the possibility and excitement that comes with finally finding someone you actually like who is available, kind, decent, and who seems to like you back.

As I said before, Ruby is attractive; very soft, very feminine. She can be inquisitive and attentive, and a great conversationalist. And when she meets men, they like her

for all these reasons. Ruby is actually really good at the dating part of dating, and when she is in a relationship, she is clearly in her element.

However, this is New York, this is life, and this is dating. Things often don't work out. And when they don't, when Ruby gets rejected, for whatever reason it may be, and however the bad news is delivered, a process begins. She is usually fine at the Moment of Disappointment. Like when this guy Nile broke up with her because he wanted to get back together with his ex-girlfriend. At the moment of impact, she is philosophical about it. A burst of sanity and self-esteem washes over her, and she tells me that she knows that it just means he wasn't the one, and she can't take it personally and it's his loss. And then a few hours go by and time will push her further away from that moment of clarity and she will start to slip into the Crazy Pit. Her beloved, whom she once saw at normal size, starts growing larger and larger and larger, and in a matter of hours he becomes the Mount Everest of desirability and she is inconsolable. He was the best thing ever to happen to her. There will never be anyone as good as him ever again. Nile did the most powerful thing he could do to Ruby -- he rejected her and now he is EVERYTHING and she is nothing.

I've gotten so used to watching Ruby go through this, that I make a point of being around her during those critical few hours after a rejection, to see if I can stop her at the top of the stairs down to Crazy. Because, let me tell you, once she goes down, there's no telling when she's going to come back up. And she doesn't like to sit there alone. Ruby likes to call up her friends and describe in vivid detail, for hours, what it's like in the basement of broken dreams. The wallpaper, the upholstery, the floor tiles. And there is nothing we can do. We just have to wait it out.

So you can imagine that after a few years of these ups and downs, whenever I get the call from Ruby that she has "met this great guy" or the second date went "really, really well," I'm not necessarily jumping for joy. Because, again, the math is simply not promising. If three weeks can add up to two months of tears, imagine how terrified I am when Ruby celebrates her four-month anniversary with someone. If she ends up breaking up with someone after a few years of living together, well, I don't think at this point there are enough years left in her life to get over him.

Which is why she decided to get Ralph. Ruby was tired of being disappointed. And as long as she kept her windows closed and doors not ajar, Ralph would never leave her. And Ruby would never have to be disappointed again. But Ruby didn't know about feline chronic renal failure. And now, well, now Ralph was the best cat there ever was. Ralph made her happier than any animal or human could have ever possibly made her and she has no idea how she will ever live without him. She still manages to work. She's got her own business as an executive recruiter, and she has clients who rely on her to get their asses jobs. And thank God for them, because she will always get out of bed to help someone in need of a good nonlateral job placement. But a Saturday afternoon is much different. Ruby isn't budging.

Until I told her about Georgia. How her husband left her for a samba instructor and she's devastated and wants to go out and feel good about life. Then, Ruby understood completely. Ruby understood that there are moments when no matter how badly you feel, it's your duty to get out of the house and help deceive a newly

single person into believing that everything is going to be okay. Ruby knew, intuitively, that this was just such a night.

How I'm Single

Let's be honest. I'm not doing it any better. I date, I meet men at parties and at work, or through friends, but things never seem to "work out." I'm not crazy, I don't date crazy men. Things just don't "work out." I look at couples walking down the street and I want to shake them, to beg them to answer my question, "How did you guys figure that out?" It has become the Sphinx for me, the eternal mystery. How do two people ever find each other in this city and "work out"?

And what do I do about it? I get upset. I cry. I stop. And then I cheer up and go out and be absolutely charming and have a great time as often as I can. I try to be a good person, a good friend, and a good member of my family. I try to make sure there isn't some unconscious reason why I'm still single. I keep going.

"You're single now because you're too snobby." That's Alice's answer every time the subject comes up. Meanwhile, I don't see her married to the handsome gentleman working at the fruit stand on the corner of Twelfth and Seventh who seems to have taken quite a shine to her. She is basing this judgment on the fact that I refuse to date online. In the good old days, online dating was considered a hideous embarrassment, something that no one would be caught dead admitting to. I loved that time. Now the reaction you will get from people when they hear that you're single and not doing some form of online dating is that you must not really want it that bad. It has become the bottom line, the litmus test for how much you're willing to do for love. As if your Mr. Right is definitely, absolutely guaranteed to be online. He's waiting for you and if you're not willing to spend the 1,500 hours, 39 coffees, 47 dinners, and 432 drinks to meet him, then you just don't want to meet him badly enough and you deserve to grow old and die alone.

"I don't think you're really open to love yet. You're not ready." That's Ruby's answer. I'm not even going to dignify it with a response -- except to say, I didn't know that finding love had become something equivalent to becoming a Jedi Knight. I didn't know there were years of psychic training, metaphysical trials to endure, and rings of fire to jump through before I could get a date for my cousin's wedding in May. And yet, I know women who are so out of their minds they might as well be barking like dogs, who still find men who adore them, men whom they, in their madness, feel they are in love with. But no matter.

My mother thinks I'm single because I like having my independence. But she rarely weighs in on the subject. She comes from the generation of women who didn't think they had any other option but to get married and have children. There were no other choices for her. So she thinks it's just dandy that I'm single and that I don't have to rely on a man. I don't think my mother and father had a particularly happy marriage and after my father died, she was one of those widows who finally got to come into her own -- the classes, the vacations, the bridge and book clubs. When I was still just a girl, she thought she was doing me a great service, giving me this wonderful gift of

reminding me that I don't need a man to be happy. I can do anything I want, be anyone I want to be, without a man.

And now...I don't have the heart to tell her that I'm not really happy being single, and if you want to be someone's girlfriend or wife, and you happen to be straight, you kind of do need a man, sorry, Mom, because then I know she'd worry. Mothers do not like to see their children sad. So I steer the conversation away from my love life and she doesn't ask, both of us not wanting to reveal or know about any pesky unhappiness.

"Oh please," Serena -- who, among my friends has known me the longest -- said. "It's no mystery. You dated bad boys till your mid-thirties, and now that you've finally come to your senses, the good ones are all taken."

Bingo.

My last boyfriend six years ago was the worst one of all. There are some guys you date who are so bad that when you tell the story about them, it reflects just as badly on you as it does on them. His name was Jeremy and we had been dating for two tumultuous years. He decided to break up with me by not showing up to my father's funeral. I never heard from him after that.

Since then, no bad boys. But no great love, either.

Georgia weighed in on this subject of why I'm single on one particularly dark, lonely, regretful night.

"Oh for God's sake, there's no reason. It's just totally fucked. You're kind, you're beautiful, you have the best hair in New York City." (It's really long and curly but never ever frizzy, and when I want to straighten it, it looks just as great. I have to admit, it's my best feature.)

"You're hot, you're smart, you're funny, and you are one of the finest people I know. You are perfect. Stop asking yourself that awful question because there is not one goddamn reason why the sexiest, nicest, most charming man in New York City isn't madly in love with you right now."

And that was why I loved Georgia. And that's how this weekend I ended up spearheading an outing with my mismatched set of friends to make her feel like life was worth living. Because at the end of the day, it's night. And in New York, if it's night there's nightlife, and when there's life, as most optimists will be happy to tell you, there's always hope. And I guess that's a big part of how to be single. Hope. Friends. And making sure you get out of your damn apartment.