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On the Road to Mr Right

Belinda Jones

REVVING UP...

Picture the scene: It's late at night and my best friend Emily and I are heading home after a weekend of life-affirming hedonism in Las Vegas. We've always found it a profound wrench leaving that vibrant neon fantasy to face the grey reality of our lives back in England, but this time we're in a particularly despondent slump.

'I feel like we're going back to sit in this big, bland, sensory-deprived waiting room until our next visit,' I sigh, eyes blurring the white lines on the freeway. Over the last couple of nights we've come to realize there's not nearly enough dancing involved in journalism.

Not that our jobs are really the problem. If anything we have it pretty good scribing for a couple of the UK's top women's magazines. We can also put a substantial tick in the boxes marked FRIENDS and FAMILY. No horrors there. But the one big blank in both our lives is SIGNIFICANT OTHER, and 'His' absence is starting to take its toll. Lately, everything is starting to look a bit lacklustre and old. Without the spark that love brings, we're finding our energy depleted and our optimism at an all time low. Only Vegas seems to get us going, tempting us back to a state of vitality with all its unexpected pleasures. That's what I relish - the thrill of not knowing who or what is coming next. As a consequence leaving to go back to our Groundhog Day existence feels so wrong I'm actually nauseous.

'Isn't there something we can do?' Emily pleads, getting so impatient with the accelerator that I think for a minute she's going to pull a U-y and head straight back to The Strip.

If only.

Instead she switches off the radio and looks at me with troubled eyes. 'I really don't think I can go back to normal this time.'

The quaver in her voice moves me. There's more to this than après-holiday blues. I feel it too. Ordinarily we get on the plane, zombieified with resignation, fly home and do what we have to do. We're not gracious about it. We moan constantly, finding pleasure only in planning our next trip. But



we always go home. This time there's a wall of resistance building and it's getting stronger and higher with every tyre rotation. Pretty soon we're going to slam into it and come to a complete halt. But what then? What choices do we really have?

Antsy with frustration, I wind down my window and lean out so the wind can bluster and buffet my face. It feels good, invigorating. I lean out further.

'You get back in this car!' Emily demands, tugging at my shoulder.

I slump back in my seat and laugh in exasperation. 'What are we going to do?'

'I don't know, you're the one with all the ideas,' Emily shrugs. 'Can't you have one of your barn-raising sessions?'

'Brainstorming,' I correct her, darting a glance at the dashboard clock – still a good five hours drive ahead of us.

Five hours? My heart jolts. Suddenly I feel like I've been presented with a window of opportunity: five hours 'safe time' to come up with a solution – some ingenious way to re-focus our lives so we can let all the unnecessary distractions fall away and put all our energy into a spontaneous pursuit of love and vodka-cranberry.

A-jitter with determination I take a deep breath and announce, 'I think it's time for us to go over the rainbow.'

'Gosh, that was quick,' Emily startles. 'What's the plan?'

'I don't know yet,' I admit, taking out a notepad and pen in preparation for inspiration. 'But we have to act fast - once we're on that plane the portal that can lead us to a magical new world will close forever!' Nothing like a bit of drama-queening to rev up the adrenalin.

'Do you want the reading light on?' Emily offers.

'Not yet.' I decline, happy for now to be in a cocoon of darkness. I do all my best thinking at night, that's when anything seems possible.

'So, do we go about this in the usual way?' Emily enquires, psyching herself up for The Process.

'Absolutely. It's always worked in the past.'

This is how it goes: Emily takes the role of muse, I do the musing. I run a million options in my brain and when one gets me sufficiently agitated I tell Emily. She then squeaks excitement back at me, we start babbling over each other, whipping ourselves into a frenzy of possibility and wild expectation and then eventually we simmer down and construct a practical plan.



We've been operating like this for the past 12 years, ever since fate arranged for us to meet at the offices of Just 17 magazine. She was on a week's work experience and I was filling in until they employed a full-time features writer. Prior to her arrival I'd been uncharacteristically subdued and paid little attention to the young blonde girl who walked in that Monday morning other than to give her something small to write, fully expecting to have to re-do it. But in one short paragraph she made me snort with mirth.

I gave her more pieces to work on. Every one was a rib-tickling winner. From then on we'd spend the day rolling our wheelie chairs back and forth between each other's desks getting increasingly giggly and deranged. (Really, you have to see Emily laughing to believe it: it takes over her whole body – she convulses, bending double, clutching at her belly, face goes fuchsia, eyes and nose dribble... It's fantastic!) Unfortunately the production editor didn't feel it was appropriate to be having this much fun in a work environment and barked at us to quit our ridiculous snickering and get a grip! It felt like being back at school. I bit my lip but I couldn't wipe the smile from my face.

Even when Emily's week was up, she used to wait for me outside the Carnaby St entrance and I would whisk her off to whatever shoot or assignment I'd been given. She was just such fun to have around. And so game. In the past friends had often responded to my hair-brained schemes with a tentative, 'Oh I don't know, it might go wrong, what if...' but Emily was always so gung-ho about things.

It wasn't long before our capers extended into après-office activities: wheedling our way backstage to befriend Chippendales, stalk boybands and, on one triumphant night, get down the dancefloor with Tom Jones, one thigh apiece. Things just seemed to happen when we were together. It was like I'd been blessed with a soulmate sidekick - we both felt life should be a giddy pleasure with the occasional dreary stint to offer contrast and make you realize how lucky you were, not one long chore with the occasional hysterical break-out. It became our shared goal to make the switch and live the fantasy. And here we are today, on the verge of a breakthrough. Or so I like to think.

I tug at the seatbelt so I can twist around and get a good look at my muse, currently powering through the Nevada desert on full-beam. You'd never think someone as sassy and confident and, let's face it, as busty as Emily would have a crap love life but man-misery has always been one of our key bonding issues. Despite countless summit meetings to discuss new ways of alerting Mr Right to our whereabouts, the condition persists. We've even started to predict worst-case scenarios for ourselves – me age 70 with a twitch and twelve cats, Emily engaged to Darren Day. That's something I intend to address with this life-changing masterplan.

I look at my notepad. Blank. I look at the clock. Four hours. That's okay. Plenty of time.

But first things first. I have to factor in our radically different tastes in men: Emily likes older, witty, doting types; I always go for the young, pretty,



disinterested ones. She likes them rich and fragrant, I like them poor and fashionably skanky. She favours a clean shave and a closely-cropped bonce. I go weak at the sight of Catweazle whiskers and a ponytail. (I truly wish I could get over this fixation for men with long hair – it's brought me nothing but trouble! - but I've been skewed this way since I was a teenager so I don't hold out much hope.) I should also take into account our different styles of approach - Emily is bold and blatantly seductive whereas I tend to cop out and hide behind work, cooing: 'I'd love to put you in a magazine article!' On the plus side I've never fancied someone in a bar and not gone up to them – it's not that I'm brave, I just couldn't live with the 'what might have been' factor – but the downside is that it's always me doing the running. Just once I'd like to catch someone's eye and have them come up to me.

That's less of an issue for Emily. She's like a pro-active honeypot throwing men into a state of punch-drunk love and then moving on. As she recently confided: 'If you took away that feeling - you know when you first meet someone and there's that stomach-flip, knee-buckle, urgent attraction - I wouldn't want to live.'

She means it. It's like an addiction to her. I, however, appear to be going cold turkey. I haven't been out with anyone in years and now I'm in my 30s I think of a relationship as something that happens to other people. Last week I totted up the number of days I was in someone's arms last year and came up with six. Which basically means that for 359 days of the year I wasn't. And that was a good year. Even though I never wanted to get married, not even as a little girl - divorce runs in our family, and something about the motif of a ball and chain struck home rather too keenly – sometimes I get so swamped with loneliness I can hardly breathe. I love my friends, but it's like I'm missing someone I haven't even met yet. Only Emily can talk me round, fire me up and make me believe that if we just make one more concerted effort, we'll meet our matches. But lately I've stopped believing. People talk about losing heart and I think somewhere along the line, I've lost mine...

I didn't get off to a great start romantically: the first guy I slept with finished with me the next day, and I was so traumatized I didn't sleep with anyone for two years, until I found myself a nice grateful virgin who seemed to view me as a wordly Mrs Robinson figure whereas of course, in reality, I didn't have a clue. I'd kissed more pop posters than real lips. (I still slightly rue the day I made the transition from Adam Ant to the DJ's friend at the local Under 18 discothèque.)

After the virgin came the only quality guy I've ever dated – a debonair American art student named Don. More pals than lovers, we parted on good terms. Then, following a series of unwise crushes, my heart became well and truly ensnared by an enigmatic hippy-stoner with flame-dipped dreadlocks, a thrice-broken nose and the most alluringly gurgly laugh I'd ever heard. Christian - the only man in my life who has ever said 'I Love You' out loud, to my face, while actually going out with me. (As opposed to those pitiful, after-the-fact lamentations that pepper my history.) To this day he's still The One.



Rather unpromisingly, his first words to me were: 'Can you lend me 30p?'

We were in Exeter's premier sticky-floored dive and he'd found himself caught short at the bar.

I looked into his huge, densely-lashed, brown eyes and it was love at first pint. I really was stupefied by him. I'd never before felt such a dreamy, swimmy sensation in someone's presence. By the end of the night we'd exchanged hairbands as a symbol of our love and arranged to meet on the cathedral green the next afternoon.

He was a mere three hours late. I forgave him. We lay on the grass sharing relationship revelations until the sun went down, then he walked me home. While I nervously dunked teabags in the kitchen he was clunking away at the typewriter in the study. After he left I pulled out the paper and found the words 'I think you're cool!' typed in the centre of the page. I was hooked. I couldn't believe someone as sexy and alternative as him could like someone as square and un-Crazy-Coloured as me.

To cut a long story short, we ended up moving into a flat together in London's Finsbury Park, and aside from the arguments, accusations and miscommunications it was heaven. He even asked me to marry him but instead of being overjoyed I had this sickening feeling in my gut that if I did, I would miss out on the chance of becoming the person I was really meant to be - our jealous insecurities were restricting us both. Then one day at work I burst into unstoppable tears in the ladies loo and a woman I'd never met before said, 'You know, if it hurts this much, it isn't love.'

I knew what had to be done but splitting up from Christian was by far the most confusing and harrowing experience of my life. I went back to him on more than one occasion, only to make things worse, and one (bad) day he even told me that I would never be happy because I'd never let anyone truly love me. It's been like a curse that haunts me still.

You'd think that would be the end of that, but about eight years ago I was helping my mum with a big house-moving clear-out and I re-discovered his old love letters. They slayed me. Three hours later, on my way back to London, I was still in a daze on the train platform, still clutching them when, in a puff of soot, he appeared by my side - same platform, same train, same destination. It was as if I'd summoned him up.

On the journey we played Travel Mastermind, drank beer and talked. He'd had a baby but split with the mother of his bambino and appeared to have mellowed into a wiser, calmer, more content individual. It just felt so natural to be with him, as though fate was giving us a second chance, and my mind raced with possibilities. At Paddington he and his bike went one way, me and my cab went another. But not before one of the most heartfelt, swoon-inducing kisses ever.

'Do you remember -' I began, smiling at an incident from our past.



'I remember everything, Belinda,' he breathed, stroking my hair from my face.

I nearly passed out with the combination of emotion and desire.

We arranged to meet later that week but come the day, he didn't show. I practically threw up with disappointment – it was like losing him all over again. I never did find out why he changed his mind and to this day I get a loop in my stomach if I see someone who remotely resembles him. It's as though part of me is still hoping he'll magically appear like he did on that train platform. I wonder if I'll ever really be able to let him go and move on...

'What are you thinking about?' Emily prods me. 'You look a bit forlorn.'

'Ex-boyfriends,' I mumble, reaching for the bag of Starbursts.

'Nasty,' Emily winces.

'I know.' I pop a lime square in my mouth. 'Hey - do you know what's just occurred to me?'

She shakes her head.

'I've met every one of your boyfriends.'

Emily takes a moment to check the veracity of my claim then confirms, 'You're right! All five of them. And I've met all yours since...' Emily frowns. 'Who was it after Christian?'

'That medical student who was a little too thorough in his pill research,' I grimace, adding: 'The one with the long hair.'

'They've all got long hair,' Emily tuts. 'Anyway, I don't mean him - that only lasted a few weeks. The blond.'

'What blond? I don't like blonds.'

'You know, the one with the banshee ex-girlfriend who chased you out of the house with a broken bottle?'

'Ohhhh!' It's all coming back to me. 'You mean The Carpenter.'

'Not exactly your intellectual equal, was he?'

Accordingly to Emily that's two giveaway clues that I'm a complete commitment-phobe right there – firstly I never choose anyone where there could be a chance of a future, and secondly I refer to them by their profession rather than their name in a bid to de-personalize them, so it's always The Carpenter, The Projectionist, The Drummer, The Taxidermist. Actually I never went out with a taxidermist though taxi drivers (specifically Algerian taxi-drivers) do have quite a thing for me.



‘Of course the next one was smart,’ Emily remembers. ‘If only he’d had a heart.’

